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Declaration:
'I, Johanna Woodcock Ross, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.'
Abstract

This empirical study uses critical realist principles in an under-labouring role to inquire what communicative tensions might lie beneath social-worker-with-Christian-parent-communication. The first empirical stage - 'thick description' - used qualitative methods within an intensive case study design to generate data of both the substantive event of social-worker-with-Christian-parent-communication (the 'speech-act') and agential meanings of such action signifying contextual and experiential understanding:

1. A Forum Theatre performance to a volunteer sample of 31 qualifying and qualified social workers
2. Unstructured qualitative interviews with a sample of 12 volunteer social work service users (parents self-identifying as practising Christians) to create the basis for the performance script.

The second stage used critical-realist-appropriate analytic tactics from Grounded Theory (1967) to conduct the retroductive analysis. Key findings identified Christian parents being so mistrustful about revealing ontological commitments to their Christian living/parenting praxis that they altered their language - a wariness worsened by the social workers’ absenting of Christian belief-talk through using formulaic strategies. The explanation tentatively outlined empirical, utilitarian, romanticist, and secularist structural inclinations, emanating from the profession’s own Post-Enlightenment worldview commitments, as promoting instrumental moral reasoning and dissuading dialogue about personal spirituality. The study recommends changes in social work education and presents an example of a pedagogic method and some practical communication skills. The study fills in gaps within an under-researched field. Despite Britain’s religious, spiritual, secular diversity, and despite national legislation and policy (England) directives, there appears a lack of specific UK empirical research
investigating social workers *actual communication-in-action* with Christian parents during statutory parenting assessment. Further, wider *related* knowledge identifies social workers' communication about religious beliefs as largely ineffective and academics/practitioners holding preconceptions of Christian identity/beliefs/practices.
Impact Statement

The study contributes new knowledge - responding to legislative and policy directives - to a social work practice field lacking research attention. The study has already begun to have an impact, and I have mapped a dissemination strategy of peer-assessed journal papers, conference papers and published monograph. The invited delivery of draft findings as papers to social work departments at the University of Kent and Oxford Brookes University shows some significance to the profession of an ontologically deep understanding of social-worker-communication-with-Christian-parents. Legislative directives require consideration of a family’s religious background in parenting assessment, and policy-driven child protection practice has begun to grapple with the issue of ‘faith-based abuse’ and ‘contextual safeguarding’. My study presents/contributes useful conceptual and practical understanding of integrated worldviews motivating parenting.

The study expands thought of ‘how to provide theoretical linkages to communication skills’ by approaching the matter of social work communication in a new way. My submitted abstract for the European Social Work Research Association Conference summarises provisional findings from Chapter 4 of the thesis: that commentators have persistently warned of limited conceptual clarity within social work ‘communication skills' literature, citing implicit theoretical underpinning, limited consensus of empirically-derived theoretical constructs, and deficiency in understanding how communication skills are derived from/transfered to practice¹. In deploying critical realist principles, my study critiques such empirical frameworks as comprising a mix of objectivist and constructivist ideas, and a privileging of instrumental reasoning that ‘absences’ meaningful belief-talk, and ‘silences’ parental accounts of their motivated parenting praxis. The study proposes ‘communication

¹Trevithick et al., 2004; Dinham, 2006; Luckock et al., 2006; Dixon, 2013
capacity’ to be better conceived/taught as dynamically multi-layered, going beyond surface appearances to consider deeper aspects of ‘what is going on’.

The study contributes to the call for researching about communication with parents within child protection processes in a new way: to look at communication-in-the-event-of-practice-actions within the reality of demanding frontline social work practice with parents (Ferguson, 2016). Despite highlighting interpersonal dynamics and organisational obstacles in face-to-face communication, existing studies have not investigated social workers’ and parents’ reasoning for their communication action during the actual moment of it taking place. My research study proposes forum theatre as an innovative research method that can get as close as possible to the internal conversations of social workers and Christian parents as they reflect-in-action. This contrasts with interview or self-report questionnaire methods, which elicit reflection-on-action after the event, when the language/emotion/sensation/image might be lost.

The study intersects with civic work outside academia. The thesis – investigating and improving social-worker-with-Christian-parent communication - has received interest from the ‘Home for Good’ national philanthropic target strategy to provide foster homes to children in the UK care system. I met with the founder and members of adoption groups to engage them in discussion about my provisional findings. This national platform provides a way to increase impact beyond the academic press and conference circuit.

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2 For details of the national strategy, please refer to https://www.homeforgood.org.uk/
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Trying to write succinctly and with clarity about the complex, changing phenomenon of statutory (UK) social work and its communication theory/practices is complicated enough, but doing so about the sensitive topic of religious/spiritual/secular worldviews brought another whole level of ethical integrity and complexity, to which I then added the challenge of articulating/applying the philosophical principles of critical realism! The reader will judge if this was wise and if I have achieved sufficient depth and clarity, but for myself, I am deeply grateful to Professor Andrew Wright for enabling my understanding of critical realism, and for his continual supportive refrain to ‘keep going’. Thank you for your commitment as supervisor to the journey’s end, including enabling me to move from KCL to UCL to continue supervision. It has been a life’s chapter, and I am grateful.

Importantly, I gratefully acknowledge the parents and carers, the social workers and qualifying social work students who participated in the study and graciously voiced their thoughts and feelings to me. Notably, I have conducted this doctoral study whilst working full-time and changing employers. I thank my current employer for supportive understanding and time to study in the end phases. However, I note the biggest burden was borne by my husband Mark, and my beautifully grown-up daughter Lauren. Neither ever complained (not once), and both were unremitting in their belief and encouragement. I am grateful, too, for the support from my wider family (particularly Dad and Estelle), and Riverside church. Sadly, in the latter stages of my thesis writing, my mother-in-law passed away. Thoughts of her gentleness, thoughtfulness and loving commitment to her family are at the front of my mind. Tragically, suddenly in her wake, my beautiful, vivacious niece passed away too. With love, this thesis is dedicated to them, Diane Beatrice Ross and Kayleigh Ann Ross.
Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1. AIMS AND RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

The aims of this exploratory study are to develop a critical realist explanatory understanding of social worker communication action with parents and carers who are practising Christians during the processes of statutory parenting assessment (in England). In what follows, the thesis provides insight into communicative tensions that appear to underlie and frustrate such social-worker-with-Christian-parent communicative action. Given that the focus is upon communication, I aim to do so in a way that gives voice to the perspectives of both agential parties; social workers and Christian parents. Such inclusion of ‘insider’ service user perspectives has been an important feature of my empirical studies throughout my career, responding to critiques from service users that their voice is too often unrecognised and/or undervalued within their communication with social workers (Diggins, 2004; Cree and Davis, 2006; Woodcock and Tregaskis, 2008; Lishman, 2009; Woodcock Ross et al., 2009; Woodcock Ross and Crow, 2010; Woodcock Ross, 2011 and 2016). However, additionally in this study, I draw upon the under-labouring services3 of critical realist principles to look at communication from the micro perspective of social-worker-with-Christian-parent interaction, as well as from the macro perspective of structural mechanisms underlying that action, with the objective of presenting some findings

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3 Critical realist researchers use the term ‘under-labouring’ to refer to the useful accessory role that philosophy (particularly ontology) can play to strengthen the substantive research, theory and practice of a discipline (Dobson, 2002; Price and Martin, 2018). The term is taken from Locke (1894, p.14) as “clearing the ground a little... removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way of knowledge”. In a special issue of the Journal of Critical Realism providing examples of applied critical realism in the social sciences, the guest editors (Price and Martin, 2018, p.1) explain how “currently, much critical realist work takes the form of underlabouring...in the space created by the work of the underlabourers, there are certain characteristics of critical realist social research that are likely to be permanent. Of these, we have chosen to highlight the following: a commitment to ontology; the use of retroduction and judgemental rationality; the use of the critical realist approach to structure and agency (either in the Bhaskarian form of the Transformational Model of Social Activity (TMSA) or the Archerian form of Morphogenesis/Morphostasis); the application of interdisciplinarity, based on a laminated, scalar ontology; an engagement with hermeneutically based methodologies (such as grounded theory or qualitative interviews); a commitment to reflexivity; and the application of moral realism, leading to normative assertions and suggestions for action”.

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about the structural-agent interplay. In line with the emancipatory aims of critical realist inquiry, my aim also is to consider how the understandings might provide for changes in social work education to improve practice. In this first chapter I outline the rationale for the study, and correspondingly present the research questions.

There appeared much need for the study. In religious, spiritual and secular diverse Britain, national legislation and policy (England) directs social workers to identify how religious/non-religious and spiritual/non-spiritual beliefs and practices connect with other bio-psycho-social-structural influences to potentially motivate aspects of family life and parenting capacity (H.M. Government, 2018). While generally in this field there has been little empirical study of the relationship between religion, parents’ motivations, and parenting practices (Larson and Larson, 1994; Phoenix and Husain, 2007), studies indicate such influences as often protective in affirming children’s identity, strengthening families, and fostering safe and secure relationships for children’s developmental wellbeing (Shor, 1998; Mahoney and Pargament et al. 2001; Smith and Denton, 2005; Utting, 2007; Horwath et al. 2008; Smith et al., 2013). This contrasts with recent practitioner attention, that identifies a lack of empirical attention and has focused upon such influences as potentially increasing vulnerability to child maltreatment. The term ‘faith-based abuse’ has been used, for example, in relation to unregistered religious settings where children might not be adequately supervised (believing they are safe from contact with ‘grooming perpetrators’), and/or in circumstances where children are perceived to be witches or ‘evil spirit-possessed’ (DfES and Stobart, 2006; LSCB, 2011; DfE, 2012; NSPCC, 2014; Simon et al., 2012).

Specifically in legislative terms, social workers (acting for statutory local authorities) have a general duty to: “(a) to safeguard and promote the welfare of children within their area who are in need; and (b) so far as is consistent with that duty, to promote the upbringing of such children by their families” (The Children Act 1989 s17). The concept

\[4\text{ Analyses of published serious case reviews occurring since 2010 where culture and religious faith were considered significant issues (NSPCC, 2014).}\]
of ‘risk of significant harm’ is the threshold that warrants compulsory intervention in families in the best interests of a child (The Children Act 1989, s.47(1)). ‘Harm’ is defined as “ill-treatment or impairment of health or development” including for instance impairment suffered from hearing or seeing the ill-treatment of another person (including emotional harm suffered by children being aware of/witnessing family violence). ‘Development’ denotes ‘physical, intellectual, emotional, social or behavioural development’; ‘health’ incorporates ‘physical or mental health’; and ‘ill-treatment’ encompasses ‘sexual abuse and forms of ill-treatment which are not physical’ (The Children Act 1989, s31(9) and amended by The Adoption and Children Act 2002). While there are no absolute criteria on which to adjudicate ‘significant harm’, policy guidance points to severity, frequency, duration, cumulative effects, and degree of coercion and premeditation (H.M. Government, 2018). Attention should be given to the parental capacity for care and the family context within the wider community in meeting the developmental needs of the child, ensuring that family strengths and supportive resources are included in such judgements. Herein, in specific relation to ‘religion’, social workers are directed to give “due consideration....to the child’s religious persuasion, racial origin, cultural and linguistic background” (The Children Act 1989, s22(5)(c)). Moreover, as central actors within parenting assessment, children and parents have rights to be communicated with effectively about their parenting and what matters to them (The Children Act 2004; The Care Act 2014). This is paralleled in national equality legislation whereby the unequal treatment of a person is not tolerated, and ‘religion’ is one of several characteristics given protection (making it unlawful to give a person unfair treatment on the basis of such beliefs)(The Equality Act 2010). An individual and community’s freedom to practice religion and belief without hindrance (unless unreasonably encroaching upon another freedom), is also protected by European statute: “everyone has the right to the freedom of religion or belief, either alone or in community with others and in public and or private, to manifest religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance” (Article 9, Human Rights Act
1998 and Article 18, United Nations Declaration of Human Rights). Put simply, parents' religious worldviews cannot be ignored, considered irrelevant, or marginalised by social workers within statutory-mediated assessment practice with families. Moreover, parents have rights to be communicated with about them.⁵

Yet despite these legislative and policy requirements (in England), specific UK empirical research investigating social workers' actual communication-in-action with parents of practicing religious faith during statutory parenting assessment appears to be absent. More worryingly, when drawing on the extant knowledge related to the area – mainly small scale empirical (qualitative) studies of the attitudes of qualifying and qualified social workers about religion and belief and integration in their practice - knowledge points to social workers' communication about religious beliefs and parenting practices as being largely ineffective (Furness and Gilligan, 2010). Indeed, a recently published rapid literature review concluded that social workers lack the knowledge and confidence to communicate with parents about matters of religious belief (Simon et al. 2012). Most recent findings from a qualitative study in the US repeat the message that social workers appear not to talk with their clients about matters of religion and belief. Ominously, in this study the social workers claimed that they felt they had the skills to do so, yet analyses of practice revealed that they did not actually engage in the communication (Oxhandler et al., 2015). Moreover, in particular regard to Christianity, social work literature points to there being negative academic and practitioner perspectives of the intersection between social work and Christian beliefs/practices (Larsen 2015). Herein, there appear to be generalised assumptions and stereotyping about 'being a Christian', signifying marginalisation, and a lack of discernment of differences, whether for example, in tradition (such as Orthodoxy, Protestantism, Roman Catholicism), denominational difference, or individual beliefs as a worldview expression of existence (Hodge, 2002; Bowpitt, 2002; Jackson, 2004;

⁵The same conclusions about rights for communication about religious worldviews is obviously accorded to children too, but 'parents' are the focus of my study.
Canda, Nakashima, and Furman, 2004; Ressler and Hodge, 2003 and 2005; Thyer and Myers, 2009). So, what is going on within such social-worker-with-Christian-parent communication contexts that is creating barriers, and preventing communication agency?

The aforementioned practitioner-led analyses (of published serious case reviews occurring since 2010 where culture and religious faith were considered significant issues) proposed such lack of confidence and capability to work with families of religious faith as arising through “a lack of understanding of the religions and cultural context of families” (NSPCC 2010). From their ‘identification of risk’ perspective, the reviewers proposed that absence of understanding can “lead to professionals overlooking situations that may put family members at risk; whilst the desire to be culturally sensitive can result in professionals accepting lower standards of care.” A lack of understanding can also contribute to professionals overlooking the positive, protective influences of religious faith and community for identity-development, parenting capacity, and family life. It is a caution also arising from the sole evaluation about social work practice with families in matters of religion and beliefs (the Safeguarding Children’s Rights special initiative by Briggs et al., 2011, which focuses rather specifically upon witchcraft and evil spirit possession, and notes the absence of empirical study in the area). It is also a caution arising from the sole-reported (Joseph Rowntree Foundation funded) study of children and parents’ perspectives of the influence of their religious faith upon parenting capacity within the UK social work literature (Horwath et al., 2008). From the point of view of my thesis, the study did not focus upon children and parents who had received social work services, and did not focus upon parental communication with welfare professionals about matters of religious faith within their parenting practice. Nevertheless, the authors did publish implications of their study’s findings for social workers conducting parenting

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6 This is an online source, so there is no page number available.
assessment (Horwath and Lees, 2008). Importantly, the authors highlighted how the categories (‘dimensions’) within the official national policy guidance for parenting assessment (the ‘Assessment Framework’) failed to grasp either the holistically integrated nature to ‘living out’ faith in everyday life (including parenting), or the supportive influence of the faith community (upon parenting), that had been described by the parents within their study. Instead, the categories of the official guidance denoted religious faith as an ‘add-on component’ that could be segmented off and identified as an isolated factor.

Certainly, for social work practitioners and academics in the West, as a legacy of Enlightenment thinking, there continues to be tense debate as to whether conversations about religion and belief have a place or even matter in social work communication (Praglin, 2004,p.69). Is not ‘religion’ about personal values and lifestyle choice, an ‘add-on’ that can be segmented from the rest of life, a private matter, therefore, and not the subject of professional social work practice activity? The answer, surely, is that it does matter, for UK social workers practice within an increasingly religious, spiritual and secular diverse British landscape in which policy-makers and scholars are “realising that religion and belief are everywhere” (Dinham 2015,p20). In this diversity, the Christendom of the UK has declined (Pew Research Centre, 2012; Theos, 2015), and there appears a growing disenchantment with religion in Western Europe (Taylor, 2007⁸), but Christian beliefs are not disappearing. According to the 2011 Census, of the 56 million residents of England and Wales in 2011, 59% were Christian, 5% were Muslim, 0.4% were ‘Other’ religion and 25% had ‘No religion’. Of the numbers of non-UK born residents arriving in the years 2001-2011, over half were Christian (ONS 2015). Christian beliefs are growing globally (particularly China, the Americas, and sub-Saharan Africa) (Casanova, 1994 and 2006 a, b and c; Schultz,

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⁷I am referring here to the Enlightenment division between fact and value whereby religion is reduced to private spheres of life – I expand on this in Chapter 2.

⁸I note that this is a point of debate: Jenkins, 2002; Wuthnow, 2009; Noll, 2009.
Taking an even wider perspective, according to the Pew Research Centre (2012): “85% and increasing of the world’s population profess some religion”, and every single person holds beliefs and has a worldview of some kind (even if it is to reject that they have a worldview!)

The sociological work of Grace Davie (1994 and 2007) is frequently proffered as a way to make sense of changing trends in Christian religiosity in the past decades in the UK (Theos, 2015). For her, religion can be spoken about in terms of positioning across two axes: ‘believing in a religious worldview position(s) or not’ and ‘belonging to an identity/group/community or not’. Four quadrant positions become possible: 1) believing in religious worldview and belonging to a religious community; 2) believing in a religious worldview but not belonging to a religious community; 3) neither believing in a religious worldview nor belonging to a religious community; 4) belonging to a religious community but doing so nominally without actually believing in the religious worldview. Numbers in Group 1 are declining, but it is also understood as being representative of a wider transient and mobile society that is also less socially-geographically community-orientated (less ‘rooted’). Group 3 – the ‘Nones’ - has also increased, but analyses note that it does not comprise a rationalistic, naturalistic and humanist set of people. As Theos research of this group highlighted (2013 and 2015):

“61% of people claiming to be non-religious believe that ‘there are things in life that we simply cannot explain through science or any other means’…34% of non-believers believe in some kind of spiritual being and only 25% believed that ‘humans are purely material beings with no spiritual element’. Astonishingly 8% of non-religious felt they or someone they knew had experienced a miracle and
12% believed prayer could heal you… ‘no religion’ might often be rather more religious or spiritual then secularists might want to believe.” (Theos, 2015).\(^{10}\)

The other two groups (2 and 4) present something interesting about changes in religiosity, and particularly the connection and importance attached to ‘spirituality’ but dissatisfaction and scepticism of ‘traditional’ (‘modernist’) religious institutions. It is also linked to an increased availability of internet-based material and a society in which individual choice is celebrated over communal responsibilities/ties (Theos, 2015). Having said this, there is a rise in the number of Christian ‘mega-churches’ and independent churches worldwide. This corresponds with individuals seeking a greater sense of spiritual community to mitigate de-personalising and alienating effects of postmodernity (Gray, 2008). To echo my early point, religion is not ‘going away’ but shifting in its forms and patterns as other influences connect with it.

Yet, it is only recently that academic literature has perceived a need to educate social workers on matters concerning religion and spirituality, and curricula inclusion and practical pedagogic models are still lacking (Hodge and Derezotes, 2008; Sheridan, 2009; Nagai, 2010; Roberts-Lewis, 2011; Buckey, 2012; Coholic, 2012; Senreich, 2013; Hunt, 2014; Husain and Sherr, 2015; Timmins et al., 2015; Neshama-Bannister, 2016). The overwhelming leaning of the textbooks emerging upon the academic scene is towards recognizing ‘spirituality’ over ‘religion’ – seemingly angling for a non-sectarian and allegedly more inclusive ‘spiritual awareness’ or ‘spiritually sensitive approach’ to the subject (Lindsay, 2002; Moss, 2005; Canda and Furman, 2010; Mathews, 2009; Wong and Vinsky, 2009; Holloway and Moss, 2010; Crisp, 2010 and 2017; Gardner, 2011). Neshama-Bannister (2016), drawing upon qualitative studies of social worker attitudes elicited from classroom settings\(^{11}\), posits that this too reflects a

\(^{10}\) This is an online source, so there is no page number.  

\(^{11}\) Graff, 2007; Canda & Furman, 2010; Furman, Benson & Canda, 2011.

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practitioner preference away from traditional religion, although she notes that this disables social work students in having foundational knowledge of the world religions for their day-to-day practice. Yet, as Gray (2008) highlights, for many, religion has more systemic meaning to adherents, rather than simply being a set of abstract doctrinal statements to be 'learnt'.

To summarise the discussion thus far, while specific research evidence, social work knowledge of the Christian religious tradition/practices as integrated living, and qualifying curricula and pedagogic direction are lacking in this area (Hugman, 2013; Oxhandler and Pargament, 2014), and there appears a lack of empirical investigation of the perspective of Christian parents’ communication with social workers, in legal and ethical terms, Christian parents have rights to be communicated with effectively and to have attention to the cultural meaning and practices of their parenting. Children have rights to have the positive protective, and negative harmful influences of their own and their parents’ religious worldview considered. In fulfilment of the profession's (structural) anti-oppressive values for improving human rights and promoting social justice, social workers, in their everyday practice, have to find nuanced ways to reconcile the structural contradiction of universalism and cultural relativism inherent in those human rights (Ife, 2001; Healy, 2007 and 2008). Moreover, in the aftermath of government appointed reviews, this is a time of increased public scrutiny of the effectiveness of social workers' practical intervention and communication skills in frontline practice with families (SWTF, 2009a,b,c; Munro, 2011a,b). Resultant education policy has directed social work educators to increase the teaching content of basic and specialist communication skills in the curriculum, yet reviews of the teaching and learning of communication skills identified theoretical content as often implicit, and when explicit lacking critical analysis and attention to structural forces (Trevithick et al. 2004; Dinham, 2006; Luckock et al. 2006; Dixon, 2013). Therefore, the study sits within
a broader aim for educators to begin to bridge the knowledge gap of specialist social work communication (‘skills’) for the real-life challenges of practice (Diggins, 2004; Trevithick et al., 2004).

Thus there appear to be three key fields of ‘macro’ structural, contextual issues that intertwine to provide the contextual landscape to my inquiry:

- Christianity as an integrated worldview, and the opposing worldview tensions that interface with it.
- Professional (UK) social work as a secular liberal humanist institution and set of practices, and its intersection with Christianity and matters of faith.
- Social work communication theory, practices and skills, the intersection with the Christian worldview and secular liberal humanist worldview, and the tensions that arise.

I should note that I am taking these three fields to be boundary-markers to the study, and I am aware that in such a nuanced landscape of communication about religious faith there are likely to be more fields or boundary-markers of interest. These were the three that arose most keenly from the discussion, and that appeared most fruitful (an aspect that I kept under review throughout the study, for as will be seen, I was not seeking deductive confirmation of a priori themes but a posteriori understanding inferred from listening to the data). Moreover, given that the discussion identified such structural influences to communication, a matter that I had to address was what form the inquiry should take. To further explain the rationale for my approach it is important to clarify my personal and professional standpoint.
1.2. **WHAT IS MY PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL STANDPOINT FROM WHICH I AM APPROACHING THE RESEARCH PROBLEM?**

The spiritual heritage afforded to me by my family was, primarily, that of a Christian worldview, however the spiritual heritage afforded to me more widely in the UK was more fragmented and inherently controversial. As a youth, I dutifully attended youth groups at church, but there were cracks in the coherency of my own worldview. I questioned the relevance of Christian belief for those parts of my life which existed beyond the family or church, where understandings for the order-of-things were presented in secular, immanent language, and the purpose for life was sold as a human only pursuit for self-fulfillment. It was the late 1980s with ‘yuppies’ and ‘new romantics’ but also Youth Training Schemes (‘YTS’) - young people had to buy into capitalism’s profiteering and dream of self-aggrandisement or risk (what teachers and the news media told us were) the hopelessness of the YTS. I can see now how my experience displayed an increasing grip of the naturalistic and liberal humanist worldviews\(^\text{12}\) upon education and youth culture occurring within the de-Christianising of previously taken-for-granted norms in the UK. The Christian teaching provided to me either at church or home or school did not help me make sense of this conflicting and changing cultural milieu. Neither did this Christian teaching help me make sense of my worldview questioning stemming from the inequality, stigma, and family discord that I observed my family experience as a result of dealing with the pressure of raising their severely disabled child (my sibling). While my parents found some solace in their Christian beliefs and support from their conservative church community, they also experienced misunderstanding and alienation from (some people within) that community and (many people within) wider society. What the experience did was to convict me with a strong sense to fight inequality more generally and I went to University to study for a qualifying degree programme in social work. Here, it was

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\(^\text{12}\) I explain what I mean by these worldviews in Chapter 2.
within the student life (but notably not within the taught social work curriculum) that I became acutely aware of the plurality of spiritual belief and lifestyle options not just contained but applauded by the UK’s liberal pluralist society (Newbigin, 2014). I embraced the social work profession’s anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive stance to diversity in general (noting again that religious diversity had not been specifically covered despite it being a ‘protected characteristic’ for equality legislation), and I took on perspectives to my Christian worldview that affirmed anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive stances. I did not see my Christian worldview as impeding any such affirmation.

As a registered social worker, and later as a University Lecturer in Social Work, I was aware that any sectarian identity was a controversial position to hold in any way other than completely privately. The social work rhetoric was firmly one of separating out personal values from professional secular values, examining personal biases (recognising that sometimes these arise from taken-for-granted privilege and can potentially cause harm to others), and keeping personal values firmly private. I unquestionably complied. Nevertheless, consistent with empirical responses of social workers identifying with a Christian worldview (Ressler and Hodge, 2003 and 2005; Thyer and Myers, 2009; Dessel et al. 2017), I have seen negative generalized assumptions of non-toleration to difference ascribed to adherents simply on the basis of Christian identity (rather than attitudes or behaviour). A specific example that I would note concerns professional and personal affirmation of LGBTQ individuals and communities. A frequent generalised assumption is that there is one, single Christian view or belief related to sexual orientation, gender identity and expression. Yet, a body of literature exists concerning the heterogeneity of beliefs/values within and between Christian (and non-Christian) individuals, groups, denominations, and traditions concerning LGBTQ identity, sexualities and relationships (good summaries of this from a social work perspective see Dessel et al. 2017, Levy and colleagues 2011a,b, 2013,
2014), and wider literature includes Hodge, 2005a; Thumma and Gray, 2005; Hagger-Holt and Hagger-Holt, 2009; Liechty, 2013; Drumm et al. 2014; Tan, 2014 and 2016; Foster et al. 2015; Lewis, 2015; Vines, 2015; Beardsley and O’Brien, 2016; Beeching, 2018; Chalke, 2018; Hartke, 2018; Ozanne, 2018). A Christian worldview is not an inevitable or necessary obstacle to affirmation. For the purposes of my inquiry, these reflexions pointed to the usefulness of understanding ‘religion’ as a ‘lived out worldview’ that motivate very practical actions and attitudes (such as illustrated by my training to be a social worker to challenge inequalities). It also highlighted how worldviews are not only religious, but can be spiritual and secular in so far as they indicate coherent ways of living, and that worldviews can interact, influence, and share commonalities (as I found in my experience in relation to matters of equality/inequality). Nevertheless, the reflexions did highlight some operation of power structures that mitigate against such dialogue (as illustrated by the generalised assumptions and silencing).

Through the course of my career, perhaps stemming from these biographical sensitivities to inequality and silencing of ‘insider’ voices/identities, I have always empirically studied and taught about the interplay of dynamics arising within the communication between social workers and service users. A focus of my published work has been the identification of barriers/obstacles affecting communication which appeared cultural and structural. My study of communication with parents of children with disabilities revealed how social workers often sought to understand parenting practices in purely psychosocial terms, yet I challenged the sufficiency of such understandings, finding a social model of disability analysis better able to highlight the influence of systemic barriers on families’ capability to function in their social context (Woodcock and Tregaskis, 2008). When a practical application of the social model of disability approach was ‘added-on’, it was possible to better appreciate the ecological context of their everyday living. For example, an alternative explanation to the social
work ‘problem-hunting’ finding that parents tended to over-emphasize their child’s development was to recognize the reasons why these parents communicate so strongly about aspects of child development— that this was about parental attempts to overcome systemic barriers to their child receiving effective help such as preparation for significant life stages (like going to school).

Looking back, I felt the work was under-theorized, I could see cultural and structural influences, as well as individual barriers/assumptions but the interplay of the different levels of influence was lost on me. I was left identifying communication skills as an 'on-the-shelf' 'product'. In so doing I believed in the capacity of individuals to enact and develop 'communication agency' which could take account of the demands of the context. Perhaps this was a naïve assumption given that I had also identified that the context was presenting inhibiting influences from multiple systemic levels (individual, cultural, structural). Essentially I was operating what Archer (1995) refers to as a conflationist approach – not sufficiently seeing structure and agency as separate entities and reducing (‘conflating’) one (‘structure’) to the other (‘agency’). Seeking to understand and explain (provide theoretical linkages) to communication skills required more understanding of the 'micro-macro-linkage' – the interplay between structure and agency.

Readers may wonder why I have taken an unusual step to spend such considerable word space (over several pages) transparently outlining my personal and professional standpoint. It is well established that no research can claim an independent, objective vantage point - as Nagel (1986, p.130) put it, “there is no view of us, no matter how external, that permits complete detachment”. Being transparent about our standpoint (as researchers) enables us and others both to be able to recognise and draw light to emic (‘insider’) understandings, and question/decide what might be new, surprising insights (‘etic’ questioning/understanding) to such taken-for-granted meanings. Thus, from the start it seems important to pause and reflect upon how this transparent
moment of public disclosure of my Christian worldview brought some emic (insider) knowledge to this particular study at this early stage. For me, the disclosure raised feelings of personal and professional vulnerability in a professional social work academic and practice context that positions belief as subjective opinion and personal lifestyle than objective fact, and so outside of public discussion/life. Would people think I held irrational, biased opinions? Would people assume I held conservative, illiberal positions about people’s parenting styles, and identity choice (when in fact, as outlined in my standpoint, I do not just hold liberal views, but an anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive stance)? Would people know that there is a diversity of Christian positions within and across the Christian worldview, particularly as religious literacy was not part of the qualifying social work curriculum (as outlined in my standpoint)? This feeling of vulnerability shed(s) some light on how vulnerable Christian parents and Christian social workers might also feel when making public to social workers their privately held beliefs, and tension that might arise when doing so. This was a reflexion (of my own and research subjects’ vulnerability and tension at public disclosure) that I usefully raised in supervision with my supervisor, such as how it pointed to ethical issues for the choice of research methods (decision for forum theatre methods over solely interview methods or participant observation), the need to record/utilise participants’ exact wording and actions with detail and accuracy, and finding ways to code and analyse the data in a way that could question my familiarity and cause me to be surprised by the data. Indeed, it was a reflexion of personal and professional vulnerability that is not without some substance. For example, Dessel and Bolen (2014, p.2) acknowledge the vulnerability of social work academics making visible their Christian worldview, pointing out how the profession is at a crossroads in its values of freedom of religious expression and full affirmation of freedoms such as sexual orientation, permission (or not) to wear body coverings (such as headscarves), expectations of monogamous relationships and so on.
I echo Dessel and Bolen’s (2014) observations of the need for innovative thinking and action to address these tensions and create safe, welcoming learning and practice environments. Research that seeks to give voice to such potentially silenced insider perspectives sees the qualitative researcher as a central tool, reflexively questioning understandings as they arise. In this study I brought myself as a tool, holding an emic perspective as a Christian parent and as a qualified social worker that can help elicit and understand some of the issues voiced by the participants in the study. But I also bring an etic perspective, as a social work academic and researcher critiquing and questioning different viewpoints, comparing and contrasting to theoretical understandings, actively looking to extend the horizons of my own understanding with regards to my published knowledge of communication skills and parenting assessment, and indeed my personal and professional knowledge of ‘worldviews’. With this emic and etic position, I was thus ideally situated as a researcher to conduct this study. To manage these perspectives, such as the aforementioned reflexion of my own and research subjects’ thoughts and feelings of vulnerability and tension at public disclosure, I made use of a reflexive diary. Such processes of researcher reflexivity are crucial to critical realist research (as discussed in Chapter 6), and I refer to the reflexive memos drawn from that diary extensively throughout the thesis, showing the usefulness of the reflexive diary in questioning my understandings (thoughts and feelings). I have included a table summarising key instances where I specifically refer to the use of reflexive processes within the thesis below.

Table 1: Summary of instances where I specifically refer to the use of reflexive processes in the thesis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter, Section Number, Page Number, Title of Section</th>
<th>Reference to Reflexivity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1, Section 1.2, p.21-25 (&quot;What is My Personal and Professional Standpoint&quot;)</td>
<td>Here I give a detailed 3.5-page exposition of my personal and professional standpoint.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professional Standpoint from which I am Approaching the Research Problem?</td>
<td>The iterative critically reflexive research process commenced with the beginning stages where I carried out a preliminary literature review, sketching out the rationale and contextual features for the study. Part of this process involved me engaging in reflexive processes to make transparent my own standpoint to the research issues, recognising that no researcher approaches research without theoretical presuppositions but should make them clear and account for them. Taken together (as explained within Chapter 1) all this reasoning pointed towards taking a critical realist approach to the study, the identification of preliminary research questions (kept under review as the data emerged), and the corresponding abstraction of the three fields of contextual features (as key ‘boundary-markers’ in the theoretical landscape).</td>
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<td>In Chapter 2, Section 2.4, p.67-68 (‘How do these worldviews interact?’)</td>
<td>I engaged in reflexive processes about the experience of Otherization within my own experience as a parent, and how my deconstructive analysis of my own subjectivity drew attention to potential oppressive cultural expectations faced by social workers and service users.</td>
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<td>In Chapter 3, Section 3.2, p. 75 (‘Social work as a modern liberal project’)</td>
<td>Reflection is given to the social work practice context, in terms of how it is highly regulated and instrumentally driven by assessment processes and procedures that influence the reasoning processes of social workers making sense of what freedoms can be tolerated/not tolerated in parenting situations.</td>
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<td>In Chapter 4, Section 4.2, p.105, p.113 and p.120 (‘Contradictions within the knowledge and practice frameworks for social work communication skills at a surface level’)</td>
<td>Reflexivity is shown through (emic and etic) reflection upon the practice context and how this makes demands upon social workers in the kinds and manner of questioning that might also explain the parents’ findings of the unhelpfulness and negativity of hypothetical questioning in bearing little relation to their actual parenting situations.</td>
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<td>Chapter 5, Section 5.2, p. 151 (‘What is critical realism and what are its analytical tools?’)</td>
<td>I reflect upon practice experience to posit and illustrate how social workers can understand critical realism’s retroductive process and deployment of judgemental rationality, for (ostensibly at least) it mirrors what they face day-in-day-out when making sense of manifest situational problems and harmful behaviours, and what might be ‘going on’ to generate or maintain them.</td>
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<td>Chapter 5, Section 5.4, p. 165 and 168 (‘How can critical realism enable us to better ...’)</td>
<td>I reflected upon practice experience to posit and illustrate how social workers can understand the kind of systemic emergence proposed by Person&gt;Agent&gt;Actor morphogenesis by referring to their own professional</td>
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understand society and social work better?’) development journey to take-on the professional identity and role of social worker. I also reflected upon how social work assessment processes – in ideal terms – resonate with critical realist aims and retroductive processes.

Chapter 6 Methodology Chapter, Section 6.3, p. 183-196 (‘Rationale for the data-collection methods and the story of the research process’) I engaged in reflexive processes to consider which research methods showed most potential to materialise critical realist underlaboured methodology for the research question(s) whilst also giving upmost attention to ethical considerations arising from the practical circumstances of the research situation. This meant drawing upon my professional experience and research knowledge to find a way to uphold critical realism’s concerns for emancipatory practice through ensuring no harm to the participants, whilst simultaneously maintaining integrity to the phenomenological aspects of critical-realist-principled inquiry (to get as close as possible to the phenomenon). It was never going to be ethically appropriate to stop social workers within their real-life interactions with service users to examine detailed communication strategies, thoughts and feelings; the parenting assessment would be compromised.

In Chapter 6: Methodology Chapter, Section 6.3, p.196-197 (sub-section ‘Data-analysis: the unstructured interviews with the Christian parents’) Across these pages I provided reflexion upon the approach to data analysis, about how I developed the abductive orientation to the coding, and managed prior emic and etic understandings to incorporate the retroductive analysis required of the critical realist inquiry. As part of this, I provide detailed reflexions upon my use of the communication skills within the interviewing (to draw out and consider the parents’ “reflexive deliberations”) and critically reflect upon my emic and etic perspectives, such as managing my thoughts and feelings in doing so.

In Chapter 7, Section 7.2, p.214, p.215, and p.217 (‘Parental perspectives: themes from the unstructured interviews’) Detailed reflexive discussion is provided about how parents of religious worldviews may have feelings of vulnerability and tension at public disclosure of their worldview, and about assumptive questioning and lack of understanding of the diversity of the Christian worldview. I consider the potential influence of my etic perspective as a social work lecturer-researcher, and emic perspective as a social worker and Christian parent in coming to perceive these findings about negative, assumptive questioning.

In Chapter 7, Section 7.3, p. 236-239 (‘Reflexive considerations’) I provide a detailed 3 page reflexive discussion of the interview data findings, including consideration of volunteer bias, interviewer effects, managing ‘self’, and use of supervision and reflexive memos.

In Chapter 8, section 8.2, p. 242, p.244, p. 250-251, p.255, p. 260, I provide discussion of my use of reflexive memos at each of these points to make sense of data and thematic findings. This includes reflexion about: tension and noise in
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<th>Summary</th>
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<td>p. 266-269, p.273, p.275 (‘Social worker perspectives: themes from the forum theatre performance’)</td>
<td>Performance data; the display of laughter and a formulaic approach to the communication; the air of awkwardness among the spect-actors at sensitive topics; the tense interest among the spect-actors for whether a satisfactory resolution to the matter of how to discuss religious beliefs had been identified; and that there were contradictory responses from the spect-actor audience to the social worker’s questioning. I also provide reflection upon practice experience and the practice context to consider the social worker’s seemingly superficial language about ‘valuing diversity’; to consider alternative readings for findings where social workers responses were lacking in reflective empathy, and parents’ repeated reasoning was being ignored. I described my reflexive discussion with the actors in relations to their feelings of aggression from a social work spect-actor towards them, and provided a reflexive discussion about how and why such aggression might be perceived, including the pressures upon social workers of the practice context.</td>
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<tr>
<td>In Chapter 8, Section 8.3, p. 277-280 (‘Reflexive considerations’)</td>
<td>I provide a detailed 3 page reflexive discussion of the forum theatre performance data findings, including consideration of volunteer bias, and research effects of using the forum theatre method.</td>
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<tr>
<td>In Chapter 9, Section 9.3, p. 285-296 (‘So what seems to be the best possible retroductive explanation for the findings presented (‘what seems to be going on?’)’</td>
<td>Across these pages I consider possible reasoning for the findings of tensions in communication, including reflexively considering the practice context.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Chapter 9, Section 9.4, p.305-312 (‘Overall Reflexive Summary of this Study, Its Limitations, and the Opening for Further Social Work Research’)</td>
<td>Across these 7 pages I provide a detailed reflexive summary of the thesis and its possible limitations. I reflected back upon the research questions, contextual boundary-markers to the study, and methodological approach. I stipulated/discussed specific instances that I engaged in reflexive processes throughout the study, identifying that this did not just happen as a section in the ‘Methodology Chapter’ but within each chapter of the thesis, including specifically designated sections of detailed reflexive considerations at the end of Chapters 7 and 8 that presented the data findings.</td>
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1.3. APPROACHING THE RESEARCH PROBLEM TO ENABLE STRUCTURE-AGENCY THEORISING ABOUT COMMUNICATION TENSIONS

It was with the above discussion in mind that I sought to capitalise upon the under-labouring services of critical realism to enable theorising about such structure-agency interplay within this thesis, and in doing so drew upon Margaret Archer's (1995) morphogenesis as an interpretative framework. The object of study – the communication between a social worker and Christian parent – is a highly complex social phenomenon. Drawing upon the discussion above, when social workers and Christian parents seek to operate communication agency they appear to do so within (at least) three force fields of constraining and enabling social structures. This suggested the following research questions, framed in the manner of critical realist ‘retroductive’ inquiry that begins with the observed phenomenon and looks back/beneath for potential structural influences (‘causal mechanisms’) interacting with agential entities for such action/effects to have occurred. Importantly within this, given the above discussion, I recognised that the inquiry should not silence the voices of the agential parties, but actively seek the perspectives of both social workers and Christian parents.

Research Questions

Thus, beginning with the observed phenomena - the action of social-worker-with-Christian parent-communication - the ‘meta’ research question asked: 'How do the three fields influence communication issues and communication action between a Christian parent and social worker?' Sub-questions drawn from the discussion and which elucidate this meta question were:

1. When communicating within statutory parenting assessment, how do social workers and Christian parents or carers perceive the issues arising from:
• the Christian belief issues?
• the issues arising from the social work role?
• the interpersonal communication?

2. How do these three types of perceptions of communication issues relate together to affect the decision-making, choice and actions taken?

Thus, to answer the research questions, and take up Archer’s framework, the thesis places the action of social worker-Christian parent communication at the central interface of those three aforementioned fields (or spheres) containing structural entities potentially enabling or constraining that action (see figure 1 below).

*Figure 1: Diagram of Overall Theoretical Framework: Social-worker-with-Christian-parent communication action at the central interface of three structural fields*

Put simply, the three fields and their interface with the action of social worker-Christian parent communication represent three of the four building blocks in the development of the thesis. These are understood with the underpinning epistemic services of the fourth building block: critical realism. Originally developed by Bhaskar, critical realism presents an alternative philosophical perspective to the ontological and epistemological
assumptions about ‘knowing’ raised within the three fields. Social reality is not relegated to merely the epistemological means by which we can grasp it, rather it is ontologically recognised as being independent and more than the totality of sensory experience (objectivism) or perceptions of individual or collective meaning (interpretivism) (Carter and New, 2004). For critical realists, a central concept is ‘layered, ontological depth’, referring to a deeper strata to reality, the domain of the ‘Real’, in which the powers and properties of structural entities (‘the three fields’) are potentially enacted through interplay with agential entities (‘the social workers and Christian parents’) to produce events/effects (‘possibly communication action’) in the domain of the ‘Actual’. Only a portion of those events, at the Empirical level, are potentially conceptually experienced (Ackroyd and Fleetwood, 2000). Reality is ontologically stratified and causally powerful in a second way. An entity (structural or agential) is made up of layered ‘parts’ that relate to each other, with that entity incapable of being reduced to the constituent properties of its parts. Further, the causal powers and potentialities of entities ‘emerge’ from the way in which those layered parts are made up (Archer, 1995). For example, an agent’s causal powers are emergent from particular interacting combinations of properties from the different layered parts of the physical brain, emotional and cognitive reasoning, interpretation of cultural symbols, amongst others (Smith, 2010). In viewing social reality as a multi-layered, web-like open system of interacting properties and powers critical realism presents a theoretical language to explore the complex dynamism of social work communication with parents about matters of their Christian beliefs (Houston, 2010).

Indeed, mindful of the critical realist prioritisation given to ontological depth, the conceptualisation of Christian religious belief that I have taken to the study is that of a ‘Christian worldview’ (Walsh and Middleton, 1984; Wright, 1992; Wright, 2013). ‘Worldview’ recognises Christian praxis as a way of thinking and concrete everyday living that makes sense of the peculiarity of circumstances but is not ‘individualistic’ for
it is connected to social and communal components of life. Neither is it represented as a reified abstract system, for Christianity “finds concrete expression in specific communities of people who try to live out the values and ideals of the religion. A religion calls for a distinctive way of life, and adherents with good standing within the religion are expected to conform to the established ideals. Religion thus provides an interpretive matrix within which particular groups of people understand themselves and what they regard as truly ultimate, and order their lives accordingly” (Netland, 2015, p.28). It is a matter to which I consider in more detail in Chapter 5: ‘Critical Realism as an Under-labourer’.

In addition to the principle of ‘ontological depth’, critical realists refer to a second principle of ‘epistemic relativity’. This principle refers to how it is our epistemic means for ‘knowing’ those events that are fallible (the Empirical level of reality), and not the ontological existence of reality itself (Iosifides, 2011). The critiquing and potential for replacing of existing theoretical explanations brings to bear the third central principle of critical realism: ‘judgemental rationality’. Competing knowledge claims require adjudication. However, with knowledge itself considered inherently contextual, there is an absence of universal criteria for such adjudication (Wright, 2013). In response, the critical realist researcher engages in rational judgement of the range of available evidence to retrospectively arrive at the best explanation for the patterns and processes already closely scrutinised in the phenomenon under investigation. Critical realists regard the preconceptions and assumptions of the researcher as inevitably influential in this activity, but view the process of researcher reflexivity as crucial and necessary for eliciting the understandings required. Indeed, Archer’s (2000 and 2007) emphasis upon the conscious process of agental reflexivity is a continual theme throughout the thesis, influencing all stages of the methodology (hence the importance of including the previous section in which I outlined my personal and professional
standpoint). What this retroductive inquiry looks like – the way it hangs together and how it is presented by the thesis - will now be summarised.

1.4. THE STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

In Part 1 of the thesis, I map out the structural territory of social-worker-with-Christian-parent communication (the three fields), and appraise that landscape in the light of critical realist principles. Whilst presented 'up front' I would highlight that my understanding of the three contextual ('structural') fields developed in an iterative way throughout the study (I say more about this in Chapter 6 'Methodology'). The thesis then moves to Part 2, to present the empirical component that I used to facilitate the rich retroductive explanation of the potential structure-agency mechanisms influencing the communication processes. The first empirical stage aimed to generate rich descriptive material by using Geertzian (1973) 'thick description.' Herein I used qualitative research methods within an intensive case study design to generate detailed descriptive data of both the concrete behaviours of the substantive event of social-worker-with-Christian-parent communication (the 'speech-act') and individual (agential) meanings of the way such action signifies contextual and experiential understanding ('parts and whole understanding')(Vanhoozer 2007). Two different qualitative methods were used to produce two data sets to attend to both the actual event of communication and social worker and Christian parent or carer perceptions of it:

1. The Forum Theatre method used within a performance to a sample of qualifying social work students and qualified social workers (Practice Educators)

2. Unstructured qualitative interviews with a sample of volunteer social work service users (parents self-identifying as practising Christians) to create the basis and themes for the script used for the forum theatre performance.
This powerful description was used for the second stage, where analytic tactics from Glaser and Strauss' Grounded Theory (1967) were used within a critical realist framework to conduct the retroductive analysis and produce the retroductive explanation of the communication tensions. It is important to note that I have sought to structure/present the thesis with the layered ‘parts and whole’ understanding of critical realist enquiry with the ‘macro’ perspective of the structural fields owning their own chapters at the beginning in Part 1 of the thesis (Chapters 2-5) but intersposed with insights from the empirical data (the ‘micro’ perspective of agential reflexions and actions). Part 2 of the thesis views the data from the other direction, presenting key themes from the ‘micro’ participant perspectives of the communication action, but intersposed with reference back to the three fields of ‘macro’ structural entities (Chapters 6-8). It is important to note that I have chosen to structure/present the thesis with the layered ‘parts and whole’ understanding of critical realist enquiry with the ‘macro’ perspective of the structural fields owning their own chapters at the beginning in Part 1 of the thesis (Chapters 2-5) but intersposed with insights from the empirical data (the ‘micro’ perspective of agential reflexions and actions). Part 2 of the thesis views the data from the other direction, presenting key themes from the ‘micro’ participant perspectives of the communication action, but intersposed with reference back to the three fields of ‘macro’ structural entities (Chapters 6-8). I recognise that for some readers, this is an unusual approach, for it brings some data forward prior to the methodology (in the ‘macro’ perspective chapters) even though the main bulk of the data is presented after the methodology (in the ‘micro’ perspective of agential reflexions and actions chapters). My reasoning is that this presentation reflected more accurately the critically iterative, back-and-forth, recursive, spiral process of seeking increasing explanatory understanding of the phenomena of social-worker-with-Christian-parent-communication. The relationship between the processes and the results was dialectical and ongoing from start to finish of the study. Put in simple terms,
there was something of a recursive ‘chicken and egg’ understanding of the ontologically deep reality of the phenomenon going on, and I wanted to reflect that in the presentation of the study. As summarised and presented later in Figure 2 (Chapter 6: Methodology), the stages were iterative not linear. In accord with King (2004), therefore, my presentation of the findings can be seen, not a separate ‘end process’, but integral to the analysis. The thesis concludes with considering how the understandings achieved might provide for future changes in practice. The structure is reproduced visually below (Figure 2).

*Figure 2: Diagram of Overall Thesis Structure to Promote ‘Parts and Whole’ Understanding.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thesis Structure</th>
<th>Numbers and Titles of Chapters with Brief Summary of Content</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Part 1:</strong></td>
<td></td>
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</table>
| ‘Macro Perspective’: The Structural Fields | Chapter 2: Field of Christianity (as an integrated worldview)  
This chapter is organised in three parts to present my considerations of how communicative tension could be connected to socio-cultural structural tensions operating at a deeper level to the interpersonal interaction. |
| **Chapter 3: Field of Professional Social Work** | This chapter considers how statutory social work (in England), as an institution and set of practices, is primarily influenced by a secular liberal humanist worldview, yet claims a socially informed set of practices and values that provide a richer perspective to liberalism’s ‘toleration’. Moving into deeper examination, the discussion highlights structural influences that point to marginalised understanding of Christian worldview praxis. In the final section, when specifically looking at more culturally accepting Christian parent-with-social worker communication, and drawing upon moral and theological reasoning from a Christian perspective, |
Chapter 4: Field of Social Work Communication

This chapter looks for what the social work theoretical and practice frameworks concerning social work communication reveal about the outworking of tolerance within the dynamics of social workers’ communication with Christian parents. The discussion points to the importance of recognising the potential for instrumental reasoning within the micro level of social-worker-with-parent communication, whereby the action of communication can operate in powerful interests to impose norms, limit individual freedom and distort truthful understanding.

Chapter 5: Critical Realism as an Under-labourer

This chapter explains how critical realism offers philosophical analytical tools for questioning the absence of place for metaphysical ontological commitments (truthful living) in matters of social work communication. The first section introduces critical realism and outlines its analytical tools – the key principles of ontological realism, epistemic relativism, and judgemental rationality. The second section displays the significance of these critical realist analytical tools by applying them to the matter of worldviews, particularly highlighting how critical realism: a) retrieves religious discourse (worldviews), and b) identifies non-religious discourse as itself being a faith worldview. The third section goes deeper in unpacking the way worldviews function in terms of the dynamic between agents and structures, and the pitfalls of upwards and downwards conflation in theorising about such social relations.
<table>
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<th>Chapter 6: Methodology Chapter</th>
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<tr>
<td>This chapter details the empirical component taken to facilitate the rich retroductive explanation of the potential structure-agency mechanisms influencing the communication processes. The first section presents the methodology that addresses the research questions and how its hermeneutic-phenomenological epistemological underpinning is informed (under-laboured) by critical realist retroductive enquiry. The second section gives the rationale for the data-collection methods, tells the story of their deployment, and describes how I went about doing the analysis including how I decided to best report the data. In the third section I outline some specific ethical considerations that influenced decisions about the choice of method, given that the research is based upon a controversial issue, and engages with the experiences of real people who could have experienced negative consequences as a result of the process (such as being prevented to parent/adopt).</td>
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<th>Chapter 7: ‘Reporting the Christian Parents’ Voice’: Findings from the interview data</th>
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<td>This chapter (and the next chapter) presents key themes from the ‘micro’ participant perspectives of the communication action, but interspersed with reference back to the three fields of ‘macro’ structural entities. In this chapter I present themes from the unstructured interviews with the Christian parents of their reflections of their communication with a social worker: Theme 1 ‘Different worlds, different language’, then Theme 2 ‘Motivated richness to their Christian parenting’.</td>
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<th>Chapter 8: ‘Reporting the Social Workers’ Communication</th>
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<td>Actions and Reflexions*: Findings from the forum theatre data</td>
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<td>The themes from the interview-based parental perspectives were put into dramatised dialogue, which, in Part 1 of the forum theatre performance, the social worker spect-actors watched, to ‘take in’ the parental perspectives of social worker-with-Christian-parent-communication. The script being re-performed in Part 2 immediately followed Part 1. In this chapter I present thematic findings drawn from my analysis of the Part 2 reflexive discussions and communication action, accompanied by insights from my reflexive memos of the dynamics observed among all the spect-actors including the social worker spect-actors and the Christian actors enacting the perspectives of the Christian parents. The six themes presented are: “Strong emotional reaction to perceived judgemental attitudes”; “Sticking with the formula” (looking for formulaic communication action); “The church issue” (social worker initiated communication about belief); “Keep them private or make them public” (keeping beliefs personal or making beliefs public); “Assuming indoctrination” theme (assuming conflict of interest); “Get real!” (assumption of naivety).</td>
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<th>Concluding Material</th>
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<td>Chapter 9: Conclusions and Implications</td>
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<td>It is now that I draw the developing threads of understanding from the thesis together. First, I present what seems to me to be the best retroductive explanation of ‘what seems to be going on’ behind/beneath the communication dynamics summarised within the aforementioned section. Second, I move forward to where I think we should go from here in terms of changes in social work education for practice. Finally, I offer an overall reflexive summary</td>
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of the study, its limitations and the opening for further social work research.

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The following chapter begins the journey by introducing the contextual landscape to the study, familiarising readers to some of the tensions and terminology of integrated worldviews.
Part 1
‘Macro Perspective’: The Structural Fields
Chapter 2: Field of Christianity
(as an integrated worldview)

2.1. INTRODUCTION TO THE CHAPTER

This chapter is organised in three parts to consider how communicative tension could be connected to socio-cultural structural tensions operating at a deeper level to the interpersonal interaction.

- There is a failure to consider the complex nature of the Christian worldview, particularly in its expression of truthful, integrated living. As such, the chapter begins with considering Christianity as a worldview perspective of a coherent structure of meaning - containing the elements of ultimate questions of meaning and purpose of life, cultural symbols and communal practices, as well as lived out praxis, all underpinned by a Storied Biblical metanarrative.

- The notion of worldview is then taken to summarise the components of the secular liberal humanist worldview: the Post-Enlightenment matrix of naturalism; secular humanism; and secular liberalism. The discussion displays the clash of the Christian worldview with the dominance of the secular liberal humanist worldview.

- The third part of the chapter moves to explore the interaction and expectations of each worldview towards each other. The discussion considers ‘flashpoints’, and particularly the moment when Christian Otherness becomes not celebrated but a problem and a threat to the principles underpinning the political liberal solution.

2.2. CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW

I interviewed Ellen, a part-time schoolteacher in her fifties, in the sitting room of her semi-detached home in a smarter road of a city suburb. Intermingled among framed
photographs of her children were cards, candles, pictures and ornaments depicting praying hands, crucifixes and Bible verses displaying variations of humorous but encouraging sentiment alongside statements of God as father and creator, Jesus as friend and saviour and Holy Spirit as comforter. Ellen was born into a conservative Anglican white middle-class family and her father had been the local vicar. Although not ordained, she had been a part-time member of clerical staff of a large evangelical Anglican church for over a decade. Every week, she hosted a mid-week small group meeting of church members for prayer and Bible Study in her home. She co-led a weekly parent-toddler group and organised a holiday club for the children of local families in every school holiday. Ellen had been a single parent for most of her parenting years, her first marriage crumbled by the sudden tragedy, trauma and relentless care of one of her children (Ruth) being brain damaged during an operation. As the parent of a child with disabilities, Ellen had met with several social workers to assess her family’s support needs. When describing to me the matter of how her beliefs had arisen in communication with one of those social workers, she referred to her sense-making of her parenting situation as being shaped (in her words) “by a Christian foundation”. As the following extract displays, she did not refer to a list of doctrinal statements or rules, but reasoned her family’s predicament and her coping action by drawing upon an overarching narrative of a divine being (God) reaching out to suffering humans to bring them in relationship with him. She describes meeting the social worker at a developmental review for her daughter at a specialist hospital.

“Ellen: I remember meeting this particular social worker who was extremely friendly, and I remember one thing that was very important to me, she greeted Ruth as if she was a real, well she was a real person, but talked to her and wasn’t fazed at all by Ruth’s limitations to respond. And then she got talking with me and she was asking, sort of, about how the assessments had gone that particular day, how I had felt about it, and I sort of said that I was very
depressed about those kind of meetings because they always seemed so negative and she just sort of said ‘well having a disabled child is sort of difficult anyway, how do you cope?’ And it was at that point that I said, ‘well, it doesn’t solve the on-going, day-to-day problems but I am a Christian, therefore, that is the foundation that I look at situations and work out what’s going on. And then she shared with me that she was a Christian too. So that was fairly amazing. I am trying to think about how she did that. My memory was that she said ‘Oh, you too’ with a lovely smile and that opened up the conversation really about, the whole issue really, about suffering and how God allows these things, but she was there, obviously in a very practical capacity to talk with parents who had been to the Centre and she wanted to know all the practical stuff about how we were going to get home... Erm, what I remember was that she made it very, very clear in everything she did, everything she said to me, the way she related to me, that she saw Ruth as a completely valid person, although she was so limited, and she understood that my relationship with Ruth was in many ways a terribly normal mother and daughter relationship. I cared intensely about her and I wanted the best for her but obviously there were a lot of extra bricks in that particular building because of Ruth’s disability...I think she also understood, erm, she did because she was a Christian, about the struggle you have with suffering when you are a Christian... I didn’t have to justify or explain lots of things to her about my faith because she shared them and she understood that. It was just positive and I appreciated it so much. In fact I did see her on other occasions. It was a very, very valuable experience for me.

Johanna: So when you say that you didn’t have to explain it to her because you felt that she ‘understood’, was that particularly because of the conversations that you had about the suffering issue, or..?
Ellen: [interjects] I think that the key thing was the way in which the suffering came in. The guise, the form it came into our family life was that most people are really, really angry about this, like 'as a Christian how on earth could God have allowed this to happen?' That is the immediate response of most people. Particularly people who don’t share your Christian faith. ‘How could the God you claim to love and worship...how could he have done this? He could have stopped that’, which is a valid point. But I didn’t have to, that wasn’t how she approached it. She understood that, I suppose, God doesn’t send suffering. That because our world’s mucked up he allows it, all those kind of things. That he is through it, in it, with us.”

In the landmark series “Christian Origins and the Question of God”, N. T. Wright (1992) proposes a particular Christian worldview philosophical approach to consider Christian belief statements (such as those illustrated by Ellen) as not merely random, abstract propositions but speech acts given meaning through reference to a Biblical meta-narrative that narrates God’s revealed personality and plan as narrated through the prophets of Ancient Israel, the actions of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and then the community of Christian believers. God creates, and then saves and restores his creation (having been made impure and broken by humans) through the death and resurrection of Jesus as Messiah in accordance to ‘eternal law’ and in accomplishment of his promises to Israel (Wright, 2006). This overarching Biblical narrative of the Christian worldview constitutes reality assumptions that present a coherent structure of meaning for people. For Christian believers the meta-narrative or ‘Story’ is a live drama in which they play a part, as God’s actors in the restoration, and for which purposes God empowers them through the Holy Spirit. As such the Story gives a hopeful purpose to their existence and meaning to life’s events. Wright’s explanation of ‘living within the Story’ is as living within an overlapping time of heaven and earth, whereby
“God’s future purposes, having come forward to meet us in Jesus, are now to be implemented ahead of the day when God makes all things new” (Wright, 2006, p.162).

Wright regards humans as inherent story-telling creatures, with story-telling being the preferred modus operandi for humans in comprehending and relating with the world. Stories are everywhere: told generationally through traditional myths as well as within political discourse or family communication and personal reasoning. New information is positioned within the pattern of existing storylines or the overarching Story, with stories told to reinforce, defend, fine-tune, challenge or modify existing worldviews. In this way worldviews can be considered to have internal coherency as a structure of meaning but remain open and dynamic to resist and/or accommodate change when tested by life’s experiences and alternative worldviews. Christian worldview theorists argue that the analysis allows for nuanced differences to exist within this coherency, such as within differing branches of Christianity, but that ‘family resemblances’ remain (Dockery and Thornbury, 2002).

When applied to Ellen’s statement, it is possible to see how her positioning of her story within the ‘Story’ enabled her to cohere the peculiarity of her situation with existential issues concerning life’s meaning and purpose. She felt able to cope because she drew upon her and her daughter’s place in the larger Story, citing a relationship with a transcendent God who, in the face of a ‘broken world’, seeks to come alongside and strengthen hurting humans. As she described God equally reaching out to her in her suffering, the Story had become her story too. The Story gave an ethical purpose to her parenting and she drew comfort from it. Moreover, she was at pains to emphasise the usefulness and satisfaction gained from her feeling that the social worker understood her Story-telling. It was not just through a shared understanding of the terminology (and related significance) of its ingredients, particularly the tensions raised concerning suffering, but her perception of the display of the Story in the affirming actions of the social worker herself. Those actions displayed a valuing of her
daughter’s existence and their parent-daughter relationship, notwithstanding the difficulties within it.

In addition to the overarching meta-narrative, Ellen’s statement also illustrates a second component of Wright’s four components of a worldview: existential questioning. Wright joins many theorists’ contention that worldviews also contain basic questions encountered by everyone to make sense of their existence: Who am I? Where am I? What is wrong? What is the solution? (Dockery and Thornbury, 2002; Sire, 2004; Downey and Porter, 2009; Sherwood, 1998; Walsh and Middleton, 1984, p.35) To answer these questions – to “begin to see reality in a sensible pattern” - individuals draw on deeply held beliefs or foundational commitments that are seldom conscious but pre-theoretical in nature (Walsh and Middleton, 1984, p.35). According to Wright (1992, p.123) the stories expressed by advocates of specific worldviews “can in principle” illuminate the answers to the existential questions. Drawing upon a number of different worldview theorists, an example of answers to the four ultimate worldview questions from a Christian worldview perspective is provided below. Following Wright, those answers are conceived as expressing meaning through the aforementioned overarching Biblical narrative.

1. Who am I? Christians claim there to be one true God who has a triune nature of: Creator-Father; Jesus Christ – the Son/Saviour; and Holy Spirit – intercessor/comforter. God is transcendent (separate from creation) and yet also personally engages with creation with power and goodness. Christians believe that humans are made in the image of the Creator God (Genesis 1: 26-27; Genesis 9:6; James 3:9) and thereby have personhood with intrinsic meaning and value regardless of characteristics and social location (race, gender, class, ability, geographical location, sexuality) (Wright, 1992). Humans’ thoughts and actions are not determined, but “given the gift of agency” (Sherwood 1998: 121) to freely act but with responsibility (Genesis 1:218; Genesis 2: 21-25; Genesis 3: 1-21). Created by and in the image of a relational
God, humans are relational beings commanded to ‘love your neighbour as yourselves’. Christians particularly highlight God’s parental love, emphasizing God’s wish for a loving close personal relationship with each person. Service to people, societies, animals and the planet is regarded as reflecting worshipful glory to God and of ‘imaging God’ in the world (Strom, 2009; Naugle, 2012). Christian believers look to God for guidance about ‘truth’ and ‘truthful living’. God’s self-disclosure has been categorised as general revelation accessible to anyone open to receive it, and specific revelation of certain matters to particular people (Huffman, 2009). Examples of the former are evident in the manifestation of God in nature, or the purposeful movement of the Christian tradition through time, or the human expression of desire to worship God and care for each other. Specific revelation is demonstrated though Scripture and the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ (Hebrews 1: 1-2).

2. Where am I? Christians believe the world to be beautiful, moral, ordered and purposeful, created as an act of love by God. The world is not God, nor is God emanating, but is a testimony to God’s creative power, provision and benevolence (Genesis 1:1-2:3; Psalms 96 and 97). Humans are not in an abstract world (as Gnosticism suggests), nor in a cosmos to which humans owe allegiance as a god or many gods (as pantheism suggests) (Wright, 1992).

3. What is wrong? Wright (1992, p.133) words the answer in terms of human rebellion against the creator, reproducing a “cosmic dislocation between the creator and creation” such that the (human and natural) world falters because it is out of kilter with its original perfect state and created purpose. The world “groans for redemption” (Romans 8: 22). The problem is in the operation of freewill whereby humans tend to operate by human rules rather than relying upon God’s revelation and actions (Romans 7: 14-20). The Bible tells the first rebellion story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and consequences for humans in being separated from God, facing evil, death
and experiencing suffering. The rebellion stories are repeated in the Old Testament story of Israel and the prophets, and then the New Testament and Jesus’ teachings.

4. What is the solution? The remedy is reconciliation with God through redemption. It is through redemption that all that has been destroyed can be renewed. The Old Testament speaks of the need for a perfect sacrifice. As opposed to a perfect animal, in the form of the sacrificial offerings of the Old Testament, the New Testament speaks of the perfect sacrifice being a God-man, Jesus Christ, who was with God at the beginning of the world and who lived a perfect life resisting temptation. Trinitarian Christians believe that God saw that humans (being imperfect and unholy by virtue of their rebellion) could not solve the problem of redemption on their own, and so God intervened on their behalf. By being a tripartite being – three persons of Father God (Jehovah the creator), God the son (Jesus Christ), and God the spirit (Holy Spirit) – he sent himself (Jesus Christ) to be the perfect sacrifice. Thus, as Wright (1992, p.133) emphasises, the solution is God’s continual action in the world (past, present and future) to address the suffering caused by human rebellion/separation and to recreate the world intended to “resonate fully with his own presence and glory”. For Christians, these are acts of grace from a loving God. Sherwood (1998, p.121) cites St Paul’s letter to the Ephesians (2: 8-10) in this regard: “For by grace you have been saved by faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no-one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” With personal redemption comes conversion from ‘sinful’ rebellious ways to a new way of living – ‘born again’ – to live a life more like Jesus Christ, seeking to be ever closer to God, and to be serving and healing people in the manner of his life.
It is important to recognise that Wright does not propose a solely cognitive/intellectual formula to his worldview approach. Rather, Wright's third and fourth components of a Christian worldview encompass the way in which a storied worldview and its answers to the four questions is made visible: cultural symbols and praxis. Cultural symbols constitute artefacts and events, such as buildings, festivals and family activities. Such symbols are produced and maintained by cultures to serve a social and cultural function in conserving a deeply-held worldview. Through their visibility and enactment, the symbols show the boundaries and reference points for that worldview – with engagement identifying those who are ‘included’ or ‘insider’ to that worldview. They influence the way in which everyday reality is apprehended, marking what is and is not plausible to accommodate within a culture. Indeed, the changes over time of both communities and cultural contexts means that symbolic references are challenged, resulting in accommodation, resistance, adaption and change. For example, religious reforms, often instigated by religious elites, attempt to purify religious symbolism and orchestrate rituals (Riis and Woodhead, 2010). An example is the Christian split arising from the Reformation movement and resultant Protestant denominational diversity. Another is the Christian split in response to the Enlightenment challenge. Christianity’s religious symbolism and language came under challenge in response to post Enlightenment plausibility structures regarding rational certainty. This is given attention in later sections.

Importantly though, a person's storied worldview can be best viewed by the way a person actually lives their life - what Wright refers to as praxis. This includes the forms of everyday habitual (“taken for granted”) actions, as well as a person’s overall “life-aims” and related motivated activity. Having resolved the four questions of existence, a person gives expression to their storied worldview by the concrete experiences of everyday life as a Christian:

13 I note James K A Smith’s (2009) critique that some worldview theorists tend to reduce Christian faith to formulas of what Christians think rather than include what Christians do.
“World views are best understood as we see them incarnated, fleshed out in actual ways of life. They are not systems of thought, like theologies or philosophies. Rather, world views are perceptual frameworks. They are ways of seeing. If we want to understand what people see, or how well people see, we need to watch how they walk. If they bump into certain objects or stumble over them, then we can assume that they are blind to them. Conversely, their eyes may not only see but dwell on certain other objects” (Walsh and Middleton, 1984, p.17).

Thus for NT Wright, Christian worldview reasoning about how to act ethically in the world is Trinitarian-narrative-dependent, rather than through reference to abstractly reasoned objective rules. It is based upon a big picture Biblical view of God’s revelation of himself through his creative and redemptive work and words in history, and ensuing confidence of his continued revelation and intervention in the lives of people charged with making his Kingdom. Wright (2006) emphasises the logic between narrative and action as vocation:

“Listening to God’s voice in scripture doesn’t put us in the position of having infallible opinions. It puts us where it put Jesus himself: in possession of a vocation, whether for a lifetime or for the next minute…..But the performance isn’t just about our own private pilgrimages. It’s about becoming agents of God’s new world - workers for justice, explorers of spirituality, makers and menders of relationships, creators of beauty.” (Wright, 2006, p.161-162).

So in this way NT Wright sees the church (as a community of believers) being the main symbols and symbols-in-praxis of the Christian worldview. He expresses strongly that the church community is God’s “advance guard”, his agents in the world. Naugle (2012) explains the potential for such agency as a matter of ‘imaging God’: “First, to be God’s image means that we are like God as total, embodied beings in substance, relationships and function…we are sufficiently like him to represent him in the world in
our various roles. Our identity as God’s image comes to expression as we image him in this world”. NT Wright (2013) fleshes out his perception of the church being the main symbols and symbols-in-praxis in the world within his detailed Christian worldview-study of St Paul’s letters (New Testament). He presents how Paul places unity, holiness and witness as central themes of this social praxis and as a counter to that traditionally positioned by Judaism and the Greek world (Galatians 3: 28). Wright considers the promotion of the ‘unity of the church’ as a driving theme to Paul’s mission (1 Corinthians and Romans 9:11), with the church presented as a ‘family’, manifest by ‘loving relationship’ and ‘hospitality’ to each other and to those outside (McKnight 2013). Importantly, the central shaping marker of this form of symbolic praxis, and of stipulated others (including prayer (and mysticism), Scripture, baptism and Eucharist), was that of the ‘good news’ narrative of the Messiah in the restorative work of crucifixion and resurrection. Jesus’ actions had educed Messianic symbols that declared Israel’s God being personally present with God’s people. Christians, therefore, choose not only to believe but to live out this ‘good news’ structuring narrative.

In summary, the belief content of an integrated worldview is positioned as motivating certain practices and experiences – that there is an “internal logic for doing Christianity” (Smith, 2007, p.167). It is through the medium of a worldview, as it is thought and lived out, that it is possible to make out some distinctiveness for the mainstream forms of belief of a religious tradition, in this case Trinitarian Christianity. To further clarify this distinction, it is useful to contrast the Christian worldview with the worldview which is most dominant in contemporary British culture, and provides the context for statutory social work practice: a secular liberal humanist worldview.
2.3. WORLDVIEW OF SECULAR LIBERAL HUMANISM

The worldview that frames social work is the post-Enlightenment matrix of naturalism, secular humanism, and secular liberalism (Hodge, 2015). It is impossible to fully debate the premises here but I will summarise the general features of each matrix constituent. In doing so, I will show how the historical development of the secular-liberal-humanist matrix is foundationally entangled with the Christian worldview.

2.3.1. NATURALISM

The basis of the naturalistic view is of the cosmos being a self-generating and emergent natural system of which human beings are the most supreme entities and thereby able to freely action their own motivations (Gellner, 1992). Accelerated during the Enlightenment, naturalism responded to the Cartesian anxiety for secure and stable foundations for thought and action (Bernstein, 1983). Late medieval reasoning (espoused in William of Ockham’s writing) had questioned the actions of humans in reasoning about God. In the search for knowledge of God and certainty of his actions such human reasoning reduced his sovereignty and omnipotence. God had the power to act arbitrarily in human lives regardless of any human acts of worthiness or intercession. It was a matter that increased uncertainty about the human place in the world (A. Wright, 2015). Natural science showed increasing success to describe the natural world with major technological advances securing wealth and prosperity. Humans claimed to increasingly understand and control nature through experiment and reasoning, fuelling a heightened perspective of their place within the natural order-of-things. The emerging assumption was that there could be understanding of natural events without recourse to explanations of supernatural, transcendent interventions. There was no need to look beyond the natural because nature was the bedrock - there was no meaning and purpose beyond it (A. Wright, 2015, p25-26)

The answers to the four ultimate existential questions shed more light upon the underpinning naturalistic worldview. To the first two questions (‘Who am I? Where am
I?`) the naturalistic answer is that if the cosmos is an open and emergent natural system that self-generates but has no higher purpose or meaning, then the emergence of sentient beings is similarly arbitrary and purposeless. With natural laws of cause-and-effect creating the conditions of possibility for emergence, the human race continues in its adaptation to cause-and-effect regardless of whether the individual suffers or dies (Cosgrove, 2006).

The answers to the worldview questions ‘What is wrong? What is the solution?’ simply affirm the natural adaptive basis to existence, whether the problem is, for example, sexual exploitation, mental ill health, or abusive parenting. As Anacker and Shoup (2014) comment, the question is strange, for “it is like looking at a normal tree and asking ‘What is its condition, what is its problem?’ Humans are what they are – that is a random product of a blind physical process. They live, experience pleasure and pain, have thoughts, dreams, plans, and emotions, and then they die” (Anacker and Shoup, 2014, p.40). Thus, the solution can only be natural - aimed at reducing pain, extending life, and intensifying gratification. Ultimately this means that as there is no ultimate purpose to the suffering endured by humans, there is no point in letting suffering linger, and prolonging life (Cosgrove, 2006). If the natural order is all that there is, with human life having no particular meaning or purpose beyond reproducing and adapting through cause-and-effect, then determining right or wrong actions in human situations in terms of any absolute values is immaterial. In living out a purely naturalistic worldview naturalists have proposed the ‘is-ought’ equation as an ethic for determining behaviour that might allow the human race to continually survive. This reads as anything that ‘is’ (has evolved/survived historically) ‘ought’ to be good enough to continue (Cosgrove, 2006). Yet, the logic of this ‘survival of the fittest’ ethic in justifying continuity of any behaviour/human situation, no matter how odious, has been called into question. No one lives as if any detrimental human situation or behaviour is allowable and without curtailment simply on the basis of it already existing. The outplaying of the naturalistic
worldview in ethical terms is therefore problematic. It is a problem well illustrated by Ellen’s account of her interaction with the hospital medical professionals, specifically her distress at the continual negativity and hopelessness in regard to her daughter’s development. In such situations of intense vulnerability, when the meaning and purpose of difficulties is unclear, and a solution in solely natural terms absent, the naturalistic understanding can only offer stoicism and fatalism.

The Cartesian anxiety underlying the naturalistic worldview is attributed to an increasing scepticism – a ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’ - of anything that cannot be known for certain. Moreover, increasingly for Enlightenment philosophers this came to mean anything that does not stand up to scrutiny of reason and empiricism (A. Wright, 2015). Herein, the policy of scepticism distinguished the certainty of objective fact from the equivocality of subjective value. Matters of aesthetics, morality and transcendence were demarcated as private matters of opinion and choice, rather than as offering knowledge of humankind, the world and the ultimate order-of-things. Descartes extended the hermeneutic of suspicion to any claim made on the trust basis of externally sanctioned authority, such as collective norms/rules. He privileged the individual human capability for rational self-reflections upon experience, giving greater authority to the authenticity of such autonomous knowing, as Andrew Wright (2004, p15) explains:

"It is here in the immediacy of his self-awareness, that Descartes arrives at the Archimedean point from which all distinctively modern ways of knowing proceed: if I am to accept something as true it must be something I know for myself, something I have experienced first hand; if I am to live authentically in the modern world then I must learn to have the courage to think for myself, to trust the experience of my own senses, to follow my own feelings and instincts, to do things my way. I cannot live vicariously at second hand, trusting in external authority and allowing other people’s experiences to act as substitutes
for my own. It is my own unique existential reality, rather than any shared beliefs or collective experiences, that must act as my ultimate guide. The hermeneutic of suspicion thus leads directly to the distinctively modern notion of rational autonomy: independent, emancipated, self-governing and self-reliant.”

Andrew Wright (2015) continues to explain how modern naturalistic philosophy became predicated upon such dislocation of the human mind from the external world ‘out there’. It rested upon a realist theory of truth grounded in the potential correspondence of ideas developed in the mind with the natural entities of the world, and claimed the language of scepticism alongside the method of empiricism to achieve the connection. Logical positivism took an extreme philosophical position to this adjudication through its application of the principle of verification. With a view of the natural world as being ordered, universally law governed, and encompassing all possible sense experience, empirical description of the natural world was deemed possible through systematically staged scientific procedures. Naturalistic knowledge, in seeking to reveal objective and verifiable ‘facts’ of reality, confined itself solely to that which is revealed by the senses. Anything potentially existing beyond the senses was deemed unverifiable, rendered meaningless and unreal. This stood in opposition to any notion of a metaphysical reality of supernatural mystery beyond the boundaries of human comprehension but nevertheless real. By way of illustration to my example, a logical positivist reading would view Ellen’s belief statements as merely value-statements without meaning, including her reference to external authorities of doctrinal-based belief and traditional practices grounded in the Biblical metanarrative. The truthfulness of her propositions would have no way of being empirically verified or refuted for neither her reference to transcendence (“he is through it, in it, with us”) nor the moral purpose to her parenting could be seen, smelt, tasted, touched or heard.
2.3.2. Secular Humanism

The seeds of human aspiration to separate out and control a natural world for wholly human purposes were also identified with Renaissance humanism (Goheen and Bartholomew, 2008). In northern Italy a set of radical thinkers sought to challenge the totalitarianism and rigid hierarchy of church structures that had curbed individual freedom, technological development, and non-religious creative expression. They shifted their scholarly orientation away from the otherworldly (Greek philosophically informed) vision of the Christian worldview to an orientation focused upon the present natural world. In separating off the natural world (the saeculum) from God's jurisdiction, their re-orientation brought about changes in perception of God's declining engagement (and his authority) in human and natural life. It is this re-orientation that is proposed as the early opening to secular humanism (Goheen and Bartholomew, 2008).

The emphasis upon the secular realm brought encouragement of a sense of human autonomy. Understood in terms of freedom to live apart from God's authority, it stood in contrast to the Biblical worldview of living in obedience to God's instruction. Furthermore, the secular focus upon autonomy from God was extended to the non-human world. In viewing the world as 'nature' and not 'created', the world became viewed as independent and ordered by its own laws and machinery. In summary, this early secular humanism began to deny that either the natural world, or the human world, or their interaction could be viewed as inevitably ordinate to God's rule (Goheen and Bartholomew, 2008).

Humanism was further equipped by romanticism. Modernity was not blind to the reductive horizons of the naturalistic metanarrative. Operating as a mirror image of naturalism, an alternative romantic meta-narrative was generated celebrating the human capacity to encounter truth through examining the ideas/thoughts of the mind, regardless of any sense experience (Gadamer, 1979). Idealism rested on a coherence theory of truth, whereby the truthfulness of claims was adjudicated according to their inherent intelligibility, relatedness and unity. The language of scepticism was geared to
connecting an adequate coherent expression of thoughtful intuitions (‘sensibility’),
rather than to connecting the mind to the (‘sensory observed’) external world (A.
Wright, 2015). Modern idealists (such as Spinoza and Hegel) proffered cohesive
systems of rational thought with an emphasis upon a ‘dialectic of reason’. However,
later romantic idealists gave greater authority to feelings and emotions as providing
authentic bases for reasoning about reality. Aesthetics, morality and religion provided
the creative and imaginative sources and the language to give voice to such
experiences, and secured a path to universal knowledge through reflexively reasoned
self-knowledge. For Romanticism, the purpose for being human was to develop the
potential of one’s individual personality, seizing autonomy to self-express inward
desires/motives: “Be yourself; cultivate your personality” (Randall, 1940, p.415 cited in
Goheen and Bartholomew 2008, p.103).

However, exactly how the connection could be made between individual emotive
experience and reality presented a challenge to Romanticism. Romanticism filled the
human gaps left by the naturalistic reductionism of a world, and it provided access to
the intuitive domain of moral, aesthetic and religious value. Yet, in so doing it loosened
ties to any objective confidence through empirical verification. This left romanticism
open to accusations of an unconvincing dependence upon the subjective imagination.
‘Scientific physical fact’ verified by the objectivity of the natural world became
disconnected with ‘subjective value’ authenticated by subjective experience.

2.3.3. Secular Liberalism
Andrew Wright (2015) explains how liberalism, when traced back to John Locke, can
be seen as an ethic mediating the dualistic pressure between the Enlightenment meta-
narratives of naturalism and romanticism. The liberal ethic sought not to reconcile their
contradictory meta-narratives, but to find a way in which both could live together
harmoniously. It rested upon the principles of freedom of beliefs and tolerance of
others’ beliefs. The strategy was heuristic and practical. It reflected Locke’s recognition
of romanticism’s salutation of the importance of values and beliefs to human and societal flourishing (and claims for authentic experiential knowledge of them), while recognising the naturalistic assertion of the uncertainty of secure epistemological foundations for such phenomena. Until such time as the questions concerning the search for truth could be resolved, the freedom of belief principle was extended to any matter evidenced as being epistemologically uncertain. Moreover, the freedom for the individual to believe whatever she chose was tied to an associative moral obligation to tolerate the freedom of others to do the same. In such ethical climes of mutual respect, it was proposed that differences could be accepted and explored.

In time, however, the nature and operation of liberalism altered. As opposed to being a means to effect respectful understanding across cultural boundaries, liberalism became a comprehensive, non-negotiable worldview (MacIntyre, 1984; A. Wright, 2015). Tolerance and freedom of expression became end products, with believers of orthodox traditions (such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam) required to support relativism and denounce claims to the exclusive, universal truth of each of their traditions. It is an argument holding that in the public sphere it is unreasonable/intolerable to accord beliefs any more than relativistic and privately held status, on the basis that belief systems are unable to make secure knowledge-claims (being deemed unverifiable according to epistemic, scientific criteria for objectivity over subjectivity) and that some individuals or groups, in their outworking of their belief position(s) can infringe on others’ freedoms and cause harm. Indeed it is important to recognise that while many Christian adherents hold inclusive ‘accepting’ and/or liberal ‘affirming’ perspectives to individual and familial wellbeing, some positions and practices can be harmful in rejecting individual freedoms, and at an extreme level, be dangerous and abusive (such as in cases of clergy abuse and/or where children are deemed to be possessed by evil spirits). Social workers in their assessment of parenting operate within this statutory liberal framework of tolerating a plurality of beliefs and associated behaviours.
whilst ensuring that expression of those beliefs and behaviours do not impinge on the freedom and wellbeing of others (the latter not being tolerated). It is a matter that I come back to in the next section (looking at how the two worldviews interact/collide along a trajectory of that which is increasingly intolerable) and the next Chapter (looking at how social workers enact their secular liberal role in determining such situations of toleration/freedom). Here, my point is that from Liberalism’s perspective, private subjective beliefs about unverifiable matters should not have any influence upon public law and policy. Rather, within the Liberal polity, the more verifiable influences of scientific evidence govern. The Liberal premise is that the public sphere is can be should be independent and neutral in its determination of public good and individual wellbeing, with the measure of tolerating only verifiable scientific evidence providing some protectionism to its neutrality. Of course, it is impossible to ignore that this is a challenging premise in an era when public policy is driven by changing sets of opinions and contradictory evidence sources, such as contemporary examples of left or right wing political parties, cross party Brexit opinions of Leave or Remain, and Trump-government claims of truth, untruth and post-truth to external scrutiny of policy.”

The move from the politically driven liberal ethic to the worldview of comprehensive liberalism is associated with the postmodern scepticism of any meta-narrative and its capability of providing certainty to the order-of-things. In this way comprehensive liberalism encompasses an ideology of pluralism: “that is, the belief that pluralism is to be encouraged and desired and that normative claims to truth are to be censured as imperialist and divisive…Claims by any one group or individual to have an exclusive hold on ‘truth’ are thus treated as the intellectual equivalent of fascism’ (McGrath, 1992, p361). The intellectual grounding to pluralism is associated with postmodernism’s scepticism of modernity’s universalised, fixed, certain absolutes, its mistrust of the motives and power of metanarratives, its challenge of an inherent socio-
cultural embedding to any human knowing, and its celebration of cultural differences and myriad intersections. Postmodernity, though imprecisely defined and disputed, at base points to a demise of modernity (Gorski et al. 2012). The Enlightenment promise of progress for public wellbeing had been found wanting. Science and technology made advances in medicine and physics, yet simultaneously produced the harmful effects of urbanization and worldwide warfare. The idolisation of the enterprising human spirit and power of human reasoning brought the Jewish Holocaust and Stalinist Purges. Human reasoning had not succeeded at either delivering “foundations for a universally valid knowledge of the world, and God” or supplying a morality conducive to the actualities of real world living, as opposed to abstract thought. “And with this collapse in confidence in universal and necessary criteria of truth relativism and pluralism have flourished” (McGrath, 1992, p364).

In such limited word space this could only be somewhat of a whistle-stop tour of the meta-narratives of naturalism, romanticism and liberalism to show how the secular liberal humanist worldview takes together all three in its account for the ultimate order of things and a way of living in light of it. There have been charges that secular humanism is not a coherent ’sealed’ worldview, but a collection of oppositions to theistic belief (Barnes, 2015). However, founding principles published by the Humanist Society claim a particular stance to the world (Humanists UK 2017). It is possible to consider how the four ultimate existential questions relate to it: Who am I? Where am I? What is wrong? What is the solution? For answers to the first two questions, secular humanism follows naturalism in viewing the world as a self-generating natural system (secular) but sheds the naturalistic logic of humans being merely arbitrary (humanism). Secular humanism recognises an experience of humanness to be held in highest value by self and other humans, and negates any valuing by a god, for life holds meaning and purpose but it is a secular not sacred universe. The highest purpose of personhood is to discover ‘self’ and attain full potential. This is a purpose achieved
through freeing deep personal intuitive feelings. As self-determining persons with consciousness, humans are considered to have inner directness toward moral action.

For the secular liberal humanist the answers to the last two questions (What is wrong? What is the solution?) lie in the unblocking of internalised and/or external obstructions to human self potential. Rules and limitations imposed by family, community and belief-systems are posited as sometimes causing suffering by being unfairly restrictive and harmful. However, this stance assumes that each individual's self-determination of ‘what feels like the right action’ is never in error. What if a person’s most innermost desires are fulfilling to self but also detrimental to self and to others? This raises a question at the high view of humanity position, for as Cosgrove (2006, p.103) summarises “there is no meaning to suffering: you may grow from hard times, but suffering or martyrdom is rarely a good choice of behaviour.” If humans are more than arbitrary products emerging from a universe that reproduced them, then the value and meaning of their existence to themselves, to each other, and to the world, needs greater coherent explanation, rather than to simply claim high esteem for them. Despite these inconsistencies there are symbols and cultural practices to a secular liberal humanist worldview. James K A Smith (2009), for example, presents the shopping mall as being like a temple of cultural practice given materiality through such things as the flags and messages that adorn the walls and shop-fronts.

2.4. **How do these worldviews interact?**

To say that either worldviews are hermeneutically sealed would be an error. Neither worldviews are static, monolithic entities (Brümmers, 1999; Walker and Parry, 2014). There is both bleeding within and across, with resistance or adaption as each encounters fresh circumstances and each other (Netland, 2015,p37).

As just explored, the secular liberal humanist worldview propounds rules for dealing with religion. Articulated as ‘freedom of religious conscience’, adherents of religious
ways of life are free and autonomous to believe what they wish, so long as they are tolerant of other people’s beliefs and practices. In the UK’s current pluralist climate, this notion of freedom and autonomy is expressed as a celebration of cultural diversity. It links with ideas of embracing ‘Otherness’, with the cultural ‘Other’ and pluralist ‘Others’ encompassed within an economy of secular liberal humanist autonomy. This can be illustrated by the institutionalising of ‘valuing diversity’ within public policy-practice and legislation. Herein, the notion has become foundational rhetoric for public service provision, enshrined within professional Codes of Conduct (such as the British Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics 2012). Actions that negatively discriminate (treat unfairly) on the basis of another’s ‘difference’ are unlawful (The Equality Act 2010). So when does Christian Otherness become not celebrated but a problem and a threat to the principles underpinning the political liberal solution? To answer this it is important to consider the expectations of each worldview vis-à-vis each other.

The secular liberal humanist perspective regards the Christian worldview as existing among a diversity of cultural Others. The expectation is for the Christian expression of values to remain sufficiently private and unobtrusive so as to be co-operative and without offense to alternative cultural Others. To be tolerated as ‘Other’ a Christian perspective and way of life cannot bring negative public attention to itself. However, to arrive at the converse position - to no longer tolerate the Christian worldview as Other - the secular liberal humanist response appears to operate something akin to a trajectory. At its base, when a person moves from a position of privately holding a Christian worldview to disclosing it publically, the response is to regard the declaration as tolerable but not to be celebrated. For the secular liberal humanist, whose vision excludes a transcendent dimension, such public revelation of a belief system whose plausibility structures it deems are irrational and subjective is illogical and thereby uncomfortable. More unease arises from the assumption that any disclosing Christian
will inevitably seek to persuade secular and religious Others to change their beliefs and accept core Christian commitments. Formal Christian position statements, available in the public domain, promote openness, humility, integrity, and absence of compulsion in any witness of faith to another (i.e. absence of proselytization), on the basis of enacting a doctrine of ‘love to one’s neighbour as oneself’ and to following ‘the way of Christ’ as being a matter of free-will, i.e. chosen with free choice.\footnote{For a summary on this matter see Bickley’s 2015 research published by the think tank Theos, or the joint publication by the three main Christian bodies (World Council of Churches, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and World Evangelical Alliance, 2011) entitled \textit{Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct}. The three groups represent hundreds of Christian denominations, including Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican, Protestant, Evangelical, Pentecostal and independent churches.} Wright helpfully explains the Trinitarian theological grounding thus:

“...from the ontology of divine love: a truly loving relationship, as perfectly and eternally actualised in the Trinity, requires the reciprocal free gift of each person in selfless service of the other. Without such freedom, relationships become coercive and their ontological grounding disrupted. Since God lovingly created the world for the world’s sake, the proper end of creation is to enter freely into a reciprocal loving relationship with its Creator. God’s gracious gift of love thus requires that creation be free to reciprocate in kind” (Wright 2013, p.158, his italics).

However, for the secular liberal humanist, the Christian’s evangelistic obligation to bear witness to the Christian Story (no matter how culturally sensitive in its undertaking) is an affront to freedom. In some inter-religious contexts evangelistic dialogue could contain symbolic power, such as those contexts containing legacies of the past relations of colonialism and inter-religious violence at the hands of Christendom (Porpora 2004; Netland 2015). At this stage of the trajectory, however, the secular liberal unease stems from \textit{assumptions} of Christian motivated behaviour, rather than actual proselytization.
Yet, the trajectory steepens when a Christian’s publically made position intensifies to making public assertions or publically defending Christian values, or raising criticisms of the secular status quo. The secular liberal worldview response is to consider it ‘bad taste’ (Griffiths 2001). Netland (2015,p.232) describes this flashpoint as constituting questions of normative action for the benefit of the “common higher good”, whereby “the rights of free speech and freedom of religious expression clash with what seem to be common sense and simple decency”. The flashpoint reveals a distinction between the actions of a person in pursuit of what is legally permissible in constituting religious freedom, and the actions of what a ‘good citizen’ ought to do in fostering civic virtue. Herein, the moral quality of civil virtue is given higher accord to the pursuance of legislative rights. It is a normative stance expecting a sacrifice of religious freedom. Christian groups typically portrayed by the media as embodying bad taste are evangelical Christians. Characterised by the media as demonstrating zealous proselytising, and boldly applying uncritical literal readings of Scripture to issues of everyday life, evangelicals are publically ridiculed or chastised for their visibility (for example, Strhan (2012) illustrates this same point with articles from the Daily Telegraph 2012; Daily Mail 2012). Strhan’s (2012,p.8) ethnographic study of the lived, everyday experiences of conservative evangelical Christians in London provides an insight into the structuring effects of the tension in living under the label of such characterisation (“being labelled ‘intolerant’ by ‘tolerant’ liberals”) for seeking to live differently to universalizing modern norms. She explored how in desiring a “public expression of belief”, the meaning and public expression of her research subjects’ beliefs and their felt experience of God, were revealed and reinforced through “listening and speaking practices”. As a medium of communication it bound them more closely “in their sense of dependence on God and each other” but equally it exposed them to secular liberal criticism alongside a sense of moral fragmentation. Throughout the study she considered how her research subjects negotiated secular expectations for appropriate worldview expression, describing “a faith… patterned through their being
shaped as modern, urban subjects according to norms of interaction internalized outside the church and their development of moral and temporal orientations that rub against these” (Shrhn, 2012, p.2). In other words, their expression of faith was mediated by secular expectations to not act in ‘bad taste’.

The point in the trajectory at which a Christian worldview perspective is regarded as becoming threatening and potentially dangerous is when its claims to exclusive truth are made readily apparent (rather than merely assumed). Liberal pluralism tolerates only cultural relativity. An absolute position pronounced or defended to others is perceived as inherently conflictual (Griffiths, 2001). When Christianity proclaims its value-positions to be ‘truthfully derived’, it claims a ‘more correct’ perspective to the order-of-things. More than this, when seeking to speak about ‘living truthfully’ Christians make a claim to certainty that secular human reasoning itself is sceptical of knowing. Put together, such reality-orientated communication is regarded by secular liberals as actualising confessionalism, with Christian dialogue viewed as “striving to impose a set of ideological beliefs upon [others] in a closed and distinctly uncritical manner” (Wright, 2013, p.1). In viewing those exclusive claims as having no reasonable rationality, and arbitrarily influenced by subjective opinion, the secular liberal humanist seemingly regards any public pronouncement of the exclusivity to the Christian worldview as intolerant and dangerous.

Possibly, also, the flashpoint is intensified by the view of the end point of the trajectory - when exclusive worldviews are forcibly expressed by violence (Porpora, 2004). Contemporary examples are evident in the terror attacks experienced worldwide, and increasingly in the UK context. I would note, though, that studies do not support a direct causal relationship between religion and violence, but recognise a complex political picture of intervening factors (Croucher et al. 2017). In flashpoint instances of ascribed dangerousness, the secular liberal humanist response is to utilise methods to ensure a non-coercive environment.
It is at this flashpoint where the two sets of human rights publically collide. Human rights institutions are increasingly called upon to debate and legislate matters of cultural difference, including scenarios in which the appropriateness of the articulation of a religious worldview has been called into question on the basis of intolerance and harm caused (Ahdar 2001). For the purposes of illustration, a relevant and recent example (Rudgard, 2017) pertained to the issue of homosexuality, and whether/how the human right to freedom of speech and religious conscience impinged upon another’s freedom (for homosexual identity/everyday living) and caused harm to them. In this example, an ex-social work student won the right to legally challenge a decision barring him from the social work profession because he was deemed ‘unfit to practise’ on the basis of his interpretation and expression of Christian moral teaching in which he had made public his own views of lesbian, gay and bisexual clients. I should note that those views were his interpretation and they do not reflect the views of many Christians - diversity exists within the Christian worldview including those who are liberal and inclusive (accepting and affirming homosexuality), across to those who reject homophobia and accept the Other-for-being-Other but do not necessarily proactively affirm homosexuality (Dessel and Bolen, 2014). He did go on to lose the legal challenge). In this example the Chief Executive of The Christian Legal Centre (backing the student) appraised the situation as indicative of a wider societal silencing of the voice of “orthodox Christians” that went against human rights for freedom of speech. The Telegraph newspaper quoted her as saying: "The idea that someone could be expelled from a social work course for expressing a view in a Facebook post and then declared not fit to practice is very detrimental to free speech…Students with orthodox Christian views are being told that they aren't fit to practice….For religious

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15 Dessel and Bolen’s (2014) edited volume ‘Conservative Christian Beliefs and Sexual Orientation in Social Work: Privilege, Oppression and the Pursuit of Human Rights’ gives a thorough explication of the diversity within the Christian worldview, and presents a number of viewpoints of the history and parameters of the issues regarding the ethical challenge and responsibility for social workers to work for conflicting human rights while protecting the wellbeing of LGBTQ individuals and Christian individuals. I note that it is a volume focusing on conservative Christian worldviews than liberal Christian worldviews, and is situated within the mainly US context.
people who believe now what most people used to believe, it can be a bar to office.”

The legal representative of the University terminating his student status defended the expulsion decision by referring to: the content of the comments as being “derogatory” to certain population groups; the nature of the comments as being indicative of views which undermine “the trust and confidence” of certain population groups as well as confidence in the social work profession; and the mode of delivery of his comments (making public his private beliefs via a discussion thread on a social media site). Whilst I have presented the (published) contrasting positions pertaining to this case example, I should make it clear that for the social worker, operating for the state within the liberal framework, the issue is not one of whether or not there is homophobia, that regardless of whether it comes from religion or non-religious or other personal worldview beliefs (and any rights to freedom of speech pertaining to such religious/non-religious/personal worldviews thereof), homophobia is incompatible with social work because the effects of homophobia upon others will be adverse. The state (enacted in the person of the social worker) should be above criticism in relation to this when assessing the parents for a vulnerable child. The thesis completely agrees with this. The issue for the thesis in light of the discussion, is whether and how in enacting the liberal framework, within the context of such structural worldview tensions (as illustrated within the example and about which parents or social workers may or may not be aware), the social worker has been able to communicate at a sufficiently deep level to elicit and discuss the influence upon parenting of Christian parents living out their religious beliefs that may or may not present protective or harmful influences to parenting practice, and that may or may not include the presence of homophobic attitudes (the latter of which would be harmful, abusive and not tolerated).

The discussion illustrates how ethical questions at an abstract level, arising from the context of structural worldview tensions, can seemingly impact upon the social and

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inherently practical domain of social workers’ communicative interface with others. Here, for example, on the one hand is a perspective that proposes that Christians have to defend their legislative rights to religious freedom, and this concerns matters not just in the public sphere but also the private sphere. This is a perspective proffered by Ahdar (2001) in his study of (UK) legislative debates, case law, and published commentary, in which he identified an increase in clashes between the expression of Christian value commitments and human rights positions. He proposed that the alignment of liberalism with human rights has had the effect of delimiting public acceptance of religious freedom and strengthening secular liberal ideology. For him, it suggests a contradictory reading of the liberal claim for tolerance or neutrality. An alternative reading – as adopted by social workers in their role as agents enacting for the state - is that liberalism is not simply about tolerance but about tolerating plurality of behaviours and views which do not delimit the rights of others. In other words, Liberalism’s condemnation of intolerance is negated in cases where intolerance delimits the rights of others. In this case intolerance of that form of intolerance is appropriate. The thesis does not dispute this. Of course, it is important to remember that the identification of intolerance as being worthy of intolerance can be difficult to achieve, and the principle, practice and justification of tolerance/intolerance is well-known to be paradoxical (Popper, 1966; Scanlon, 1996; Heyd, 1996; Williams, 1996; Brown, 2006; Scheffler, 2012). Although such analyses raise difficult ethical questions at the abstract level, those tensions nevertheless boil down to have relevance to social workers working with Christian parents to make sense of parenting actions and determine vulnerability or likelihood of harm: is absolute religious freedom always justified or in some instances should limits on religious liberty be required to protect the most vulnerable from harm? Where is the line to be drawn between satisfactory/tolerable and unsatisfactory/intolerable limits upon religious freedom? These are the kinds of contextual structural tensions that the thesis is trying to bring to
the surface to ponder about as (potentially) being part of the communication action and environment.

What does secular liberal humanism look like when coming from a Christian perspective? There are different accounts of how the body of Christ – the church in its broadest sense – interacts with the secular liberal humanist world. Of these, two extreme paradigmatic heresies are considered to exist. The first derives from a Docetic theological perception of God whereby God intervenes within the world but is dislocated from it. The Docetic view of the incarnation suggested that, in Jesus, God merely took on the appearance of being human. It was a theology imitated by Deism within the modern era (Gunton, 1983). Enlightenment rationalists challenged the historical particularity of the Christian claim to Jesus’ incarnation as denoting a union of being wholly God and wholly human, and the status of it (and its sources) as ‘revealed truth’. Christians claim(ed) Jesus of Nazareth to be an historic figure and the incarnation to be an historic event, but that transactions with the divine occur throughout the ages, such that Jesus is transcendent in the present reality. Herein, Ellen’s words (“he is in it with us”) captures this Christian claim, held by many believers, to knowledge of God as revealed through the life of Jesus but also revealed through other sources of Scripture, spiritual experiences and the transmission via a faith community (Wright, 2000). However, the Enlightenment rationalists asserted that historic events are too contingent as sources of truth, for truth must be universally accessible to all rational beings and made recognisable through reason. Lessing’s maxim was frequently cited: “the accidental truths of history can never establish universal truths of reason” (van den Toren, 2011). Thus the Enlightenment philosophers pursued knowledge of ultimate reality in the universal structures of human reason. Accordingly, Idealism presented a reading of Jesus’ life as symbolically representing an eternal ideal rather than as an embodiment of divine truth. The result of this Deistic formulation, like Doceism, was a separation of the divinity of God from
the world (Wright, 2015). Christian living could be conceived as being separate to worldly living. This narrow and protective perception of the relationship between Christians and the world - in which Christians ‘cut off’ from the world - is now less common within practising Trinitarian Christianity, being represented by unofficial cults or sects.

The second heresy is that of accommodation. This relational position sees no difference between Christian values and the values of the natural world. Influenced by Enlightenment naturalism (the aforementioned worldview position that rejected any transcendent domain to exist outside of the natural order) this reading recognised Jesus as having existed historically but being solely human and without transcendent significance (Wright, 2015). Ostensibly to protect the continuity of the church, this naturalistic reduction denied the Christological focus of the Story of Christianity (Christ taking a dual divine-human nature to rescue humanity) and is challenged for encouraging syncretism.

The incarnation doctrine (as summarised by NT Wright’s Christian worldview) takes a different relational perspective to both heresies, seeing the church as being in the world but with a vision that transcends the world. Christians see their vocational worldview ‘business’ as being ‘salt and light’ to the world, referring to affirming (drawing ‘light’ upon) what is good in the world and rejecting what is bad, or transforming it (applying ‘salt’ as healing). In this motivated action (of ‘imaging God’) Christians love and nurture the world, and as such are attentive not separate to it. Historic examples include Wilberforce’s perseverance at bringing public attention to the slave trade. More recent examples include the church’s stance against poverty, whether through the voluntary organisation of Food Banks, debt-mediation (CAP), and homeless shelters. In such instances of symbolic praxis of their worldview, the Christian obligation to regard Jesus as having Lordship over the matters of life does not conflict with the secular liberal obligation for civic morality. Indeed, Christians refer to the Scriptural
reference of Jesus’ teachings in this regard. When under Pharisee questioning about the appropriateness of Jews paying civic taxes, Jesus called for distinction but also respect to both divine and secular civic authorities (“Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s” (Matthew 22: 21). Other Biblical references also call for commendable conduct, representative of Jesus’ Great Commandment to love God supremely and to love others as oneself (Matthew 22:35-40; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10: 25-37), and which honours secular mandates (Romans 13:1-7; 1Peter2:13-17) (Netland, 2015).

However, this same ‘salt and light’ motivation means that there are some things that Christians do not want to embrace or transform. For example, in wanting to see a child feel valued and flourish, a Christian will not wish for them to become sexually active at an early age. In wanting to encourage human dignity and worth, a Christian will promote human freedom and not be silent on issues of social justice. In pursuing freedom, a Christian will not seek to coerce or ‘brainwash’ a person into Christian commitment. When state-mandated obligations are perceived to contradict obligations as followers of Jesus, then Christians are called to be obedient to God and vocalise a stand against those measures (Daniel 3:16-18, 6: 10and 21-22; Acts 4:19-20, 5:29). The issue for Christians becomes one of speaking and acting faithfully to the Story whilst, with sensitivity and respect, demonstrating love to religious and secular Others.

Facing secular liberal humanist scepticism about religious truth is a central issue for Christians seeking to live truthfully today. The postmodern mistrust of the motives and power of metanarratives, and assertion that there is an inherent subjective embedding to any human ‘knowing’ (making ‘truth’ historically and culturally contingent), presents a powerful structural barrier against revealing one’s Christian commitment. Recent ethnographic case study research describes practising (evangelical) Christians encountering perilous obstacles in revealing a Christian identity and articulating Christian sentiment as it is deemed unsuitable anywhere other than the most private
spaces of any secular work environment (Strhan, 2012). Christians in secular work spaces describe secular expectations upon them to occupy different roles as a believer in one context and a professional in another, such that they “face different ways with different roles” displaying alternative commitments to God, others and self (Whipp, 2008). Such times of inability to achieve and display faithful integrity can be frustrating and emotionally distressing, with such emotions (potentially) emitting during interpersonal communication (Fiddes, 2000). There is a corresponding pressure for self-management of different forms of ‘appropriate’ language and behaviour, for example to ensure employment compliance with secular norms of the secular working environment. However, this cognitive work in finding a way to speak authentically (as a Christian) yet appropriately to secular audiences can create cognitive dissonance, a form of self-preservation or coping which in turn forms another potential obstacle within the communication taking place (Bhabha, 1994 in Whipp, 2008 p39).

Whilst this presents a somewhat bleak viewpoint of Christian engagement with the secular workplace, Christians point to the way in which their enduring belief fosters self-identity and self-worth that buttresses against more negative encounters. For example, a recent qualitative study of social workers with Christian beliefs noted how their “commitment to a purpose beyond themselves”, and their perception of being able to deploy “gifts and abilities” gave them a meaningful sense of direction, and positive energy to persevere, so that they displayed resilience in the most distressing and challenging situations (Hare, 2010, p.70). Echoing the findings of Canda and Furman (1999) this study pointed to how their lived-out beliefs contributed to their management of stress and longevity of career, sometimes spanning decades, at a time when the profession is struggling to retain social workers burnt-out by the relentless pressure of large caseloads of highly dangerous family situations, and disillusionment of capability to effect changes in peoples lives with the limited time and resources available. Hare (2010, p.70) looked particularly for what kept the social workers motivated and feeling
effective, identifying how: “meta-themes of the ‘bigger picture’ and God the Creator, empowered by prayer and other forms of spiritual communication, carried the participants through times of difficulty and challenge when there was little progress in the agreed goals for the client. The participants’ personal relationships with God lent them a sense of wisdom and direction as they asked him for help…[The] ability to hand over and release issues to a higher authority was an effective stress management technique that lent strength to the participant’s practice and was a recurrent theme.” Yet, it was not like a technique that they just ‘switched on and off’. Indeed, reflecting upon the participant interviews, Hare noted how the participants had found it challenging to express how their beliefs influenced their practice because their faith was intrinsic to their personhood and how they conducted themselves: “To separate this topic as merely an aspect of their practice was not easily workable as their description identified their faith as being part of themselves” (Hare, 2010, p.70).

The discussion seems to show how Otherness is acceptable on the terms determined and enforced by the more dominant secular liberal humanist worldview. This occurs despite a basic freedom to express one’s beliefs, and operates at the macro level of human rights legislative discourse as well as the micro level of personal disclosure within the workplace. Could it be the case that what is occurring is a subtraction of freedom for having particular beliefs? Certainly powerful social relations are at play. Finally, in this chapter, to explore more of this interplay I refer to the notion of Otherization.

‘Otherization’ draws attention to the representation of the Christian worldview within a de-Christianised socio-cultural context by the more dominant secular liberal humanist worldview, and particularly how the intervention of discourse (language and cultural imagery) frames such denotation. Otherization refers to social relations that flexibly adapt to maintain a person or group in a powerful position of superiority by categorising as different – as Other - those whom the powerful have attributed with less socially
desirable characteristics (Edgar and Sedgwick, 1999). When outsiders visualise Christian parents, the images drawn upon tend to be those sensationalised by the secular media. Herein a disproportionate high level of media coverage is given to moments of the aforementioned ‘flashpoint’ issues. Otherization points to the role of such oppositional imagery in structuring accounts of identity. The dominant secular liberal humanist discourse labelling of a Christian worldview as ‘intolerant Other’ enables it to claim favour for a ‘tolerant’ discourse for itself. This occurs regardless of whether the worldview being termed ‘intolerant’ or ‘irrational’ has reality at all. Moreover, the representation of the entity denoted ‘Other’ is presented as a generalised totality. It is presumed that there is no variation in the degree to which a person possesses the characteristic, nor whether stratification variables influence its presentation (age, gender, geographical location, race, political (including liberal) motivations, education level, class and so on). It presents Christianity as static and monolithic with an assumed homogeneity rather than being dynamic and changing. Notions pertaining to ‘absence’ and ‘invisibility’ play out in this representation. Herein the concept of ‘difference’ in the work of Jacques Derrida (1982) influenced ideas around Otherization by questioning the dominant (modernist) use of binary distinctions within language use. The meaning of a word (‘rational’ or ‘public’ or ‘secular’) depends upon its differentiation from which it is not (‘non-rational’ or ‘private’ or ‘religious’). That word is therefore privileged, for it is foregrounded (and made powerfully ‘present’) against a background of absences (Gergen, 1999). Images of Christian parenting that display loving, warm, consistent care are absent from the media. So too are images of Christians who hold inclusive attitudes and/or liberal stances. Instead, a representation of ‘intolerant Christians’ is made powerfully present.

Such overly simplistic (Otherized) representation promulgates stereotypical imagery. This, in turn, influences the communication between those living and working across worldviews. Cooke (1997, p.101), for example, identifies how people’s preconceptions
contain such representational (Otherized) images, and that we bring these images “as part of the baggage” to our dialogue with each other. Writing about the circumstance of women and religion (particularly Muslim women), her analysis shows that contemporary secular liberal humanist society attributes primary identity to a person’s faith position and that this overrules all other characteristics. She considers such representational images to be hard to erase. Even when a person is encountered who does not fit the contours of the basic picture, that individual is considered an exceptional case, and so therefore reinforces the original image rather than questioning it. The image has a structuring effect, as Cooke (1997, p.102) notes “Sometimes we are at the mercy of the image our addressee has of us or chooses to invoke. Sometimes we hide behind the image. Sometimes we act as though neither of us had an image of the other. Sometimes, those ideal times, the image disappears and the contact is unmediated by the myth. Then we can act as individuals between whom messages pass easily regardless of the contact, code or context”.

I recognise the experience of Otherization within my own experience as a parent. In earlier (published) research I employed ‘deconstruction’ to analyse how it was that the private knowledge of my lived experience of parenting a child with chronic sleeplessness was disbelieved and rendered absent (Sheppard (now Woodcock Ross), 2000). The public knowledge of scientific theories of child development were privileged (made more powerfully present) as explanations, working alongside gendered ideologies of ideal motherhood that reinforce dominant cultural assumptions of ‘good mothers’ knowing instinctively what to do by virtue of their biological identity as women. This analysis of my own subjectivity drew attention to the oppressive cultural expectations faced by social work service users: to always provide sensitive, responsive care, without the need of advice or assistance, regardless of the social circumstances to the parenting. The deconstructive analysis constituted ‘reflexive’ processes whereby I drew out my subjective ‘knowing’ as a socially situated social
actor within a social situation relating to other socially situated actors within a social relationship. Indeed, the deconstructive penetration into lived experience showed the gap in meaning ascribed by the cultural authority of ‘public knowledge’ and showed the importance of drawing upon both informal and formal forms of knowledge to understand and ‘make visible’ everyday life (Denzin, 1994). Now, looking to Ellen’s account of her experience, I wonder if she too had experienced Otherization, with the social experiences of her parenting rendered invisible by the medicalizing (naturalistic) discourse within the hospital. Perhaps, with the social worker legitimizing the visibility (presence) of her Christian worldview she had been able to give voice to her own words of meaning – her private knowledge was not rejected. In that social relationship, in relation to her Christian identity (if not also her parental identity), she was not solely the Other with all its ascribed structural paraphernalia, but a parent with a Christian worldview struggling to make sense of her difficult life circumstances. Perhaps instead, in telling her parenting story the Christian Other could be valued, rather than potentially penalised, for ‘difference’.
3.1. INTRODUCTION TO THE CHAPTER

The worldviews shaping the socio-cultural landscape discussed in the last chapter appear to have had a corresponding impact on the priorities, organisation and practices of social work. This chapter considers the concerns of social work in terms of how they relate to Christian and secular liberal humanist worldviews:

- The first section considers how statutory social work as an institution and set of practices is primarily a product of a secular liberal humanist worldview and operates liberalism’s principles of freedom, tolerance, and reasoning within it. Yet, social work also comprises a socially informed set of practices, values and ethics, which ostensibly provide a richer perspective to liberalism’s ‘toleration’. However, in practical contexts those values and ethics contain complications and conflict, particularly in situations of diverse worldview interests.

- Different structural conditions appear to be operating at a deeper level that displays anchorage to the different worldview commitments. In this second section I propose that these point to a tendency towards universalism and nominalism. Both of these marginalise understanding of Christian worldview praxis.

- When looking at a more culturally accepting Christian parent-with-social worker communication, drawing upon moral and theological reasoning from a Christian perspective, additional structural conditions arise to those considered earlier. Given that the communication between the parties is at a deeper level that displays anchorage to different worldview commitments, what is a way forward in the dialogue? Universalism is challenged and disregarded.
3.2. Social Work as a Modern Liberal Project

I interviewed Catherine and Derek, a married couple in their thirties, in their semi-detached home within a large housing estate of a predominately working class coastal town. Both were working professionals, although Catherine worked part-time hours at her paid employment in order to devote more time to their role as foster carers. Catherine and Derek described their fostering in vocational terms, as a “calling” by God to include another child within their family. Both were actively involved in their (internationally affiliated) evangelical church community, playing musical instruments within the band that led the contemporary style sung worship every Sunday. They spoke warmly about how they had gone about preparing children for permanent families (taking care to respect confidentiality). In that fostering work, they had communicated with several social workers. In the extract that follows Catherine relayed one specific time that her Christian faith had become the focus of communication with a social worker. It was initiated by a letter of complaint by a prospective adopter who had visited the family home as part of the adoption process. The complaint contained reservations about the couple’s suitability to parent. The adopter was a single woman who was already frustrated with (what she regarded as) social workers’ intrusive questioning within the adoption assessment processes, including questions about her sexuality. The extract displays the action of the social worker (and indeed the adopter), in operating from a secular liberal humanist worldview perspective when addressing the cultural differences inherent in the situation.

Catherine: Looking back, probably we were at the time ‘oh my goodness’, but looking back now, although she [the social worker] was supportive, she kind of honed in on the fact that we were Christians and there were things that we had to do as a result of the complaint, like we were advised to go on some diversity training, and we had to watch what we said in our homes. This was the week
where you do the adoption swap over so the adoptive parents were coming into our home. So of course your guard's down a little bit and the lady [the adopter] asked lots of questions, and we just chatted and to all intents and purposes it felt like we were just chatting and sharing views and opinions. Afterwards [with the social worker] then it was like ‘well you can’t do that in your own home’ which was quite a shock I think because it was the early days of our fostering, wasn't it? I think there were certain things picked out that we had to do because, I felt, of our Christian views and the adopter, as far as we know, nothing was ever picked up on.... She was just left to, like it's fine she can do whatever she likes, but for us it was you've got to this, this and this...Looking back I think that wasn't that fair really. We were treated differently.

Johanna: What was the issue around your faith that was a problem?

Derek: ...She was a very high-flying [professional] and she was coming to adoption, but actually she was very angry with the whole process that she'd had to go through, and actually she was out to entrap...So one question she asked me, she said ‘Jane [the foster child] has been going to church with you, she’s really enjoyed it. When she comes to me, I’m not a Christian, we don’t go to church, do you think she should carry on going to church?’ She wanted me to say she should because, you know, but actually I said ‘well, she’s your daughter now so it’s up to you’, so I managed not to get entrapped...

Catherine: ...There were a lot of questions put to us like 'what do you think', and I shared loosely my feelings that ‘actually I think it's ideal that a child is placed with a mum and a dad, but having said that we've got a friend who is a single lady and she has four or maybe five, adopted them all, and she does the most fantastic job.’ So I always balanced it out with like ‘we know these people and if social services had agreed that these people should adopt and foster then they shouldn't be treated any differently to anyone else’. So I was very clear but she
picked up on just the little things that I said that I expressed as my Christian
views. Of course because I was in my home I let my guard down a bit and you
just think that it’s just a conversation. I was very clear to balance things out
saying ‘if they were going through the process then they should be treated
properly and shouldn’t be treated any differently’. But then of course we were
then treated differently.

The example shows the classic dilemma faced by the social worker, who being
professionally placed in a position of power to offer, instigate or remove services, has
to decide whether to assist or compulsorily intervene in challenging parenting
situations. Social workers work with children, parents and families from diverse cultural
backgrounds, who are often socially and materially disadvantaged and/or have
interpersonal difficulties arising from adverse life experiences, and whose behaviours
challenge social and moral norms by inflicting harm to themselves or other family
members. Child protection work includes the assessment and support of families
(including those like Catherine and Derek who provide substitute parenting care) where
children are deemed ‘likely to be at risk of significant harm’ (The Children Act 1989).
Herein, social workers are charged to encourage and advocate the socio-cultural
diversity and difference of their service users, whilst simultaneously operating within
the remit of government institutions that regulate social norms through public policy
(Gilson, 2015; Spolandera et al. 2015). Statutory social work, since morphing from its
original (mainly) Christian confessional form, has mediated this tense, ambiguous
social space between the public and private spheres as a form of social engineering on
behalf of the liberal state – as Parton (1998, p74) summarises “social work provided a
personalized strategy to enable government at a distance and was to prove important if
the liberal ideal of maintaining autonomous individuals who are at the same time
governed was to be realized.”
Thus, social work, as an institution and set of practices, is primarily a product of a secular liberal humanist worldview, and as such accommodates liberalism’s moral principles of freedom and tolerance within it. As Spolandera et al. (2015) summarise, liberalism maintains the individual as the central focus of moral concern, and as such the pursuit of individual freedom is paramount. At its extreme, the individualism of liberalism – atomism – regards individuals as ontologically prior to society, motivated by the desires of the self, and reliant upon self, in the pursuit of the good life. It is an optimism that gives primacy to the individual in determining what most benefits them, and the ideas of justice and freedom arise from it. Herein liberalism draws upon the key Enlightenment theme of ‘reason’ with individuals depicted as rational beings, able to delineate and pursue their own best interests. The presumption is towards non-intervention, in order not to restrict any rational person’s path to flourishing in society.

Yet, in order to live in non-oppressive/non-restrictive social relationship with other individuals (who are equally maximising freedom in pursuing their self-interests), a rational person must also be capable of social responsibility and mutual respect. Herein, the principle of toleration is required to promote the conditions favourable to another person’s self-determined subjective path to flourishing. Non-toleration (of individual autonomy) may be applied to restrict potential unequal social interactions that may inhibit those conditions. Toleration, therefore, is a principle addressing the inherent tension arising from the liberal individual-focused formulation of unrestrictive freedom. It is a form of ‘glue’ holding the individual atomistic parts together. The third principle employed in the liberal enterprise – that of reasoning – is required to make wise decisions about the degree of balance to be struck between intervention and non-intervention, non-toleration and toleration of individual autonomy.

Catherine and Derek’s example illustrates the liberal undertaking with the social worker faced with the freedom displayed by the parents, and having to opt between toleration and non-toleration. The complaint presented to the social worker was of the parental
expression of their Christian values, of which the complainant suspected contained homophobic attitudes. The social worker sought to maximise freedom, but had the problem of whether and how to balance individual freedom with restrictions. If the issue were about homophobia then the matter would clearly be one of non-toleraton. However, the matter is not so simply closed. A closer observation reveals the matter was not about homophobia. It was not an attitude held personally by either of the foster carers. Later in the interview, for example, they stated:

Derek: We have a friend who is a homosexual and he would make the most amazing father, don't we? Yeah, I tell him all the time... he would make a really good dad so if a child was placed with him, their safety, their health, being raised, I would have no issue with that... I've been saying this to him for about six months trying to persuade him to be a foster father because he would be the most amazing father.

Catherine: Yes, he would (laughs). He's amazing with kids.

The issue was more about the brush between liberal and non-liberal understandings of sexuality. According to liberalism, so long as another person is not harmed, an individual has the freedom to express their sexuality according to his or her wishes. According to the Christian perspective, the expression of sexuality is “in conformity to natural law and the will of God” (Wright, 2007,p.34). Humans are born in the image of God, and loved equally by God, placing a concomitant responsibility upon Christians to provide a loving context to people expressing that choice. While Catherine identified her own Christian perspective to be (what has been termed) a ‘conservative’ reading of evangelical teaching (“actually I think it's ideal that a child is placed with a mum and a dad”), she was adamant to contextualise this within the liberal polity of freedom and tolerance, emphasising that parents should not be discriminated against for choosing same sex relationships (toleration of freedom for expression), but have equal treatment (affirming freedom) in the opportunity to parent. Indeed, the couple did not seek to
impose their moral standards on either the female adopter, or their male friend. Catherine’s articulation of her worldview was not just consensual, it was invited. In summary, the couple did not see their Christian principles as being in opposition with liberal society. In contrast, they presented an unambiguous acceptance of it. Why, then, were their views reasoned to be sufficiently insupportable so as not to be tolerated within their own home, even though the parents stipulated that citizens should have freedom to live according to their wishes? Why did those views become a marker of their capability to parent, with a social worker exercising their authority to intervene and adjudicate what would not be tolerated?

A key point to make is that statutory social work, as currently practised in the UK is highly regulated and instrumentally driven by assessment processes and procedures that influence the reasoning processes of social workers making sense of what freedoms can be tolerated/not tolerated in parenting situations (Parton, 2008). Social workers use the national policy-prescribed ‘Assessment Framework’ to assess the capacity of a parent (and viability of the family) to safeguard children at ascending threshold levels (which correspond to legally-based categories) of ‘early help’, being ‘in need’ and ‘suffering or likely to suffer significant harm’ (s17, s31, s47 of The Children Act 1989; ‘Working Together to Safeguard Children’, H.M. Government 2018). In this, safeguarding is required to be child-centred, with children, parents, and carers with “parental responsibility” provided assessment and support to meet the child’s welfare as the paramount concern (The Children Act 1989; The Children Act 2004). The liberal consensus is explicit within the policy, with emphasis upon “parental responsibility” rather than ‘state responsibility’, and with statutory safeguarding action being minimally intrusive so as to attend to human rights for family life and thereby maximise individual/family freedom. In this regard, for example, The Children Act (1989) directs

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17 This practice persists despite: a) social work research highlighting the constraints of such processes upon the relational potential of social work practice, and b) while the profession continues to establish its reclaiming of professional autonomy.
local authorities to give “due consideration....to the child’s religious persuasion, racial origin, cultural and linguistic background”. As central actors within parenting assessment, children and parents have rights to be communicated with effectively about their parenting and what matters to them (The Children Act 2004; The Care Act 2014). This is mirrored in national equality legislation whereby the unequal treatment of a person is not tolerated, and ‘religion’ is one of several characteristics given protection (The Equality Act 2010). Religious freedom is also protected by European statute: “everyone has the right to the freedom of religion or belief, either alone or in community with others and in public and or private, to manifest religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance (Article 9, Human Rights Act 1998 and Article 18, United Nations Declaration of Human Rights). However, (referring back to the Assessment Framework) in recognition of the overriding rights of the child to be safe (‘free’) from ‘significant harm’ and concomitant duty upon the state to intervene and protect, statutory social work intervention in families increases in intensity and degree of voluntariness/involuntariness at each ascending threshold level of concern (Parton, 1997; Parton et al., 1997; Pollack, 2010; H.M. Government, 2018). Herein, statutory social workers have authority to intervene (non-toleration) through holding the role of duty-bearers and their employment by local government – an institution that “is itself a part of the political infrastructure of society which is legitimised and therefore accorded power” (Parker and Ashencaen Crabtree, 2014). It is noteworthy from the outset that the Assessment Framework presents the social worker with an adjudication concerning tolerance. In the operation of thresholds to prevent excessive early intervention the Assessment Framework seeks to maximise tolerance. However, it is at the same time appropriately intolerant of some parenting beliefs and behaviours. In this, the social workers’ role – in enacting the role of the state - is to determine whether or not the parent’s specific belief or behaviour impinges on others and thus is potentially problematic for a vulnerable child or individual. The social worker’s adjudication in this (adjudicating that which is tolerable/intolerable) and intolerance of harm is obviously
entirely appropriate. However, it is not without its complexity. Drawing upon the previous chapter, such adjudication of the line regarding toleration/non-tolerations rests upon a quality of depth in communication with parents about the influence of belief upon parenting behaviours, in which all parties can express themselves with honesty about their Otherness, and in ways that identifies/counters Otherization. Also, as discussed earlier, complexity arises at the theoretical level whereby there have been challenges to the inherent paradoxical nature to the principle, practice and justification of tolerance/intolerance. Hereby, the identification of tolerance/intolerance as being worthy of tolerance/intolerance is not necessarily straightforward in its achievement (Popper, 1966; Scanlon, 1996; Heyd, 1996; Williams, 1996; Brown, 2006; Scheffler, 2012). It is a discussion that again points to deeper structural tensions (potentially) arising within social-worker-with-parent-communication.

The Assessment Framework itself is presented as a dynamic inter-relationship model – denoted ‘the ecological approach’ – that considers interactions as operating across social sub-systems at micro, meso, exo, and macro levels (see Bronfenbrenner 1979; Jack, 2001and 2003; DH 2000). Within the Assessment Framework those sub-systems pertain to ‘domains’ of child’s development needs, parenting capacity, and the wider social environment (including indicative sub-dimensions within each domain). Herein the Framework responds to a knowledge base within wider psychological and social scientific literature, where parenting is predominately understood as a relationship which is multiply determined by the quality of relationships in the proximate social network, and a constellation of mutually inter-relating factors and relationships within the wider sociocultural environment (Belsky and Vondra, 1989; Reder and Lucey, 1995; Woodcock, 2003; H.M. Government, 2018). In accordance, social workers should retain a relational focus and analyse the quality of the inter-relating factors including: the degree of risk of significant harm wrought by the direct impact upon the child’s welfare or more indirect impact from the influence upon parents’ needs.
and parenting capacity; and the way in which sociocultural factors intervene to increase vulnerability or present as protective mechanisms to decrease vulnerability to harm, enable more successful child developmental pathways, and improve parenting capacity through expanding “parenting ability, motivation and opportunity” (Horwath 2007, p.7).

At the time of writing the Assessment Framework policy guidance explicitly states the importance of understanding the influence of religion within family life (reflecting the aforementioned legal rights):

“Every assessment should reflect the unique characteristics of the child within their family and community context... The Children Act 1989 promotes the view that all children and their parents should be considered as individuals and that family structures, culture, religion, ethnic origins and other characteristics should be respected.” (H.M. Government, 2015, p.23).

New policy guidance just coming into currency continues the relevance of religion as important “contextual safeguarding” influences to be considered within such assessments:

“The Children Act 1989 promotes the view that all children and their parents should be considered as individuals and that family structures, culture, religion, ethnic origins and other characteristics should be respected. Local authorities should ensure they support and promote fundamental British values, of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs.” (H.M. Government, 2018, p.23-24).

In order to find more detailed reference to religion within the various sub-dimensions of the three Assessment domains, one has to look to the previous (fuller) published version of the policy guidance published before its integration with the Working Together multiagency safeguarding protocols (Department of Health et al. 2000).

Herein, within the domain of a ‘Child’s Developmental Need’, the guidance identifies
'religion' as being potentially important to a child’s developing a sense of identity. ‘Places of worship’ are referred to within the domain of ‘Family and Environmental Factors’ as important community influences and resources for some children and families (Horwath and Lees, 2010). The policy guidance is more specific in requiring components of strengths to be identified from the inter-relating dimensional influences (HM Government 2018,p.27). In this, it responds to research identifying how some children display resilience in the face of adversity, particularly Rutter’s research (1985) highlighting key components of resilience as self-esteem, a belief in one’s own self-efficacy/agency to change one’s circumstances, and to problem-solve. Religion and spiritual beliefs have been proposed as important cultural influences contributing to strengths and resilience, such as providing meaning for life experiences, or offering a value system for parenting (Gotterer, 2001; Dutt and Phillips, 2010; Furness and Gilligan, 2010).

In contrast, the scandals of clergy abuse of children (O’Hagan, 2001) and more recently of witchcraft/evil spirit-possession labelling (Laming, 2003; Tedam and Adjoa, 2017) have alerted social workers to the potential vulnerability of children within unregulated and unsupervised religious contexts that influence parenting practices. Here, professional attention has been drawn to the potential dangers of taking more morally relative positions when questions of cultural diversity arise within parenting assessment (Laming 2003 and 2009). So-called “errors of reasoning” are considered to arise from professional assumptions of parenting values being ‘culturally relative’ without appraising them in light of whether they restrict freedoms causing harm to other parties (in recognition of the aforementioned human rights). Often those assumptions are considered to arise due to a lack of knowledge or experience in relating to families of different secular, religious and cultural background to that of the practitioner (Laird,

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18 I recognise here that statutory child protection safeguarding procedures are in place within regulated religious settings in accord with H.M. Government 2018, and evident in the Churches’ Child Protection Advisory Service (CCPAS – now called ‘Thirty One Eight’) available at: https://thirtyoneeight.org/about-us/who-we-are/ (last accessed 28.1.2019, 10.50).
This position displays further moral ambiguity for the social worker. On the one hand, the position exhibits a strengthened universality (absolutism) of human rights orientation to social work, as evident within the profession’s national and international Code of Ethics, Code of Conduct, and pre and post-qualifying standards (‘capabilities’) for practice (Healy, 2007; Ife, 2008; Reichert, 2007). One might expect a strengthened absolutist human rights-based approach to ensure the incorporation (‘toleration’) of all protected rights, including that of religious/cultural difference where harm is not perpetrated, particularly given the contribution to strengths and resilience discussed above. Yet, in practice, as with my illustration of Catherine and Derek’s situation, the absolutism of some human rights is questioned and potentially diminished in the face of others. Moreover, what this case particularly illustrates is that the principle ‘doing the trumping’ is not actually another human right, but Liberalism’s value of tolerance (to actively demonstrate respect for the freedom of others to live according to individual preferences). That this occurred in Catherine and Derek’s case despite their actual voicing of acceptance of such liberal values reveals an even stronger application of the principle. Thus here is another problem to ‘toleration’: in such elevation of Liberalism’s value to being an ‘ideal’ as opposed to a means for neutral debate, its raison d’être in promoting acceptance of the ‘Other’ is questionable.

The differential treatment towards religious Others raises another complication: it goes against social work’s traditional anti-oppressive commitment to a universal view of social justice, whereby universal values are taken to socially and culturally diverse situations to enable social workers to identify (and be intolerant of) dissimilar manifestations of difference and associated inequality in access to social power (Dominelli, 2008). Social work’s ethical principle of social justice recognises the

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19 The universalism of the strengthened human rights approach appears to represent another accommodation by the profession to the prevailing liberal moral framework. Associated with forces of globalisation and armed with the secularised notion of inalienable ‘natural rights’, the profession looked to ‘human rights’ to make sense of ethical practice within the diversity of human experience within the international context. In this, ‘human rights’ offered a unifying and legitimising mechanism for a profession that continues to consolidate its status nationally in a hostile public environment, and internationally as a global profession (Reichert, 2007; Bisman, 2014).
contextual reality of unequal distribution of social, economic and material opportunities and goods, which differentially advantage some at the expense of disadvantaging others through social structuring processes, such as racism, sexism, ableism, ageism (among others) (Dalrymple and Burke, 2006; Dominelli, 2010). The anti-oppressive orientation propounds social workers to expose structural blocks to equity and diversity, recognising that these occur as multiply intersecting dynamics of oppression at personal attitudinal, cultural and social-structural levels such that moral reasoning about family problems cannot be reduced to the level of individual moral pathology (Hick et al. 2005; Thompson, 2006; Dominelli 2002 and 2010; Mullaly, 2010; Baines, 2011; Strier and Binyamin, 2014). In this, social work’s anti-oppressive theoretical frameworks have moved on from an unsophisticated ‘spotting’ of various structural divisions to a more deliberated appraisal of the patterning of multiple facets of ‘identity difference’ within dynamic “webs of oppression” (see Mullaly, 2010, p.198). Ostensibly this is an elaborate and rich approach to tolerance. However, it remains the case that any features of difference being selected can only ever be those that are well known or made visible. Religious and cultural values that are not widely accepted, particularly those different to one’s own, are unlikely to prevail (Laird 2008). When taken to Catherine and Derek’s case, for example, one might wonder if Christian values were minimised through being less widely accepted and more different to the secular liberal humanist worldview rather than those of sexual orientation(s). That there are such conflicts over determining which ‘difference’ gains more tolerance over another in circumstances when such ‘differences’ are coterminous or cumulative points to incongruities and challenges in the universalism of human rights and social justice (Skegg, 2005; Banks, 2006; Hugman, 2013).

20 Social work’s anti-oppressive orientation has drawn upon diverse radical, critical and conflict approaches (Dominelli, 2010; Mullaly, 2010; Baines, 2011) that were solidified in the 1990s into a practice approach that propounds the exposure of structural blocks to equity and diversity.

21 In such individually devised webs, a person’s identity is segmented and differentially ascribed privilege or oppression in accordance to particular social contexts. Pictorial mapping is used to describe the changing nature to oppressive social relations across those contexts.
Certainly, some social work theorists have challenged the uncritical acceptance of universalism to human rights. One key criticism is that it restricts toleration for the plentiful variation within and between cultures that create varied stances on values and ethics in different contexts (Ife, 2008). Secular liberal social work’s Enlightenment assumptions are not necessarily relatable to other cultural and/or national contexts where cultural values have alternative foundations, and which can experience the imposition of secular liberal humanist values in the manner of an implicit imperialism (Gray and Fook, 2004; Yip, 2004). Moreover (as seen in the previous chapter) cultural worldviews are not monolithic, unchanging entities. Ethical differences can exist between people sharing a cultural identity. Boundaries between worldviews are not impermeable. As changing circumstances or new knowledge about matters arise, different positions are often taken on particular issues (for example, the appropriate way to discipline a child within parenting, or the freedom of expression of sexuality), with debates ensuing within that culture as to ‘what is different’ (tolerated) and ‘what is wrong’. Thus, rather than seeking to make sense of social work situations (such as matters of parenting) by looking for signs pointing to universal values of human rights and social justice, this theoretical position argues for an understanding that at least starts with the cultural particularity itself. It begins, first, with looking for what is normative to the particular context (Healy, 2007). Again, there are potential complications – this time associated with the ‘ethical relativity’ to the position (whereby claims of values difference are made by members within cultures according to individual or group standpoints). To hold up, the position has to overcome the charge of ‘ethical subjectivism’. This is an ethical position holding that values are so diversified that they have relevance only to that person or group, with no potential for dialogue or judgment as to whether a practice (such as parenting approach) is simply ‘different’ or ‘wrong’ (Hinman, 2008,p.37).
3.3. STRUCTURAL CONSIDERATIONS AT THE DEEPER LEVEL

My key point for consideration at this stage is that despite these statutory practice and ethical frameworks, and in the face of such ambiguity/complications within them, literature highlights that social workers often do not consider the influence of religion and spiritual beliefs routinely in their work with parents (Seden, 1995; Gilligan, 2003; Furness and Gilligan, 2010; Dutt and Phillips, 2010). Rather, as Canda (2008) suggests, religion or spirituality is often viewed as an 'optional add-on component' to other components from the ecological inter-relationship model. This feature seemed evident in the social worker’s exhortation to Catherine and Derek to dislocate their parenting from their worldview praxis. Drawing upon the discussion in the previous chapter of the naturalistic worldview, it is possible to discern a clear empiricist assumption underlying the Assessment Framework, whereby knowledge of the reality of parenting is reduced to the detection of recurring patterns of interaction between objects that are observable. The empiricist inclination is to bracket out issues pertaining to transcendence, for at base reality is understood in solely natural terms. The psychological and social sciences have a view of religion within that immanent understanding. When taken to my illustration, it is possible to see how the social worker found it possible to bracket out Catherine and Derek’s Christian worldview. For her, parenting was ordered on the basis of her epistemic assumptions. The influence of religion within their parenting was reasoned through an epistemic distinction between objective religious facts and subjective religious beliefs. It is a distinction that claims to retain a neutral (‘tolerating’/‘more acceptable’) attitude to cultural diversity required of modern liberal professions (Wright, 2004). The affiliation to ‘more acceptable’ objective factual representations of religion fits with social work’s history of professionalising, whereby it embraced psychological and social scientific epistemologies to secure its modern bureaucratic identity. In an attempt to accommodate itself within modernity’s metanarratives, secularising interests within and without the profession sought to
negate the traces within the profession of a residual confessional Christian heritage in its purposes and practices (Gray, 2008). Yet, a reduction of religion to the naturalistic entirety of human culture marginalises and prevents critical understanding of the truth-claims of different worldviews, such as those of Catherine and Derek, which are committed to a way of living that is truthful to transcendental purposes. It can neither grasp that there are differences in truth-claims between secular and religious worldviews, nor grasp the depth of moral commitment to the existential obligations associated with such worldviews.

Further problems in the practical outworking of tolerance are evident when one looks to the everyday experiences of social workers mediating the structural conditions of the empirically-driven policy-practice Assessment Framework. Researchers of social work practice highlight how social workers often do not operationalize their knowledge of parenting as a complex, multiply-determined set of relationships, but hold a narrow focus of concern upon parental behaviour and parental omission (Woodcock, 2003). Parenting is conceived in more concrete terms as the behavioural components of a task and neglects influences arising from the sociocultural context (Garbarino and Collins, 1999). Herein, reasoning is dominated by whether service user circumstances meet the legally-based categories that constitute the thresholds to trigger intervention. The Assessment Framework has taken on more of an instrumental use to collect appropriate information from which to classify a parent’s behaviour in terms of their eligibility to receive a prescribed response (Broadhurst, 2007 and 2009). This instrumental and process-orientated reasoning is further exacerbated by the structure of the instruments themselves (online forms) as they inhibit an analysis of interrelating factors arising from the Framework’s ‘domains’ of child’s development needs, parenting capacity, and wider social environment. The information collected in relation to each domain is presented independently and disconnected from the other domains (Raynes, 2003). Thus reasoning is instrumentally orientated and as Swift (1995,p.67-8)
summarises, is organised “around the problems of identifying and categorising the experience of clients to determine its ‘fit’ with specific social categories”.

Researchers point to organisational interests of parenting assessment being contained within such process driven models, whereby threshold stages of intervention reduce reasoning and action to a series of utilitarian rational-cognitive activities (Broadhurst, 2007 and 2009; Gillingham and Humphreys, 2010). Organisational interests are not met by the social worker showing independent thinking (using their knowledge and skills) to deliver a custom-made intervention, but prefer competent determination of the level and type of response required. The characterisation is of the use of instruments to detect ‘routine faults’ by carrying out a series of pre-coded procedures to meet a managerialist agenda of generating reliable responses of consistent quality and ‘manage’ risk. Instituting routines, systematising practices and predicting undertakings are considered part of the current neoliberal outlook that seeks to define and measure performance, generating greater value-for-money and reducing state spending, while simultaneously addressing an increased service user (as consumer) demand for greater accountability for improved services. In this, ‘modernisation’ policies 22 built upon the economic-market principles of welfare privatisation 23 and continue to drive a managerial accountability model that utilises techno-rationality (Challis and Davies, 1986; Griffiths, 1988; Jordan with Jordan, 2000; Jenkins, 2007; Jones, 2014). It is in operating this neoliberal residual welfare mandate that statutory social workers are required to work (to tolerate) a minimum-intervention remit of child protection, with their work overwhelmingly comprising risk assessment and the instigation and monitoring of child protection plans.

Yet, the instrumental rationality used within these processes bears little resemblance to the actual experiences of social workers in meeting volatile and emotionally charged behaviour of multiply socio-economically disadvantaged families and indeterminate

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22 Originating with Labour's ‘third way’ but continuing with successive governments.
23 Originating with the Thatcher and Major Conservative governments.
outcomes (Broadhurst et al. 2010a and b; Ruch, 2012). The latest government appointed review of child protection emphasised that social workers needed to increase rather than diminish time spent with vulnerable families to engage with their problematic feelings, and process affective responses in order to illuminate possibly harmful conditions (Munro 2005 and 2010). Social work theorists, drawing upon the profession’s (aforementioned) ethical principle of social justice, have branded such utilitarian treatment of social workers and the service users whom they serve as ‘inhumane’, pointing to an undercurrent of hard neoliberalist moral labelling within the categorisation of ‘problem families’ as opposed to ‘families with problems’ (Broadhurst et al. 2010a and b). As considered in the previous chapter, being regarded as free, autonomous agents, liberalism ascribes citizens with rationality, freedom and choice to act in their individual interests – to kowtow and conform, or rebel and misbehave – when in full knowledge of the consequences of their actions. The responsibility for behavioural change is placed upon the individual – as Howe (1996, p.88) puts it: “if they know the rules it is up to them to decide whether or not to abide by them”. As before, it is the hardened Liberalism that sees the end purpose for intervention as individual autonomy rather than a welfare purpose that does not tolerate human suffering and intervenes to transform individual and social wellbeing. Thus it is possible to see that the ‘work’ of parenting assessment, in being perceived as receptive to routine and prescribed responses, does not just display an empiricist inclination with moral reasoning, but also a pragmatic utilitarian inclination to reduce human wellbeing to meet parochial interests of a neoliberalist state and its welfare organisations.

Among those parochial interests seem to be those advocating secularising concerns, for in line with the post-secular philosophical and theoretical critiques of Millbank (2006) and Taylor (2007), the structural conditions of procedural and instrumental bureaucracy are considered to display a utilitarianism that is ‘disenchanted’. Pragmatic, instrumental social work reasoning about what a parent ‘does’ rather than ‘why’ he or
she does it stems not only from empirical inclinations but also romantic inclinations that, as seen in the previous chapter, doubt the authority of any overarching metanarrative to provide causal theoretical accounts for explaining things. The nature of any reality or notion of truth, transcendent or otherwise, is considered arbitrary and contingent. In this light, the extent to which a social worker could claim to be able to make sense of parenting situations by reference to underpinning empirical theoretical perspectives, or by use of prescribed categorised responses, with any degree of certainty is brought under question. By the same token, claims made by parents of there being an ordered metanarrative in which their parenting is located and can be understood, such as with the Christian parents within my illustration, are equally regarded with suspicion. Moreover, within a rise of reflexive liberal individualism and a social landscape of increased religious diversity, organised religion and traditional religious dogma are perceived as imposing oppressive, prescriptive relations, and are rejected for restricting personal 'liberating' lifestyle choices (Lovat and Morrison, 2000; Gray, 2008). It is in this context that 'spirituality' has been more recently emphasised over 'religion' to meet the profession's diversity concerns and claim toleration (Shaw, 2016). Herein a 'spiritual but not religious discourse' has visibility (claims toleration) in claiming an ostensive 'culturally competent' practice by acknowledging spiritual sensibilities as components of personal flourishing, although not within the obligations of 'organised' religion but under a mantle of affirming freedom in choice and expression of spiritual identity or identities (Gray, 2008). There appear to be two variations of this:

- those seeking to bring religion within a wider universal conception of spirituality;
- those articulating a more privatised, eclectic spirituality - one that Shaw neatly (date,p.12) summarises as a “shift of authority from external religious structures to individual choice thereby representing a post-traditional religious eclecticism in which religious identity becomes privatised, abstract, impersonal, narcissistic and more concerned with self-empowerment, self-actualisation and a personal
quest for meaning rather than a collective act of worship or obligation towards the common good”.

*Universal conceptions of spirituality*

In terms of the former, it is possible to see how social work’s shifting away from its original tolerance of religious identity to spiritual sensibility could be understood as the development of a universal approach to represent ‘religion’ in a form acceptable to a diversity of religious and secular inclinations. It is a development similarly evident within another modernised/secularised profession – religious education – which in seeking to avoid accusations of indoctrination into specific religious traditions or claims of superiority of one tradition over another sought “a common-denominator” depiction of ‘religion’ tolerable to all (Wright, 2004,p.183). By drawing upon romanticism’s identification of the intrinsic importance of religious/spiritual experience to human flourishing, religious educators claimed religious/spiritual experience to be central and prior to religious or secular doctrinal commitments. This was reasoned through a separating out of different understandings of doctrine: “religious doctrine as revealed dogma and a liberal understanding of doctrine as the outward expression of inner religious experience” (Wright 2004,p.183). By embracing the latter understanding, assigning it a non-cognitive status, and assuming that primary, intrinsic experience is common to all, religious educators claimed a “common-denominator” depiction of religion. It was a compromise that cut loose religious experience and values from their metanarrative moorings and enabled ‘religious’ and moral values to be taken into the secular liberal classroom. In a similar vein, social work’s own accommodation of Christian religious values to fit within the prevailing liberal moral framework is evident within its statements of values and ethics, and codes of professional conduct. Herein, (as aforementioned) social work’s anti-oppressive approaches are rooted in universal values of human rights and social justice. These values operate (mainly) original
Christian notions of there being absolute moral obligations of ‘what one ought to do’ - deontological ethics of duty to humans as having intrinsic moral (sacred) value, with rights to be considered equal, and concomitant duty to not treat a person differently from anyone else, and enable each person to ‘live well’ (Ife, 2008). Social work, prior to its secular liberal rationalisation, comprised Christian actors motivated to connect their Victorian philanthropic projects to God’s divine intentions for human life. Voluntary charity societies formed by individuals and groups within the Church concerned themselves with human needs, serving the multitudes of poor and oppressed casualties of urbanisation in enactment of the Christian ‘golden rule’ (Hugen, 1998). To accommodate itself with modernity’s meta-narratives, social work bought into Kant’s Enlightenment rationalist revision of the ‘golden rule’ (Banks, 2006) and Locke’s translation of inalienable human rights being ‘natural rights’ to secure universal, categorical moral values that could transcend context without reference to a divine authority (Hugman, 2013). Secular humanist notions of the individual as a rational, self-determining, autonomous subject directed social work further away from its Christian philanthropic origins, with a concomitant development of teleological ethics of consequences whereby ‘social justice’ came to entail utilitarian discernments as to who should receive services, particularly in circumstances of prioritising the distribution of limited resources (Banks, 2006; Reisch, 2002; Gray and Webb, 2010). It was a development claiming to have peeled moral obligations away from their underpinning religious meta-narratives - to ostensibly ‘stand by themselves’ in moral neutrality. Yet, in practice those principles served the interests of the political-economic economy in rationing resources by pointing to individual autonomy and responsibilities.

Privatised, eclectic spirituality

24 Interestingly, more recently the trend has continued beyond the accommodation of values, with studies emerging of social work and other care professions cutting loose principles and practices of forgiveness, meditation, and prayer from their Christian theological anchorages to use as legitimate therapeutic interventions in secular (mainly mental health) settings (Aponte, 1998; Harris, Thoresen et al., 1999; Hodge 2005c&d; Wachholtz, et al., 2007a&b; Sheridan 2010).
‘Privatised spirituality’ appears to give more importance to an individuals’ subjective spiritual experience as an end in itself rather than as a heuristic device. As with similar developments in religious education, it displays a postmodern valuing of an individual’s inwardly expressed emotions as providing authentic, self-sufficient bases for moral reasoning as opposed to relating to any objective reality (Wright, 2004). Drawing upon the previous chapter, the engagement with experiential expression reflects the romanticist rejection of Enlightenment rationalism in preference to aesthetic sources that give voice to self-expressed inward desires/motives, and celebrate the capability as a human to reflexively reason to attain self-knowledge and develop the potential of one’s individual personality (Goheen and Bartholomew, 2008). Within religious education, this meant a turn away from a rationalistic teaching approach that suppressed religious/spiritual experience and that focused upon ‘objective’ phenomenon-descriptive facts about religion. Preference was given to engaging pupils to express religious/spiritual emotions in order to give voice to their own motivations and (ostensibly) consider tolerance to others (Wright, 2004). A corresponding move within social work can be seen in a small wave of published studies (mainly US based) that point to the importance of spirituality for personal wellbeing, and promote holistic assessment tools that specifically include spirituality alongside biological, psychological and socio-cultural aspects (Boyd, 1998; Nathanson 2003; Hodge, 2003, 2005b, 2005c, 2005d and 2006; Hodge and Williams, 2002; Van Hook, 2005; Stirling et al. 2009). The tools are designed to enable the service user to form their own narrative that encapsulates their spiritual journey and engages discussion of ‘transpersonal’ issues and relationships (Hare, 2010). Spirituality is understood as differentially and idiosyncratically patterned, as an “...intricate tapestry of all aspects of human diversity woven together with spiritual experiences, values, beliefs and practices (Canda and Furman, 2010,p.101). When taken to its postmodern conclusion, ‘privatised spirituality’ appears to be the promotion of subject-constructed spiritualties and secularities. These are diversified and subjectively relative - so much so that it obfuscates dialogue that
could be labelled ‘sectarian’ and enables a representation of ‘religion’ as ‘spirituality’ in a format ‘tolerable’ to liberalism. Yet this format, in reducing religion to such romanticist extremes of individual subjectivity, asserts an understanding of the Christian worldview as being anti-realist. This reduction marginalises the realist claims of the worldviews, as expressed by the Christian parents in my data, wherein being truthful to transcendental purposes motivates living.

Where do all these ambiguities and contradictions leave the social worker, who in communicating with a Christian parent, has to adjudicate legislative thresholds of intervention, while seeking to fulfil the profession's anti-oppressive values for improving human rights and promoting social justice, and practice in ways that are not ‘inhumane’? Thus far the structural conditions show empirical, utilitarian, romanticist, and secularist inclinations that have tended to promote instrumental reasoning and dissuade dialogue about personal spirituality. Certainly surveys of (UK and US) social workers show limited attention to spirituality or religion within their assessment work (Gilligan, 2003; Furman, et al., 2004; Gilligan and Furness, 2005). Where does this leave Christian parents, whose worldviews and truthful praxis are either misunderstood or absented from these assessments of their parenting? What are the approaches to moral reasoning and ethical living arising from the Christian worldview? Do these bring further structural conditions? It is to this that I now turn.

3.4. **Comparisons with the Christian Perspective to Moral Reasoning**

The conundrum explored in the previous section can be further explored with a comparison scenario of the operation of the liberal triune of freedom, tolerance and reason, but this time with the social worker reasoning not to intervene to restrain freedom of religious expression. In the extract that follows from my interview with David, an ordained Baptist minister in his late thirties, he described how the context to
the interaction - the cultural difference between his Christian worldview and the social work secular liberal humanist worldview – was mediated during communication about parenting. David described his approach to his ministry as being culturally aware to the contemporary de-Christianised UK context in which Christians live out their faith. Together with his wife, David parented his birth children, and many different foster children over an eight-year period. David spoke positively of several social workers with whom he had communicated in the course of the foster parenting, identifying “graciousness” to the communication style, signified by a relaxed, friendly (“smiley”) manner and gentle probing that acknowledged the sensitivity of questions.

David: I guess we would want to say that our faith is not a bolt on extra to our lives. It isn’t just when we are at church or at housegroup but our faith influences everything about what we do. That’s to do with how we spend our money, what we watch on television, where we go on holiday, the jobs we do, the jobs we choose not to do, the things we choose to invest in, how we relate to our neighbours, how we drive a car. Everything is influenced by our faith. I can understand how a social worker not familiar with that pervasive integration of faith and living, that could be difficult. But [its important] to recognise [that] part of my faith means the offering of hospitality to people who don’t share my faith. That’s about our family creating space for people to agree or disagree with what we believe. So when we’ve looked after children from a different faith background, like a Muslim faith background, that has meant asking permission from the birth parent, like ‘What does it mean in terms of food? What does it mean in terms of hair cutting? We as a family participate in a church community on a Sunday, as part of the things that we do. We wouldn’t force that on a child, but if a child was happy to attend with us, we would make space for that. But if they didn’t, then we would find a way to accommodate that.’ Just being really open about what that involves. In general our relationship on this issue with
social services and birth parents has been very good. Recently we had a foster placement with us, an emergency one, it was about 5 days before we were attending a large Christian festival. We asked permission if we could bring this teenager with us. That wasn't a problem at all; it was seen to be a good thing. In fact it seemed to be ‘great, this kid’s been through enough already’ and ‘here’s a safe place where he can have a lot of fun for a week, meet some new people, hang out with our family, it would be good for him.’ So it was seen as a positive. The way that we handled that with the foster child was ‘everything was optional’. They didn’t have to go to any of the sessions. He could stay at the fairground, or swimming pool, but he made friends with the other kids his age and ended up going to a lot of things and again that was seen as a positive thing. It was a problem in social services that they couldn’t find a doctor that could see this lad to sign him off to be able to come away with us. He had an injury to his arm. So I said, ‘OK, are you happy for me to use the contacts we have through our church? We know three GPs, three nurses?’ - because that’s a very popular profession for Christians. ‘Is that OK?’ Social services said ‘Great, we’ve been on the phone for six hours yesterday, three people doing it. We couldn’t find anybody, so any help you can give us is great’. So we phone up and in twenty minutes we are at a doctor’s, he’s made some space and he gets the medical sign off that he needs. So the church was seen as a positive network that could get things done. It can help.

In this scenario, as with the previous scenario (Catherine and Derek), the social workers encountered the freedom displayed by the service users. Each social worker engaged with it in terms of their authority (to prevent significant harm to self or other family members), determining whether and how the service user needs help, support or compulsory direction in using his or her freedom. The social workers sought to be
tolerant of the freedom expressed within the actions of the service user, for at base the liberal solution is to remove limitations to human flourishing (and thereby maximise freedom). However, if that freedom was not used wisely then the social worker could not be tolerant of it. Thus in the former scenario the social worker could be understood as deeming Catherine and Derek’s public revelation of Christian values as an ‘unwise’ use of freedom. Reflecting back to the previous chapter, such action in ‘making faith-based values public’ constitutes the first step upon the secular liberal humanist trajectory of intolerance, with such statements deemed ‘bad taste’ and poorly enacting the moral quality of civil virtue - a normative stance expecting a sacrifice of religious freedom. A perception of ‘dangerousness’ is applied when public statements are asserted as ‘truth’. For the secular liberal such difference in cultural values should remain private, and an absence of active celebration of cultural diversity is deemed faulty (Netland, 2015,p.232). For these parents to continue to foster children – to be tolerated - they had to participate in diversity awareness training and curtail making public their privately held beliefs. Drawing upon Hinman’s (2008) account of pluralism, this is a reading of toleration as ‘putting up with’ rather than as acceptance and affirmation of diversity and difference. Hinman identifies a relativistic stance of ‘anything goes’ as impossible (recognising limitations to a steadfast pluralist account of freedom), and maintains that it is possible to separate out ‘what is wrong’ from ‘what is different’, such that ‘what is different’ can be valued in a way that goes beyond merely ‘putting up with’. Herein Hinman (2008,p.55) determines that there are acts that constitute “egregious moral wrongdoing” (that display evil/malevolence, devalue humanity and obstruct individual/societal functioning) about which different ethical approaches (within and across cultures) can agree. For him, it follows that any act deemed ‘not egregious’ (that is virtue-laden and valuing humanity, promoting individual/societal functioning) should be embraced as a positive manifestation of a diverse society, no matter if the act appears extraordinary within a dominant culture. Hugman (2013,p.129) neatly summarises Hinman’s position as – “To be sure, ‘putting
up with’ is preferable to inappropriate hostility simply on grounds of another position being unusual or strange, but pluralism encourages the effort to go further and give value to difference as part of what it is to be human. This does not imply that cultures have to accept each other’s values, but to be able to appreciate as good that each culture has sufficient social space to pursue its values.”

The social work response to David, the parent within the second scenario, displayed this more positive acceptance of cultural difference. Whilst retaining a focus upon protecting the child’s interests, the social worker intervened in a way that supported difference (Dominelli, 2008; Clifford and Burke, 2009). Within their dialogue David felt more able to be “really open” about what the enactment of his Christian values involved. For example, he could confirm that the child would not be coerced to participate in culturally specific activities (“the way that we handled that with the foster child was ‘everything was optional’”); that the family would adapt to the child’s wishes unconditionally (“part of my faith means the offering of hospitality to people who don’t share my faith. That’s about our family creating space for people to agree or disagree with what we believe”); he could explain how the environment and experience could benefit the child (“it was seen [by the social worker] to be a good thing. In fact it seemed to be ‘great, this kid’s been through enough already’ and ‘here’s a safe place where he can have a lot of fun for a week, meet some new people, hang out with our family, it would be good for him’”); and he could make available cultural resources to assist his caregiving (“so the church was seen [by the social workers] as a positive network that could get things done. It can help”). Thus, it could perhaps be argued that David had more capacity to reason how his parenting came within the boundary of ‘what is different’ rather than ‘what is wrong’. Perhaps David’s social worker was more open to his reasoning of the way in which his parenting was not ‘egregious moral wrongdoing’ and this secured greater toleration. Certainly, David’s social worker gave a
platform to the cultural discussion in a way that did not silence the Christian Other. It was a silencing that did occur for Catherine and Derek in the first scenario.

What were the structural conditions running deeper in this more culturally accepting Christian parent-with-social worker communication that were different to those considered earlier? What does moral reasoning look like from a Christian perspective? What is the level of freedom permissible to Trinitarian doctrine? What restrictions does Christianity place upon human freedom?

From a Christian worldview, the greatest human good is obedience and acquiescence to the will of God. Christians, believing humans are created \textit{imago Dei} (Genesis 1:27), have a corresponding God-given obligation to serve and tend humanity (to ‘image’ God) in a way that esteems and upholds the freedom provided by God to humans to live rich, fulfilling lives. Thus the Christian moral obligation for service should never contain force or restrictions (Hauerwas 1981). Moreover, from a Trinitarian position, the nature of social relationships formed between Christians and God’s created order is premised upon the \textit{reciprocal loving} relationships of the persons of the Triune God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This divine love involves reciprocal processes of giving and receiving, with each person unconditionally affirming each other’s identity. It is an understanding of love as \textit{agape}, as displayed by Jesus Christ in the way he engaged with others, particularly those socially excluded, through “proclaiming and embodying God’s gracious and unconditional love of creation and inviting listeners to reciprocate this offer of love without any attempt at coercion, rhetorical persuasion or insistence on prior conditions. In doing so, Jesus revealed the nature of God as love” (Wright, 2013,p.116). Thus, Trinitarian Christians regard humans as relational beings, being created in God’s own image as a relational being (Genesis 1:27), and relating to each other in such affirming, unconditional, altruistic ways, whether, for example, as parent to child, parent to social worker, or social worker to parent.

The Trinitarian doctrine of the incarnation furthers the view of God as being faithful to
maximising human flourishing. The hypostatic union of God and humanity in the person of Jesus Christ provided the means of mediating the separation between God-the-Creator as being wholly transcendent and his created (humans and the world) as being wholly immanent. By enacting personal agency, God, in being both fully transcendent and immanent, made (and continually makes) possible the ultimate redemption and perfection of humans (Cochrane, 1944; Gunton, 1998). It is through the incarnation that the Triune God self-reveals himself, makes himself accessible to humans, and also restores humans to becoming more Christ-like. Christians, in striving to grow like Jesus Christ and mature spiritually, seek to connect with God through prayer, worship, reading the Bible, fellowship with others, and participating in other sacraments. In this they are encouraged to be continually reflective, such as through examining ‘self’, lifestyle and relationships in accord with a humble walk in faith that looks to ‘act justly and love mercy’ (Belcher and Cascio, 2001; Micah 6:8).

Thus it is a generous foundation upon which Christians mediate social relationships, for it appears to be one that goes beyond ‘putting up with’ or ‘acceptance’. It is a moral obligation that is based upon transcendent values that are derived from God as the ultimate source of value and goodness. It is theologically captured within the doctrine of *perichoresis*, which references the mutual coexistence and ‘interconnecting permeability’ of the persons of the Trinity. Within such reciprocal ties of divine love, any matter concerning one person concurrently concerns the three. Thus, when God sought to redeem humanity and the world through Jesus’ death upon the cross and resurrection, it was not one person but the Triune God making himself vulnerable to evil forces. It was a freely given sacrificial act showing God’s love for humans and desire to be at one with humanity. Correspondingly, with redeemed freedom and in the light of divine ‘interconnecting permeability’, humans can be similarly interconnected with the Triune divine ties of love. The moral emphasis generated by such Trinitarian reciprocally affirming relational understanding is of non-coercive, unreserved
acceptance of the ‘other-for-who-they-are’, an agape love with humble openness and concomitant duty to provide self-sacrificing assistance to others. The kind of moral obligation being described, with its transcendental linkages, was illustrated within my data extract of David’s explanation of the Christian orientation to his parenting – it being the non-coercive and unconditional “offering of hospitality” to a stranger. In this he did not describe the “offering of hospitality” being made for reasons of his individual subjective preference, or because it phenomenally described ‘what most people happen to do’, or because it made more ‘logical’ sense according to human reason (Gewirth, 1978), but he described the offering being made as if the stranger were Christ (Bretherton, 2010).

Further clarity can be derived from the distinction that Christian scholars have made between ethical approaches to Christian moral living: ‘Christian ethics’ and ‘moral theology’ (Long, 2009). The focus of ‘Christian ethics’ is to propose ‘ethics’ as universal categories for application to social issues, using a non-sectarian (non exclusive Christian) formulation that can be applied to and implemented within both secular and non-secular institutions or policies. The underpinning assumption is that ‘ethics’ is less divisive than confessional doctrine, and that a toning down of exclusive doctrinal claims under the mouthpiece of ‘ethics’ provides a less controversial conduit to public discourse. What is being sought is common ground with people wanting ethical solutions but who are not accepting of Christian claims. The ‘golden rule’ or Kant’s configuration of it as the universal categorical imperative is an example of such commonality - as Long (2009,p.458) summarises: “It assumes that good is a more universal category than confessional doctrine such as that God is triune. Every individual can be good; every individual cannot confess that God is triune”.

The alternative approach - moral theology - disputes the Christian ethicists’ assertion of more universality and inclusivity for ethics over Christian doctrinal teaching (Hauerwas and Wells, 2004). Moral theologians point to the separation of Christian ethics from
Christian theological teaching (as "some putatively universal ethical kernel") to be a modernist abstraction that distorts understanding of Christian integrated living (Long, 2009,p.458). When Christians live in accord to the narrative structure of the Christian worldview (as actors imaging God through playing their part in God’s Story of redemption) their forethought is of God, who he is and his agapeistic loving purposes. With a Christological focus (as explored above), they seek to be more Christlike in their social relationships and projects (being restored by Christ and equipped by the Holy Spirit). The development of their moral character and their moral praxis – Christian virtues of faith, hope, charity, patience, gentleness, acceptance of the ‘other-for-who-they-are’ - arises from this foresight (Hauerwas, 1981,p.95). This contrasts with the Christian ethics position that gives import to the ‘commands’ of God as neutral dictates stripped of such Christological meaning, and operating as free-standing abstract principles that humans can rationally apply (without guidance from traditions/church community) to “quandary” situations (Hauerwas, 1985, p.2; Placher, 1997a and b; Long, 2009). When taken to the practical situation, this suggests that when social work questioning of Christian parents operates from the basis of such “quandary ethics” – testing/adjudicating parental espousal of their ethical principles in the light of hypothetical situations such as in the situation of Catherine and Derek – it completely misses the Storied agapeistic premise of the Christian virtues that offers acceptance and freedom to the ‘Other-to-be-Other’ (Hauwerwas, 1985,p.2).

Moral theologians declare as problematic the Christian ethicist claim of an independent, neutral, public space – “independent of historical and social context, and independent of any specific understanding of [human’s] nature or purpose” - from which to ‘do ethics’ (D’Costa, 2000,p.3). As with many philosophers, they question the original Cartesian suggestion of rationally derived knowledge having neutral, certain, universal foundations, and posit that no epistemological perspective can be devoid of subjectivity and claim to be value-free – there is “no view from nowhere” (Long, 2009).
While, as Hauerwas (1981, p.84) summarises - “the story that liberalism teaches us is that we have no story” - at base all epistemological perspectives are essentially faith and/or political commitments/stories, and there must be an underpinning of ‘teaching’ (corresponding to those commitments) to every ethical principle for it to be comprehensible within social relations (MacIntyre, 1984, p.22). The issue is not whether but which faith and/or political commitments are present, and whose interests are served. It follows that moral decisions concerning ‘why I must act’ and ‘what are good or bad actions’ in parenting situations are not sustained by themselves – never just ‘facts’ or ‘ideas’ – but are always interpreted in the light of a worldview-based value judgement. This is as true for social workers operating under the instrumentalism of a secular liberal humanist framework as it is for Christian parents operating within the Christian Story.

In summary, the discussion points to the communication between Christian parents and social workers being at a deeper level that displays anchorage to different worldview commitments. Given this, what is a way forward in the dialogue? In this chapter I have proposed that universalism seems to be an inadequate answer. On the one hand universalism itself is privileged upon a hard Liberalism that sees the moral principles of freedom and tolerance as being ultimate ideals (end purposes) to welfare rather than the original Lockean ‘soft’ liberal interpretation of the principles being operated as a neutral ‘interim ethic’ to encourage dialogue and debate about more-or-less correct ways to achieve the good life. Any non-Liberalist worldview coming up against these hard Liberal ideals (dressed as ‘principles’) will be considered intolerant, or ideologically oppressive.

However, universalism itself draws upon the Cartesian suggestion that that there can be secure, certain foundations to knowledge. Yet, as considered in the previous chapter, this occurs despite the certainty to any epistemological foundation being questioned. There is no “view from nowhere” - epistemological perspectives are all
essentially faith commitments. There is no foundation to communication – instead (below) are different faith perspectives/worldview commitments. What is lost, for example, when the modernist universalism of ‘ethics’ is applied as a Liberal accommodation (such as the ‘golden rule’ or ‘universal categorical imperative’), is a sufficient non-liberal/post-liberal understanding of how Christian worldview-integrated-living inhabits the truth-claims (the meta-narrative/Story) that sustains it, and enacts the morally social praxis that flows out of it (the associated Christian virtues in agapeistic service to humans and the world)(Placher, 1997a and b). Put simply, an understanding of Christian belief and Christian living that fails to see the worldview Story that anchors it or the virtues inculcated by it (seeing only abstract ‘moral commands/standards’), completely misses the point.
Chapter 4: Field of Social Work Communication

4.1. Introduction to the Chapter

In the previous chapters I proposed the presence of structural conditions displaying empirical, utilitarian, romanticist, and secularist inclinations within the institution of social work that appear to promote instrumental moral reasoning and dissuade dialogue about personal spirituality. This chapter looks more specifically at the dynamics - at a more micro interpersonal level - within social work-with-Christian parent communication. Here I am looking for what the social work theoretical and practice frameworks concerning social work communication reveal about the outworking of tolerance within the dynamics of social workers’ communication with Christian parents. Do these frameworks point to any means for neutral dialogue, and promote acceptance of the religious ‘Other’? Or do they operate as a mechanism/tool/strategy/method for social work’s mainly instrumental reasoning?

The ideas discussed, again, point to how the communication takes place across worldviews - that this is not a conversation about or between worldviews. Rather, social work communication primarily colonises the Christian voice.

- The first section identifies the dominant knowledge and practice frameworks taken to social work communication, and begins to identify ambiguities and contradictions within and between them at the surface level of communication.

- In view of those contradictions, and developing the on-going critique, the second section digs down to outline empiricist, romanticist and instrumental inclinations that primarily display the profession’s mainly secular liberal humanist worldview commitments. These commitments marginalise communication of Christian worldview praxis. Instrumental reasoning
particularly operates to distort communication. Social work’s traditional ethical allegiance to social justice – evident in the romanticist inclination - appears to temper the authoritarian tone.

- The third section draws upon Christian theorists to provide a Christian worldview understanding to the dynamics. The narrative theological approach proposes an understanding of communication action as signifying (bearing meaning to) the meta-narrative (Story) in which the person inhabits. In order to enable dialogue that is not distorted, social workers will need to take steps to grasp this narrative. To do this, they have to recognise that they also have a narrative.

4.2. Contradictions within the Knowledge and Practice Frameworks for Social Work Communication Skills at a Surface Level

Isobel and Lewis, a married couple in their late forties, were parents to several older birth children and one adoptive pre-school child. They also provided intermittent short-term foster care. They lived on a small, quiet owner-occupied housing estate in a rural area in the outskirts of a large town. Both had decades of experience in children’s work, with Lewis currently employed in a senior role by a Christian charity. Isobel was the main carer for the children - the youngest having severe global development delay - and she also provided support services for adoption support groups. In my interview they described how the relational support and spiritual encouragement that they had received from their (internationally affiliated) evangelical Christian church community had particularly bolstered them during the social work assessment processes for the adoption of their daughter. The following presents the first of two extracts illustrating how the communication of two different social workers emphasised the instrumental moral reasoning of the social work institution rather than hearing the voice of the parents in articulating how they would contribute to a child’s flourishing. The extract
begins with the parents approaching the communication with an openness and optimism to their capability to parent. For them, it was an openness and optimism based upon their Christian worldview perspective of being significant and secure in their relatedness to God (as his redeemed creation) and having been vocationally equipped and ‘called’ through their life experience, work opportunities and Church community support to provide care for others (Anderson and Goss, 2017).

Isobel: We came in and said “this is us” because, you know, that’s who we are, you know, it’s no good going to an interview when people are considering whether you are suitable and hiding things. So we explained about, talked quite openly about being part of our church, our family, we have lots of friends. Talked about knowing people who had adopted, a friend who was an adoption manager, and talked about that.

Johanna: Who initiated it, the bit about your faith? Who brought it up?

Isobel: I can’t really remember, but in that first interview they kind of ask you lots of questions of “why do you want to adopt?”

Lewis: It was intertwined with our motivation, in terms of an expression of our faith, you know. It was slightly different motivations for ourselves [each other] because Isobel was from a big family, so we had three birth children and she was one of four so having four children was quite a natural…normal thing. So there was quite a strong maternal drive there. I was kind of mostly, not maternal obviously, but more altruistic, more aware of the need and if I was able to make some difference into that need then that would be a good thing for us to do. So there was a meeting of complementary motivations. So part of that would have been from a faith position so, obviously, in our lives we would want to seek the wellbeing of others and as an expression of love [we would think] ‘how can we reach out to others in need?’
Johanna: So you said that you were quite open when you raised it, how did you feel when you talked about the faith stuff?

Isobel: I was OK because they talk quite positively about support networks…research done about a higher success rate for children within faith communities, you know, of adoptions.

Lewis: Less breakdowns, less disruptions.

Isobel: Specifically with disability…I feel [that with the church] there’s more of a community feel. That people take on that child as part of that family and they see the, they look upon [the child], as a person not at the disability. And our church are very much like that. We have a number of people in our church who have learning difficulties. So they [the church family] absolutely adore our daughter. They even text us and say, “She’s such a blessing”…I think we probably went into it at the beginning, we felt, you know, ‘we’ve got a good community, we’ve got a happy family, we live in the country, we’ve got a nice house’, you know?

Johanna: You had so much to offer?

Isobel: But that wasn’t our experience at all. Both of us have 20 years’ experience working with children. But that never felt valued. It was “Oh yes but, you'll never have experienced what the children from the care system will be like”. Our particular social worker portrayed them as like being like, kind of, ‘the hounds of hell’, you know,

Lewis: They were trying to paint a counter, negative perspective, almost obstructive.

Johanna: To try to put you off in a way, or would that be too far?
Isobel: No, I think, what it was that they wanted you to realise that, you know, they have a lot of problems.

I have presented this extract for illustrative purposes, notably because it could be read as illustrating another moment whereby Christian parents when publicly expressing their Christian worldview, deviate from the normative secular liberal humanist expectation to keep religious worldviews private. Herein (from this perspective), they present the social worker with the moral dilemma discussed in the previous chapters: either to tolerate the utterances as the expression of diversity as Other (whether as merely ‘putting up with’ or exploring/discussing as ‘acceptance’), or operate the trajectory of non-tolerance according to the perceived level of discomfort (‘civil bad taste’) or dangerousness. In this scenario, the social worker’s outworking of moral reasoning appeared to indicate non-toleration. According to the parents’ perspective, the procedural questioning and responses of the social worker displayed a misinterpretation and disregard (non-toleration) for the optimism and openness that the parents brought to the communication of their potential to parent children with difficulties. The parents experienced their voice being colonised by a different ‘reading’, whereby they were perceived as communicating a misplaced naivety to the demands of parenting children who had been maltreated. On this basis, the social worker held reservations about their capability to parent an adoptive child. From this perspective (reflecting back at the discussion in the last chapter) it looks like the kinds of social work listening and speaking practices displayed here potentially reveal something about norms of interaction internalised from the institution of social work.\(^\text{25}\) Is there another reading for why the social worker asserted this line of questioning, and imposed this interpretation so early on in the process, without exploring the parents’ reasons for their optimism and openness (their capabilities, motivations, resources, supports)? Drawing upon practice experience, another reading might be that the social

\(^{25}\) In Strhan’s (2012) ethnographic study, for example, listening and speaking practices revealed and reinforced universalizing modern norms.
worker is aware of another aspect of the practice context - the high level of placement breakdowns - and pursued a key goal to check out whether the potential adopters/foster carers really understood the differences of caring for an adoptive or foster child (who was likely to have had a number of adverse experiences) compared with their own birth children. This reading recognises that there is a complexity involved in doing a foster care or adoptive assessment, where the family’s views and family practices have to be brought to the surface and assessed to ensure that carers have considered how their practices might be experienced by children placed with them. The Prospective Foster Carer Report Form (Form F (England), Coram BAAF, 2018, p.6), for example, specifies how the assessing social worker “should consider the extent to which the applicant has resolved past traumas or losses; has the capacity to make and sustain close relationships; is able to empathise and understand other people’s feelings and is able to reflect on emotive matters”….and refers to how “difficulties in establishing or maintaining effective communication are amongst the most common reasons for applicants being deemed unsuitable, or foster carers being deemed no longer suitable to foster….suggest[ing] that assessments need to rigorously consider whether applicants will be able to work effectively with others, particularly in the stressful and challenging contexts that are inevitable with fostering.” Practice experience in the field suggests that this intrusiveness can be troubling for prospective carers and so it could be argued that it is not just the issue of belief/faith/religious practices that is causing an issue here (i.e. not necessarily that anyone’s doing something wrong). This matter of parents finding such questioning overly intrusive is supported by the UK government’s most recent evidence review of the fostering system in England (Baginsky et al., 2017, p.80) that discusses Sebba’s (2016) research of “the experiences of applicants contain[ing] complaints of delays and paperwork throughout this period as well as feedback on the intrusive nature of the process….complaints about too much focus being placed on their relationship with previous partners and insufficient attention paid to their ability to care for a child…there
was a clear recommendation to prepare applicants by explaining early on why intrusive questioning and delays may be necessary”. Questioning, therefore, whether seen as ‘rigorous’ or ‘intrusive’ seems to be a tense part of this practice context for a number of parents. Whether, how and in what ways aspects of such tense communication practice relate to matters of religious worldview needs more exploration. Therefore, to consider these points further, it seems important to turn to the expectations emanating from the theoretical and practice frameworks for social work communication.

The implementation of the recent overarching professional standards framework in England - the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) – changed the accent of the professional education of social workers to address the development of the qualities and capacity required to work with service user situations of increasing complexity, risk and uncertainty (situations as considered in the last chapter with reference to the neoliberal context). The PCF sets out developmental pathways of expected capability for different career stages with social workers aspiring to ascending stages of capability. Professionally capable practice is simultaneously determined to be a nexus of several (sometimes all) of nine interdependent domains of professional capacity: Professionalism; Values and Ethics; Diversity; Rights, Justice and Economic Wellbeing; Knowledge; Critical Reflection and Analysis; Intervention and Skills; Contexts and Organisations; and Professional Leadership. In declining the exclusiveness of each domain and conceiving their interdependence, professional capability is deemed ‘holistic’, and signifies “a significant step away from the previous checklist approach of assessing demonstrable behavioural competence against occupational standards” (Woodcock Ross, 2016,p.2). In these terms, the teaching and learning of ‘communication skills’ should turn away from ‘occupational competence’ and point towards progressing social workers’ developmental capacity to communicate in ways that connect with the dynamics happening within increasingly complex, often risk-ridden situations. Herein, one would expect skilled communication to be
increasingly conceptualised as ‘communication capacity’, embracing the interdependence of several domains of professional capacity (such as ‘Diversity’ and/or ‘Contexts and Organisations’) as opposed to the behavioural manifestation of one alone (‘Intervention and Skills’) (Woodcock Ross, 2016). In this perhaps, could there be glimpses of tolerance for hearing, and accepting the voice of the religious Other? Could it offer an atmosphere of dialogue with disclosure of worldview(s) and some neutrality?

Knowledge about social work communication appears not to have taken this direction, but instead focused primarily upon the matter of limited conceptual clarity to social work communication skills. Seemingly reflecting the empirical inclinations of social work considered within the previous chapter, social work literature reviews criticised the communication skills literature for: vagueness in theoretical underpinning to such skills; a lack of consensus of relevant theoretical constructs with a resultant absence of empirical study; and deficiency in understanding the way in which learnt communication skills were transferred to differing practice settings (Trevithick et al. 2004; Dinham, 2006; Luckock et al. 2006; Hall and Slembrouck, 2009; Dixon, 2013). Notably these commentators drew on central reviews which were commissioned by the government funded Social Care Institute of Excellence (SCIE) to identify ‘key messages’ for effective learning of communication skills that could be isolated, identified and taken up by educators in order to improve social work practice for the reality of the frontline (Trevithick et al. 2004; Luckock et al. 2006)\(^\text{26}\). This call for social workers to be better prepared for the frontline has been repeated in recent Government and employer exhortations for social workers to take a more authoritative tone in their communication with families, particularly those displaying “resistant and deceitful” behaviours (Laming, 2009), and considered high risk through combinations of

\(^{26}\text{Two systematic literature reviews (Trevithick et al. 2004; Luckock et al. 2006) and one 'practice review' (drawn from the Trevithick et al. 2004 study) of existing communication skills teaching which applied mixed research methods to over half of the qualifying social work programme providers in the UK (63% of the total 78 institutions) (Diggins, 2004).}
substance misuse, mental health difficulties, and family violence (Tuck, 2013; Ferguson, 2014).

The commissioned aims for the SCIE reviews - to identify 'off-the-shelf' behavioural techniques to increase communication effectiveness - suggest an objectivist knowledge position that there are particular skilled ways of communicating 'out there' to meet the occupational demands of differing social work situations waiting to be conceptually identified. The underlying assumption is that any competent communicator can select an appropriate communicative response according to the demands of a situation, drawing on a set of communication skills ('micro-skills') (Greene and Burleson, 2003). In response to sensory (verbal and behavioural) cues from a service user, the process is one of looking deductively at linkages within and between abstract constructs and choosing the correct response. It is a rational process of deduction, with its operation grounded in principles of perceptual-cognitive-motor skill development learnt through processes of technical activity (Trevithick et al. 2004; Proctor et al., 1995 in European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, 2006). The underlying assumption is one of acquired personal competence in instrumental reasoning - that once learnt, such skills become part of a personal repertoire for use in practice situations across the frontline. It is a conceptualisation used within qualifying social work education whereby students are often taught a list of abstract qualities to evidence a level of communicative competence, which is assessed through observed behaviour (such as in role-plays) (Greene and Burleson, 2003). The underpinning belief is that such skilled communication can be transferred from the rehearsal environment of the classroom to real-life practice, although the need to consider possible intervening variables arising from the social worker and context is also identified (Trevithick et al. 2004; Richards et al. 2005). I will say more about such contextual variables later in the section. At this point it is important to note that the approach of deducing linkages between constructs on the basis of observables
(behavioural cues) has not just been used within the classroom. Evaluation research of qualified social workers’ communication skills with parents has also utilised the approach, signifying some agreement of appropriateness of the constructs and the approach for the statutory social work practice context (Forrester et al. 2008).

The abstract constructs (drawn upon as ‘micro skills’) often comprise psychological concepts from counselling approaches and methods for interviewing (Mead et al. 1997; Hall and Slembrouck, 2009). The aforementioned SCIE knowledge review found psychologically derived ‘interpersonal skills’ in addition to ‘interviewing skills’ used by social work educators to describe communication skills (Trevithick et al. 2004). In previous research I also drew upon such communication skills textbooks to summarise the communication skills commonly arising. As set out below, these were primarily psychological concepts from counselling that were deemed as basic and thereby potentially transferable across different social work practice contexts (‘transferability’ again postulating rational and technical proficiency) (Woodcock Ross, 2016, p.12):

• “‘active’ or ‘reflective’ listening, attending, acceptance, often demonstrated through summarizing, paraphrasing, reflecting back or ‘mirroring’
• ‘questioning’, such as through open or closed questions, probing or prompting
• ‘demonstrating empathy’, identifying feelings, using silences
• ‘challenging’, recognizing psychological defences and ambivalence
• ‘identifying and using non-verbal communication’, such as body language
• ‘focusing’, such as creating and working on a shared purpose, and keeping the communication focused, setting goals, encouraging self-efficacy and identifying service user strengths
• ‘avoiding assumptions’ and self-checking for unhelpful judgmental attitudes

• ‘managing aggression and hostility’, looking for the feeling behind the words and actions”

Given the structural conditions discussed in the previous chapter, it is not a surprise to see such therapeutic concepts materialising as communication skills. Social work, in its traditional ethical allegiance to social justice and in its professionalising accommodation of the psychological and social sciences, continues to emphasize the therapeutic relationship as the vehicle for an interpretative process of information exchange. Indeed, while more widely the concept of interpersonal communication is itself a contested area of study (see Burleson, 2010 for a summary), a conceptualisation of interpersonal communication as a transaction of encoded and decoded messages to achieve shared understanding and pursue social goals within the context of a relationship is applied to social work (Egan, 2007; Shulman, 2009). The formation of a ‘communicative relationship’ or ‘working alliance’ is considered a condition to interpersonal communication and is constitutive of two people expressing their intention to convey reciprocal messages (Koprowska, 2005; Burleson, 2010). Interpersonal dynamics operate in the securing of a shared understanding or agreement of the purpose of the work in improving family relationships and resources to safeguard their child (Woodcock Ross, 2011). For example, Shulman (2009) considers such interpersonal dynamics in terms of ‘agendas’. Service users receiving social work services on a voluntary basis often bring an agenda to the communication that is about having their needs and difficulties understood and ameliorated, with strengths identified. As discussed in the previous chapter, such intervention displays ‘tolerance’ on the part of the social worker in outworking the liberal imperative to encourage personal autonomy. However, as also observed in the previous chapter, often there is a degree of ‘intolerance of freedom’ and associated involuntariness underpinning the social worker’s contact due to the social worker’s legislative authority for safeguarding. Herein, the social worker brings an agenda for the communication
process to enable him or her to fulfil that authority role. It is a role for which the social worker is required to draw upon instrumentally focused process-driven assessment procedures. Potentially, therefore, two conflicting agendas may be operating (Shulman, 2009). Indeed, with specific reference to parenting assessment, such work is often characterised by parents communicating ambivalence and resistance which is as much linked to having a social worker involved in investigating (and possibly restricting) their freedom for their chosen family practices rather than resistance to change (Forrester et al. 2012). Certainly, research of social work within child protection highlights how practice has become more ‘investigative and intrusive’ (Ferguson, 2014). In some circumstances, in the face of such communication obstacles, it could be that no truly ‘shared agenda’ becomes established between the parties as to the purpose and function of the work in benefiting the family. In the absence of a ‘shared agenda’ the resultant communication between the parties could become merely an “illusion of work” (Shulman, 2009; Woodcock Ross, 2016).

In operating the inter-relational approach, including the mediation of such communication obstacles, social workers are encouraged to use concepts from psychodynamic theory to attend to potentially underlying unarticulated but unconsciously and behaviourally revealed thoughts and feelings in order to demonstrate that they have adequately heard and understood a person’s communication of their feelings and experiences. For example, Seden (2005:26) emphasizes the importance of “listening to the base line (what is not openly said but possibly is being felt)”. Indeed, the adequacy of ‘active listening’ or ‘reflective listening’ through a display of empathy is a constant referent within the communication skills literature (Woodcock Ross, 2011). Such is the attention to empathy as an indicator of whether or not communication is considered effective that Hall and Slembrouck (2009) considered it a central feature of existing conceptualisations of communication skills. Within social work there is wide agreement that empathy refers to the act of
recognising (including providing a response to) the authenticity of what another person is feeling (Koprowska, 2005).

Other concepts from psychodynamic theory, drawn upon extensively in existing communication skills texts to identify underlying unarticulated thoughts and feelings within social work communication (Trevithick et al. 2004), have received renewed ascendancy within a recently rekindled 'relationship-based approach' (Ruch, 2009, p.350-351). These pertain to the obstacles that can arise from the playing out of various psychological defences against having to experience anxiety provoking information (Rustin, 2005). Herein, powerful feelings from early relationship experiences are proposed to be unconsciously ‘transferred’ to the present and experienced within the interpersonal processes of the social work relationship (Salzberger-Wittenberg, 1970; Bower, 2005; Howe, 2005). 'Transference' is considered inevitable, and for social workers it is considered a helpful 'use of self' in recognising service user feelings (Mattinson and Sinclair, 1979; Howe, 1998; Agass, 2002; Ruch, 2005). Counter-transference has been used to describe the reaction set off in the worker as a result of being receptive to a service user's transferred feelings. There is a need for the social worker to critically reflect upon whether the feelings that they have about what a service user is trying to communicate to them is valid, or whether it is the social worker's own reaction triggered off by their own unresolved problems and feelings (Salzberger-Wittenberg, 1970). Indeed, studies have considered how social workers’ feelings of vulnerability and anxiety about complex, emotionally challenging parenting situations can create psychological defensive behaviours, particularly in the face of increased hostile public and media scrutiny ‘to always get it right’ (Buckley, 2000; Rustin, 2005; Taylor, 2008; Froggett, 2012).

It seems important at this stage to pause and summarise the complexity and complications that arise from these knowledge frameworks thus far and what they imply for a practical situation. For example, looking back at Isobel and Lewis’ account
of their assessment meeting, according to these social work communication knowledge frameworks, for the social worker to have communicated well it appears that she should have been able to draw upon a selection of prior abstract theoretical concepts (mainly drawn from the psychological and psychodynamic sciences) to rationally encode and decode communication messages sent between her and Isobel and Lewis. These messages would have been sensory in form but have potentially referred to deeper conscious or unconscious thoughts and feelings (deemed more authentic) that may have arisen within either the parents or herself (the social worker), and which, if not adequately recognised and understood had the potential to create communication obstacles. In other words, the suggestion is that social workers should be able to simultaneously use but also bracket out the influence of their own thoughts and feelings. They are to be both objectively distant (to be able to instrumentally discern and apply universal abstract categories), but subjectively present to encounter communication (feeling) that appears to be deemed more authentic. Yet, as seen in Isobel and Lewis’ example, interpretations can differ and thereby affect shared understanding of meaning (Burleson 2010). If the social worker is subjectively interpreting (decoding) the messages being transmitted then how can this at the same time fulfil the requirements for objective ‘reading’ of the ‘facts’? Similarly, if the social worker is required to pay attention to instrumentally driven process-focused procedures, then how can this encourage simultaneous empathic engagement to the parent-led concerns? So, on the one hand, it might be reasonable to ask whether if empathy and/or transference had been utilised within the social worker’s communication with Isobel and Lewis, then their consternation at being misunderstood might have been more meaningfully explored? That, from this angle, a reasonable question to ask might be ‘if empathy is not there to be empathy, then what is it doing?’ On the other hand, an additional reading might be that social workers may empathise but still have to raise and discuss particular issues. From this angle, an empathically attuned response might mean acknowledging the difficult feelings for parents but, at
the same time, not duck the issues – and this is why parents might feel there is no empathy. This ‘non-duking of the issues’ was considered earlier in relation to the tensions occurring at the perceived ‘intrusiveness’ of questions being asked as part of the ‘rigor’ of parenting assessment. At issue here though is not whether the social worker should or should not discuss difficult issues – the social worker must operate within the liberal framework and discern and discuss where freedoms are potentially/actually being impinged upon and potentially/actually causing harm to children’s wellbeing - but to what extent the social worker does actually provide an empathically attuned response (does actually acknowledge the difficult feelings for the parents), and whether that empathically attuned response does actually perceive the ontological depth to the discussion (that it takes place across worldviews) and does actually voice understanding to the tensions that this raises for both parties. It is a point that I unpack further in sections 4.3 and 4.4, where I return to the question of ‘if empathy is not there to be empathy, then what is it doing?’ Without pre-empting the detail of that forthcoming discussion (not wishing to put the cart before the horse), to summarise, at this stage I am noting that there are inherent inconsistencies in the knowledge assumptions to the idea of ‘skilled communication’; inconsistencies that may decrease capacity for either Christian parents’ or social workers’ voices to be heard and deeply understood.

Perhaps in apprehension of such inconsistencies, the recent relationship-based approach also contains social constructionist ideas emphasising that social workers should also self-examine (‘deconstruct’) the underpinning knowledge and assumptions that they bring in ‘constructing’ service user situations (Ruch, 2009). Potentially, such constructions are mirrored both through the language (or other communication methods) used with service users and social work colleagues, as well as the methods that are not utilised, or not validated (Thompson, 2003). As such, the constructions could be understood as presenting further communication obstacles. For example, in
earlier research I drew on critical theorists (Nicolson, 1993; Richardson, 1993; Smart, 1996) to consider obstacles to social work communication arising from social workers’ privileging of formal knowledge and preconceived ideas and cultural stereotyping of parental circumstances and difficulties with social prescriptions of parenting applied to parents (Sheppard, 2000; Woodcock, 2003; Woodcock and Tregaskis, 2008, Woodcock Ross and Crow, 2010). However, it is important to highlight that this is a somewhat superficial application of a social constructionist conceptualisation to fit what appears to be a more dominant interpersonal conceptualisation of the removal of communication obstacles to enable more participative, authentic communication. A more complete social constructionist conceptualisation would emphasise the socially constructed nature of the communication process, with the social worker and service user being social actors actively influencing the process and outcomes of the socially situated context (the social work interview) with service users who are in a social context themselves (Sheppard, 1998; Sheppard, 2000). Nevertheless the idea of communicated understanding being deconstructed and then ‘co-created’ has been identified within wider parenting research (health care settings) using discourse and conversational analysis, and then subsequently applied to social work scenarios. Here, for example, Hall and Slembrouck (2009, p.466) refer to Willig (1999, p.2) in identifying that language is “constitutive of experience rather than representative or reflective” and exemplify it as being “when a social worker talks to parents about their child’s behaviour, the concerns are created within that encounter. This does not mean that the problems do not exist outside the interview, but that the telling and listening in the interview bring the problems into existence. How they manage the discussion matters, for instance, in terms of the relative importance given to particular elements by the professional and parent. On other occasions, in the case conference, at the school or in supervision, the child’s problems are likely to be talked about differently, with some elements given more salience and credence than others”. 
Some claim that such communicated understanding of problems being deconstructed and then jointly re-constructed presents communication that can be perceived as non-adversarial, in which to affirm the ‘voice’ of the service user in describing their personal and cultural context. Here it claims to secure greater parental participation in the co-identification of personally and culturally appropriate solutions given the obstacles of ambivalence and avoidance that often arise (Jefferson and Lee, 1992; Egan, 2007; Gray and Fook, 2004; Gray, 2008). In this, it is possible to glimpse the structural mediating influences considered in the previous chapters, whereby social work as a secular liberal profession seeks to tolerate human rights rather than diminish personal autonomy. Social work communication, as with other practice strategies, has to respond to the increased legislative and policy emphasis to give due consideration to children and parents as central actors within parenting assessment, with rights to be communicated with effectively about their parenting and what matters to them (The Children Act 2004; The Care Act 2014; The Equality Act 2010; Article 9, Human Rights Act 1998 and Article 18, United Nations Declaration of Human Rights). Certainly, this theme of promoting service user self-determination and participation is evident across the social work communication skills literature (Lefevre, 2012). Houston and Cowley (2002,p.643), for example, highlight that the “particular concern is to ‘empower’ the client; the professional acts as a facilitator, encouraging the client’s perspective with a flexible professional response”. This co-identification knowledge position presumes a degree of equality and convergence of interests between the social worker and service users. Could such a position present opportunity for increasing acceptance and dialogue with the Christian ‘Other’? When looking at Isobel and Lewis’ situation it would seem this was not the case, for their ‘telling’ was overridden and distorted by the social worker’s own ‘listening’ and ‘telling’.

Yet, paradoxically, the social constructionist ideas do appear to be claimed under the umbrella of social work’s traditional anti-oppressive commitment to social justice. As
discussed in the last chapter, this commitment recognises the contextual influence of socially and culturally diverse situations, and calls social workers to identify (and be intolerant of) dissimilar manifestations of difference and associated inequality in access to social power (Dalrymple and Burke, 2006; Dominelli, 2008 and 2010). A consistent theme within the social work communication skills literature is of communication being 'culturally constrained' by the social context in which it occurs (Koprowska, 2003; Hall and Slembruck, 2009). Effective interpersonal communication requires sensitivity to individually and culturally held meanings. Failure to respond to contextually related communication messages could present further obstacles to social work communication than those already arising from the culturally constrained context (Shulman 2009). For Lefevre and colleagues (2008, 2012) all such obstacles constitute 'inhibitory factors' which act like 'noise' in distorting the potential for "participative 'noise-free' dialogue and unconstrained, authentic and mutual exchange" (Outhwaite, 1994 in Lefevre, 2012, p.33). In their 'Knowledge Review' for SCIE, Luckock, Lefevre and colleagues (2006) applied this conceptualisation of skilled communication to communication with children, creating an interpretive framework of 'inhibiting factors' arising from the service user, social worker and context that 'impeded' the communication process. A framework of 'Core Conditions' was created to enable mediation of inhibiting factors and create a more facilitative environment for communication (Luckock et al. 2006). Lefevre's (2015a,b) recent work conceptualised skilled communication with children as the capacity or capability of the social worker in identifying and addressing those inhibitory factors. Grouping these capabilities into 'Capability Domains', she conceived the domains as interactive and interdependent such that capacity for enacting effective communication ('Doing') cannot be achieved without drawing on knowledge ('Knowing') and personal attributes ('Being'). The task for the social worker was in integrating the capabilities in a way that met the communication demands for each individual situation with a child.
Herein lies a further dilemma confounding the conceptualisation of communication skills. In seeking an adequate account for the influence of the social and cultural context, communication, in its linkages across different capability domains, becomes contextually determined and individually defined. The reality of whether communication is meaningful is relative to that context, and the truth of it cannot be asserted because it can only be held up to multiple, competing claims. Yet, in spite of these objections the conceptualisation of social work communication as a transaction of coded messages and overcoming of obstacles to achieve participative dialogue remains dominant. The emphasis placed upon the capacity or capability of the social worker to engage with communication obstacles continues to centre the responsibility for effective communication upon the individual. There remains the assumption that social work communication is a technical-rational activity that takes place at a surface level, and that the communication process can be controlled through rational choices (including the deployment, or otherwise, of empathy). This occurs despite the simultaneously delivered warning that communication is highly contextual and 'culturally constrained' through complicated and dynamic social worker-parent relationships. Moreover, while such social and cultural forces within the context are noted as probably present, the actual nature of those forces and their interplay with the communication agency of the participants appears not well theorised. The exception is in relation to anti-oppressive practice values that exhorts the social worker to 'identify disadvantage, difference, and strengths' within the 'culturally constrained context', and uphold secular liberal values to not diminish personal autonomy (see Koprowska, 2005; Lefevre, 2012, and 2015a,b), but, following the argument thus far, it seems like we need even more coherence from a communication strategy to achieve it. Thus, social workers face contradictions in the use of the theoretical concepts to make sense of their communication. These contradictions add to the tensions and misunderstandings operating within social worker-with-Christian parent communication.
4.3. DIGGING DEEPER TO IDENTIFY FURTHER STRUCTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

The contradictions and inconsistencies within social work communication appear to contain the modernist divergences of naturalistic rational sense and romanticist emotive sensibility considered in the previous chapters. In terms of the former, the idea of communication being the passive act of transmitting signals containing knowledge and social norms – a passive sending and receiving of packs of sense data – reveals a clear empiricist inclination. It suggests a primary, surface-level focus upon the messages being sent and received – as concrete facts – rather than containing any inherent substance (of cultural meaning) or being the interpretive subjective influences of sender and receiver. Knowledge of the reality of ‘what is being communicated’ becomes reduced to the detection of repetitive patterns of interaction between objects that are rationally ordered and observable. It is under these empiricist assumptions that social workers are considered able to draw upon ‘facts’ to engage in (the aforementioned) rational-technical reasoning about ‘what is really being communicated’.

Indeed, when looking at those ‘facts’ specifically, it is possible to see further indications of empirical, but also secularising inclinations. The particular knowledge framing social work’s understanding of communication skills is “the received secular wisdom of the psy-disciplines” (Whitley, 2012). As stated in the previous chapter, the empiricist inclination is to fasten onto objective ‘facts’, and bracket out issues pertaining to subjective values, which includes matters of transcendence, for at base reality is understood in solely natural terms. The psychological and social sciences’ view of religion is within that immanent understanding. Concomitantly, communication is similarly ordered on the basis of those epistemic assumptions, drawing an epistemic distinction between communication constituting objective (religious) facts and that which is subjective (religious) belief (Wright, 2004). This negates openness (tolerance)
to people’s communication that might contain moral and theological discourse - as Whitley (2012) neatly summarises, it “contrasts with the language common in the psy-
disciplines, which typically discourage use of moral and theological language,
preferring to frame happenings in the amoral language of clinical psychology or
neuroscience”.28 Taken together, this points to social worker-with-Christian parent
skilled communication operating primarily at an abstract ‘psychologically scientific’
level, disenchanted and detached from the subjective difference of their Christian
worldview, and made sense of using abstract-secular-idealistic concepts within
configurations of predetermined conceptual schemas.

Yet, there is also a contrasting inclination for romanticist emotive sensibility, as evident
within social work communication theorists’ attention to feelings as supposedly
indicating authentic communication of thoughts and experiences. As discussed earlier,
ostensibly there is considerable import given to the social worker’s capability to
connect with “what is not openly said but possibly is being felt” (Seden, 2005, p.26).
The social worker is expected to have ability to articulate that revelation and thereby
display understanding that enables the service user’s emotions to be ‘contained’ and
discussed (Woodcock Ross, 2016). In this, ‘communicating well’ is an ingredient of
human experience. Being able to tolerate powerful, painful emotions and then decipher
their relevance and origin (as pertaining to the ‘self’ or ‘other’) is a matter of self-
experience and self-understanding rather than an external influence of ‘fact’. It
constitutes knowledge of communication that necessarily proceeds from subjective
interpretation. In this it reflects the romanticist suspicion of intellectualism, claiming
more authenticity to knowledge that is humanly experienced rather than abstractly
reasoned. When applying this romanticist perspective to the empiricist conception of
communication concepts (drawn from psychological science), such concepts are
perceived as ‘merely words’ – abstractions – representing idealistic language-shaped

28 According to Whitley, this is illustrated in the work of Kleinman, 2006; Mowrer, 1960; Rose,
1989.
abstract thoughts. Indeed, romanticism points to how the empiricist tendency to prioritise abstract reason over human experience essentially reifies such concepts. What this means for Christian parents, such as Isobel and Lewis who attempted to disclose their perspective, is that their communication is filtered and then represented in terms of those (secular) abstract ideas. Hence their openness and optimism was filtered and rebranded (‘colonised’) as misplaced naivety.

In retort, the naturalistic-empiricist perspective would regard the romanticist knowledge generated by subjective interpretations as being entirely contingent upon the socially and culturally relative values of each individual interpreter. In the absence of objectivity it would not be possible to assert validity/objective-truthfulness to any communicated understanding because that understanding would be only one of multiple, competing claims. Ultimately the empiricist critique of such interpretivist understanding is that it leads only to the atomisation of communication, such that it is not possible to claim meaningful communication has taken place at all. Rather than the romanticists being able to uphold a claim to a more ‘authentic’ – essentialist – understanding of communication via human experience, the reduction of understanding to the level of individual interpretation means that it is literally solely what he or she says it is - it is nominal - “in name only” – with no linkage to any deeper shared patterns of meaning. Following this argument, for Isobel and Lewis this could mean that the words of their communication, that for them were valid (because for them they contained ‘truthful substance’), were cast off from their anchorage to their worldview commitments. I recognise that the words ‘truthful substance’ are tricky (such as for readers not familiar/comfortable with realist ‘deep’ ontology), and to be clearer I refer the reader back to the ontologically deep conceptualisation of ‘worldview’, of people aspiring/motivated to live with valid congruence (‘living truthfully’) according to what is real/true to them (of ontological commitments ‘going all the way down’ within worldviews - as discussed in Chapter 1 and expanded upon in Chapter 5). For Isobel
and Lewis, it means that their worldview pertained to reality, their words echoed their
‘story’ within the larger Story of God’s plan and intervention to redeem and transform
humans and the world. One reading here, therefore (from this ontologically deep
worldview perspective) was that their Christian voice (with its linkages to deeply held
ontological commitments) was not elicited and heard, and possibly even (for them)
colonised by a different (secular) interpretation (of that voice) before being shown
understanding and, importantly, therefore, before the depth of potential/actual tensions
were fully considered.

This ‘deeply-worldview-aware’ argument does not negate the liberal framework.
Indeed, again, it is important to reiterate that the social-worker-with-Christian-parent
communication must take place within the liberal framework - the social worker’s role is
to ensure potential adopters fully understand the risks and difficulties, and the adoptive
child has the right to this being done with diligence. In this vein, another reading of the
data might be that to some extent the prospective carers were not sufficiently able to
reassure the social worker that they actually did understand this role/requirement
(whether or not they did) and that is why the social worker persisted in her line of
questioning. Certainly, from my own published research and practice experience, I
know that social workers face considerable tension simply from inhabiting the authority
role of the social worker within their assessment encounters with parents (regardless of
religious/non-religious beliefs and behaviours). Considerable skill is required to
‘achieve a shared purpose’ within such moments, such that dual agendas or hidden
agendas might operate and need to be skillfully identified and brought into the open for
discussion (Woodcock Ross 2011 and 2016). In child protection/parenting assessment
contexts where tension abounds, people can become adversarial, and agendas
entrenched. But what the thesis is considering here is the potential for
additional/deeper understanding of the tension in the communication and dangers of
miss-communication in circumstances when worldview meaning is closed down before
exploration. In this, what the thesis is considering here is whether the instability of such knowledge foundations arising from either the naturalistic-empiricist or romanticist orientations possibly contributes to such closure in a way that leaves both the Christian parent and social worker in a precarious situation for the parenting assessment. By this I mean that the Christian parent is less able/empowered to have the ontological depth of their communication of their motivations grasped and recognised as legitimately available for dialogue (whether ‘felt’ or abstractly reasoned), and the social worker has to make judgments about safe parenting without the potential for having full (if any) communicated understanding of the meaningfulness of those motivations. For the social worker this presents a situation of difficulty and potential dangerousness – inadequate communication means that a full assessment of the potential protective, resilience-building influences or vulnerability, harmful influences of the parents’ worldview-orientated parenting praxis is obstructed

Moreover, in this light it is little wonder that social workers face contradictions in the use of the theoretical concepts to make sense of their communication. Not only are the knowledge foundations of each orientation unstable, but also both orientations are simultaneously evident in the knowledge frameworks of communication practice. Indeed, the same concepts (pertaining to adequate identification of communication obstacles being ‘transmitted’) are signified by both knowledge orientations as being vital for encouraging shared understandings of meaning between social worker and parent. Yet, the different knowledge orientations have conflicting meta-narrative roots (naturalistic-empiricist and romanticist), that in turn point to different and contradictory ways of achieving this. This was evident in the discussion within the previous section, whereby social workers are presumed able to simultaneously use but also bracket out the influence of their own thoughts and feelings. They are to be both objectively distant (to be able to instrumentally discern and apply universal abstract categories), but subjectively present to encounter communication (as feeling). A ‘knowledge paradigm’
perspective – in which both orientations are considered hermeneutically sealed and exclusive – would see such a situation as tautologically impossible. According to this argument, as it is deemed conflicting to simultaneously subjectively interpret (decode) the messages being transmitted (romanticist orientation) at the same time as objectively discern and cast aside subjective ‘values’ from ‘facts’ (naturalist-empiricist orientation), then social workers are probably leaning to one orientation over another. If they are not, then according to the knowledge paradigm argument, they are pragmatically and idiosyncratically pulling together different understandings that are rooted to different theoretical meta-narratives, with the effect that the combined understanding cannot claim to be cognitively valid. If the knowledge paradigm argument is accepted, even with the knowledge foundations of each orientation being unstable, then which orientation dominates in practice?

Yet, while this might seem a logical question to arise out of the discussion of the conflicting and unstable nature to the knowledge foundations of dominant social work communication frameworks, the question potentially misses the mark. As considered in the previous chapter, the statutory social work practice context manifests the primary utilitarian interests of neoliberal welfare organisations. Research has pointed to how the capacity for empathic, creative and thoughtfully focussed communication is overtaken by the primarily instrumental and process-driven social work practice context (Richards et al. 2005). Most recently three UK studies have begun to look particularly at ‘what social workers actually do’ rather than solely ‘what they think/recall they do’ (or I would add what they think they should do according to the knowledge frameworks) within the moment of interacting with parents within child protection (Forrester et al. 2008; Hall and Slembrouck, 2009; Ferguson, 2011 and 2014, p.1).  

29 The Forrester et al. (2008) and Ferguson (2011 and 2014) studies are empirical, and the Hall and Slembrouck (2009) study is theoretical.
large ethnographic (participant-observation) study\textsuperscript{30} of real-time social worker interaction with parents and children found encounters being rushed as a consequence of organisational pressure to work to time-limited timescales prescribed by employers and Government policy, ostensibly to promote purposeful intervention, but foreshortened in duration due to high workloads. Herein social workers’ communication varied in levels of ease and creativeness to cultivate the kind of meaningful relationships to stimulate therapeutic change. Indeed, Ferguson saw a tendency for an instrumental approach to initial visits which appeared to follow the domains of the Assessment Framework in collecting information about the child’s health and development, parental and family histories and support, housing issues, and the nature of any other professional intervention. Similarly different capability levels of social work engagement were evident within Forrester et al.’s (2008) evaluation of the verbal communication of experienced social workers in parenting assessment. Using the controlled environment of actors enacting the role of the parents, the evaluation utilised predetermined constructs of ‘good communication’ that reflected many of the precepts of therapeutic information exchange discussed earlier: reflective feedback; open and closed questioning; eliciting service user issues and strengths; and mediating resistance. Social workers who were able to display empathic responses appeared to encounter less parental resistance and more disclosure of concerns. However, as set out below, other social workers were regarded as displaying a degree of compassionless authority:

“To find that workers use predominately closed questions, that they use few reflections, that they rarely recognise strengths and that they tend to lack empathy is profoundly concerning. It is good that workers almost universally managed to raise difficult issues and that they were able to be clear about

\textsuperscript{30}Notably Ferguson’s (2014) large ethnographic study used participant observation methods to observe real-time social worker interaction with parents and children within 71 home visits across two local authority areas. It appears to be the only study of actual interaction of social workers with service users within practice settings in England, as opposed to research conducted of social workers at their social work offices, or research interviews with social workers about their work.
concerns with the parent. However, the way in which this was done often appeared unskilled and, in a few instances, virtually abusive to the parent” (Forrester et al. 2008, p.49).

It should be remembered that the social workers in this study might have been demonstrating ‘observer effects’ (Denscombe, 2014), such that their behaviours differed from everyday practice. Also, the researchers were looking deductively for particular researcher-led predetermined variables, rather than those arising inductively from the situation that may have been intervening or more relevant. Nevertheless, the commonality in the social workers’ display suggests at least some shared social work perspective/understanding/conditions about ‘how to do communication’ which were less exploratory and empathic but more interrogatory and authoritarian. Herein, interestingly, the third of the three studies (the theoretical study by Hall and Slembrouck, 2009) particularly questioned the relevance of the continued use of such predetermined concepts given their conceptual under-determination in the light of the (then) complete absence of studies of ‘naturally-occurring’ social worker-with-parent interaction. In their theoretical review, the authors pointed to an absence of potentially illuminating sociological informed insights that might inform other communication/interactional strategies. To make the point they drew out some themes from findings in social interactionist studies of professional conversations with parents in wider healthcare contexts. However, in my opinion, those themes still generally emphasised a similarity in professional authoritarianism and process-driven instrumental practice rather than offering particularly new insights. For example, the theme of ‘asymmetric interaction’ between nurses and patients summarised the nurses’ approach being instrumentally structured and task orientated across settings. Herein nurses dominated proceedings, denoting an unequal power relationship in which patients tended to respond to (rather than initiate) questions. Professionals took

31 Informed by social interactionist theorists such as: Goffman, 1967 & 1983; Sacks et al. 1974; Heritage, 1997.
employers’ institutional agendas for process-driven routines into the communication, but these were hidden to the patient. Other themes also indicated the professional having much more control of the interaction than the patient. Professionals ‘managed’ their verbalisation of potentially difficult information that may create conflict (and thereby interfere with routines) through selectively tailoring and limiting medical advice according to the professionals’ perception of the needs of the patient. They also restricted clients’ own participation when their formulations were deemed obstructive to the therapeutic process. The thematic findings are instructive in building a picture of what appears to be primarily authoritarian, process-driven practice within the overarching welfare system. As social workers work within this same overarching welfare system, it is perhaps not too much of a step to consider such social interaction as similarly occurring within social worker-with-parent encounters – particularly given the instrumental and highly regulated reasoning identified in the previous chapter.

When looking across all three studies, it could be proposed that such authoritarian interactive practices reflect an outworking of the (aforementioned) neoliberal Government and employer exhortations for social workers to take a more authoritarian tone in their communication with families with higher levels of risk and/or who are resistant to intervention (Laming, 2009; Tuck, 2013; Ferguson, 2014). Indeed, using the communication concepts discussed above, the hearts and minds of social workers receiving messages (whether abstractly reasoned and/or felt) are not vacant containers awaiting (and unresponsive to) sense data. Rather, as seen in the previous chapter, social workers are, according to their professional role, primarily employees and agents of a secular liberal humanist economy. The authoritarian tone and regulated practices exhorted by their employer organisations perhaps display the outworking of liberalism’s instrumental concerns to regulate the worlds of individuals and particular communities for social and political purposes (Habermas, 1989). Herein, (as previously discussed) it appears to be a hardened Liberalist tolerance promulgated by instrumental reasoning,
that sees the end purpose for intervention as individual autonomy (to choose whether to comply or not) rather than a welfare purpose that does not tolerate human suffering and intervenes to transform individual and social wellbeing. In this it is possible to see social work communication action as influenced - Habermas (1991,p.95) would say “distorted” - by a pragmatic utilitarian structural inclination to reduce human wellbeing to that which meets parochial instrumental interests of a neoliberal state and its welfare organisations.

How does this instrumentalism interface with the romantic and empiricist inclinations of the knowledge frameworks so dominant to social work communication? How can/does this occur, if those dominant knowledge frameworks primarily conceptualise communication as a process of message (‘sense packet’) exchange that operates mainly at the surface abstract level of ‘ideas’? Where is the empathy, and attention to the institution’s allegedly traditional therapeutic orientation to the social work relationship? Do the romanticist (empathy, transference) and empiricist (technical-rationalist abstract skills) elements of communication have a meaningful role within neoliberal interests for social work communication, such as in practical situations of moral reasoning concerning tolerance of the Christian worldview?

Once again, it is instructive to look to religious education as another modern profession dealing directly with the issue of communicating across differing secular and religious worldviews. Wright (2007), for example, draws upon the critical theory of Habermas (1989 and 1991) to shed light upon the possibility of state agencies (such as education, and in my case social work), generated by modernity’s powerfully structured systems for political, educational and welfare, imposing ideological representations upon people’s everyday ‘life-world’ understandings in the service of such power structures. Habermas considers reasoning as being used as a vehicle for such instrumental purposes, pointing to the potential for restrictions upon freedom, and distortions in truth
Such instrumentally orientated communication action can take a number of forms to influence and prevent others’ action:

- **Teleological communication** – whereby the influence of the speaker is in rhetorically persuading others to “bring opponents to…grasp beliefs and intentions that are in the speaker’s own interest”;

- **Normative communication** – whereby language is presupposed as a kind of enculturing process – “as a medium that transmits cultural values and carries a consensus that is merely reproduced with each additional act of understanding”;

- **Dramaturgical communication** – that endorses self-expression (rather than imposed through ‘power’ or ‘universal norms’) - “language [which is] assimilated to stylistic and aesthetic forms of expression”.

(Habermas, 1991,p.95).

Habermas rejects the first two on the basis that they aggressively impose and disallow other voices to have permission to speak. Specifically, Habermas (1991,p.95) dismisses the first, teleological communication, on the basis that it gives weight to those with the most power (that ‘might is right’). The second, normative communication, he dismisses for presupposing a normative vision of permitted speech and imposing it. While these first two represent ‘modern’ forms, the third (dramaturgical communication) takes a post-modern form that permits everyone to express by themselves. It is a form Habermas also dismisses. This time it is on the basis of its inherent subjective particularity and ultimate relativity – in being no more than ‘an end in itself’ it is not predisposed to dialogue. However, Habermas also presents and approves a fourth form – **Communicative action** – as an antidote to the other three. In this he claims an aim for “uncurtailed” truthful communication across worldview perspectives. I look at this fourth form in the next section. In the meantime I want to
propose what appears to be the possibility of the first three forms operating within the (aforementioned) complexities and contradictions of social work communication – and that this ‘triad’ operation thereby reveals something about norms of interaction internalised (and imposed) from the institution of social work. Indeed, using my illustrative example of Christian parents, it could be that it was this triad of normative imposition that forestalled openness for “language as a medium of uncurtailed communication” across their worldview perspectives (Habermas, 1991, p.95). For example, normative communication seemed revealed by the imposition of secularising norms that limited the appropriateness of topics to those that were immanent. It was also displayed by the imposition of instrumental, utilitarian norms that sought to regulate the behaviours of the parents in accordance to neoliberal ideals of tolerance, and that promoted the use of more authoritarian communication to do so.

That such authoritarian language was not explicitly proscribed by the knowledge frameworks, or indeed conveyed by all social workers within practice – suggests that other norms of interaction internalised from the institution of social work appeared to be employed to legitimise and sanitise the hardened edge of the predominant instrumental and secularised norms. Herein it could be argued that it is through a combination of ‘teleological communication’ and ‘dramaturgical communication’ that those hardened instrumental norms became ‘made more acceptable’ to the profession given that the institution of social work ostensibly claims a commitment to empirical practice through the deployment of psychological and social sciences, as well as a commitment to social justice and therapeutic concerns. For example, teleological communication could be conceived as apparent in the persuasion that there exists a (false) consensus of abstract communication constructs – ‘skills’ - that are empirically derived and thereby sufficiently disenchanted and neutral to be universally applied to the communication of all worldview accounts of living. The persuasion to the social worker is that the communication process itself can then be reduced to a technical-rationalist
deployment of those ‘skills’ to uncover communication obstacles. In this it becomes a matter of individual professional responsibility/capability to be able to do so, and a measure of professional incompetence when communication fails – governance that (as seen in the previous chapter) meets the instrumental interests of neoliberal welfare organisations. That those skills are ideologically laden, being disenchanted and theoretically unstable, within communication dynamics with families that are far from consistent and rational (to be able to employ technical-rationalist approaches), is of no consequence to such instrumentalism. Indeed, arguably, for those skills to be even employed suggests that some other form of persuasion must surely be operating in tandem. Surely it cannot simply be a matter of enforcement because the manifestation of such oppressive behaviour would contravene the institution’s commitment to social justice?

Potentially, it could be argued that it is in this – presenting a ‘less oppressive’ persuasion – that dramaturgical communication takes place. Dramaturgical communication seems displayed by the romanticist insistence that communication is more authentic/correct when it is self-expressed. It is here that the deployment of ‘empathy’ is persuasive to the social worker and service user for it claims to give voice and validity to self-expression and ostensibly enable social work’s traditional therapeutic purposes. Again, it is considered to be a matter of professional capability to be able to demonstrate empathy to sustain relationships, and again, as such meets neoliberal instrumental interests for diminished state responsibility and increased individual professional accountability. Moreover, far from conflicting, instrumental interests are served by such empathic – subjectively derived - understanding for it imposes a relativistic ontology onto worldview perspectives that claim a reality to their praxis. For Christian parents, however, this trivialises their articulated claims to truthful living, and enables the meaning of their motivations and practices to be colonised by instrumental concerns.
I asked earlier: “If empathy is present, then what is it doing?” Perhaps the answer lies here – in bringing some kind of humane-personable veneer to what appears to be primarily instrumental reasoning. Reflecting upon examples of my own (published) social work practice, and indeed the last twenty years of my everyday lived experiences of educating qualifying social workers, this conclusion, at face value, seems unsympathetic. I know that where possible I truly sought to enable my service users to tell their stories of everyday parenting, to express their opinions, and I tried to bring into the discussion feelings that they seemed to be displaying, and to reflect with them about them (Sheppard (now Woodcock Ross), 2000; Woodcock Ross, 2011). Every day I see classrooms of qualifying social work students, many of whom are enthusiastic to communicate in compassionate ways with service users, and passionate to advocate with and on their behalf for social justice (Woodcock Ross, 2016). However, my experience, too, is that some qualifying and qualified social work students bring a high degree of suspicion to such empathic processes. They point to a dissonance between the ‘aspiration’ of such communication and the reality of frontline practice that is dominated by the instrumental processing of high numbers of families who display increasingly risky behaviours and employ tactics of avoidance (Woodcock Ross, 2011 and 2016). In this light, of variations in motivation and capacity, it does seems appropriate to question whether subjective understanding is necessarily achievable by such empathic processes. The idea that social workers have capacity for empathic, creative communication, regardless of personal circumstance/characteristics, and unaffected by the current process-driven social work practice context (Richards et al. 2005), fails to recognise that it requires “a level of self awareness that is not needed in everyday life” (Koprowska, 2005,p.7), and involves a high degree of “emotional labour” (Gray, 2002, p.13).

Yet, Ferguson (2014), in his study, highlighted that it requires deep ethical commitment and personal qualities to desire to experience the communication of the Other, and he
emphasised that in his research there were some clear examples of social workers being “welcomed, wanted, and clearly valued”. To illustrate the ingredients of “relationship-styles” that he observed as facilitating more “deep and meaningful” relationships he summarises the approach of one social worker towards a mother who in suffering with severe mental health difficulties and recently experienced violence from her ex-partner, was encountering problems in parenting her seven month old baby:

“[It was a] self-conscious relationship-based manner that was informed by a strengths perspective. Her relationship style…was motivational, playful, tactile, yet authoritative and this example typifies how the atmosphere of encounters in such cases were often positive, caring, creative and joyful”.

Could it be that some social workers, despite the ‘distortive force’ of empiricist and utilitarian structural inclinations hold onto a warmth and professional artistry in their communication? Or is Ferguson’s description of “relationship-styles”, or indeed the earlier descriptions of social worker approaches from some of the parents in my study, better encapsulated as friendliness and warmth (such as ‘smiley’, ‘gracious’) within a technical-rationalist approach to realise instrumental requirements of social work assessment? Perhaps, given the predominance of the authoritarian demand of the socio-political context, social work’s relationship-based, social justice inclinations operate to temper and water down the contrasting empiricist and utilitarian demands. Perhaps it is nothing to do with ‘social work’ at all, but relates to other influences within the context, such as the personal attributes and motivations of the agents themselves. Certainly, some texts of the relationship-based approach point to the use of knowledge that is not solely formal, ‘public’ and empirical, but that is informal and ‘private’, having been acquired and refined through on-going personal and practice experience (Wilson et al. 2011).
What is the potential for social workers’ communication action to see or enable dialogue in a way that does not distort or colonise the voice of the Christian Other? To reflect upon this, and to ensure that I do not also exclude the Christian voice, I now draw upon Christian theorists to consider a Christian worldview understanding of the dynamics of communication action. Does this bring further understanding of communication action that might signify (bear meaning of) the meta-narrative (Story) in which the person inhabits?

4.4. **Christian theoretical input to understanding the communication action: You can only understand my story if you see that you have a story**

In the last chapter I drew a distinction between Christian approaches to moral reasoning to point to the problems with the deployment of universalism. In this section I return to the distinction to deepen the discussion about structural conditions within the micro communication action. Before doing so, I should summarise my earlier point that drew upon the useful distinction held within the Christian theoretical literature about ethics between ‘Christian ethical principles’ and ‘moral theology’. In summary, the Christian ethical principles position regards decisions about ethical choices as open to rational resolution about ‘what is right’ and ‘what is wrong’, and identifies/promotes universal principles for the task that it claims can be inclusive to non-sectarian audiences (Long, 2009). In contrast, moral theologians assert the Christian ethical principle position to be a modernist abstraction that: a) distorts understanding of Christian integrated living and associated moral praxis (Long, 2009); because b) it fails to see any problems in the possibility of neutral, public space – “independent of historical and social context, and independent of any specific understanding of [human’s] nature or purpose” - from which to ‘do ethics’ (D’Costa, 2000,p.3); and c) it fails to see that at base, all epistemological perspectives are essentially faith and/or
political (‘worldview’) commitments, and that ethical principles correspond to those commitments in order to be comprehensible within social relations (MacIntyre, 1984, p.22). Thus, in the last chapter I concluded that it is not just the Christian parents who bring a worldview to the communication, but also the social worker.

Operating from a narrative theological position, the moral theology proposed by Hauerwas (1981) fleshes out this idea that everyone holds to a worldview commitment and that this directs their moral reasoning and communication action. Narrative theology commits to a transformative understanding of the Biblical narrative - in that Christians proffer their lives to be observed and moulded by the Christian Story in co-operative commune with others (Wright, 2004). Put simply, the central idea is that as humans we always think in ‘stories’, everyone has a story to their lives, and as such our purposeful living, our moral projects, our identity, and indeed our communication action, is made meaningful through and because of the stories that we tell and enact in community with others. For Christians, therefore, as Hauerwas (1981,p.95) encapsulates it: “narrative provides the conceptual means to suggest how the stories of Israel and Jesus are a ‘morality’ for the formation of Christian community and character”. In other words, for Hauerwas, Christian moral character is developed by living life’s journey in service to others according to the Christian virtues - faith, hope, charity, patience, gentleness and others - as part of a Christian community guided by the Christian Story. Living ‘Christianly’ is living an ethic of social praxis of service to the world – quite literally communication action – action (not ideas or principles) that communicates reference to the Christian worldview Story. Reflecting back to my earlier chapter, N.T. Wright (2006) illustrated this logic between worldview narrative and the performance of communication action as vocation:

“Listening to God’s voice in scripture doesn’t put us in the position of having infallible opinions. It puts us where it put Jesus himself: in possession of a vocation, whether for a lifetime or for the next minute…..But the performance
isn’t just about our own private pilgrimages. It’s about becoming agents of God’s new world - workers for justice, explorers of spirituality, makers and menders of relationships, creators of beauty.” (Wright, 2006: 161-162).

This matter of ‘performing communication action’ can be illustrated with reference to Isobel and Lewis, the Christian parents in my example. Their optimism and openness in telling their story of their capability to parent was based upon an assurance of being significant and secure in their relatedness to God (as his redeemed creation), and being equipped and obedient to be God’s agents in the world with the purpose of furthering human flourishing (to be ‘salt and light’) (Anderson and Goss, 2017). For them, there was a truthful substance to the words of their communication – words echoing their story within the larger Story of God’s plan and intervention to redeem and transform humans and the world. Their story was of their motivation and their personal journey of readiness until this point. It was a journey with an on-going development of their Christian virtues, shaped by their Christian community; that community itself constituting “a people who have been formed by [the same] story that provides them with the skills for negotiating the danger of this existence, trusting in God’s promise of redemption” (Hauerwas, 1981, p.10).

The idea of Christians living out their life ‘story’ within an overarching Story – their ‘communication action’ bearing symbolic meaning by embodied reference to that Story - is also helpfully encapsulated by Vanhoozer’s (1998; 2005; 2007) ‘theodrama’. Vanhoozer (2007,p.41) perceives humans as living consciously – as performing with “speaking and acting parts” - within the on-going drama of the Biblical narrative of the Storyline of God’s involvement in (or God’s Triune communication with) the world. The theodrama is not relegated to the past, but has continual contextual relevance to the intentional actions of humans - as Vanhoozer explains (2007,p.41): “the cultural scenes in which the church finds itself may vary, but the play is always three-dimensional: creatures and structures originally created good have been corrupted by the fall; still...
groaning, they are presenting being renewed by Christ through the Spirit. To understand a cultural text [intentional human actions] truly thus requires putting it into theodramatic context – reading it in light of the control-script; viewing it thrice over in terms of creation, fall, and redemption”. Moreover, Vanhoozer (2005) frequently refers to the communicative importance of the drama performance, repeating that “the play’s the thing”. In this, he is emphasising that it is the performance and the activity that communicates something about one’s self to an audience. This performed activity is in excess of merely ‘transmitting information’, and it is not talking about ‘correct ideas’ or the application of ethical principles, for as he summarises:

“We are in the realm of action…Drama is about communicative activity. It is about people doing things, saying things that share something of who they are with others. You can’t have a drama unless you are acting in front of someone…action is what it is all about. It is not about the principle of the thing...” (Vanhoozer in interviewer with Tony Reinke, 2014).

To build on this notion of communication action, and consider its possibility for dialogue across worldviews, it seems appropriate to refer back to the last of Habermas’ forms of communication. Habermas (1991,p.95) approved a fourth form – Communicative action – as an antidote to the other three that, as identified in the previous section, unless unchecked lead to ideological misrepresentations that limit freedom and ‘spin’ (colonise) truth. Habermas sees that there is a spiritual fragmentation to modern society. Rather than giving up on the idea of society having a shared concern for ‘truth’, Habermas proposes ‘communicative action’ as possessing emancipatory potential for enabling co-operative communication about peoples'/communities’ truthful stories/enactments of worldview living. His solution is to propose an ethical orientation to create the conditions for such reasoning (‘argumentation’), whereby communication is the medium for enhancing dialogue about ‘what is really real’. The proposal is for
parties to come together with presuppositions for shared inter-subjective understanding, bound to the idea of contingent rationality: acknowledging that each bring initial ontological commitments as they understand them from their own worldview perspectives, and appreciating that, equally, others come with ontological commitments that differentially concur, differ, or conflict with their own, but nevertheless commit to openly work together to adjudicate contestations in the enterprise of securing public statements of truth. It is a proposal recognising that communication which either precipitates a false consensus or which imposes (colonises) one worldview upon (by) another is not going to be enough (such as considered earlier from a critical lens in regard to Liberalism’s enforcement of ‘freedom and tolerance’ as end goals rather than means for debate). Thus, in a rather similar way to Hauerwas and Vanhoozer above, Habermas locates himself within a moral theology by promoting a self and communal reflexive commitment to mutual understanding, and a virtuous way of maintaining distinctiveness within co-operative communal living in which people can tell truthful stories without being silenced.

Indeed, looking back to Vanhoozer’s and Hauerwas’ ideas of the Christian church community, neither see that community as seeking to be separated from the world, nor do they desire to establish a sectarian Christendom. Rather, both seek to maintain distinctiveness out of the church community’s social praxis witness to the Christian Story. This is an important point for the matter at hand. It is an ethical stance explicitly and distinctly rooted in that worldview narrative. As such, it makes it possible for its adherents to see the differences in others’ actions to that of the narrative. To explore this idea, I now draw upon the following extract from my interview with Isobel and Lewis that illustrates communication action displaying such different worldview approaches to moral reasoning.

Isobel: It was …the second visit and so a different social worker came round and she was here for three hours doing it – [the duration of] which our social
work manager wasn’t very happy about. She did it between 11am and 2pm over lunch, and I get prone to low blood sugars, and I get a bit ratty (laughs).

Lewis: And you’re not able to think straight, are you?

Isobel: And this particular social worker came out and she was asking the normal kind of checking questions and she started saying, “Well about the faith, well, if your child came home and told you they were homosexual what would you say? What would you do?” We said, “We'd love them”. What else would you say? And the next question was, “If your child came home and the only invitation they'd ever received was to a Halloween party, what would you do then?” It was all very like, “If this happened, if this happened, if this happened, if this happened.”

Lewis: Narrowing it down to an obscure set of circumstances.

Isobel: I got really ground down by it and ended up getting really fed up by this woman.

Johanna: So the hypothetical questions about matters, which didn’t really seem important in relation to your assessment, seemed really annoying?

Isobel: They did… I think that was the worse bit when it came to our faith. (Isobel pauses, sighs, looks down).

Johanna: OK, thank you. (Turns to Lewis) Can I ask you to think of that moment then with the social worker?

Lewis: Yeah, so I might be blurring the first social worker with the second opinion, but I remember feeling a sense of disquiet about where this was going in relation to faith, issues around sexuality, and with issues around proselytization. It was that area of questioning that probably caused me the most discomfort or disquiet, probably because a lot of the time I was trying to
work out what's behind the question so that I can work out their start point and not necessarily what is being spoken about at the time. So that might be just how I am wired. (laughs)

Johanna: So there's stuff going on in your head about 'I wonder why that's being asked?'

Lewis: Yes. A bit of second-guessing, trying to make some assumption leaps myself in relation to where I think the conversation is going...I think a red flag in my mind of what would be looked for, and be as transparent as I could, but remain true to my faith and to equally communicate from a position of trying to understand where the social worker is coming from and therefore speak with, albeit from a position of assumed understanding, around the nature of their questioning.

Johanna: (referring to earlier comments) So when you said that 'I would pray about it and walk it through', that's Christian language, how did that go down with the social worker?

Lewis: I may not have

Isobel: (interjects) I don't think you said those things

Lewis: I think we probably talked about it more in terms of how our faith basis provides an understanding and the starting point, so we wouldn't have shied away from relating our faith to the everyday, but it would have been fairly low key in how it was expressed.

In the extract the parents indicated that they were aware of differences in perspectives from the communication actions of the social worker ("I remember feeling a sense of disquiet about where this was going in relation to faith, issues around sexuality, and with issues around proselytization"). They spoke of how the social worker’s questioning
– in the testing/adjudicating of their espousal of ethical principles in the light of hypothetical situations – missed the point of their Storied agapeistic acceptance of children-to-be-who-they-are (Hauwerwas 1985,p.2)(“...she was asking the normal kind of checking questions and she started saying, “Well about the faith, well, if your child came home and told you they were homosexual what would you say? What would you do?” We said, “We’d love them”. What else would you say?... So the hypothetical questions about matters, which didn’t really seem important in relation to your assessment, seemed really annoying? ...They did... I think that was the worse bit when it came to our faith [Isobel pauses, sighs, looks down].”) They noted that during the communication, the social worker’s actions in adherence to procedural questioning appeared not to ‘take in’ the discomfort or experience of the parents, and further signified to them a privileging of her own ‘agenda’ for instrumental reasoning (“She was here for three hours doing it – [the duration of] which our social work manager wasn’t very happy about...over lunch, and I get prone to low blood sugars, and I get a bit ratty...And you're not able to think straight, are you?” and “It was all very like, ‘If this happened, if this happened, if this happened, if this happened’...Narrowing it down to an obscure set of circumstances...I got really ground down by it and ended up getting really fed up by this woman.”) In the light of those symbolic actions, the parents were alerted to the likelihood of the social worker being unable to understand their own communication actions, including their explanation of their parenting practices. Thus, while originally approaching the communication with openness and optimism, they then began to explicitly look for indications of her assumptions within her communication actions (“...a lot of the time I was trying to work out what's behind the question so that I can work out their start point and not necessarily what is being spoken about at the time...A bit of second-guessing, trying to make some assumption leaps myself in relation to where I think the conversation is going...I think a red flag in my mind of what would be looked for, and be as transparent as I could...”).
They then looked to respond with what they considered was an approach that was acceptable to the social worker’s worldview. In other words, by knowing that they inhabited a particular worldview of their own (their story operating within the metanarrative of God’s Story), they had recognised her worldview from her communication action, seeing it as different to their own, and sought to communicate with it as such (“...be as transparent as I could, but remain true to my faith and to equally communicate from a position of trying to understand where the social worker is coming from and therefore speak with, albeit from a position of assumed understanding, around the nature of their questioning.”) The result was that the parents framed their responses in a way that omitted their Christian language and minimised the influence/significance of their Christian faith in their lives. In so doing they showed that they were not willing to get caught up in instrumental games (such as also illustrated earlier by Derek’s words “to not get entrapped”). In Vanhoozer’s terms, they ‘performed’ the communication back to the social worker, recognising the ‘opera spectacles’ (worldview) of their audience (“...so when you said that ‘I would pray about it and walk it through’, that’s Christian language, how did that go down with the social worker?...I may not have...I don’t think you said those things...I think we probably talked about it more in terms of how our faith basis provides an understanding and the starting point, so we wouldn’t have shied away from relating our faith to the everyday, but it would have been fairly low key in how it was expressed.”)

On the one hand the illustration shows the social worker operating their role within the secular liberal framework, trying to expand the adoptive parents’ way of looking at the situation in terms of what might happen if they had a child with difficulties within their care, and gauging the appropriateness of their responses (what is tolerable/non-tolerable) to deal with such problems. The role of the social worker to do such rigorous assessment work is required by policy (this is certainly not at issue here) – an adoptive child has the right for such issues to be explored. One reading might be that the
difficulties arising might be due to the social worker's lack of skill in this regard. Such lack of skill in showing empathy to parents was evident in the aforementioned studies by Forrester et al., (2008) and Ferguson (2014). On the other hand, what the illustration additionally seems to show are the potential consequences to that assessment work when the social worker fails to display recognition of the parents’ way of living and worldview motivated action. In this example, the public articulation of the parents’ own communication action was not elicited and heard, and (for them) possibly even colonised by a different interpretation (of that voice) before being shown understanding and importantly, before potential/actual tensions considered.

Drawing upon the earlier theoretical deliberations from Hauerwas (1981) and Habermas (1989 and 1991) such illustrative instances can be read in terms of examples of ‘meaning-laden communication action’ - that underpinning all communication action are essentially faith and/or political commitments/stories. It is a theoretical understanding potentially enabling elucidation of potentially deeper levels of social worker-with-Christian parent communication. For example, a deeper reading could be that the parents could see that the ‘communication action’ was taking place from different narrative standpoints – (Lewis used the term “different starting points”) – but that the social worker did not. This could be because the social worker, required to operate under the instrumentalism of a secular liberal humanist framework, came to the communication with assumptions that her standpoint was the normative, neutral, independent one. In Hauerwas’ terms (1981,p.84), she had harkened to “the story that liberalism teaches us is that we have no story”. She had operated from the liberal perception of there being a neutral, independent consensus from which to deliberate (Habermas 1991). Yet, building upon the discussion in the previous chapter, there are no certain knowledge foundations beneath communication. To believe that there are is the product of the post-Enlightenment worldview; and is itself a faith commitment (MacIntyre 1984, p.22). From this theoretical angle, for her to achieve her assessment
of eliciting and deliberating both the potentially protective/resilience-building influences and vulnerability/harmful influences of the parents’ worldview-orientated parenting praxis (on behalf of the child), the social worker had to be prepared to hear the voice of the parents (to hear their God-Storied communication action). From the theoretical discussion, to do this, she had to recognise, first, that all communication action is Storied, second, that this included her own, and third, that she was willing to look at how that Story intersected (converging or conflicting) in different ways to her own. Put simply, to understand, hear, and not prematurely colonise their story, she had to recognise that she too – with the enactment of her ethical and social praxis within her communication action - inhabited a Story.

In summary, this chapter has pointed to the importance of recognising the potential for instrumental reasoning within the micro level of social worker-with-parent communication, whereby the action of communication can operate in powerful interests to impose norms, limit individual freedom and distort truthful understanding. Is it even possible to pursue a shared dialogue with the aim to achieve mutual understanding, recognising Others may understand reality in sometimes conflicting, sometimes converging, ways to oneself? Can this be done without the imposition of worldviews of one interest group over Others, or without the use of some form of false consensus? Critical realism has something to offer to these issues, and it is to this that I turn within the next chapter.
Chapter 5: Critical Realism as an Under-labourer

5.1. INTRODUCTION TO THE CHAPTER

In the previous chapters I proposed that all communication action is Storied (including the social worker’s own), and that the communication takes place across Storied worldviews. However, this is not a conversation about or between worldviews, but rather, social work (as an institution and as communication) primarily colonises the Christian voice. It appears to do this in related ways. First, it misunderstands/de-legitimises the Storied communication action of the parents by failing to recognise how their communication has ontological claims and epistemic commitments to the Christian Story. Second, such devaluing appears to arise from not recognising that Others may understand reality in sometimes conflicting, sometimes converging, ways to oneself. The outward show is of a neutral, independent, consensus position that is normative to all, yet by its discounting talk of meta-physical ontological commitments (the truthful living of everyday practices, communities, traditions), it seems invisibly ontologically tenured to another Story (the ontological worldview matrix of naturalism, secular humanism and secular liberalism).

Critical Realism offers philosophical analytical tools for questioning the absence of place for meta-physical ontological commitments (truthful living) in matters of social work communication. It is committed to pursuing ontological reality, in the shape of a “holistic narration of intrinsically meaningful events than atomistic description” (Wright, 2013,p.251). Within this chapter:

• The first section introduces critical realism and outlines its analytical tools – the key principles of ontological realism, epistemic relativism, and judgemental rationality.
• The second section displays the significance of these critical realist analytical tools by applying them to the matter of worldviews, particularly highlighting how critical realism: a) retrieves religious discourse (worldviews), and b) identifies non-religious discourse as itself being a faith worldview.

• The third section goes deeper in unpacking the way worldviews function in terms of the dynamic between agents and structures, and the pitfalls of upwards and downwards conflation in theorising about such social relations.

5.2. WHAT IS CRITICAL REALISM AND WHAT ARE ITS ANALYTICAL TOOLS?

The philosophical movement referred to as critical realism arose from the wider background of tensions between ontology and epistemology. It has an ancestry in natural science, and independently within theology, as well as dialogue between the two (Torrance, 1962, 1969 and 1980; McGrath, 2001-2003; Wright, 1992; Archer et al. 1998; Archer et al. 2004). Given particular momentum in the UK by Bhaskar (1997), and taken up by other theorists from differing subject orientations, critical realism attempts to carve a route past the opposing poles of modern rationalistic certainty (idealism and empiricism) and postmodern scepticism (anti-realism and pragmatism) using the central philosophical principles of: ontological realism, epistemic relativism, and judgemental rationality (Collier, 1994). To unravel these three concepts, therefore, it is important, first, to look to the key issue that critical realism spotlights: Western philosophy’s misapprehension of the relationship between ontology and epistemology. Modernity’s search for certain foundations of knowledge delimited ontological reality to the rational epistemic criteria of either empirical proof via sense data or logical coherence via idealised concepts. In simple terms, it could be summarised by the question: ‘How can I establish the most secure knowledge of the outside world?’ Its

32 Gorski (2018) summarises such approaches within the variants of either “philosophical cum sociological” or “theological cum scientific”. Other overview examples are: Collier 1994; Archer et al. 1998; Sayer 2000.
own answer was that only with ‘certain objective knowledge’ could anything be deemed ‘externally real’. Postmodernity has also been preoccupied with the adequacy of knowledge’s grip upon external reality, but approaches it from the opposite angle of utter scepticism. Herein, it challenges the claims of empirically derived sense data and idealised concepts to adequately capture external reality. Its assertion is that reality cannot constitute anything more than the language of individually held subjective interpretations that reflect a myriad of eclectic subjectivities with associated positions of power/powerlessness. However, in critical realist terms, by confining their engagement with reality to these contrasting parameters of human knowledge, both modernist and postmodernist angles display the ‘epistemic fallacy’ (Bhaskar, 1997). Put simply, the fallacy is in the primary preoccupation with epistemology - a position reflecting the Cartesian pursuit for epistemic closure (as identified in Chapter 2). What results from the epistemic fallacy is the reduction of ontology to epistemology: modernity conflates ontology with epistemology (to be able to claim certainty for knowledge of reality), while postmodernity unhooks epistemology from ontology and then discards it (claiming that knowledge of reality can only ever be uncertain)(Bhaskar, 1997,p.16; Wright, 2013).

Critical realists point to the ultimate dangers of inadequate recognition of the epistemic fallacy for individual and societal wellbeing. Uncritical confidence in epistemic certainty to ontological reality (the modernist position) can ultimately propagate extreme political ideologies, such as seen in the fascist totalitarian systems of Nazism and Stalinism. Excessive epistemic scepticism to ontological reality (the postmodernist position) can reinforce oppressive relations by failing to produce intellectual armoury to sufficiently question and counteract such oppressive states of affairs (Wright, 2013). In response, Bhaskar’s (1997) premise was to see ontology in a different relationship with epistemology - as neither fully enmeshed (modernity) nor mutually exclusive (postmodernity). On the basis that reality can be more than the human capacity to entirely know it (that it potentially constitutes more than sense data or ideal concepts of
objects and events, as in the case of electricity for example), and that it is impossible to claim 'authentic objective' knowledge that is 'unblemished' by subjective perspectives, then it is not possible to claim outright epistemic certainty. Yet, neither is it possible to claim out-and-out scepticism, because this would obviate examples of existing knowledge of reality that are, for example, adequate enough to perform brain surgery upon infants. In other words, human knowledge is fallible and can be misguided, but it is not necessarily always erroneous, and (provisional) statements about reality can be made (Gunton, 1983; Groff, 2004; Cruikshank, 2007). It is a position that recognises not just a possibility, but priority for reality ('ontological realism'), but yet maintains a contingency to knowledge-claims of it whilst simultaneously holding hasty epistemic closure at bay ('epistemic relativity'). The issue then becomes one of judging the most full and powerful explanation in the light of (existing and increasing) knowledge of reality ('judgemental rationality'). In simple terms, it is a position that amends the question asked earlier in this section ('How can I establish the most secure knowledge of the outside world?'), to ask a different question: 'Given that this is the knowledge of the external world, what's the best explanation of it?' The criteria for truthful engagement with reality becomes no longer empirical proof or logical coherence or individual romantic experience but judgement of the currently best possible explanation of that which we already know ('judgemental rationality')(Bhaskar, 1997). I look at some of these key ideas in more detail below.

**Ontological Realism**

The critical realist acceptance for such descriptive explanations containing traces of epistemic accuracy of external reality whilst still being ‘in progress’ and incomplete, is made sense of by distinguishing the *intransitive* ontological domain of real objects and events (being prior, independent and more than the totality of empirical experience), from the merely *transitive* epistemological means by which humans can grasp such reality (Bhaskar, 1997; Carter and New, 2004). This intransitive-transitive distinction
thereby encourages ontological realism, and does so on the basis that it yields more explanatory power, rather than other options. As Wright (2013, p.11) encapsulates:

“The fact that natural scientists are able to construct accounts of the natural order-of-things that enable us to develop technologies that empower us to walk on the moon demands rational explanation. The anti-realist claim that such accounts are mere language games that have no substantial purchase on external reality is significantly less powerful than the realist claim that they constitute relatively accurate, though necessarily incomplete and partially fallible, descriptive explanations that enjoy a measure of transitive purchase on the intransitive ontological order-of-things.”

Critical realists’ reference to ontological depth elucidates the intransitive-transitive distinction. There are two central features to the notion of ontological depth, and both refer to reality being stratified. The first pertains to the stratified domains of the ‘Real’, the ‘Actual’, and the ‘Empirical’. The domain of the intransitive Real refers to deeper strata of reality. Here, the powers and properties of existing structural entities are potentially enacted by agential entities to produce events and objects (‘effects’) in the domain of the Actual. While these events and objects are brought about and occur in the domain of the Actual (sparked at the deeper level of the Real), only a portion of them, at the Empirical level, are potentially conceptually experienced (Ackroyd and Fleetwood, 2000). It is in this deep, stratified way that objects and events can be considered as being ontologically real - being prior and independent but more than the totality of empirical experience (Bhaskar, 1997,p.25). It is our epistemic means for ‘knowing’ those events that are fallible (the Empirical level of reality), not the ontological existence of reality itself (Iosifides, 2011). Transitive knowledge is but “only a description of that reality” (Porpora, 2004,p.49). For critical realists, descriptive explanations are more powerful by considering this ontological depth, looking for ‘what
must be going on’ at deeper levels of reality for objects and events to be discerned at the Empirical level.

Herein, multiple explanatory (transitive) descriptions of the same real object or event are considered to add to, rather than confound, understanding of its differing ontological features. This is proposed even when those explanatory descriptions emanate from different natural, social, psychological and theological orientations. This is made possible by reference to how reality is systemically ‘relational, open and emergent’ (Iosifides, 2011). Indeed, ‘emergence’ relates to the second way in which reality is ontologically stratified and potentially causally powerful. An entity (structural or agential) is made up of layered ‘parts’ that relate to each other, with that entity incapable of being reduced to individual constituent properties of its parts. The causal powers and potentialities of entities ‘emerge’ from the way in which those layered parts are made up. In other words, there are internal and necessary relational conditions of those parts for emergence to occur (Archer, 1995). For example, an agent’s causal powers are emergent from particular interacting combinations of properties from the different layered parts of the physical brain, emotional and cognitive reasoning, interpretation of cultural symbols, amongst others (Smith, 2010). The proposition is that different ontological layers can be illuminated by knowledge from corresponding natural, social, psychological, and theological orientations to produce complementary rather than conflicting multi-dimensional understanding. Thus critical realists look to produce powerfully ‘thick descriptions’ 33 for multi-layered, deep ontological understanding of objects or events, and reject ‘reductionist thin description’ for providing superficial, uni-dimensional understanding (Vanhoozer, 2007).

Epistemic Relativism

This move to recognise the precedence of ontology over epistemology, to maintain that something must already be in existence before one can know of it (Bhaskar, 1997),

33 To save on word space, I will say more about ‘thick description’ in my Methodology chapter.
challenges the direction of much modernist and postmodernist thinking that deems something not to exist if there is not comparatively certain knowledge of it. It is a move that challenges the way in which fixed epistemic criteria has been allowed to shape the parameters of reality, whether this has been through epistemic certainty (modernism) or epistemic scepticism (postmodernism). For critical realists, both manifest the epistemic fallacy (Wright, 2013). For example, when looking at the modernist empiricist concerns of social work, such as in the ‘evidence-based practice’ overtures, the epistemic fallacy is discernable by the restriction of reality to the logical positivist epistemic criteria of verifiable ‘objective’ sense data. The ‘objective evidence’ of such sense data is preferred for being verifiable – as ‘factual’ – over the expression of aesthetic, moral and spiritual values that are deemed merely ‘subjective opinion’ and disregarded for being unable to claim verification/replication. What occurs therefore, in the pursuit of epistemic closure, is that the epistemic criteria force a division between facts and values. The subjective values are divested, and reality becomes restricted - indeed reduced - to ‘facts alone’. This presents a problem to people whose lived reality is constituted by their facts and values, for their everyday experience is marginalized and denied existence.

Postmodernist approaches to ‘knowing’ encompass the epistemic fallacy in different, more sceptical ways. A ‘softer’ epistemic scepticism denies there being possibility of substantial knowledge of reality independent to the knower - that knowledge is contextually particular and solely relative to that person’s own perception and linguistic constructions of reality. Continuing with an example of social work knowledge, a postmodern constructionist perspective would attribute a woman’s expression of her experience of parenthood as her personal construction of private experience, but accorded no legitimate public voice, for it cannot be known in any terms other than its own and therefore is unable to access any external reality beyond it (Sheppard (now Woodcock Ross), 2000). The epistemic criteria are again applied to secure epistemic
closure, although this time in the direction of determining that there can be no accessible purchase upon reality. So it is that the facts-value divide continues, but this time in the opposite direction to restrict reality to ‘values alone’.

A ‘harder’ epistemic scepticism denies there being external reality at all. Rather, what is presumed to be reality is a parody of power structures positioned by totalitarian regimes that seek to maintain hegemony by legitimating and disguising their power within authoritarian knowledge claims of ‘what is allowed to be normative and real’. As seen in earlier chapters, theorists propose that this ‘normative reality’ is created and maintained through forms of instrumental reasoning that use language to reinforce existing normative structural arrangements of power and influence (Habermas 1989 and 1991). The emancipatory-orientation of hard postmodern scepticism is considered to be a reaction to such oppressive relations. Herein, it seeks to deconstruct such totalitarian knowledge claims, pointing to ‘reality’ as being no more than language games aggrandized by powerful endorsement (Rorty, 1989,p.6). Instead, it salutes individual emancipation, and configures it as an extreme form of subjective relativism that promotes self-determination over external authority/guidance, and encourages the pursuance of personal self-interest and desires. Critical realists point to how this manifestation of extreme subjective relativism emanates directly from the operation of the epistemic fallacy - it delimits reality to epistemic criteria that deny existence to anything unsecured by certain knowledge, whilst at the same time denouncing any possibility for certainty of knowledge foundations at all. Moreover, this occurs despite there being an inherent incoherency to this business of operating epistemic scepticism in the name of emancipation, for as Wright (2013, p.13) points out,

“…reacting against epistemic certainty by embracing epistemic scepticism does nothing to remove the hegemony of the epistemic fallacy itself. Postmodern claims that we have no access to external reality, or that external reality does not actually exist, are themselves truth claims, that in so far as they are deemed
to be self evident and non-negotiable, take on precisely the same hegemonic and totalitarian features they were designed to avoid”.

Thus, to summarise, in pointing to the epistemic fallacy, critical realism sees problems with both extremes of absolute epistemic certainty and out-and-out epistemic scepticism. Instead it sees knowledge as lying between the two (Wright 2013). First, humans are fallible and do not have the capacity to know all that there is to claim absolute truth. Reality can neither be limited to our own sense data nor disentangled from our own understanding. We cannot step outside our own pre-existing beliefs onto a neutral viewing platform from which to demolish and build our knowledge, for such detached neutrality does not exist (McGrath, 2002; Wright, 2013). As Nagel (1989) puts it, there is “no view from nowhere” - we view our beliefs from an internal position within the context we find ourselves. Our knowledge of reality is necessarily provisional and epistemically relative. But, second, this accent to epistemic relativism does not impose a hardened epistemic scepticism. Humans can hold beliefs/explanations about reality that are not wholly erroneous (planes do fly safely for example). Human knowledge has frontiers (limits), but those frontiers can be exceeded with improved future knowledge, and degrees of truthfulness might be achieved (Wright, 2013). Importantly in this, however, the epistemic relativism proffered by critical realism does not seek to impress swift epistemic closure in tracking down truth. Neither, does its ‘relativity’ signify a dead-end position of allowing all available beliefs/explanations to be of equal worth. Rather, it pushes for adjudication to identify those more truthful.

Judgemental Rationality

In the light of the above discussion, how is it possible to adjudicate between the belief/explanation of X and that of Y, if I have none of the customary epistemic tools – by which I mean hard-and-fast foundations upon which to form knowledge or conventional fixed scientific criteria or procedures - to arbitrate truth claims? The critical realist position, that spotlights ontology and resists the epistemic fallacy, would see this
question as missing the point. It is not for reality to be altered to comply with fixed rules
of epistemic tools, but for those tools to change according to the determinants of reality
(Wright, 2013). To do the former is to commit the epistemic fallacy. Thus, judgemental
rationality proceeds in accord with the (above) perspective of knowledge of reality as
inherently provisional and contextual, but, in resisting the epistemic fallacy, seeks a
‘knowing’ that is also relational between the knower and the object of reality. This is
achieved through an on-going relational process of revision, refinement and rational
scrutiny (Hiebert, 2012, McGrath, 2002). It is well encapsulated by Wright (1992):

“..the only access that we have to this reality lies along the spiralling path of
appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing
known…”(Wright, 1992, p.35).

The hermeneutic ‘spiraling path’ being described is that of inference in tracking down
the most cogent explanation to describe ‘what is going on’ for an object or event to
exist and behave in the way that it does (Harman, 1965; Lipton, 2004). What is sought,
is the kind of powerfully rich theoretical explanatory model described earlier in this
section, being multi-dimensional and comprehensive with a ‘parts and whole’
understanding that can depict deep ontology (Vanhoozer, 2007). McGrath (2009)
describes a spiraling process that begins with abduction, getting close and personal to
new data or new ideas or fresh examination of long-standing issues in order to
intuitively generate new insights. Such abductive insights display important beginning
moments of ‘knowing’ as we engage and respond to the world – as Wright (2013, p.15)
explains: “…we know more than we can say, and embrace the power of an hypothesis
– e.g. that genocide is evil or that the music of Mozart is sublime – long before we can
give a full rational explanation for doing so”. The process continues with retroduction,
whereupon the abductive insights are utilised to generate retroductive hypotheses
about ‘what is going on’ for events or objects to be manifest or enacted (Evers and Wu,
2006). In other words, such hypotheses propose ‘causal mechanisms’ operating at
underlying deeper levels of reality (Bhaskar, 1997, p.125). Once proposed, the hypotheses are exposed to iterative examination and revision as the researcher/knower continues to relate with the object. Sayer (1992, p.107) encapsulates the retroductive process as a “mode of inference in which events are explained by postulating (and identifying) mechanisms which are capable of producing them”.

Social workers can understand this retroductive process and deployment of judgemental rationality, for (ostensibly at least) it mirrors what they face day-in-day-out when making sense of manifest situational problems and harmful behaviours, and what might be ‘going on’ to generate or maintain them. In critical realist language, they can understand the retroductive process, in terms of the way that judgemental rationality is employed a posteriori, to seek to understand ‘what is going on’ in view of all available information, including information which is existing as formal (theoretical) knowledge and that which arises from informal relational knowledge (such as intuitive or practice wisdom from previous experience). They can understand the importance of questioning the influence of their own inclinations and preconceptions, by first looking to describe the intrinsic nature of the object and event under inquiry, and allowing that to inform and shape the developing explanatory hypotheses. Indeed, herein, they can understand the triviality of reducing judgemental rationality to any one solitary assessment criterion, for there can be tragic consequences to service users and professional reputation if they have not gathered an adequate range of differing types of possible evidence, sufficiently appraised for relevance and integrity, and decided upon the best possible explanation in the light of it (Laming, 2009).

For critical realists, this latter point is critical. A manner of openness in critical deliberation as to the deployment of judgemental criteria is crucial to the ongoing process of ‘knowing’ about an object or event (Wright, 2013, p.15). Put simply, because knowledge is contextual and relational, it is important for the knower to be
open and reflexive about how their judgement between competing hypotheses has been reached. The ‘how’ in this refers to the aforementioned developing ‘spiraling’ process by which the knower has come to some ‘knowing’ of the object or event, and thereby accepted or rejected ongoing competing hypotheses. Thus, to summarise this section, such choices begin with inferred abductive insights – prior ‘knowing’ that is implicit and intuitive but about which one is puzzled to explain – and continue with identified explanations that “tend to lend rational support” to those prior insights “rather than establish or ground them” (Wright, 2013, p.15).

5.3. **WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CRITICAL REALISM (HOW CAN IT UNDER-LABOUR) IN MAKING SENSE OF WORLDVIEWS?**

In the previous section I outlined some persuasive arguments put forward by critical realism that draw attention to fundamental flaws within the epistemic assumptions/tools of much modern and postmodern thinking. The focus for this section is to consider what significance these critical realist arguments – as analytical tools – bring to the matter of worldviews and across-worldview communication. Indeed I should note that critical realism understands itself in such an under-labouring role, posing questions to progress engagement with reality, rather than presenting conclusive/absolute answers. To do so would go against its own principle for epistemic relativity.

*Critical realism retrieves religious discourse (worldviews)*

A key significance for religious worldview(s) lays in the “different epistemological starting point”: the rejection of the drive of both the modernist and postmodernist worldview narratives for epistemic closure that look for empirical proof or rational argument (modernism) of ontological reality or reduce it to individual atomistic subjective constructions (postmodernism)(Danermark et al. 2002). Such epistemic dead-ended positions ‘explain away’ religious worldviews as being no more than
irrational/unscientific personal values/beliefs or eclectic-subjective experience (Gorski, 2018, p.290). The principle of ontological realism highlights how such representation trivialises what is intrinsic of religious traditions – that they are instituted by their ontological truth claims, which in turn are not grounded in individualised or systemic reified abstractions, but concretely expressed in theological beliefs, specific communities, and everyday ways of living out the religion’s values (Wright, 2013; Netland, 2015). Herein ontological realism recognises religious actions/events/objects/propositions as being meaningful ‘parts’ (bearing claims to ontological substance) that co-mingle with the ‘whole’ of cohesive narratives, so that in such “webs of significance” ontological substance can be understood as “going all the way down” (Geertz, 1973, p.5). The notion of an integrated worldview provides a way of conceptualising such integrated thinking and living. It makes sense of the peculiarity of circumstances but is not ‘individualistic’ for it is connected to social and communal components of life. It recognises that basic existential assumptions are not always fully cognizant to us, but that a worldview nevertheless provides the spectacles or “interpretive matrix” (Netland, 2015 ,p.28) to give “reason and impetus for deciding what is true and what really matters in our experience…It has what Geertz calls a dual focus: it tells us both what is (and is not) the case and what ought (and ought not) to be the case. A worldview is both a sketch of and a blueprint for reality: it describes what we see and stipulates what we should see” (Olthuis, 1989, p29).

Related to such matters of ontological realism, a key aspect to critical realism’s (Bhaskarian) emancipatory purposes is “the dialectic” – the positive identification of oppressive constraining powers of structures, as well as the “transformative elimination of absences” (MinGyu Seo, 2014, p.60; Houston and Montgomery, 2017). For Bhaskar (1993, p.5), this concern to recognise opposing forces within ontological reality is important, for what is not positively identified (“absence”) has an existence as “real determinate non-being” with properties and powers. Moreover, ‘absencing’ is a
process, whereby the continual drive for the elimination or ‘absenting’ of constraining social forces can produce transformative critical consciousness to increase freedom and human flourishing. In this way “absenting ‘absence’ is consequently a driving negativity, a negativity that propels change” (Houston and Montgomery, 2018, p.63). As an example with reference to ‘worldviews’, critical realists in the field of religious education have pointed to the persistent occlusive representation (‘absenting’) of religious traditions as not ‘allowed’ to bear claim to ontological substance. In ostensibly ‘absenting absence’ they propose such occlusion as being a potential modus whereby modern professions have removed (‘absented’) what they regard as the ‘intolerability’ of ontological truth claims from religious traditions. By suitably attiring such phenomena as ‘merely socio-cultural’, they meet Liberalism's diversity concerns for religious tolerance (Wright, 2009, p.23). Earlier, I applied this critique to the example of social work as a modern profession (Chapter 3). I considered the same occluding (absenting) modus as potentially operating social work’s increasingly ‘spiritual but not religious discourse’, whereby claims for culturally tolerant practice are made by acknowledging spiritual sensibilities but ‘absenting’ truth-directed beliefs/practices of ‘organised’ religion (Gray, 2008). The manner of this ‘absenting’ appears as a universalism to represent ‘religion’ in a form acceptable to diverse religious and secular inclinations, or as the abstraction of a more privatised, eclectic spirituality/spiritualties. In both cases, the ontological commitments to such worldviews are denied (‘absented’) as relevant to the lives of adherents.

Importantly, critical realism’s different epistemological stance deems religious worldview statements to be epistemically relative and thus not subject to modernity’s and postmodernity’s epistemic dead-ends. Epistemic relativism accedes that we have a small measure of reality - we live out our lives embodied within it and in relation to it - but reality transcends our capacity to attain perfect, total knowledge concerning it. As we personally encounter the world/reality-in-its-fullness, we cannot help but respond to
its ontological exigencies through our cultural/moral/aesthetic/value-laden ways of living, and ask ultimate existential questions of it. This begins with our current ‘knowing’ (or assumptions of ‘knowing’) but we seek deeper and more truthful understanding of it as we continue to encounter it (Wright, 2009, p.22). It is a perspective affirming that the value-laden ontological commitments that people hold matter to them, as opposed to rejecting them for the purposes of epistemic closure. Thus, by legitimising the epistemic relativity of subjective unverifiable belief (and rejecting the epistemic closure/impossibility of objective verifiable knowledge) it allows adherents of different worldview/belief-systems to ‘speak’ (epistemically) of their truth-claims. That the result is conflicting, provisional worldview responses of ‘what is reality/truth’ is not considered a problem, for critical realism’s third principle (judgemental rationality) promotes dialogue and critical assessment between them (Danermark et al. 2002).

For Christianity in particular, the intellectually robust interface between critical realism and specifically Christian theology has been largely limited to explorations of concordance between theology and the natural sciences (Torrance, 1986; McGrath 2001, 2002, 2003). The ‘philosophical-cum-sociological’ orientated work of critical realists Archer et al. (2004) began to open up important synergies, but in this explorative enterprise they restricted their inclusion of Christian theological matters to only certain aspects of orthodox doctrine and sources. A more recent and substantial critical realist engagement with matters of Christian doctrine, including a rebuff to a critique of Christianity from the academic secular critical realist community (Creaven, 2010), has been provided by Wright (2013). Prior to such explorations theological critical realism has engaged with Christian theology in the work of Biblical historiography.

**Critical realism identifies non-religious discourse as being a faith discourse (worldview)**
Indeed, the principle of judgemental rationality is of significance for it does not write off religious worldview commitments as being arbitrary, or deem it impossible to make informed and judicious decisions between them. Rather, it completely denounces the post-Enlightenment default stance of only verifiable rational argument being able to objectively confirm knowledge-claims. In this, it points to the impossibility for any knowledge-claims (secular atheist or religious) to be unadulterated in their objectivity and value-neutrality, to the extent that all manifest a faith commitment of some shape. Thus, the adjudication is not between the ‘certainty’ of objective verifiable knowledge and the ‘blind risk’ of subjective unverifiable belief, but between faith commitments. Yet neither does this status require a ‘making-do’ with the dead-end relativity of pluralist (‘equally valid’) commitments. Rather, judgemental rationality pursues the most full, powerful explanation, informed, critically adjudicated and refined in the light of (existing and increasing) understandings of reality (Wright, 2009). Taken together, it becomes legitimately possible to dialogue across and between worldview explanations - to “publicly discuss our claims about reality, as we think it is, and marshal better or worse arguments on behalf of those claims” (Archer et al. 2004, p.2). For example, for the Christian parents in my study, the most profound explanation for the ultimate-order-of-things is the Christian narrative as concretely lived out.

For one to really take in the potential for this significance (of worldview dialogue) requires one to step back, and consider that contemporary post-Enlightenment Western culture is not the absence of a worldview, but is itself a faith discourse (worldview)(Porpora, 2001). Indeed, in ‘absenting this absence’ critical realists have proposed an account of the influence of the epistemic fallacy on post-Enlightenment Western culture, that seems to have generated what appears to be an ontological (‘worldview’) matrix that holds together naturalism, secular humanism, and secular liberalism (Wright, 2013). I reproduced the basic contours of that account in Chapter 2
in order to set out the parameters of the Post-Enlightenment worldview, and to conserve word space I repeat only a brief summary here:

1. The desire to overcome Cartesian anxiety and establish epistemic certitude led to empiricist, idealist and romanticist foundational epistemic criteria being established.

2. Those epistemic foundations produced a division between objective fact and subjective value. The modernist strategy of giving hegemony to the universalism of reason, upheld that authentic knowledge claims should be objectively unblemished by the subjectivity of cultural values.

3. The fact-value division engendered a post-Enlightenment ontological matrix:
   - At base, the order-of-things (‘reality’) is natural (naturalism).
   - Humans, as sentient beings, are the most supreme entities of that natural order (secular humanism).
   - Therefore, humans have inalienable rights for freedom in socio-cultural life, so long as they avoid harm to self or others. Despite such ‘individual autonomy’, what dominates is not an ‘open’ politically liberal (Lockeian) society that pursues truth through open debate of contested versions of reality, but a society of closed comprehensive Liberalism that pursues ‘freedom’ as an end purpose (rather than as a means/ethic for debate), and polices disagreement through ‘tolerance’ (secular Liberalism).

When considered in the light of the epistemic fallacy, it is possible to see how, in Wright’s words (2013, p.23) – “the foundational epistemic criteria required to overcome Cartesian anxiety produced a particular understanding of reality, effectively forcing ontology into an epistemic straitjacket”. Those epistemic criteria/tools - cultivated by natural science to accord with a naturalistic view of reality - were deemed neutral and universally standard to all of reality. Using critical realist language, it meant that those
strata of reality deemed not-naturalistic (cultural values, Transcendent spiritual and aesthetic realities) were discounted, because of the hegemonic epistemic tools being unable to gain secure purchase of their ontology. Taken-for-granted assumptions of neutrality and naturalism, through processes of ‘disenchantment’, gave unquestioned default status to naturalistic explanations of the order-of-things (that at base everything is natural, self-creating and rationally defensible), such that religious explanations of natural and non-natural phenomena became accorded no status for cognitive rational justification or debate (Archer et al. 2004; Taylor, 2007).

Yet, the logic of critical realism demands efforts to make sense of the totality of reality, in all its stratified nature, not just certain parts. It adopts the manner of the hermeneutic circle, whereby the interpreter makes sense of the parts of the text in view of the whole text, and the whole text in view of its separate parts, as a continual spiralling dialectic of reflective, interpretive understanding. It is a logic that obliges explanations to be powerful and substantial in the service of understanding the features of the totality of a single but differentiated, stratified reality. This means avoiding the reduction of explanations of one stratum of reality to explanations at another. In the same way that matters of biology do not occupy the same strata as those of sociology, so the God of the Trinitarian worldview does not occupy the same strata as nature. Each area of inquiry has its relevant objects of knowledge and appointed strata of reality to investigate, and should resist opining upon matters of other strata about which it does not have authority (McGrath, 2002).

The significance of this analytical position for the matter of worldviews appears two-fold. First, multiple explanations of reality, when addressed to different strata, do not have to cancel each other out. They can co-exist. Their cumulative existence can add to a fuller and more powerful explanation (McGrath, 2002). Second, religious worldviews cannot be absented on the basis of being non-naturalistic, but are accorded legitimacy by their orientation to the strata of transcendental matters (Porpora, 2001).
Indeed, the strata of transcendental belief cannot be legitimately sidestepped, for such strata exhibit ontological exigencies. Specifically, for example, Porpora's (2001, p.152) findings pointed to “a culturally pervasive lack of orientation in metaphysical space, an inability to place ourselves meaningfully in the cosmos...[occasioning] an equally pervasive void in our own sense of self”. For many people, their religious and theological beliefs motivate their human actions to influence individual flourishing, and to impact societal functioning (Bhaskar, 1998). Indeed, it is erroneous to see the naturalism of the post-Enlightenment worldview as having inevitably neutral, default status. To this end, sociological inquiries cannot simply focus at the level of social space – perceiving religion merely as a sociocultural phenomenon for study - but seek to include metaphysical space, drawing upon religion and theology as “intellectual partners” (Porpora 2001,p.8). Herein, the framework of critical realism has significance in warranting grounds for including theology as a ‘publically accessible rational discourse’, able to respond to inquiries at this strata of reality.

Again, a key aspect to critical realism’s reaction to the post-Enlightenment worldview matrix is to recognise what is ‘being absented’. Herein, the taken-for-grantedness of the secular liberal humanist worldview as being on neutral ground and thereby normative is questioned. Far from being uncontroversial, the matrix asks its adherents to ‘take a leap of faith’ over its contestable elements and related implications. For example, to take the position of rejecting the possibility of ontological reality existing beyond the constraints of epistemic closure, and thereby reject non-naturalistic matters, despite the problematic dead-ends to such epistemic positions, is a matter of faith rather than reasoned/verifiable proof (by its own standards). Moreover, taking a step further back, to even claim epistemic closure requires reconciliation of opposing modernist and postmodernist orientations that are paradigmatically irreconcilable and effectively cancel each other out. The matrix’s attempt to reconcile that opposition with a sticky plaster of liberalism, appears to have added to the inherent incoherence rather
than resolve it. With its claims to freedom and tolerance (and policing of it), the contemporary form of comprehensive Liberalism operated by the post-Enlightenment Western worldview appears not to allow airspace to any other worldview that seeks to debate with it. From this apparent tautological angle, and in view of the inherent contradictions and absences, secular liberal humanists operate from a faith position. This observation is crucial because if that is the case then any kind of dialogue between social worker and service user can no longer be simply within the framework of one worldview - it disallows that. Yet, as illustrated from my chapters thus far, that is precisely what seems to be happening most of the time - the problematic assimilation into one worldview.

Thus, in summary, this section has applied the analytic tools of critical realism (that were outlined in the first section) to the matter of faith worldviews. It revealed that in social worker-with-Christian parent communication situations we are dealing with not one but two distinct worldviews, that overlap, but that are, at the bottom line (at the deeper level) incompatible and conflict. The next section unpacks this dynamic in greater detail by looking to how worldviews function (continuing the critical realist analysis).

5.4. HOW CAN CRITICAL REALISM ENABLE US TO UNDERSTAND SOCIETY AND SOCIAL WORK BETTER?

Thus far this chapter has outlined the under-labouring analytic tools of critical realism, and showed the usefulness of their application to a field vital to this thesis - faith worldviews. This revealed overlapping but distinct faith traditions operating within communication action. Going deeper, in this third section I consider the way worldviews themselves operate through the dynamic relationship between agents and structures. Herein I turn to another field vital to this thesis that has received useful critical realist attention relevant to social work – sociological (Archerian) understanding of the way society works.
Archer (1995, p.8 and 52), like Bhaskar, claims that an uncritical "rooting in empiricism" has presented a "brick wall" to social causal reasoning. Her attention is to the social scientific debates about society and the individual, and of the determinism contra the voluntarism of structure and agency in bringing about transformation/stagnation in social relations. She sees the debates as a "perennial conflict between individualistic and collectivist theories" (Archer, 1995, p.7). She regards the epistemic fallacy as bedevilling both opposing standpoints of structure and agency, and to do so proposes, like Bhaskar (1998), a distinction between structuralist/collectivist orientated theories as being downwards conflationary, and individualist/idealist social theories as being upwards conflationary. Put simply, she highlights how the ‘problem’ of the epistemic fallacy in both (i.e. privileging epistemic criteria for existence) has educed the conflation of one to the other, and thereby restricted the potential for causal theorising of their interplay in social situations/relations.

In terms of 'downward conflation', Archer rejects the theorising of structuralist/collectivist accounts by their viewing of human activity as determined (causally explained) by social structural processes. Such over-emphasis upon structural determinism portrays human capacity as over-socialised, and lacking of creativity and reflexivity to shape structures (Archer, 1995;1998a and b). An example is the Marxist explanation of spiritual values as socio-cultural phenomena providing material processes for the continuation of capitalism (Archer, 1995). A similar example is social work’s ‘evidence-based’ empiricist inclination that prefers the ‘objective evidence’ of naturalistic sense data to describe parents’ moral and spiritual values as being either ‘mere socio-cultural phenomena’ or ‘unverifiable subjective opinion’. Archer (1995), like Bhaskar (1997and 1998), criticises collectivist orientated theories for playing the Humean rules of a ‘methodological game’ by solely looking for regularities and bulk in patterns of ‘observables’ - material objects, qualities and actions – that meet epistemic criteria for existence (Lipscomb, 2009). To explain such
regularities, the presumption is of an ordered world with all the variables within interational processes being accountable because they are knowable by being observable and non-arbitrary. Yet, as Archer (1995, p. 54) states, this negates how for “most of the time, in open social systems, regularities at the level of events are just what emergent features do not generate” (Lipscomb, 2009).

The reverse, 'upward conflation', which Archer associates with the atomised orientation of interactionist theoretical perspectives and methodological individualism, is rejected for viewing social relations/entities as no more than the aggregate product of the arbitrary actions or abstract thoughts of individuals. The beliefs or values of Christian parents, for example, would be reduced to simply being individually imagined free-floating abstractions. For Archer, structures and society contain more properties and powers than the aggregate atomised abstractions of current interacting individuals. Rather she sees such properties operating an enabling or constraining effect upon agents. When individualist, romanticist or idealist theoretical explanations try to bypass social or cultural structures within the concreteness of interaction - such as illustrated earlier when social workers deploy romanticist communication methods to achieve ‘friendly-relatedness’ by bracketing out ‘obstacles’ of ‘difference’ and seeking intuitive empathic feeling - they allocate unlimited freedoms to personal agency that may be unwarranted. Pointing again to the open social system, Archer rejects such atomised reasoning, explaining that: “To the social realist there is no ‘isolated’ micro world – no lebenswelt ‘insulated’ from the socio-cultural system in the sense of being uncontrolled by it, nor a hermetically sealed domain whose day-to-day doings are guaranteed to be of no systemic ‘import’” (Archer, 1995, p.10, italics in original).

Archer’s third rejection is ‘central conflation’, which she associates with Giddens’ Structuration Theory (Giddens 1984 and 1987). Structuration regards structure and agency as mutually constituted and analytically inseparable, and that structures exist only ‘virtually’ until ‘instantiated’ by people when they account for them within their
activities. For Archer (1995), such inseparability does not account for the *temporal* relationship between structure and agency, whereby as *separate entities* each possess distinct properties and powers that potentially *mediate* and interact. Put briefly, in this Archer joins Lockwood's (1964) concept of ‘analytic dualism’, with (the aforementioned) critical realist philosophical scaffolding to proffer a sociological model for theorising about structure-agency interaction that resists the collapsing of social theories to the differing levels. Adopting Buckley's (1967) terminology, Archer (1995,p.16) claims her morphogenetic-morphostatic model provides a "practical methodological complement... [to] realist social ontology". Importantly, in the interconnection of their mechanisms and properties, structure and agency are not regarded as being reducible to each other. Rather, within any social context an agent is involuntarily *presented* with 'situational logics' or 'conditions of possibility' for action arising from the pre-existing differentiated powers and properties from social structures. Resultant human activity can transform structures (morphogenesis) or recreate structures (morphostasis), the mechanisms and properties of which can constrain future human action.

Yet, despite the predisposition for such pre-existing structural conditioning, Archer (1995), as stated above, rejects any inherent determinism and insists that human reflexivity prevails, such that agents can choose to act in ways which are in keeping with their own concerns but contrary to their own vested interests. Agents have the potential for deliberation and action in circumstances within their control (Porpora, 2013, p.28). Thus, the morphogenetic processes of interaction and change can not only transform further structural powers and attributes but develop the properties and powers of human agents themselves. It is a change process she terms as 'double morphogenesis'. Indeed, for Archer, stratification operates for people as much as other

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34 Structures and societies as *emergent entities* “are not only irreducible to people, they pre-exist them, and people are not puppets of structures because they have their own emergent properties which mean that they either reproduce or transform social structure rather than creating it” (Archer 1995, p.71).
strata of reality. Interplay with structural forces occurs at each of the three strata – Persons, Agents and Actors - each emergent from each other in turn. The Person is the foundation human being with capacity for reflexivity and action, and the Agent emerges from the structural interplay as being socially situated and with cultural assets and ideas. This is the (aforementioned) double morphogenesis of Agents. The latter’s emergence as Actor, socially positioned in a system of roles, is termed triple morphogenesis.

It is important to pause and ‘take in’ what Archer’s morphogenetic/morphostatic model is proposing here for the matter of cross-worldview communication between social workers and Christian parents. In proposing that social interaction involves interplay of both levels of structure and agency, and to avoid the (aforementioned) pitfalls of upwards and downwards conflation that occlude genuine dialogue, cross-worldview communication action must be understood as the dynamic interaction of structures and agents. In other words, worldviews function with agents interacting (‘mediating’) with (the properties and powers of) its structures. When a secular liberal social worker communicates with a Christian parent, there is more ‘going on’ than two agents ‘getting along’. They are both agents of something pre-existing. The agents are the same in the sense that they are both human beings, but immediately different: one is an agent as a particular social worker, and the other is an agent as a potential parent; one is the agent of the structures of a secular liberal statutory framework, and the other is the agent of the structures of the Christian Church. Immediately there are role distinctions in the differing power structures.

Yet it goes deeper than this, for as discussed in Chapters 3-4, the role-distinctions are not neutral nor without complications. The social-worker-agents mediate the pre-existing structures of statutory policy requirements and government-employer expectations for formulaic process-driven parenting assessments. These structures have empiricist, instrumental and disenchanted inclinations generated by the post-
Enlightenment worldview matrix of naturalism, secular humanism and secular liberalism. In Chapters 2-4, I discussed how Christian-parent-agents seek to mediate these as well as other different pre-existing structures. These other structures are generated by the Trinitarian Christian worldview, such as the theological Storied requirements, symbolic practices and expectations for morally living out the Christian life in community with others. Whilst not as formalised as for social-work-agents, Christian-parent-agents still have ‘rules’ or ‘normative expectations’ for conduct, with these aligned to particular faith traditions (or indeed to particular church communities or individual adherents) in varying degrees of authoritarian theological stricture. For example, when challenged with alternative (structural) expectations, Christian theology points to adherents having “the wisdom of serpents and the gentleness of doves” (Matthew 10) to mediate the structural expectations and find the way forward (Wright 2013). Responses will differ: some will say ‘I will have the gentleness of doves’ and diminish the theological difference, and others will decry any theological diminution saying ‘I will have the wisdom of serpents, so take it or leave it, and I will put it in the hands of God’.

Although the terminology is somewhat complicated, social workers can understand the kind of systemic emergence proposed by Person>Agent>Actor morphogenesis by referring to their own professional development journey to take-on the professional identity and role of social worker. They will have come to pre-qualifying training as a Person born into/belonging to a ‘collectivity’ or ‘collectivities’ (stable social group(s)) with personal attributes and ‘life chances’ (resources as structurally distributed). Their capability to mediate structural properties and powers and emerge socially situated as an Agent (with associated socio-cultural and material assets and influence) will have accorded with the social positioning (privilege/under-privilege and power/powerlessness) of their collectivity. As Agents, their action might continue to be rewarded or penalised according to that social position. Archer also differentiates
Corporate Agents as having additional capacity for strategic organisation and influential articulation of interests over Primary Agents who ‘merely’ belong to a collectivity with a corresponding distribution of resources.\textsuperscript{35} The Agents’ qualification/acquisition of the social role of ‘social worker’ and enactment of corresponding ‘sets’ of socially positioned practices (such as rules of normative conduct and resource allocation) constitutes the ‘emergence from Agent as Actor’ (Nellhaus, 2010).

There are ‘internal and necessary conditions’ differentiating social roles (such as between social worker and social work organisational management, or social worker and parent as service user), and between roles and resource allocation, responsibility and normative expectations (such as social worker as expert and assessor, social worker as safeguarding the public/vulnerable persons, social work’s professional standards and practice frameworks). Nellhaus (2010, p.42, italics as in original) explains this structural mediation upon agency quite simply: “Agents act, and what keeps agents in their locations within the system of positioned practices is the system’s continuous functioning so that the positions are constantly being (re)produced”. It is illustrative by reference to my earlier discussion in Chapters 3 and 4 of social workers communicating with Christian parents. When confronted with new information communicated from an Other’s worldview, the social workers drew upon practice frameworks and instrumental reasoning that as Actors (with acquired social work role) they reproduce in their everyday work. Within the enacting of this social role, the structural resources contextually available to understand the parents’ communication actions, such as the naturalistic-empiricist inclination of the ‘evidence-based’ approach and the romanticist tenor of the ‘spiritual-but-not-religious’ discourse, mediated the

\textsuperscript{35}The distinction can also be illustrated by reference to Chapter 3 concerning the differing experiences of Catherine and Derek to that of David in their communication with social workers. David, through his ‘life chances’ of training and experience as a Baptist minister and his resource network of Christian professionals, was able to influentially articulate and strategically organise his parenting circumstances (displaying Corporate Agency) to the social worker’s satisfaction. In contrast, the voices of Catherine and Derek were localized, under-privileged and unheard in the face of prejudicial attitudes, despite belonging to the same collectivity (Trinitarian Christian adherents).
social workers’ comprehension of the significance of the parental worldview, and constrained the resultant communication action.

Yet, whilst such socially positioned practices of social roles are normatively ‘pre-defined’ and present conditions/constraints to action, Archer (2000) maintains that Actors have the capability for reflexivity about their actions. They can engage in ‘internal conversations’ and possibly choose to act in ways contrary to the vested interests aligned to expectations of their social role and its practices. Moreover, such pre-defined (structured) roles can be re-defined as Actors have (and therefore bring to communication) personal characteristics from their Person to their enactment of their role. Hence, as opposed to viewing Actors as passively succumbing to structural conditioning, Archer’s critical realist framework centres Actors as active agents with capacity for moral and social responsibility. Indeed, there was potential of this interpretative framework for the thesis in exploring whether and how structural forces interplay at each of the three strata – Persons, Agents and Actors. According to this framework an emphasis must be given to identifying any reflexive processes of the Actors to explore their perspective of their social identity/identities and the way in which they may have defined or re-defined their role to enable or impede communication with Christian parents. This might include ways in which they have brought forth their Personal characteristics, beliefs and attitudes. Of course when I approached the data I was aware that they might not reveal any of this at all, but something quite different. Indeed, the critical-emancipatory aim of the critical realist research was to look for hidden mechanisms.

**Social Work**

I should note that social work theorists and researchers have not engaged readily with critical realism, perhaps for reasons of its complicated terminology and scarcity of illustrative practice applications (Oliver, 2012; Craig and Bigby, 2015). Those who have point to the potential of its philosophical precepts to underpin research methodologies
that can account for the contradictory pressures to ‘care and control’ characterising the
(modern Western) profession (Houston, 2005 and 2010). As I considered in Chapter 3,
such competing pressures include the legal and moral authority to intervene in
increasingly complex, multipally disadvantaged family situations, yet to operate only a
residual welfare response (as instituted by the statutory Liberalist position to increase
individual freedom and responsibility), with the use of a knowledge base problematised
by its theoretical diversity, whilst simultaneously deploying the profession’s traditional
ethical telos for social justice and relationship-based practice that is itself comprised of
competing values (Oliver, 2012; Craig and Bigby, 2015). Moreover, the neo-Liberal
instrumental demands of government and employer organisations to increase
professional accountability for outcomes through process-driven practice frameworks
and rhetoric for evidence-based practice, has arguably added to (rather than simplified)
the complexity faced by its agents.

In an early pioneering theoretical paper, Houston (2001) proposed such
instrumentalism as signifying a “depth to surface” movement within social work practice
knowledge – a praxis impasse - that appeared to arise out of the relativistic dead-end
of social constructionism and a (paradoxically) simultaneous uncritical acceptance of
empiricism within an evidence-based approach. He proposed the usefulness of critical
realist understanding of social phenomenon for giving direction in practice decisions
and interventions, over the confounding ‘uncertainty’ of decisions derived from the
atomisation and nominalism of social constructionism, or the ‘naïve empiricism’ of an
outcomes focus. He drew upon a Bhaskarian understanding to see social
phenomenon/problematic situations as constituting reality beyond solely ideas and
concepts – as the effects of human agential interaction with the enabling and
constraining tendencies of pre-existing structures (as real entities). With this he joined
with other researchers to claim possibility for hypothesising about the ‘how and why’
social work phenomenon/problems arise, and thereby generate practical social work
responses and empirically based theory (Pawson and Tilley, 1997; Moren and Blom, 2003; Houston, 2005 and 2010). As explored earlier in this chapter, social work assessment processes – in ideal terms – resonate with critical realist aims and reductive processes to obtain more-or-less powerful explanations of the correspondence of evidence to external reality (‘ontological realism’), recognising that not all explanations are equally valid (‘epistemic relativity’) and that adjudication can be made between them on rational grounds (‘judgemental rationality’). Moreover, as Houston (2010, p.74) notes, critical realism’s emancipatory purposes for such explanations, to illuminate “right conduct and the good life”, align with social work’s traditional imperatives for social justice.

This chapter ends Part 1 of the thesis – the ‘macro perspective’ of the three structural fields and the under-labouring of critical realism to question worldview, epistemic and instrumental inclinations/forces/powers that seemingly enable and constrain agential communication agency. The next chapter begins Part 2 that presents the ‘micro perspective’ of social-worker-with-Christian-parent communication action. The next chapter (Chapter 6) specifically outlines the empirical component: the epistemological underpinning to the methodology; the story of the research process; and the ethical considerations.
Part 2

‘Micro Perspective’: The Empirical Component
Chapter 6: Methodology Chapter

6.1. INTRODUCTION TO THE CHAPTER

Thus far the thesis has mapped out the conceptual territory of social-worker-with-Christian-parent communication across three key fields with deep structural entities proposed as present and interconnected: Christianity and post-Enlightenment worldviews; professional social work; and social work communication. The previous chapter (Chapter 5) identified how the analytical tools of critical realism could under-labour to produce a rich, more powerful account of social-worker-with-Christian-parent communication action. It made explicit the challenges to the epistemic assumptions that I had raised in the previous chapters, and focused on how communication agency occurs within, and interplays with, the force field of such constraining social structures. I proposed potential for theorising about such structure-agency interplay by adopting Archer’s (1995) morphogenesis as a critical realist interpretative framework. This chapter details the empirical component taken to facilitate the rich retroductive explanation of the potential structure-agency mechanisms influencing the communication processes.

- The first section sets out the methodology that addresses the research questions and how its hermeneutic-phenomenological epistemological underpinning is informed (under-laboured) by critical realist retroductive enquiry.
- The second section gives the rationale for the data-collection methods, tells the story of their deployment, and describes how I went about doing the analysis including how I decided to best report the data.
- In the third section I outline some specific ethical considerations that influenced decisions about the choice of method, given that the research is based upon a controversial issue, and engages with the experiences of real people who could
have experienced negative consequences as a result of the process (such as being prevented to parent/adopt).

### 6.2. Research Questions and Epistemological Underpinning to the Methodology (As Underlaboured by Critical Realism)

The thesis is exploratory in its aim for explanatory understanding (provide theoretical linkages to) social work communication with Christian parents by seeking greater understanding of the interplay between structure and agency within that communication. In this it has emancipatory aims in generating an understanding that has potential to facilitate future dialogue about changes in practice. In viewing social reality as a multi-layered, open system of interacting properties and powers, in which the ‘layered parts’ irreducibly relate to each other and to the ‘stratified whole’, critical realism presents a theoretical language to explore the complex dynamism and practical concrete ‘reality’ of social work practice (Houston, 2010) - in this case communication with parents about matters of their Christian worldview. Building upon the discussion in the previous chapter and taking up Archer’s morphogenesis as an interpretive framework, it was possible to conceive (and theorise) the action of social worker-Christian parent communication as occurring at the central interface of the three fields hitherto explored in the thesis that contain structural entities potentially enabling or constraining that agential action (as set out in Figure 1 from Chapter 1, and, for ease, reproduced below). The three fields were Christianity (as an integrated worldview interacting with the post-Enlightenment worldview); professional social work (as an institution/practice and contrasting with structures of Christian moral living); and social work communication (as structurally influenced communication action and contrasting with Christian motivated communication action). Drawing upon the epistemic services of critical realism, ontological and epistemological assumptions about ‘knowing' were

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36 Chapters 2-4 correspond to each of the three fields.
raised within the three fields, and then challenged in a more explicit way in the previous chapter devoted to critical realist tools for understanding. Herein, it was proposed that social-worker-with-Christian-parent communication action could be ontologically recognised as being independent and more than merely the totality of the epistemological means by which we can grasp it (sensory experience (objectivism), abstract conceptual reasoning (idealism), intuitive feeling (romanticism), or perceptions of individual or collective meaning (interpretivism)). Put simply, something can and probably does ‘really’ happen outside of the senses or the minds of the agents. To summarise in critical realist language, communication actions that Actually\(^{37}\) occur (outside of the fallacy of mere Empirical level understanding) are generated by agential interplay with deeper pre-existing structural properties and powers (at the Real level), and about which understanding at an Empirical level can only approximate to understand. Moreover, to avoid the upwards, downwards and central conflationism of social theorising, that communication action must be understood as the interplay of both social structure and human agency.

*Figure 1 Reproduced: Diagram of Overall Theoretical Framework: Social worker-Christian parent communication action at the central interface of three structural fields*

\(^{37}\) Occurring at the strata of the ‘Actual’.
Research Questions

Employing the principle of judgemental rationality, a critical realist researcher engages in rational judgement of the range of available evidence to retrospectively arrive at the best explanation for patterns and processes closely scrutinised in the phenomenon under investigation. Thus, beginning with the observed phenomena, my research question asked: ‘How do the three fields influence communication issues and communication action between a Christian parent and social worker?’ Sub-questions drawn from the discussion and which elucidate the meta question were:

1. When communicating within statutory parenting assessment, how do social workers and Christian parents or carers perceive the issues arising from?
   - the Christian belief issues?
   - the issues arising from the social work role?
   - the interpersonal communication?

2. How do these three types of perceptions of communication issues relate together to affect the decision-making, choice and actions taken?
Within an intensive ('case study') research design, a critical realist grounded theory approach was taken to facilitate a rich retroductive explanation of the interface between the observed action of the social-worker-with-Christian-parent communication and the three fields. In critical realist terms, the research task was to find theoretical descriptions for the interface (at the deeper level of the Real) so that hypotheses could be proposed that explained the observed events (at the Empirical level) (Bhaskar, 1986). As discussed earlier, retroduction is an iterative, abductive developmental process involving “the successive and incremental revision of how we see or understand something in the light of insights disclosed through the process of the engagement itself” (McGrath, 2009). It is in the surprise of new evidence, or existing evidence which has been innovatively reviewed, that such abductive or intuitive reasoning can be stirred (Wright, 2013). Thus, commencing with the observed phenomenon, which in this case constituted the action of social-worker-Christian-parent-communication, I needed a critical realist principled methodology which could enable me to get close to the data, to 'go in', see what I encountered and be surprised. In this encounter, my attention needed to focus upon the interplay of the communication action (the agential 'parts') within the context of the three fields (the 'whole').

The rationale for ‘thick description’ to enable powerful explanation

Using Geertz's (1973) interpretative ethnographic method of 'thick description', the methodology was influenced by the hermeneutic-phenomenological debates from interpretative anthropology (Geertz, 1973; Clifford, 1988) and hermeneutic theory (Gadamer, 1982; Ricoeur, 1988). For Geertz, there is an “informal logic to everyday life” in that actions hold symbolic meanings and those meaningful symbols relate to the whole cultural system as “webs of significance” (Litcherman, 2011). Symbolic action is understood by setting it in the context of the whole system. The meaning of the context is understood by seeking the meaning of the systemic parts. Thus, to pursue Geertzian
'thick description' and understand symbolic action (in this case social-worker-with-Christian-parent communication), I had to pay attention not only to the immediate concrete behaviours (such as the 'speech-act' of communication action), but the way that such action signified contextual and experiential understandings (Vanhoozer, 2007). Moreover, to attend to what that everyday experience or action meant to the person, detailed, rich description was required of it, for it is in such fine detail that the relationship between the parts and whole of a social phenomenon can be explored and richness in meaning achieved (Denscombe, 2014). Importantly for Geertz, the detail of the practical concepts of everyday lives should be described in such a way that the original meaning to everyday interaction does not become lost or altered by the researcher's detached abstraction (Litcherman, 2011). This meant that when inferring beliefs from people's actions and words I had to take care not to apply a meaning to those beliefs that they would not affirm to hold (Astley, 2013).

It is in this business of how a researcher is to see and understand enlivened meaning of phenomena that the hermeneutic-phenomenology debate plays out. The phenomenological approach regards meaning as being closely derived from a person's lived experience. From this perspective, the emphasis is for the authentic sense of meanings to be found separate to any theoretical overlay that the researcher might ascribe (Moustakas, 1994). For descriptions to be insightful, the data should be allowed to 'speak for themselves' (Van Manen, 1990). The key task for the ethnographic researcher in trying to get close to the insider's view is to identify and rule out the researcher's preconceptions and biases which are influencing the descriptive understanding of the phenomenon. Thus, although the researcher is seeking to get as close as possible to the original meaning, the researcher engages in a distanced critique of it (Swinton and Mowat, 2006).

The phenomenological importance placed upon getting close and observant to how phenomena appear seemed to strike concordance with my critical realist orientated
inquiry. First, while critical realists point to the inevitable epistemological limitations of empirically retrieved data, such data are the closest we can get to perceiving prompts (and inspiring theorising) of the interplay of invisible, underlying mechanisms and properties relating to structures and agents (Byrne, 1998). For me, here, in the attention to contextually situated action, ‘thick description’ had the potential to give voice to agential reasoning and motivation as well as the structural influences within the context. The movement between the parts and the whole to gain a rich understanding reflected Archer’s assertion of the interplay between structure and agency, as opposed to any upwards or downwards conflation. Thus, ‘thick description’ showed potential validity in eliciting the kind of data suitable for retroductive morphogenetic analysis. Second, the phenomenologist thread to ‘thick description’ agreed with the study’s critical realist conceptualisation of religion as being perceived and lived out in everyday practice rather than reduced to an abstract set of beliefs (Astley, 2002; Jackson, 1997 and 2004). Any such reductionist abstraction could not account for the plurality of expression within and across traditions, groups and individuals, and as such was open to Archer’s charge of upwards conflation. Indeed, as considered in Chapter 2, Christian religious beliefs are better understood as a worldview perspective whereby the concrete experiences of a Christian person’s everyday life and his or her engagement with cultural symbols signify an overarching Christian Story or stories (Walsh and Middleton, 1984; Wright, 1992). For example, it was just such a multi-sourced derived thick description that Wright (1992) used in his critical realist approach to the study of the historical Jesus. The framework for the thick description was a Storied worldview, through which he drew on different sources to explore how the concrete experiences of the everyday life of New Testament Christians and their engagement with cultural symbols gave expression to an overarching messianic - eschatological Story (Wright, 1992). Wright used the multiple perspectives and sources to address the different layers of understanding, recognising that even with such multi-perspectival understanding knowledge was epistemically
provisional. Thus, in principle, the demand of thick description for multi-layered ('parts and whole') understanding, with accompanying rejection of 'reductionist thin description' for providing superficial, uni-dimensional understanding of cultural meaning, appeared to concur with the critical realist premise of a deep, layered ontological reality to social phenomena (Vanhoozer, 2007).

However, the idea that a pure descriptivist account is possible, with the researcher's presuppositions bracketed off, has been challenged for being hermeneutically naïve (Hammersley, 1998). Hermeneutics argues that understanding inevitably always arises from a position or perspective and so is always an interpretation (Swinton and Mowat, 2006). For example, while I sought to hear how a parent and social worker really made sense of Christian parenting, in terms of the authentic sense that they made of it from their worldviews, I would not have been able to leave behind my own structures of understanding from my own worldview. This then potentially distorted my resultant descriptive understanding. Astley (2002) encapsulated this hermeneutic position on the part of the researcher as such:

“The point is this: even in describing your theology I am implicitly engaged in a conversation between my theology and yours, at least to some extent. My perspective influences what comes to my attention as I listen to you talk about, and see you practise your faith; indeed it influences what it is that I am capable of seeing and hearing, and what I take seriously in what you say.” (Astley, 2002, p109).

From this perspective, description can only be deemed to contain the selection of meanings noticed and deemed significant by the researcher according to the researcher's own presuppositions of significance. There is some inevitability of familiarity in selection, and this raises the claim that understanding is necessarily 'culturally-bound' (Ryan 1970). Such familiarity potentially raises an issue for critical realist inquiry whereby the researcher seeks not familiarity but to be sufficiently
surprised by data to consider invisible, underlying mechanisms and properties. However, an alternative hermeneutic position has been proposed which recognises the significance of the interpreter as being fundamentally necessary for being able to achieve shared meaning at all (Swinton and Mowat, 2006; Jackson, 1997 and 2004). Swinton and Mowat (2006) identified Gadamer's (1981) premise that a researcher's pre-understandings or 'prejudice', gained through a common situatedness in a cultural and historical context, is a precondition for action or talk being made comprehensible. As Gadamer highlights:

“To try to eliminate one’s own concepts in interpretation is not only impossible, but manifestly absurd. To interpret means precisely to use one’s own preconceptions so that the meaning of the text can really be made to speak for us.” (Gadamer, 1981, p358).

For me, the importance, therefore, was not to eradicate contextually derived pre-understandings because contextual awareness was ontologically required. Indeed, the researcher should constructively decipher the influence of his or her contextual preunderstandings upon his or her interpretation and selection of belief-imbued action and talk (Swinton and Mowat, 2006). Gadamer refers to such researcher reflexivity as one crucial aspect of a ‘historically effective consciousness’. The other aspect is to maintain openness to new experiences. It is in the encounter of new experiences – understood as a dissonance between something already known or felt - that learning occurs. New experiences broaden the horizon for further experiences, including changed understanding of previous experiences. Knowledge is gained through a back and forth movement whereby the surprise of a new experience creates re-evaluation and renewed experience of a past one. Gadamer referred to this recursive and reflexive process of knowing as the ‘dialectic of experience’.

A critical realist retroductive inquiry promotes this kind of relational way of knowing (Hiebert, 2012). The researcher is engaged centrally in a critically reflective
hermeneutic process of knowing about reality. While such knowledge of reality is provisional, and that reality is considered to exist beyond sense-data, it is inherently relational, for as Wright (1992) highlighted:

..the only access that we have to this reality lies along the spiralling path of appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known...(Wright, 1992, p.35).

Thus, in relational terms, my insider perspective both as a Christian and social worker and outsider perspective as an academic potentially lit a critical reflective pathway – not least in revealing the research problem of Christian-parent-with-social-worker communication in the first place! Clearly, the knowing of the independent reality of the structure-agency interplay within the Christian-parent-with-social-worker communication could not be separated from my critical reflections. The light being shone on the research object was not ‘crystal clear’ but ‘hazy’ in this respect. However, the retroduction had potential to enable aspects of independent reality to be pondered about which, hitherto, had not been perceived. A key component to the retroduction, therefore, was the engagement in reflexive processes, in terms of questioning the influence of my ‘self’ upon research decisions and interpretations of meaning. Reflexivity, from a critical realist angle, was considered from the aforementioned more constructive ‘Gadamerian’ hermeneutic perspective (Swinton and Mowat, 2006). Specifically, I held in mind Archer’s (2000) critical realist position that when displaying agency, human thinking is not structurally or culturally bound but active and purposeful to appraise choices (‘internal conversations’). My reflexive judgements were not about making passive, culturally determined misrepresentations (‘downward conflation’) but rational judgements about adequate representations and explanations for the observable effects of the interplay between the structural and agential entities (the three fields and the action of Christian-parent-with-social-worker communication).
Thus, in summary, the hermeneutic-phenomenological dimensions to thick description appeared to share with critical realism:

- a recognition that a true meaning of (multi-layered) phenomena exists;
- that any understanding of it is entirely provisional as the knowledge is by nature socially constructed (researcher interpretation of meaning);
- that it is nevertheless possible to operate judgemental rationality within a critically reflective process to theoretically describe it.

**The rationale for Grounded Theory methods within a critical realist framework to enable analysing and theorising of the descriptions of structure-agency interplay**

In bringing about the thick description the methodology needed also to address how theory would be developed or used in making visible those causal mechanisms in the interface of the Christian-parent-with-social-worker communication and the three fields. This required a method that could achieve the analytical work taken in operating: a) the recursive critical reflexive processes to elicit meaning and b) judgemental rationality to find the most plausible theory that could best describe the mechanisms bringing about the observed effects (Potter and Lopez, 2001; Mäntysaari, 2005). For this I utilised Grounded Theory methods within a critical realist framework.

As a methodology for the systematic development of substantive theory, Grounded Theory has evolved since its conception by Glaser and Strauss (1967) to meet the concerns of different epistemological paradigms. It has been found to be particularly relevant for meeting the substantive theoretical concerns of social work research (practice relevance and practice validity: Sheppard, 1998 and 2007), with recent publications promoting its usefulness for research within a critical realist orientation (Yeung, 1997; Maxwell, 2012; Redman-MacLaren and Mills, 2015) including social work research (Oliver, 2012). The ‘discovery’ orientation of Glaser and Strauss’ Grounded Theory (1967) resonated with the critical realist position to intentionally give
the data the chance to ‘speak’, getting ‘close to reality’ in order to encourage emergent discoveries within data sets. This discovery orientation has both a positivist and symbolic-interactionist ancestry. Barney Glaser’s positivist leanings emphasized that if the researcher maintained a neutral objectivity through approaching data without prior conceptions and he or she preserved strict adherence to analytical guidelines (reducing subjectivity and causing the researcher to ‘go beyond’ his or her existing conceptions), then new discoveries of objective truths could be found (Oliver, 2012).

The tools for the inductive discovery process lay in the Symbolic Interactionist and Pragmatist perspectives favoured by Anselm Strauss. Symbolic Interactionism emphasizes an understanding upon meanings behind peoples’ actions, with particular reference to the shared social meanings, norms, beliefs and behaviours that influence individual situations. Thus data-collection methods and analysis seek to 'uncover' the meaning of the lived realities of participants, as experienced and told by them, as opposed to deductively testing pre-determined hypotheses and looking for regularities (Downward et al. 2002). For me, this perspective of seeking authentic meaning of the reality of lived experience echoed the phenomenological threads to critical realist thick description described earlier. Herein, the detailed analytic tactics for describing and comparing ‘instances’ of experiences or perspectives as they appeared within and across multiple data sources showed capability for addressing a layered nature to reality. Such analysis could enable movement between the parts and the whole to gain a rich understanding which reflected Archer's insistence upon the interplay between structure and agency. However, the pure inductiveness of a traditional Grounded Theory approach does not stand up to the threads of hermeneutic critique in that the researcher can never objectively conduct research in the absence of preconceived ideas (Fletcher, 2017). Oliver (2012) has argued that more recent social constructionist operations of Grounded Theory (Clarke, 2005; Charmaz, 2006; Mills et al. 2006) perceive induction as being better understood as a process of abduction. Abduction concords with the critical realist premise for an iterative critically reflexive process of
seeking increasing understanding of phenomena. The researcher is ontologically positioned to be an interpreting 'bridge' in making meaning intelligible. It is through the researcher's own experience of being surprised by the data that intuitive reasoning occurs and can be explored in a recursive, back and forth manner using theoretical insights. As Oliver (2012) observes:

The inevitability of researcher interpretation through prior theoretical lenses means that retroduction has been described as “simply abduction with a specific question in mind” (Oliver, 2012, p.10).

My claims to theoretical explanation remained partial as I could only be aware of structural entities by their effects, with available research methods incapable of uncovering reality in its ontological complexity without the influence of my own perspectivism (Blaikie, 1993). Critics will probably argue that my explanation simply holds equivalence to all others, being culturally embedded and theory-laden, and thus open to the pitfall of individualisation. It is a charge held at critical realism more generally (Mäntysaari, 2005). However, critical realists hold a distinction between 'multiple realities' as being socially constructed by individuals or collectivities and valid perspectives of aspects of objective reality but with variation in adequate theoretical descriptions of it. In other words, while our knowledge of reality cannot be certain (as such knowledge is by nature socially constructed) it is possible to seek theoretical explanations which can best approximate to what is real (Oliver, 2012).

6.3. RATIONALE FOR THE DATA-COLLECTION METHODS AND THE STORY OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS

To achieve 'thick description' the research methods needed to generate detailed descriptive data of both the concrete behaviours of the substantive event of social-worker-with-Christian-parent communication (the 'speech-act') and individual (agential) meanings of the way such action signifies contextual and experiential understanding
('parts and whole understanding'). This suggested qualitative inquiry within an intensive case study design, for which I followed Simons (2009):

“Case study is an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, programme or system in a ‘real life’ context.” (Simons, 2009, p21).

Qualitative inquiry within a critical realist orientation enables intense engagement with social reality with the purpose of identifying the interplay of underlying mechanisms and properties which are not anticipated or pre-determined, and make visible individual perceptions of social processes (Barron, 2013; McEvoy and Richards, 2006). Two different qualitative methods were used to produce two data sets which attended to both the actual event of communication and social worker and Christian parent or carer perceptions of it:

1. The Forum Theatre method used within a performance to a sample of qualifying social work students and qualified social workers (Practice Educators) (capturing social worker perceptions and concrete behaviours).

2. Unstructured qualitative interviews with a sample of volunteer social work service users (parents self-identifying as practising Christians) capturing Christian parent perceptions for the basis and themes for the script used for the forum theatre performance.

Readers may question why unstructured interviews were not also conducted with a sample of qualified and qualifying social workers for the basis and themes of the script. There were clearly justifiable epistemological and ethical reasons for this methodological decision. The epistemological justification is set out in the following sub-section, and pertains to the power of the forum theatre performance method to actively provoke deep reflexive (individual and audience/group) deliberation of potentially structurally-induced oppressive relations within a safe but nevertheless
sufficiently realistic practice situation. The script, in being based upon and presented from the perspective of the Christian parents, when performed to an audience of social workers, was crucial for bringing to consciousness such asymmetric power relations and thereby agitating such deeper social worker reflexions, and producing the kinds of agential deliberations suitable for critical realist inquiry. In other words, arguably, a greater depth of social worker reflexion 'on' and 'in' action could be obtained from the forum theatre performance rather than unstructured interviews. Second, such depth of individual and group reflexion – one in which a social worker could be provoked to go beyond bureaucratic responses - required the performance environment to feel sufficiently realistic but safe. This justification pertains to the ethical considerations influencing the methodology, and these are given more detailed consideration in the third section to this chapter. Briefly, a centrally important ethical issue to address was how to research hard to access populations (both Christian parents and social workers fit this category) to examine communication strategies, thoughts and feelings about the sensitive topics of religious faith and social work parenting assessment. Quite clearly it would be ethically inappropriate, and procedurally impossible, to stop either parents or social workers within their real-life interactions during parenting assessment to do this. Instead, interviewing a sample of service users (parents) at the beginning stage of the forum theatre – to provide the bases for the script – enabled their (service user) voices to be centrally positioned (not silenced) but safely heard. If the service users had joined with the social workers to comprise the audience then this would have compromised their psychological safety, willingness, and ability to voice perspectives. Moreover, having a ‘social worker only’ audience provided similar safety to qualified and qualifying social workers to openly reflect and experiment with actions.

What is Forum Theatre and why did it seem better equipped to elicit social worker reflexions of, and substantive enactment of, communication agency?
Boals’ (1979) Forum Theatre method of participatory 'street' theatre is rarely reported in social work, but has been proposed to be ideally suited in facilitating conscious recognition of structurally induced problems occurring within service user situations and developing realistic and dialogue-based (reflexive) strategies for social work practice actions that advance service user agency (Houston et al. 2001; Boehm and Boehm, 2003; Kaptani and Yuval-Davis, 2008; Woodcock Ross, 2011). As a form of community-based performance Forum Theatre has an emancipatory aim to engage groups of people in reflecting upon and acting out ways of agentially combatting oppressive relations in their everyday lives. Boal's approach is to remove the distinction between actor and audience. Both are “spect-actors” who watch a scripted scene unfold of everyday oppression (as typically experienced by the group), and are sufficiently agitated and 'moved' by it to adopt a role within it and change the character's actions (Nellhaus, 2010). The three main characters usually consist of a protagonist whose role is to represent the experience of the group, an antagonist who embodies an oppressor role (also potentially within the experience of the group), and a ‘facilitator’ who acts as a link between the actors and audience by providing commentary on the unfolding drama and inviting response and intervention. For the purposes here, there was potential for delineation between the social worker (as antagonist-oppressor) and Christian parent (as protagonist-oppressed) in enabling reflection on how communication agency was influenced through pre-existing structurally induced oppressive actions and circumstances. Clearly social workers seek to fulfil requirements to be anti-oppressive, and are often oppressed themselves, so the delineation could not be too simplistically drawn. However, drawing upon Boehm and Boehm (2003), the method had potential power in its encouragement of embodied (felt) recognition of the service user (protagonist) experience of the communication to then provoke social worker “spect-actors” to move beyond their usual bureaucratized responses in examining agency (in this case communication agency). The delineation
of the roles – oppressor and oppressed – was therefore a necessary element to achieve this powerful ‘provocation’ for deeper reflection.

In terms of my critical realist inquiry, the opportunity presented by Forum Theatre to represent not just a picture of society (in this case social-worker-with-Christian-parent communication) but a picture of structure-agency interplay brings innovation. Nellhaus (2010) in his critical realist informed analysis of theatre history, proposes that the very ontology of Forum Theatre is founded upon the relationship between reflexivity and agency. For critical realists, reflexivity is a vital component of agency. With agency regarded as being intentional, embodied and causally powerful, reflexivity plays an essential role in a person formulating their reasons for acting (Bhaskar, 1989; Archer, 2000). When a person engages in reasoning they reflexively appraise their action in the light of their understanding of what they are doing but also what they believe they should be doing according to their worldview. The explanation for why a person has acted, therefore, lies in an understanding of those reasons. When those reasons are enacted, they can be considered causes. This does not mean that all agential actions are reasoned, but that an agent has the potential for deliberation and action in circumstances within their control. For Nellhaus, the method of theatrical reflexivity offered by Forum Theatre concords with this kind of reflexive reasoning for critical realist inquiry (intentional, embodied, causally powerful). This occurs through the way each ‘spect-actor’ (agent) is self-present in the performance. Self-presence is not passive or uni-dimensional but embodied across multi-layers of experience (such as materially, emotionally, cognitively). It is a position echoing the critical realist notion of agents as multi-layered entities. Through such embodiment agents make deep connections between the drama scene and their everyday life experiences. As Boal (2013) summarises:
“On stage we continue to see the world as we have always seen it, but now we also see it as others see it: we see ourselves as we see ourselves, and we see ourselves as we are seen.” (Boal, 2013, p26).

Moreover, the scripted performance – in representing a tableau of typical, everyday relationships and processes – references the real structures that the 'spect-actors' daily experience. Thus, as they reflect on their performance and participation, they simultaneously reflexively consider the application in the reality of their everyday lives. The consideration of a reality beyond or beneath the ficticious scenario resonates with the social ontology of critical realism. It could be argued that while the scenario operates at the Empirical level of reality, each 'pect-actor' reflexively refers to, and brings forth, their experience of events at the Actual level, which are themselves emergent effects from the causal mechanisms at the level of the Real. Indeed, Nellhaus suggests that such recursive reflexion of 'fictive scenario-real life experience' enables 'spect-actors' to implicitly consider the limiting or enabling processes to their enactment of agency. The role of the performance 'facilitator' is crucial in this regard in terms of prompting 'spect-actors' to become involved and enact agency, and to make explicit their implicit reflexive considerations through engagement in group dialogue.

It seemed to me that such recursive reflexions, when made explicit in dialogue and enacted in performance, could constitute data with the 'parts and whole understanding' required of my study. The Forum Theatre method could become a research method to prompt and capture self-reflexion about the influencing effects of structures upon social-worker-with-Christian-parent communication agency. From this perspective, validity could be increased by the data-collection being placed within a context and manner that had meaning to the social workers in terms of the real-life situations in which they practiced, as opposed to traditional qualitative methods of interviewing, questionnaires and focus groups. Moreover, as it would have been ethically inappropriate to stop social workers within their real-life interactions with service users
to examine detailed communication strategies, thoughts and feelings, a dramatised simulation made as ‘real’ as possible with professional actors had to be preferred. Having discussed the rationale for the methods, the following sub-sections summarise how this all panned out in the conduct of the research.

**The conduct of the iterative critically reflexive research process**

Figure 3 provides a summary of the recursive stages of the iterative critically reflexive research process. It commenced with the beginning stages where I carried out a preliminary literature review, sketching out the rationale and contextual features for the study. Part of this process involved me engaging in reflexive processes to make transparent my own standpoint to the research issues, recognising that no researcher approaches research without theoretical presuppositions but should make them clear and account for them. Taken together, as reported within Chapter 1, all this reasoning pointed towards taking a critical realist approach to the study, the identification of preliminary research questions (kept under review as the data emerged), and the corresponding abstraction of the three fields of contextual features (as key ‘boundary-markers’ in the theoretical landscape). I should note that the literature reviewing and theoretical abstraction did not stop here, as summarised and presented in Figure 2, the stages were iterative not linear. I was continually looking for how I could increase my developing sense of the agential meaning within the inductively derived data (from the interviews and forum theatre performance), and how action potentially signified structurally-induced contextual and experiential understanding. The next key event that I inserted within the iterative research process was the deployment of the first of the research methods to generate the detailed descriptive data for the ‘thick description’ – the unstructured interviews with the Christian parents.

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39 That is, descriptive data of both the concrete behaviours of the substantive event of social-worker-with-Christian-parent communication (the ‘speech-act’) and individual (agential) meanings
of the way such action signifies contextual and experiential understanding ('parts and whole understanding')
- Identifying rationale for critical realist approach
- Abstracting 3 contextual fields (boundary setting)
- Self-reflexion of standpoint
- Identifying research questions
- Application (successful) for full ethics committee approval, risk checklist completion, and host institution ethical approval
- During this time I transferred student register from KCL to UCL, and I also changed employment (host institution) 3 times
- Purposive sample of 12 volunteers recruited from Service User Consultative Groups in geographic region
- Extended sampling frame to minority parent populations
- Unstructured interviewing, but 'conversation purpose' requiring communication skills
- 2 staged open-coding: a) codes ascribed sentence-by-sentence, then b) widened perspective to by situating in immediately preceding text
- Axial coding linking patterns and relationships between codes, thereby pruning number of codes
- Consulted ongoing literature review of fields sense-making of context to participant reflexions and behaviours
- Identified two sets of overall themes for basis forum theatre (see Chapter 7)

- Co-wrote script (based on above analysis of perspectives) and oversaw rehearsals with professional acting company
- Audience comprising 31 social worker participants
- In Part 1 of the forum theatre performance participants watched, 'took in', and were 'probed' by the dramatised script. Part 2 immediately follows with participants actively participating in reflexion discussion about the communication dynamics taking over to change communication action.
- I upgraded to PhD status.

- 2 staged open-coding: a) codes ascribed sentence-by-sentence to address familiarity, include other verbal and non-verbal communication then b) codes situated in preceeding text and sometimes altered.
- Axial coding linking patterns and relationships between codes, and consulting both the parent dataset and ongoing literature review of field help sense-making of context to participant reflexions and behaviours.
- Proposed five overall themes (see Chapter 8)
Data-collection: the unstructured interviews with the Christian parents

Sampling strategy, size, and characteristics (Christian parent sample)

I conducted unstructured qualitative interviews with a purposive sample of five men and seven women. It was a sample small enough to enable rich description of their experiences rather than explanation (Moustakas, 1994), and with idiographic potential to bring the experience-based insights required for the study (Robinson, 2014). In this regard, all self-defined as ‘practising Christian’ and had been in receipt of statutory social work Children’s Services in relation to their parenting, seven through foster and adoption assessment, two through Tier 4 child protection assessment processes, and three through Tier 3 child-in-need intervention services to parents of children with disabilities. Children’s Services are often described by local councils using a four tier model representing a continuum of needs from ‘Universal services’ (Tier 1) > ‘Targeted services’ (Tier 2) > ‘Specialist services for multiple family needs and intensive support and services for children with disabilities’ (Tier 3) > ‘Specialist services for families with serious, acute, complex needs including child protection and fostering/adoption for looked after children’ (Tier 4). Herein, statutory services are often considered to encompass Tier 3 and 4 as being services for children-in-need and looked-after children, as established in the Children Act 1989 (DfE, 2017, p.4-5). The parents within my sample fell within these tiers, and were, therefore, all able to provide insights about their communication with a social worker within their receipt of statutory social work parenting assessment services.

All the sample bar one were weekly church goers and involved in weekday activities, such as Bible study. One participant described her Christian beliefs as influencing her daily life in “a more spiritual way than regularly going to church”. Six described their church affiliation as being charismatic and evangelical, three as anglican and evangelical, one as baptist and one as pentecostal. Ten of the parents were white British, and two were Asian-British. All the sample were of ‘traditional working age’, the
majority aged between 30 to 55 years, and two were aged in their sixties. All bar two parents were owner-occupiers and all bar four parents were employed either part-time or full-time. The demography for the sample deviated a little from that identified by the 2011 ONS Census for the same geographical region. According to the ONS (2012), the South East of England covers two Census regions: one ethnically diverse inner City region (the proportion of the White British ethnic group being the majority, but at 44.9% compared to non-white ethnic groups), and one considerably less diverse area containing rural boroughs (the proportion of the White British ethnic group being 91%). Given the inclusion of the inner City region, I was disappointed not to have recruited a more ethnically and age diverse sample.

The parents volunteered to participate, and were recruited through their membership links to the Service User Consultative Groups of four qualifying social work degree programmes covering two urban cities and two rural counties in the study’s geographical area of the South East of England. The sampling was iteratively extended to facilitate inclusion of minority groups of parent participants. This yielded two Christian adoption support groups within the geographical area. While all in the sample were parents to their own birth children, five were also foster carers and two were also adoptive parents. This purposive sampling strategy was suitable for the critical realist research design as it was focused at engaging key individuals and groups to access the phenomenon under inquiry (Clark, 2008). Indeed, through their membership of their Service User Consultative Group, whose function is to provide service user perspectives in the teaching, recruitment and administration of the degree programme, the service users recruited for this study were familiar with telling their individual narrative about the services that they had received from a social worker, and being supported in doing so. Indeed, importantly, the study did not come within the category of involving adults lacking the capacity to consent as governed by sections 30-34 of the Mental Capacity Act 2005. Nevertheless, as set out in the next section (‘Ethical
Considerations), the study underwent a thorough ethical review process, with practical consideration given to the involvement in the study of participants who are particularly vulnerable or in a dependent position, and particular care taken to ensure informed consent in recruitment. The following inclusion criteria were applied (as set out in the Participant Information Sheet under the heading ‘Why have I been chosen to be recruited to the study?’):

“You are eligible to be recruited for the study because:

i: You are 18 years old or over and able to consent to taking part in the research and,

ii: You are a member or linked to the Service User Consultative Group for the University and/or you belong to an already established service user advice, support and consultation group not affiliated to a University (e.g. adoption group), and,

iii: You are currently receiving social work services from a children and families social worker, or have previously received social work services from a children and families social worker and,

iv: You consider yourself to be a practising Christian.

You cannot be recruited to the study if you do not meet all these 4 points.”

The interviewing process

Each interview that I conducted with each Christian parent lasted about an hour, and was digitally recorded (with their permission). The aim for the unstructured interviews was to elicit the perspective of the Christian parents of their typical everyday concrete experiences in communicating with social workers about the influence of their beliefs
upon their parenting. I began with the question “Tell me about the actual moment when you met and communicated with a social worker about your parenting”.

These data informed the Geertzian-like ‘thick description’ whereby I paid attention to their accounts of the immediate concrete behaviours and the way that their accounts of the action signified contextual and experiential understandings of the three fields. Thus, my critical realist use of qualitative interviewing capitalised upon the method’s interpretivist philosophical linkages for enabling a shared understanding of meaning through gaining access to participants’ subjective understandings of actions (Iosifides, 2011). However, with the critical realist recognition of an independent ontologically stratified reality, I used the method to look beyond individual interpretation for pre-existing contextual structures that limited or facilitated those actions. This dual position raised implications for the method, and the way in which I conducted it, which warrant some discussion.

First, referring back to the hermeneutic-phenomenological discussion to the methodology, it was important that the dual position did not dilute the strength of qualitative unstructured interviewing for enabling me to 'get close and observant' to participant meaning of their Christian beliefs in everyday life whilst simultaneously recognising my role to be a necessary 'bridge' to interpreting that meaning (Astley, 2002; McGuire, 2008). In unstructured interviewing the researcher introduces the topic and encourages the participant to develop his or her thoughts and ideas rather than following the researcher’s predetermined ideas and questions (Davidsson Bremborg, 2011; Denscombe, 2014). The researcher encourages meaningful perspectives to come forth through making the communication interaction as relaxed and natural as possible. It is through the promotion of 'naturally occurring talk' that data validity is claimed to be increased (Atkinson, 1998). In this way unstructured interviewing appealed to the phenomenologist strand of my critical realist inquiry to get as close to the data 'as they really are'. To this end, in all but two situations, my interviews took
place face-to-face in the parents' homes and at a time chosen by the parent when he or she could be relaxed and free from distractions. I used communication skills (on which I have published, Woodcock Ross, 2011 and 2016) to encourage the participants to elaborate further upon their own ideas so that I could potentially grasp their meaning, including: 'paraphrasing' and 'summarising' as aspects of 'reflective listening' (Woodcock Ross, 2011 and 2016); 'reaching for feeling' and 'putting feelings into words' (Shulman, 2009) to encourage and support the expression of feeling; 'offering an example' and 'using silences' to 'prompt' (Seden, 2005); 'asking for examples' and 'asking for clarification' to 'probe' (Denscombe, 2014). I took care that my non-verbal communication was congruent with my attempts to display 'reflective listening' through adopting Egan's (2007) SOLER framework for my positioning. The ‘S’ refers to a sitting position of being ‘square on’ at 90 degrees to the participant, with an ‘open’ relaxed stance (‘O’) such as having legs and arms unfolded and hands resting. I showed attention by ‘leaning forward’ (‘L’) and seeking ‘eye contact’ (‘E’). The depth of information obtained, and friendly dialogue within the recorded interview transcripts indicated that I had achieved all this in a relaxed manner (‘R’).

Crucially, however, through employing the communication skills, I ensured that the interviews, in seeking to follow the participant lead, were not overly casual but 'conversations with a purpose' (Burgess, 1984). Indeed, I was mindful of my research aims - that I needed sufficient depth and richness in the data to expose the intentionality and context to the parent responses. Responding to Archer's (2003) view of the role of the interview, I followed my aim and used the communication skills to draw out and consider the parents' “reflexive deliberations” and individual reasoning for actions as grounded in their “inner conversation”. As stated earlier, Archer emphasises human agents as autonomous entities with capacity to thoughtfully reflect upon their 'selves' and actions in relation to the social context and others within it. In this way such inner conversations can be said to be causally powerful in effecting action. Archer
(2003, p161-162) describes a conversational approach to draw out such inner conversation which is “receptive” and “non-directive” as opposed to being intentionally “evaluative”, with the researcher reciprocally engaged in constructing meaning as opposed to being “detached”. My use of communication skills to encourage the expression of feelings as well as thoughts and perspectives, both verbally and non-verbally, as well as reflexively considering the thoughts and feelings evoked in myself seemed commensurate with this conversational approach. I captured these reflexions in memo form as soon as possible after each interview, recognising their value as crucial abductive insights (Lamb and Huttlinger, 1989). Indeed, I personally transcribed all the recorded interviews, word-by-word, including the reflexions at the relevant points. In line with the ethically approved requirements for the study, I removed all identifying features, ascribed fictitious identifiers, and deleted the audio recordings. I was confident in the accuracy of my transcription (only a few words were difficult to decipher) and its validity in providing suitably rich descriptive data for analysis - the next key moment of the iterative research process.

**Data-analysis: the unstructured interviews with the Christian parents**

Building upon my earlier explication of a 'critical realist grounded theory approach'40, I implemented analytic tactics of Grounded Theory on which I have previously published (Woodcock and Tregaskis, 2008; Woodcock Ross et al. 2009; Woodcock Ross, 2011) to describe and compare ‘instances’ of experiences, definitions or perspectives of communication issues and skills as they appeared within and across the data sources that informed the Geertzian-like ‘thick description’. This involved categorising and labelling (‘open coding’: Strauss and Corbin,1998) potentially theoretically relevant concepts and relationships before then questioning emergent themes by making connections between the parents’ concerns and (what the parents perceived as, and

40 Please refer to page 199.
what I gleaned from the literature as\textsuperscript{41}) the social workers' concerns, and the logics for each others' responses in light of their own and each other's concerns. With the open coding, to get as close as possible to the data, I commenced with looking at the data on a sentence-by-sentence basis, identifying words or phrases that encapsulated the sentiment being expressed. I was reflexively aware that I brought some familiarity and insider knowledge of the data to the analysis: I had transcribed each word of each recorded interview myself, and I was a member of the target population myself (being both a social worker, and a Christian parent, though not having undergone parenting assessment myself). At this early stage of provisional 'open coding' I wanted so-far-as-possible to utilise but also look beyond the blinkers of such familiarity so that I could capture and explore the relevance/meaning of participants' particular choice of words. I found that the initial sentence-by-sentence abductive approach enabled me to see the data afresh. Then, as a second stage in the process of 'open coding', I widened and questioned my interpretation of these provisionally coded meanings by looking at the sentence in the context of the immediately pre and post commentary. This widening of understanding sometimes caused the provisional codes to be changed. Indeed, I was open to the need to continually check and, if necessary, change my developing provisional understandings and codes. For example, an early decision that I made was to provisionally open code the parental data as I went along, as opposed to doing it all at the end. This enabled me to query my developing provisional understandings/interpretations with participants at the end of their own interviews. In this I attended to an important aspect of the study – to not silence the service user voice - but so-far-as-possible ensure that I grasped/portrayed their meanings. Indeed, for the purpose of transparently assuring the reader of my diligence in this, the examples that I have included from the parental transcripts in Chapter 7 show me

\textsuperscript{41} See Chapter 3 where, from a macro perspective, I draw upon social work literature to summarise social work (in England) as an institution and set of practices, and the influence upon social workers in this light. At this stage in the analysis I had yet to obtain the perspectives from the social worker participants themselves – this would come later with the forum theatre performance.
continually encouraging their voices (“No, no. What I want is your understanding, so this sounds great”, “So I just want to make sure I understand this, erm, because it is an interesting point”, “I am just trying to make sure that I have your understanding of that.”)

This latter point – to not prematurely silence the service user voice but to emphasise/ensure I had fully understood their own meaning – pertained to a key point of reflexion for the methodology: to make my Christian standpoint overt when asked specifically for it, noting when asked for it, and whether or how it seemed to influence the information being given from thereafter. There was good reason for this approach. First, drawing upon my reflexive work at the beginning of the study (Chapter 1), I was aware of the diversity within the Christian worldview and correspondingly, a potential diversity of different parenting practices. I could not/did not assume that the way that I live out my Christian parenting in its liberal and affirming/inclusive manner would have particular similarities and/or differences to other parents. Checking that I was not presuming participants’ own meanings was therefore crucial. Second, related to this earlier reflexive work, I was also aware that while some parents might feel more easy in expressing their own ‘take’ on their Christian motivations to their parenting to another Christian parent, some might not, such as possibly having anxiety that they might be perceived as not ‘Christianly’ enough (such as too liberal or too illiberal). An overriding concern was to enable a safe environment for the research interview, remembering my reflexions of the potential feelings of vulnerability and tension at revealing one’s Christian worldview. Of course, the parents were aware of my identity as a social worker from the outset, for the consent form clearly identified that in the situation of being informed that a person is being significantly harmed or at risk of significant harm I would follow a process of reporting the matter to my research supervisor and also to the local authority safeguarding services (section 6.4 in this chapter entitled ‘Ethical Considerations’ explains this). In the event, no such instance was relayed to me during
the interviews. Indeed, looking critically across the data (including my reflexive memos of the feelings and thoughts raised in myself that I recorded immediately at the end of each interview) what seemed more influential to the parents was not necessarily my affirmation to them as having a Christian identity, but my status as a social worker. It was this that I felt I had to work particularly at in limiting the interviewer-effects (such as diminishing professional jargon, and being prepared to repeat their own references including their religious language when they used it, and checking their meaning using skills of reflective listening). Further reflexive considerations upon the data are provided within the whole ‘Reflexive Considerations’ section of Chapter 7 (Parental Interviews).

This two-step process to the open coding increased my sensitivity to the potential range and dimensions of the categories and relationships. It was at this point in the research process that I felt I had sufficient grasp of parental meanings and explanations of communication agency and action that I began writing the script for the forum theatre performance with the professional acting company, and oversaw rehearsals with them.

**Data-collection: the Forum Theatre performance with the social workers**

**Sampling strategy and size (qualified and qualifying social worker sample)**

For the purposes of critical realist exploratory inquiry, purposive sampling (engaging strategic individuals and groups) was appropriate as it gave access to the phenomenon under examination (Clark, 2008). The social worker participants included qualified social workers (Practice Educators) and final stage students on the brink of qualifying as social workers. Their recruitment to the study took place at the host institution (at which I was employed) with the following inclusion criteria applied (as set out in the Participant Information Sheet under the heading ‘Why have I been chosen to be recruited to the study?’):

“You are eligible to be recruited for the study because:
1. You are a final year social work student at the University, or
2. You are a University Practice Educator (qualified social worker), and
3. You have practice learning experience within a children’s services setting.

You cannot be recruited to the study if you do not meet these points.”

The sample size was sufficient to deploy the Forum Theatre method, whilst holding in mind the study’s exploratory aims and feasibility in terms of finite financial resources (Mack et al., 2005). I focused upon producing one designated workshop in which I paid three experienced actors to perform the scripted role-play of social-worker-with-Christian-parent communication. The audience of ‘spect-actors’ comprised thirty-one qualifying social workers and qualified social workers (Practice Educators) who had volunteered to participate. For the purposes of Forum Theatre, this was a good sample size. The spect-actor audience was sufficiently intimate so as to create an atmosphere of safety in which to disclose and discuss perspectives, but also large enough to offer a range of possible ‘instances’ for themes to emerge. A fourth paid actor as ‘Facilitator’ prompted spect-actor audience interaction with the actors, ensuring that: a) interaction and discussion occurred with the role-play and b) that the discussion focused on eliciting communication issues.

The Forum Theatre performance process

I had contacted several professional acting companies in the geographical area. I chose this professional acting company on the basis of their vast experience in performing forum theatre, and because they could ensure that the actors role-playing the Christian parents were Christians themselves with understanding of the Christian ontological commitments being portrayed. I co-wrote the dramatised script with the acting company to ensure that it adequately captured my coded themes from my
interviews with the Christian parents, and maintained a sufficiently realistic picture of everyday social work practice.

The Forum Theatre performance took place in a large, flat classroom, with desks removed and chairs placed in a horseshoe format. Having first welcomed the participants, I reminded them of the research processes and obtained their written informed consent to their research involvement. The Forum Theatre performance took place in two Parts, operating like a workshop in that there was an expectation of participation. Indeed to emphasise this, and relax the spect-actors from the start, the actors engaged them in some trust games (lasting approximately 15 minutes). In Part 1 the spect-actors watched the dramatised script without active participation. This enabled them to ‘take in’, and be ‘provoked’ by, the parental perspectives of social-worker-with-Christian-parent-communication. Part 1 was immediately followed by the script being re-performed in Part 2, but this time with the social worker spect-actors being encouraged to actively participate in discussion about the communication dynamics taking place and to participate in action. The Facilitator encouraged the spect-actors to call out to ‘freeze’ the action and comment on it. The spect-actors did not need much encouragement, for they did this straightaway and very loudly. I could see that they had indeed been ‘provoked’ by what they had seen and experienced. Those spect-actors, having articulated their reflexions, then took over the role of the protagonist or antagonist and went about changing the communication action taking place. This was followed by the spect-actor audience being encouraged (by the Facilitator) to discuss whether and how the altered action was successful. As the Part 2 dialogue unfolded, sometimes continuing with the new communication action, sometimes referring back to the Part 1 script, there were many such occasions of the spect-actors interrupting to ‘freeze’ and deliberate upon the action. Thus, from the point of view of my own reflexions, I had confidence in the validity and usefulness of the data produced by the method, for it had elicited considerable detail of the social worker
perspectives in reflexive discussion but also enabled me to see communication action emanating from their deliberation over situated logics. I sat out of direct sight, videoing the detail of the spect-actors’ discussions (with written permission) to capture their verbalised ‘perceptions-of communication-in-action’ as well as their non-verbal actions. In other words, I was able to record their reflexions at the point in which the action occurred. My role of observer also gave me the opportunity to write down my own reflections of the dynamics and conduct of the performance, including thoughts and feelings raised within myself. I captured these in memo form during as well as immediately after the performance, again recognising the value of such reflexions as new abductive insights (Lamb and Huttlinger, 1989). The data which I transcribed word-by-word from the video recording and from my reflexions formed part of the ‘thick description’ - whereby I paid attention not only to the spect-actor accounts of the immediate concrete behaviours (such as the ‘speech-act' communication), but also whether and how their accounts of the action appeared to signify contextual and experiential understandings of the three fields. This was important because it enabled me to keep an eye on the research questions, thinking about whether they needed revision, such as adding another possible field of contextual influences. I decided not, as considerably fruitful data were emerging.

**Data-analysis: the Forum Theatre performance with the social workers**

With the forum theatre performance completed, I then conducted the same two-stage process of open coding with the forum theatre performance data. As before, I found that the initial sentence-by-sentence ‘grounded’ approach enabled me to see the data afresh. Moreover, this level of detail also meant that I could record and question the congruence/incongruence of the participants’ verbal communication to other aspects of their verbal and non-verbal communication, such as changes to pitch and tone of

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42 In Chapter 8, Sections 8.2 and 8.3, I interweave considerations of these reflexions within the presentation of the data and provide a discussion of those reflexive processes/insights.
voice, and body gesturing, such as tilt or nod of head, or movement of hands. This
added to my sense-making of the participants’ meaning. Indeed, moving to the second
stage in the process of ‘open coding’, I widened my gaze even further by looking at the
sentence in the context of the immediately pre and post commentary. This enabled me
to question my interpretation of provisionally coded meanings, and sometimes change
the provisional codes. A notable difference in this forum theatre dataset analysis to that
of the parental interview data was that with the forum theatre performance being a
‘one-off’ event, I could not check my emerging interpretive understandings with the
actual social worker participants. However, arguably, a key positive to any forum
theatre performance is that such elicitation and checking of meaning is actually integral
to the method, for the Facilitator’s role is to encourage such reflexive deliberation. As
such, I had such critical reflections/deliberations embedded and recorded within the
forum theatre data.

The analysis had a third stage, whereby I began to reduce the number of open codes
by looking for connections and combinations within and between them (‘axial coding’:
Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Herein I developed the abductive orientation, to incorporate
the retroductive analysis required of the critical realist inquiry. This involved exploring
whether and how the emerging concepts shed light upon ‘what was going on’ at the
interface between the observed action of the social-worker-with-Christian-parent
communication and the context to the communication – the three structurally-laden
fields. In conducting this, I was aware of my researcher role, ontologically positioned to
be an interpreting ‘bridge’ in meaning-making. I looked particularly for moments of
being surprised by the data, recognising that this is when intuitive reasoning occurs.
Also, I questioned moments when I was not surprised, recognising that I brought prior
understandings as a social worker, University teacher of communications skills, and as
a Christian parent and that I needed to ‘absent such absences’. A clear example was
where I couldn’t help but notice when existing notions of ‘communication skills’ were
either evident or absent within the interview and forum theatre performance data. As the presence/absences were so glaringly obvious to me (having previously published research and taught ‘social work communication skills’) I made them explicit – giving the occurrences or absences a preliminary ‘family name’ (“Existing communication skill present/absent”). Having made them explicit (reaching the edge of my existing horizons), I could then widen my horizons and look beyond them to other behaviours, and also look deeper to patterns for ‘what was really going on’ when such communication skills were present or absent (Saldaña 2013, p.146). My supervision sessions were useful in questioning such taken-for-grantedness.

Theoretical abstraction featured during the stages of axial and then thematic coding, when I was trying to make sense of the dimensions and patterns of relationships within and between my (abductively derived) ‘open coded’ data, and whether and how these related to structural entities within the three contextual fields. There were clear moments of insight when I began to see the participants ‘speaking in structures’, such as when the social workers began to fall back upon formulaic strategies, and when the parents began to reformulate their terminology to more overtly express politically-correct-liberal values (language, of course, which may or may not have already reflected their real position). My exploration occurred in a spiral of layered understanding, as I moved recursively back and forth in abductive questioning from the open coded data, and theoretical insights from the three fields, increasing my understanding of both throughout the study’s entire duration. I have presented the data as such layered ‘parts and whole’ understanding, with the fields (of structures) owning their own chapters at the beginning of the thesis (Chapters 2-4) but intersposed with insights from the empirical data (of agential reflexions and actions). Then in the next chapters key themes from the parental interview data (Chapter 7), and then the social worker Forum Theatre data (Chapter 8) are presented, intersposed with reference back to the three fields of structural entities. In accord with King (2004), therefore, my
presentation of the findings can be seen, not a separate ‘end process’, but integral to the analysis.

In summary, this section has told the story of the rationale and deployment of the data-collection methods and analysis. The next section considers some specific ethical issues that stemmed from the research being based upon a highly controversial issue, and that I was engaging with the experiences of real people who could have received negative consequences as a result of the process.

6.4. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The scrupulousness of the research methods had to be considered from the perspective of ethical integrity (Neuman, 1994). My research questions raised particular ethical considerations that impacted upon the selection of methods and research process. First, with my questions focusing upon human participants giving their perspectives of their religious beliefs and recalling their experiences as either social work service users or their practice in working with service users, my study was justifiably categorised as covering 'sensitive topics' (Lee, 1993; Renzetti and Lee, 1993; Sieber, 1993). Second, my questions sought detail of social worker perceptions of their communication with Christian parents at the point of their self-reflexion, while they were ‘communicating-in-action’, and not just their 'critical reflections-on-action' immediately after it occurred. Both types of critical reflections increased the potentiality for more of the totality of meanings of the exact practice moment being captured. Yet, social work service users, and social workers themselves, are difficult to access populations, and more importantly, it would have been ethically inappropriate for a researcher to stop social worker-with-Christian-parent communication within the real-life of parenting assessment to ask questions of each about ‘what was going on, what they were thinking or feeling about the communication, and why they were saying a

43 http://www.ucl.ac.uk/research/integrity/research-ethics/research-with-human-participants
particular thing’. Third, my questions were situated within a critical realist strategy, and as such required attention to identifying and reducing asymmetrical, constraining power relations. Such attention that should be present within all critical realist inquiry given its emancipatory aims (Iosifides, 2011).

I drew upon research ethics (Bryman, 2004) to assess and address these vulnerabilities, and took practical steps to ensure that participation: was informed, consensual and voluntary; was appropriately protective of participants’ interests (including appropriate data privacy/security); and reduced negative harmful consequences (including lack of personal benefit) from participation (ESRC, 2018). 44 Herein, a central decision was to use the Forum Theatre method. The dramatised simulation of social-worker-with-Christian-parent communication, made as ‘real’ as possible by being based on parents’ accounts of their actual experiences and then enacted by professional actors, had the potential to bring about social worker critical reflexions of in-the-moment communication. Being ‘based on’ and not ‘based within’ real-life interactions, detailed communication strategies, thoughts and feelings could still be examined, but without interference to actual parenting assessment processes. Indeed, it would not have been ethically appropriate to increase either the parents’ or social workers’ vulnerability by compromising the real-life assessments of capacity to parent. Yet, this did not mean that the Forum Theatre method was merely a lesser compromise to examining real-life in-situ communication action, for it held potentiality to remove asymmetrical power relations, and thereby attend to critical realist emancipatory aims. Here, the method gave me a way to place the service user (Christian parent) perspective of their communication agency in a central, foundational position in the study. The protagonist-oppressed character role was able to reference the typical everyday experiences of Christian parents in their communication with social workers. The writing of the drama script to embody these Christian parent

44 I explain these processes more fully in the following paragraphs, and in Appendix 1.
experiences from the perspective of the parents themselves, as opposed to the social worker perspective, was crucial. It was in highlighting the experience of the protagonist that the social worker 'spect-actors' might look beyond their bureaucratic conceptualisations, self-reflect upon the oppressive relations and consider alternative enactment of agency. Moreover, this business of encouraging them to draw deeply upon their experiences and then also think beyond the immediacy of them (indicating possible constraining structures) was exactly the kind of data that I needed from the method.

Thus the use of a simulated performance workshop gave me (as researcher) greater control over the research process to protect participants’ interests while meeting the research aims for data integrity. From the earliest stage of recruitment it meant that I could recruit service user participants purposively from a sampling frame approximating closely to the theoretical norms of the sampling population, that is, participants with experience to elucidate the research issues (having experienced Children Services’ parenting assessment intervention from social workers in child protection or adoption). Hence I chose to recruit the social work service user participants from already established Service User Consultative Groups (four affiliated with social work degree programmes, and two adoption groups in the South East of England). Academic commentary concerning strategies to research hard-to-access vulnerable social work populations (particularly parents) appeared to justify this decision. These commentaries claimed that the most successful strategies were the use of purposive sampling through the use of informants or gate-keeping or specific interest individuals/groups who are within and/or can access the population to recruit volunteers (Gurdin and Patterson, 1987; Griffiths et al. 1993; Renzetti and Lee, 1993; Goode, 2000; Elliott et al. 2002; Taylor and Kearney, 2005).

The recruitment from the established Service User Consultative Groups meant that I could use techniques to ensure truly informed consent, with participants empowered to
‘opt in’ as a pro-active, positive step rather than feeling coerced or ambushed (ESRC, 2018). While users of social work services come from a range of social and cultural backgrounds as a population group they tend to be over-represented in terms of marginalisation, material disadvantage and having received less education than the rest of the population. Mindful of this, I sought consent in an inclusive way that was familiar to the groups: I requested invitation to their already scheduled meetings in order to facilitate constructive verbal discussion; and I went through my prepared non-jargonised Information Sheets line-by-line and at an unhurried pace. Given the nature of the research issue (the ‘sensitive topics’ of religious faith and social work intervention) I wanted to take all possible steps to make all aspects of the Information Sheet understood, particularly the risks and benefits to their participation such as the way in which data confidentiality, security and anonymity were assured and circumstances in which confidentiality might have to be breached. The emotional safety of the groups and the presence of trusted group-leaders lessened their inhibition to ask questions and gave support to their decision-making. I emphasised that those interested in participation should make contact after the meeting to ensure confidentiality of information and participation. This practical step diminished passive assent by encouraging participants to take a positive step if they wished to participate rather than having to decline an invitation. I gave consideration to whether it should be myself or a third party delivering the information, recognising the potential for furthering inclusion and addressing feelings of coercion. In the event I felt professionally capable of communicating the information sensitively to the service users concerned, being a qualified, registered social worker, employed as a Senior Lecturer in Social Work, with published research and over fifteen years teaching experience on the areas of communication skills, and the assessment of parenting. Finally, using a non-jargonised Consent Form, I obtained written consent immediately before each interview took place, reiterating the Information Sheet, and highlighting rights to withdrawal ⁴⁵ at any

⁴⁵ The request for withdrawal of participation and data was to be made by contacting the
time in the research process up until the report writing. This enabled me to consider service user vulnerability on a case-by-case basis and further confirm that each participant could give his or her own informed consent. No adults over the age of 16 who lacked the mental capacity to give informed consent were recruited. Thus, the study did not come within the category of involving adults (aged 16 or over) lacking the capacity to consent as governed by sections 30-34 of the Mental Capacity Act 2005. I should note that as the data gathered in this research (‘religious beliefs or beliefs of a similar nature’) constituted ‘sensitive personal data’ as classified by The Data Protection Act, 1998, in compliance with that legislation I sought the participants’ explicit consent with the following tick box option clearly positioned in the Consent Form:

“I consent to the processing of my personal information for the purposes explained to me. I understand that such information will be treated in accordance with the terms of the Data Protection Act 1998.”

Ethical issues concerning the degree of confidentiality and anonymity that could be assured were significant given the sensitive nature to this study. I gave proper regard to participants’ expectations of confidence and privacy. Audio recordings of my interviews with the social work service user participants were stored as MP3 files and appointed fictitious IDs. The audio recordings (those on the audio device and as MP3 files) were destroyed once the scripts were written. The video recording of the Forum Theatre performance with audience participation by the social worker participants were transcribed and anonymised (removing identifiable features). The recorded video data was destroyed upon completed transcription. All data, including the signed Consent Forms, were archived securely, being either encrypted and accessed only through my researcher or the researcher’s supervisor or a third party at the host institution through email or post or by telephone to lessen any feelings of compulsion to participate and gather any reason for complaint. This was stated on the Information Sheet. No participant requested to withdraw.
individual password on my computer, or stored securely within a locked filing cabinet, in my locked office. Storage was for five years.

Circumstances in which confidentiality might nevertheless have to be breached, and the possibility of harm, were significant ethical issues. The social work service users (Christian parents) recruited for this study were members of Service User Consultative Groups whose function is to provide service user perspectives in the teaching, recruitment and administration of social work degree programmes, and/or in the recruitment and support of adoptive Christian parents. Therefore, they were familiar with telling their individual narrative about the services they have received from a social worker. Nevertheless, I was aware that the interviews with the social work service user participants (and indeed also the forum theatre performance with the social worker participants) would involve the recall of events between a service user and social worker that had the very small chance of potentially inducing ‘flashbacks’ or minor deterioration in mental health. To mitigate such potential distress I provided contact details of counselling services to social work service user participants at the end of interviews and to qualifying social worker participants at the end of the Forum Theatre performance. Furthermore, I prepared for their recall possibly including previously unidentified information which would require disclosure to the participant and local authority safeguarding services concerning the participant’s physical or mental health, or that of another person who the participant has identified as being at risk of significant harm. As a qualified social worker (maintaining my registration and Disclosure and Barring Service clearance) I am professionally trained and professionally accountable for ensuring safeguarding procedures are followed in the situation of being informed that a person is being significantly harmed or at risk of significant harm. Although such an instance did not occur, I had established a clear process to report the matter to my research supervisor and also to the local authority safeguarding services. All participants were advised of these risks to their participation
both verbally (at the Service User Consultative Group Meeting for service user participants and teaching session for social worker participants) and in their Information Sheets.

In relation specifically to the social worker participants, there were ethical considerations concerning the conduct of my study within my (then) workplace and concerning their relationship with me as the researcher-recruiter. I was carrying out research as a postgraduate student registered with a different University to that in which I was employed as a Senior Lecturer in Social Work (at University of Greenwich, and earlier in the research process at Oxford Brookes University). The following practical steps were taken to address possible conflicts of interest that may have arisen from my research taking place at my employer (host) institution. First, while participation in the research was entirely voluntary, the social work participants could have felt obliged to participate, for as the ESRC (2018) highlighted: “Participants may not be conventionally ‘vulnerable’, but may be in a dependent relationship that means they can feel coerced or pressured into taking part, so extra care is needed to ensure their participation is truly voluntary.”

To counter the possibility of such perceived pressure to participate, I attended the beginning of a teaching session with the qualifying students to discuss the research. I read out the Information Sheet, and emphasised that participation would not affect any teaching received or assessments being marked, and that there was the opportunity for the participants to withdraw from the study at any time up until the final report. I chose a teaching session that was not my own, in order that the participants saw a separation of the activities undertaken as part of the participants’ normal professional relationship with me from activities undertaken as part of my research. A third party was present to reiterate that there was no pressure to participate, and that participants could request to withdraw data via communication with the third party in case they should feel reluctant to ask me face-to-

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46 This is an online source so there is no page number.
face, or by telephone or email. Second, copies of the Information Sheet were provided individually, with me emphasising that those people interested in participation should make contact after the meeting to ensure confidentiality of information and participation. This practical step allowed participants to take a positive step if they wished to participate rather than having to decline an invitation. The qualified social worker (Practice Educator) participants were invited by a letter that contained the Information Sheet. Many had already expressed interest having heard about the workshop from the students. Written consent from all social worker participants was obtained through the option of returning the consent form using email (using electronic signature), or by signing the consent form immediately prior to the commencement of the Forum Theatre workshop.

Now, looking back retrospectively, I believe that the ethical measures that I took did seem to adequately address the vulnerabilities identified above. I did consider carefully how to involve both groups, and ensured that I covered legal requirements for researching the specific population (such as matters relating to sensitive personal data and Disclosure and Barring Service clearance). At no point were there complaints or issues about the conduct of the research process raised by the participants or the host institution. My careful attention to all the specific ethical issues is evident within my successful application for full ethical approval to the KCL Social Sciences, Humanities and Law Research Ethics Subcommittee (SSHL/11/12-1), with accompanying Risk Checklist, and my preparedness to continually seek review and approval by the Research Ethics Office of modifications to the sampling frame (see Appendix 1). Research ethics approval was also sought (and granted) from the Research Ethics Committees of my host employer institutions. For reasons of word length, if interested, please refer to the Appendix 1 for my consideration of: the benefits and rewards (not just the aforementioned risks) to the participants; and the ethical issues arising should the host institution have requested to see the data.
Taken together, this chapter has described the methodological approach taken to understanding social-worker-with-Christian-parent communication. Rather than operating the epistemic fallacy and focusing first upon the methodology and empirical methods, the critical realist approach has been to focus first upon the ontological phenomenon, and then identify the methodology and methods that, given its ontological character, seem best to examine it within the confines of ethically appropriate conduct.
Chapter 7: ‘Reporting the Christian Parents’ Voice’: Findings from the interview data

7.1. INTRODUCTION TO THE CHAPTER

I have sought to structure the thesis with the layered ‘parts and whole’ understanding of critical realist enquiry with, thus far, the ‘macro’ perspective of the structural fields owning their own chapters at the beginning of the thesis (Chapters 2-4) but intersposed with insights from the empirical data (the ‘micro’ perspective of agential reflexions and actions). This chapter and the next chapter views the data from the other direction, presenting key themes from the ‘micro’ participant perspectives of the communication action, but intersposed with reference back to the three fields of ‘macro’ structural entities. These findings provide understanding of the symbolic action of social worker-Christian parent communication, by paying attention not only to the immediate concrete behaviours (the ‘speech-act’ communication), but the way that such action signifies contextual and experiential understandings (Vanhoozer, 2007). The data is presented in two chapters in order to show the developing layers of understanding as the methodology unfolded. It also enabled me (in the final chapter ‘Conclusions’) to structure and present reflexions of the quality of each data set in light of its methods and the potential influence of my ‘self’ upon my interpretations. In this chapter:

- I present themes from the unstructured interviews with the Christian parents of their reflections of their communication with a social worker:
  - Theme 1 ‘Different worlds, different language’
  - Theme 2 ‘Motivated richness to their Christian parenting’
7.2. Parental perspectives: themes from the unstructured interviews

The findings from the data analysed here are based upon interviews with the five men and seven women constituting the parents sample. The participants’ demographic characteristics were described in the Methodology chapter, but in summary, all self-defined as ‘practising Christian’ and had received statutory social work Children’s Services in relation to their parenting. All the sample were very motivated by their Christian beliefs, being weekly church goers and involved in weekday activities, such as Bible study. The unstructured interviews elicited parental reflexions – individual agential meanings - of their experience of social worker-Christian parent communication, with their reflexions of the way such action signalled contextual and experiential understanding. The data produced from the parents’ perspectives were multi-faceted, diverse and produced lots of issues, but for my purposes two key themes emerged from it. These themes formed the basis of the script for the forum theatre.

7.2.1. Parents’ Theme 1: ‘Different worlds, different language’

Within the data of the parents’ reflections of their concrete experience of communication with a social worker, different sub-themes pointed to an overarching understanding of different social ‘worlds’ intersecting, sometimes with understanding and sometimes with misunderstanding. It was certainly not at a ‘clash of civilisations’ level, but there was conflict, mistrust, and altered language. The sub-themes are elaborated below and appear as follows: ‘assumptions and experiences of social workers having negative preconceptions of Christian beliefs’; ‘interrogative, assumptive questioning; ‘lacking religious literacy’; ‘adjusting communication to be social work acceptable’; and ‘the way social workers are’.

Assumptions and experiences of social workers having negative preconceptions of Christian beliefs
A few of the Christian parents relayed instances of warmth and depth of understanding shown by their social worker in communication with them. Ellen (whose daughter, Ruth, suffered with multiple health difficulties and physical disabilities), spoke about how the social worker had shown a depth of interest in the difficulties of her everyday parenting experience. This was useful in itself, but what had been most beneficial was how the social worker went beyond this recognition of the daily challenges to reflectively listen to how Ellen’s own emotional and physical wellbeing (in dealing with those struggles) was influenced by the meaning ascribed to her circumstances by her Christian worldview. Ellen explained how the social worker showed this in relation to the Christian understanding of ‘suffering’. For example, in the extract that follows Ellen repeated several times the usefulness and satisfaction gained from her feeling that the social worker understood the meaning to her words in relation to the overall Biblical narrative/Story. The display of religious literacy was not just through a preparedness to use the terminology, or recognition of the significance of its ingredients (such as the tensions raised concerning suffering) but her perception of the display of the Story in the affirming actions of the social worker herself. Those actions displayed a valuing of her daughter’s existence and their parent-daughter relationship, even with the tremendous difficulties within it.

Ellen: … she got talking with me and she was asking, sort of, about how the assessments had gone that particular day, how I had felt about it, and I sort of said that I was very depressed about those kind of meetings because they always seemed so negative and she just sort of said ‘well having a disabled child is sort of difficult anyway, how do you cope?’ And it was at that point that I said, ‘well, it doesn’t solve the on-going, day-to-day problems but I am a Christian, therefore, that is the foundation that I look at situations and work out what’s going on’. And then she shared with me that she was a Christian too. So that was fairly amazing. I am trying to think about how she did that. My memory
was that she said ‘Oh, you too’ with a lovely smile and that opened up the
conversation really about, the whole issue really, about suffering and how God
allows these things, but she was there, obviously in a very practical capacity to
talk with parents who had been to the Centre and she wanted to know all the
practical stuff about how we were going to get home... Erm, what I remember
was that she made it very, very clear in everything she did, everything she said
to me, the way she related to me, that she saw Ruth as a completely valid
person, although she was so limited, and she understood that my relationship
with Ruth was in many ways a terribly normal mother and daughter relationship.
I cared intensely about her and I wanted the best for her but obviously there
were a lot of extra bricks in that particular building because of Ruth’s
disability...I think she also understood, erm, she did because she was a
Christian, about the struggle you have with suffering when you are a Christian...
I didn’t have to justify or explain lots of things to her about my faith because she
shared them and she understood that. It was just positive and I appreciated it
so much. In fact I did see her on other occasions. It was a very, very valuable
experience for me.”

One might read this extract and decide that Ellen had perceived the social worker as
particularly capable in her religious literacy because the social worker had
volunteered that she also shared a Christian worldview. Drawing upon my reflexive
memo at the time, this presumption might not necessarily have been the case. There
is diversity within the Christian worldview and correspondingly, a diversity of different
parenting practices. For example, the way that I live out my Christian parenting in its
liberal and inclusive manner has similarities and differences to other Christian
parents. The multiple perspectives in Dessel and Bolen’s (2014) edited volume
illustrates a variety of different liberal to conservative to traditional perspectives that
different individuals, communities or traditions might take on issues. They recognised
that for authors in their volume (social work academics and practitioners), they were making themselves vulnerable in being open about differing viewpoints for they could be criticised for being overly liberal, or overly ill-liberal, or displaying uncritical syncretisation. They were also vulnerable from the secular liberalism of their profession for publically engaging with worldview beliefs deemed to hold only relativistic and privately held status (being deemed unverifiable according to epistemic, scientific criteria for objectivity over subjectivity). In undertaking this doctoral study I too felt such personal and professional vulnerability to such scrutiny and possible misunderstanding. It gave me an insight into how, for some parents, it might feel less easy for parents to raise their own ‘take’ on their Christian motivations to their parenting to a secular liberal individual or even another Christian in case they might be held to the same criticisms. These reflexions caused me to notice that the moment of deciding whether, when, and how to reveal one’s religious standpoint clear is wrought with risk. It made me look at Ellen's moment of revelation anew, for in that moment she had faced that risk and showed some bravery (“And it was at that point that I said, ‘well, it doesn’t solve the on-going, day-to-day problems but I am a Christian, therefore, that is the foundation that I look at situations and work out what’s going on.’”) In this light, it is perhaps little wonder that she found the social worker’s very quick response to affirm the safety and legitimacy of her revelation so helpful (“…and then she shared with me that she was a Christian too. So that was fairly amazing. I am trying to think about how she did that. My memory was that she said ‘Oh, you too’ with a lovely smile and that opened up the conversation really about, the whole issue really…”).

The social worker assessing David’s parenting for fostering did not share a Christian worldview. Yet David describes (in his words) “graciousness” to the social worker’s communication style. ‘Graciousness’ is Christian terminology, which upon my request for clarification, he explained to me as being signified by a relaxed, friendly
(“smiley”) manner and gentle probing that acknowledged the sensitivity of questions. The manner of the social worker, in being friendly, approachable and not overly officious was important to several of the parents. Earlier, in Chapter 3, I described how David had a sense of his social worker being “open” to his reasoning about the way his parenting enacted his Christian values in everyday life, and how for the social worker his reasoning seemed to come within a boundary of ‘what is different’ than ‘what is wrong’. For example, in relation to a specific example of a teenager in his care whom he wanted to include within his family holiday, he could confirm that: the child would not be coerced to participate in culturally specific activities (“the way that we handled that with the foster child was ‘everything was optional’”); that the family would adapt to the child’s wishes unconditionally (“part of my faith means the offering of hospitality to people who don’t share my faith. That’s about our family creating space for people to agree or disagree with what we believe”); he could explain how the environment and experience could benefit the child (“it was seen [by the social worker] to be a good thing. In fact it seemed to be ‘great, this kid’s been through enough already’ and ‘here’s a safe place where he can have a lot of fun for a week, meet some new people, hang out with our family, it would be good for him’”); and he could make available cultural resources to assist his caregiving (“so the church was seen [by the social workers] as a positive network that could get things done. It can help”). David did not make clear in more exact terms how the social worker displayed this openness (except for “gentle probing”), but what did seem important to him was how the social worker allowed a platform for the cultural discussion. Importantly, too, it was a platform too for the purposes of the social worker who was engaged in her role to identify the wellbeing of children and any infringement upon their rights, for it enabled David to give her some detail to the ways in which he would care for a child, and the intersection of his Christian values in relation to the provision of that care.
However, the data describes the overwhelming impression from the parents as being that they would not be able to communicate their Christian beliefs to a social worker without misunderstanding and negative consequences. All the parents brought assumptions, and most cited experiences, of social workers having preconceptions about the influence of Christian beliefs upon parenting. They viewed those preconceptions as being demonstrated by a lack of knowledge and/or being stereotypical and/or intolerant. Put simply, the Christian parents were not confident that a social worker could understand or, in some cases, was prepared to understand their Christian way of living and seeing relationships with others within the world. From the parent’s perspective the lack of knowledge of a Christian worldview meant that such perceptions were often negative and sometimes viewed as dangerous. This was well illustrated in the following extract of Gary’s reflection upon his experience of being assessed by a social worker to be a foster carer. Gary and Iona were a couple in their late forties and members of a contemporary independent evangelical church within a busy harbour town.

Gary: The impression you get is that if you are a Christian it raises a flag. Therefore so you've got to look out for this, this and this. I think that at no point did we get the impression that they thought that it was a positive thing. It wouldn't give them any comfort at all about what sort of people you were or how you did things. It just alerted them to potential dangers.

*Interrogative, assumptive questioning*

For the parents, those negative preconceptions held by the social workers were evident by the nature of the social workers’ questioning. Here, the identification of being Christian led to what felt to the parents like an interrogational style of questioning of their beliefs and values - as abstract principles - than an exploration of their
parenting relationship style incorporating or playing out their beliefs-in-action. For Isobel, the adoptive parent I introduced in Chapter 4, this was evident in the use of direct questions of extreme, hypothetical situations, not everyday life experiences. As she explained:

Isobel: And this particular social worker came out and she was asking the normal kind of checking questions and she started saying, “Well about the faith, well, if your child came home and told you they were homosexual what would you say? What would you do?” We said, “We’d love them”. What else would you say? And the next question was, “If your child came home and the only invitation they’d ever received was to a Halloween party, what would you do then?” It was all very like, “If this happened, if this happened, if this happened.”

An alternative/additional reading is that the social worker’s role in these assessments is to consider what it might be like for a foster or adoptive child to come into this family, and that they are using their hypothetical questions to try to get to that. Questioning about circumstances of possible parenting dilemmas and areas for possible conflicts must come up in such conversations. Indeed, it is required by The Prospective Foster Carer Report Form (Form F (England), Coram BAAF, 2018, p.6), where for example, it specifies how the assessing social worker “should consider the extent to which the applicant has resolved past traumas or losses; has the capacity to make and sustain close relationships; is able to empathise and understand other people’s feelings and is able to reflect on emotive matters”. My analysis through the data, however, was that the parents in my sample found these hypothetical questions difficult because to the parents they were little related to the parenting relationship or actual parenting situation actually being offered by the particular parents. The experiences of these parents did not differ from those undergoing foster/adoptive parent assessment in other research concerning “…feedback on the intrusive nature of the process…complaints about too
much focus being placed on their relationship with previous partners and insufficient attention paid to their ability to care for a child...there was a clear recommendation to prepare applicants by explaining early on why intrusive questioning and delays may be necessary” (Sebba (2016) in Baginsky et al., 2017, p.80). However, for the parents in my sample, the perceived lack of specific relevance to their parenting circumstances gave the parents the impression that they were being questioned on their beliefs per se, with the social worker then making an appraisal on their answers as to whether or not such beliefs were appropriate to being a parent. The social workers’ selection of the particular hypothetical scenarios revealed to the parents the social workers’ identification with certain belief-principles or positions as being ‘problematic’. These related to stereotyped, so-called ‘Christian fundamentalist’ positions on ‘attitudes to sexuality’, ‘expectations upon church attendance and other rituals’, ‘attitudes to premarital or extramarital sex’, and ‘discipline’.” As Iona, the foster carer married to Gary (above) summarised:

Iona: Yeah, really it felt like the social worker was asking questions based on their perceptions of what every Christian family would be like. So they were focusing on the classic bigotry type stuff like homosexuality and so on, and ‘what if the child wanted to do something different?’ Which might have been a good question, but we were being assessed for babies and so it was a little bit irrelevant because it was hard to imagine the baby having a view on it.

It was as if those moments of hypothetical questioning of assumptive belief-positions were structurally induced moments of worldview conflict. Certainly, the situation for Christian parents felt like being ‘put-on-the-spot’ to defend their capacity to parent through providing what they felt might be a ‘social work acceptable’ answer to their belief-position. This created anxiety, confusion and potential for misunderstanding, as Lewis, the adoptive father I introduced in Chapter 4 encapsulated:
Lewis: I remember feeling a sense of disquiet about where this was going in relation to faith, issues around sexuality, and with issues around proselytization. It was that area of questioning that probably caused me the most discomfort or disquiet, probably because a lot of the time, I am trying to work out what’s behind the question so that I can work out their start point and not necessarily what is being spoken about at the time.

It is important to note some of my own reflexivity at this point and the influence of my etic perspective as a social work lecturer-researcher, and emic perspective as a social worker and Christian parent in coming to perceive this finding. From my own social work practice experience, I know that the use of hypothetical questions is frequent practice within assessments of foster carers and adoptive parents. Therefore, I was not surprised to see the hypothetical questioning present within the data. What was a surprise to me was the parents’ frequent citing of how negatively it was handled by the social workers – in all but two of the parenting assessment situations described to me.

From an etic perspective, what I noted in my reflexive diary was to wonder about why the social workers seemingly lacked communication skill in explaining how particular hypothetical situations were relevant to the assessment, for it would have been relatively easy to make those questions pertinent to the particular parenting situations in front of them. Taking a specific example from the data, it would have been relatively easy to explain how, despite being assessed to provide foster care for infants only, should that baby remain in their care and become a child and a teenager that such questions about positively affirming identity positions (perhaps different to their own) is appropriate. I noted that in my everyday employment as a university lecturer I teach my social work students about the communication skill of ‘preparatory empathy’ (also called ‘tuning in’)(Shulman 2009) in order to prepare for communication encounters in order that they might perceive communication cues should they arise, and be able to reflectively empathise and explore thoughts and feelings expressed. I point out that this
is particularly necessary when they are in situations where they are unfamiliar with some aspect of difference. I teach them how each communication encounter is different, and so not to look for homogeneity alone but difference, and to ask questions to explore any aspects about which they have little knowledge (with the aim of checking and verifying later when at the office, and then, if necessary, raising again with the parents or others in the multi-agency team). If the social workers were not familiar with religious difference then maybe they could have prepared? Could they not have explored using differing types of interview questions, drawn from the communication skills curriculum? Were there ways that the exploration could have been honest about its purposes and evaluative nature while maintaining a tone of warmth and interest? Obviously, I was aware that these questions arose from the parents’ telling of their experiences. I had yet to hear the social workers’ own telling, and see their action within the forum theatre performance.

I cannot say that the feelings raised in me were anything more than surprise at (the parents’ perspectives) of the negativity and seemingly limited use of social workers’ communication skills to seek exploration. Perhaps this was because I went into the interviews with the reflexive (emic) awareness (from Chapter 1) that religious literacy was not a part of social workers’ qualifying curriculum, so I did not expect it. Nevertheless, from my emic perspective as a Christian parent, not undergone parenting assessment, but self-conscious at disclosing my faith-position publically, I did wonder how it might feel to be questioned by public authorities, and the pressure or difficulty of being able to sufficiently articulate on-the-spot what is a way of everyday lived out life. I wondered if questioning that was merely based on hypothetical questions would be able to elicit the detail of its taken-for-granted interwoven ‘everydayness’, or appreciate the diversity of different parenting practices (for example, the way that I live out my Christian parenting in its liberal and inclusive manner has similarities and differences to other Christian parents, and to non-Christian parents).
Reflexing back to my detailed standpoint position in Chapter 1, I wondered whether the
development of the liberalness, inclusiveness and open affirmation of difference of my
own Christian worldview that arose from its interface with my professional social work
qualifying education would enable me to feel more-or-less open to such questioning, or
whether it gave me more awareness of the penalty of being potentially misunderstood,
and therefore prompt me to keep my worldview even more private from the public
realm. These were useful reflexive insights that I took (with the data) to supervision to
deliberate with my supervisor. Looking at the data, and the agential characteristics of
the parents in my sample, we discussed how a number of them were child care
professionals. As such, with this professional background, they may have brought
similar fears of the penalty of being misunderstood. They may have brought to the
communication expectations of a degree of insight and care in questioning,
event contacts of recognition of their child care experience and knowledge, and perhaps
expected more intelligence from their social worker about the difficulty for them in
articulating and disclosing matters of ‘lived out’ faith. Maybe, therefore, they were
interpreting the social worker’s questioning as negative and interrogative because they
held these professional attributes and expectations. It was another reflexive
interpretation to hold in mind among the others

Lacking religious literacy

A lack of religious literacy appeared to display something of the nuanced way the
different worldviews sometimes intersected with hints of understanding but sometimes
were at cross-purposes. This structural process seemed evident in the general lack of
initiation by the social workers of whether and how parents' beliefs were enacted in
their everyday parenting, and how more emphasis was upon the hypothetical
questioning of belief-positions. Some parents identified that the social worker had
shown some awareness of church organisation and processes, with this being seen as
a basic level of religious literacy, but nevertheless regarded as helpful to the communication. In two cases the social workers had even been to visit the churches as part of their parenting assessment process, although as foster parent Catherine (introduced in Chapter 3) wryly noted “but really looking back if I had said that we had said we go to the gym, would she have gone there to check it out? No. So that felt a bit odd”. A lack of religious literacy within the communication could (possibly) equally be applied to some of the Christian parents when trying to express their integrated Christian worldview living to a person outside of that worldview. For example, later on in each interview, after I had gained rapport and listened to their stories of their communication with social workers, I asked how, in the ideal situation of communicating with a social worker with similar Christian beliefs they might explain the influence of Christian faith upon their parenting. As displayed in the following excerpt with foster carers Catherine and Derek (whom I introduced in Chapter 3), the parents seemed to warm to the question, were very thoughtful, but found it difficult to find language to express this.

Johanna: So, how would you say your beliefs as a Christian influence the way that you parent?

Catherine: (long pause, smiles at me) Massively, but how do I define it?

Derek: (rubs head, shifts position) Yeah, massively, it's who we are, so everything is motivated by our faith, i.e. the way I do my job is motivated by my faith, the way I drive my car is motivated by my faith, so the way I parent is motivated by my faith. So it's, well it's really hard.

Catherine: Yes it is.

Adjusting communication to be social work acceptable
Some parents spoke of the need to be able to translate their experiences into words that people (outside of their worldview) could understand. These parents suggested a sort of modification of their Christian language for such situations, becoming 'bilingual' in order to make it acceptable in a secular world. The consequences of not having such shared vocabulary added to misunderstanding and reinforced the separation of worldviews. As the foster parent I introduced in Chapter 3, David, explained:

I can understand why Christians sometimes get themselves in a bit of a mess trying to explain their spiritual experience when they don’t share that vocabulary or understanding. So you know if someone says ‘I felt God tell me to do this’, if I am a social worker without that experience I’ll think this person is hearing voices.

For many of the parents such alteration of their language was less to do with a proactive decision to more fully explain the influence of their beliefs. The lack of trust in the perceived ability or willingness of the social worker to understand Christian beliefs meant that the parents saw danger in revealing too much of their authentic beliefs. They stated that they tried to find a balance between being open but not too open to social worker questioning. Some parents found that if they kept the focus upon the positive benefits of church experience, such as for the child's enjoyment, as opposed to referring to more deeper aspects of personal belief, that this was 'social work acceptable' language. David, the aforementioned foster carer and Baptist minister, took an additional tack of adopting the theological concept of 'hospitality' as potentially useful conceptual language that could be used to explain to social workers how his own beliefs concerning sexual conduct did not preclude him from providing parenting space which is accepting of different views and lifestyle.

David: So part of my job as a Christian neighbour is to be hospitable to my neighbours, even if they have different views on politics, on sexuality, on a whole range of issues. It does mean hosting them in my house, providing food,
and friendship. Does that mean I am actively promoting those views? No, but I am providing a hospitable space in which they are free to express those views.

As he went on to explain, “so you know, I think it’s not that anyone is trying to hide the truth, we are just trying to find a way to help someone else from a different community understand what we are doing.”

‘The way social workers are’

Some parents, however, had undergone such negative experiences and were so mistrustful of the social worker’s capability to understand their Christian experience or language that they would not share their beliefs in any way with a social worker, even the most open-minded social worker. The collateral damage for any potential misunderstanding was simply too high (not being able to continue to parent), and they simply did not think that the social worker was capable to engage in understanding. As Derek and Catherine, the foster parents of Chapter 3, exemplified:

Derek: Actually with a person in the street you can turn around and say, or even if a person at my work turned around and said “you are a Christian what does that mean to you?” Like, I could just say “OK, yeah, I have a personal relationship with God, and I can speak to him at any time, and he's in my life. I worship him and by reading the Bible and praying I'm looking to be more like Jesus etc etc..I could answer. If it was a social worker I don't think I ever could say that.

Catherine: It would be lovely if they started asking questions about why, but the whole way that social workers are, I think that would happen very rarely.

7.2.2. Parents’ Theme 2: ‘Motivated richness to their Christian parenting’
All the parents spoke explicitly to me about their Christian faith motivating their parenting relationship and practices. There appeared different sub-themes to this motivating influence: to ‘increase the flourishing’ of the child through the ‘meaning that they gave to their child’s identity’ (being a child of God); ‘attending to their relationship with the child’ (to be more caring/loving in relationship); and ‘encouraging their child’s relationship with God’ (and consequently with other people) whilst fully ‘recognising and respecting when this was the child’s freely consenting choice’.

“Meaning given to the child’s identity” (to increase flourishing)

Many of the parents spoke explicitly about their child being created and loved by God in their own right. Concomitantly, they spoke of valuing and loving their child for not just being their filial birth/fostered/adopted relation, but also because ‘they were God’s creation’. Many parents saw themselves as responsible for the flourishing of their child, identifying that children are bestowed to parents as a gift from God. There was a depth of value ascribed to the child in terms of this identity of belonging/related to God, and an importance to parenting, and indeed obedience to God, in light of it. In this sense, parenting was perceived as a responsibility rather than a right. It was well-encapsulated by Ellen, whose circumstances of parenting her daughter with disabilities (Ruth) was described in Chapter 2:

Ellen: erm, it was never in doubt to me, in any sense at all, that Ruth was erm a valuable and a person who God cared for and loved despite everything that had gone wrong. Her value was never in dispute for me because, erm, this isn’t probably what you want?

Johanna: No, no. What I want is your understanding, so this sounds great.

Ellen: And erm I guess , I guess, sort of knowing how valuable she was to God enabled me to erm, when I was naturally very tired and really, really, sort of
exhausted by the whole business, because it was extremely tiring, it enabled me to care for her not just as a parent but because she was God’s child. I don’t mean that in a removed sense because she was God’s creation and he was in the situation with me and if he could go on loving her then he would enable me to do that. Do the grotty all night stuff and the horrible stuff that went with her care really....Ask that question again Johanna...

Johanna: It was around how your Christian beliefs influence your conduct of your everyday life and your parenting...you know, the way you do it than the way the social worker asked you...your view really.

Ellen: Yes, yes. Erm, I believe that children are an incredible privilege and responsibility. God given. I believe our children are God’s gift to us. They are on loan to us, I mean people say that and it’s a cliché, but I do believe it and we are responsible before him as to how we...the time, the energy, what we aim to put into our parenting.

Indeed, the parental valuing of their child and pursuit of their flourishing was expressed by several of the other parents as a recognition of the child having gifts and talents, bestowed by God, but needing identification and nurturance. Their expression was seemingly structured in accord with the kind of purposeful moral theological living I discussed in Chapters 3 and 4 (in relation to Hauwerwas, 1981; D’Costa, 2000; Long, 2009), with their parenting as a moral project, and their as identity as parents, made meaningful through and because of the Christian Story. Herein, their pursuit of flourishing was to encourage a blossoming of the person across all their being – emotional, psychological, social, spiritual, and material – in a way that went beyond simply meeting humanist and naturalistic orientated day-to-day needs to survive, to experience immediate satisfaction, or to become a materially prosperous citizen (Volf,
2013; Volf and Crisp, 2015; Pennington, 2015 and 2017). As Welchel (2014) put it “Biblical flourishing leads [Christians] to direct all glory to God as the source of that flourishing. He is glorified when his creation flourishes. This stands in stark contrast to the cultural vision of flourishing that elevates and glorifies [humans]”. This kind of multi-dimensional flourishing was well encapsulated by the foster carer David:

David: I guess that we would of course see that our children have physical needs in terms of food and sleep and rest and recreation and a safe place to sleep and all that physical side of things. Recognise that they have emotional needs in terms of needing affirmation, encouragement. That they need boundaries in terms of what’s right and what’s wrong and what’s doable. I guess that we would say they have spiritual needs in terms of where they find their sense of identity, how they understand their place in the world, what life is for. We would see all of those overlapping with our kids. A part of that with our birth children means that we offer them ways to explore their spiritual side of things. Whether that’s praying with our kids, whether that’s reading the Bible with our kids, whether that’s just as we are going along and talking about the day and what’s happened.

‘Attending to their relationship with the child’ (to be more caring/loving in relationship)

As Ellen illustrated, sometimes, in challenging circumstances, such nurturance of flourishing was more difficult. Herein, nearly all the parents spoke of an attitude of loving compassion for the child. The illustrations provided to me indicated the kind of agapean love that I considered in Chapter 3, describing a gracious, altruistic, and unconditional acceptance of the other-for-being-who-they-are. Indeed, believing that God was not remote but seeking a caring relationship with his created (the parents and

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47 This is an online source so there is no page number. It is from the Institute for Faith, Work and Economics, and can be found at: https://tifwe.org/four-defining-characteristics-biblical-flourishing/
children), the parents spoke of an equipping given to them by God to be able to endure and respond to parenting challenges. Accordingly, while they were very realistic about the demands, they seldom expressed apprehension or pessimism about such challenges but an optimism and resilience. Foster carers Catherine and Derek provided an illustrative example:

Catherine:....Some of the foster children are a little more testing, but just knowing that you're called to do it by God and he's put [in us] that passion and compassion for these children that it just makes that a little easier to just grit your teeth and you know God is for me and I am going to do this for these children. I think that sometimes it's really important. Certainly when I am doing the day in and day out stuff. And wanting the best for them. Knowing that God has put things in them which we need to nurture. When they've had a really horrendous start and we can try and find those things, those gifts and talents that God's put in them and just try and start to bring them out.

Johanna: Do you think that your faith is encouraging you to look for those gifts and talents?

Catherine: Oh yes definitely... just knowing that we can pray for the children when they are here and that God answers. We've not had children where we've had to deal with massive emotional or behavioural problems...Some of them have had difficulties and underlying things but without doing real therapy or work with them, just by praying for them while they are here you see some of those issues start to kind of quieten down.

The parents’ conviction that as humans (the created) they could approach and communicate with God (Creator) through prayer, to seek such equipping and empowerment to work (as parents) for the child’s good and overcome parenting challenges, was a consistent theme, unanimously expressed. The parents expected
that God would both prompt (initiate) and respond, believing in the Christian Story that he was a loving God in relationship with his created. They looked for (and celebrated) evidence of his responsive intervention (to their prayers) within their everyday lives. Continuing with Catherine and Derek, they detailed a concrete instance in relation to their motivation to foster. In the extract that follows they described how they had perceived a prompting from God to parent a foster child in addition to their birth children. Their Christian terminology used to describe this prompting was “God called us” and “God told me”. Yet as Catherine explained, this was not about actually hearing a voice, but feeling a desire, then reflecting upon its meaning and appropriateness (in terms of its relevance to Biblical values), and then looking for repeated confirmation of the prompted message in the practical day-to-day of everyday life. This explanatory (‘revelatory’) process of ‘hearing God’ is one often referred to by Christians, that refers to a self-reflective and Biblically-reflective questioning as well as practical interrogation of a heartfelt feeling or encouragement. Yet, as Derek explains, such terminology as ‘hearing God’ runs the risk of being misunderstood by those outside of a Christian worldview, as if Christians ‘hear voices’ and as such are to be misaligned as dangerous (and thereby ‘not tolerated’). For this reason, Derek and all the other parents said that they would not feel able to communicate such prayerful desires to a social worker. This occurs despite the idea of ‘calling’ being very similar to that of professional vocation. As follows:

Derek:…But actually I would like to be able to say it that like that: “I feel God has called us to foster”. And actually when we look into the Bible and I look at Luke 4, which is the verse for me, and I look at that and I think that if we are Christians then we need to be looking after the orphans and the children and

*Willard (1999, p.173) for example states how the discernment of God’s voice or ‘word’ usually comes to Christians “in conjunction with responsible study and meditation on the Bible, with experience of the various kinds of movements of the Spirit in our heart and with intelligent alertness to the circumstances that befall us”.*
we feel called to do that. If we look at our life, we always thought we'd have four kids and we have three, and we looked at that and we thought there is a gap for one, and that gap is for a foster child. When we were praying about it, about fostering, and I said “There's no way we can foster unless we get a car that's got six seats. If we've got three of our own and us two then where's the foster child going to go? I'm not taking two cars out on journeys!” Then the next day, I walked and went to [name of supermarket] and a parent from school said “We are selling our car. It's got six seats. Do you want it?” And you go, “Alright we are going to foster, he's [God] answered it!”...We got it for an incredibly cheap price, it's so ginormous, we get babies, fit all children in back, we can go on holiday. It was so cheap, came at exactly the right time. It was unbelievable. And you think “God's calling us to foster”. Part of me wants to say to a social worker that I feel called by God to foster, but I don't think that I could say that....A lot of foster carers do it and the money's important. The money is not important to us, it's not why we are doing it. I would like social workers to know why I am doing it but I wouldn't know how to say it, no.

Catherine: I think that it's a very similar thing because I believe that God puts those desires in your heart. Because that's how it came about. It wasn't like I was in the bath and I heard a voice saying “You must go and foster”. It's just a desire in me that I recognise as that's from God, and when you pray that through, then that becomes more apparent and things get put into place. So it's “that was within me, it's just what I had to do.” It's different that you are attributing that to God than just yourself.

When I asked about the influence of their Christian beliefs upon their parenting, the parents often referenced their relationship with their child, and their family activities. In
terms of the former, some parents spoke about how they sought to be caring/loving in their parent-child relational interaction. This propensity to show more care was attributed to Christian values, reinforced through the parents' habitual regard to Biblical scripture, prayer, and community engagement with church members. A succinct but illustrative example was from Keith, a sixty-year-old birth father. One daughter (Abigail) had additional needs and was receiving local authority care following maternal mental health/substance misuse and relationship breakdown. Keith’s own physical health was diminishing and social workers were making permanent plans for Abigail’s care. Keith was a Christian of over thirty years, and was a member of different groups in his evangelical Anglican church. I interviewed him in his owner-occupied home in a borough of a large city.

Johanna: Do you think that your relationship with Abigail is influenced by your beliefs or do you think that it is a biological father-daughter relationship? Do you think your beliefs enabled your relationship?

Keith: In as much as the way my Christian life is, the way erm the procedures, the stuff I do every day, my daughters are a part of that, my church family are a part of that. In as much as being a Christian has encouraged me to be a caring person, as I believe all Christians should be, and in the most case are, so therefore it must influence the activity I have with my daughters. Especially Abigail who has special needs.

In terms of providing caring/loving responses, several of the parents identified how their Christian faith encouraged them to look beyond the superficiality of behaviour. They spoke about looking for deeper understandings for why their children might be exhibiting difficulties. Continuing with Keith for illustrative purposes, he refused to talk about his daughter in what he perceived as an objectifying way – labelled as an ‘object
of concern’ with her ‘challenging behaviour’ as being ‘risky’. From his Christian position, he had a less sceptical view of difficult behaviour and personal circumstances, and more hope in the behaviour and circumstances being able to change in a way that could reduce risk. This did not mean that the risky behaviour was to be condoned or minimalised, but that spiritual motivations for the potential for change (“self-improvement”) should at least have been aired as they were important to his daughter.

Keith: ... We were actually talking about Abigail, as ‘the client’, who the social worker believed was at risk, and so I had an opposite view, but I understood the risk he was talking about, but in my opinion those elements of risk could be overcome by addressing those factors over time rather than just saying “she’s a risk, we must do something about it”. My attitude was that it could be overcome. In saying that, because he was concerned about Abigail as the person we were talking about, I was able to say that she has Christian values, and so therefore she will have an objective to improve herself because of her faith.

Johanna: So I just want to make sure I understand this, er, because it is an interesting point... So you’re in a conversation about ‘risk’ and the issue of belief comes up, which I think is interesting, so er, how do you think he made sense of your belief as lessening the risk, which I think is what you are saying? [pause] I am just trying to make sure that I have your understanding of that.

Keith: Erm, [pause] I think it is very much a job-related question in as much as within any job you have your boundaries. You have set procedures. Within his job frame Abigail ticks certain boxes and I am in fact suggesting that some of those boxes are incorrect so that’s a challenge to him in his job... In fact he had already completed a document which I didn’t agree with because it was so negative, so I completed the same document as from a carer’s perspective and

49 For clarity, the ‘risky’ and ‘challenging behaviour’ was her refusal to comply with service-led rules/routines rather than personalised care.
it was a positive document. Not because I was being deliberately difficult, but just because I believe he was bound by the rules of his job – ‘a risk was a risk’ – and I had to concede to him that this was true. I couldn’t say that it wasn’t. I did feel that over a period of time looking at the different areas that caused him to believe it as a risk if they could be overcome that Abigail would have a right to [continue with her current care provider].

Several other parents identified how having a faith perspective to everyday life gave them a heightened awareness of emotional and spiritual matters as being potential deeper causes to challenging behaviour. They identified their birth/foster/adoptive children as having emotional and spiritual needs – that these were important dimensions to a child’s overall health and developmental flourishing. In other words, they did not obfuscate emotional and spiritual matters but actively gave a place to them within the understanding of the developmental needs of their children. Foster parents, Catherine and Derek, for example, spoke of their child’s need to internally forgive the actions of another person (never over-riding safeguarding measures within a protection plan), so as to be able to settle his emotions and relate to others. For them, and for many Christians the Biblical directive to seek forgiveness for one’s own actions and forgive another’s actions to oneself gives emotional and spiritual healing to conflicted emotions and encourages social relationships (Hazard, 1992; Meek and McMinn, 1997). Herein, foster carers, Gary and Iona, described to me how, as Christian parents, they gave importance to bringing forth such talk about emotional pressures, recognising an importance to emotional and spiritual space within their conversations with their (now young adult) birth children:

50 In addition to the academic sources here, a summary of Biblical instruction regarding forgiveness can be found at: https://www.allaboutgod.com/definition-for-forgiveness-faq.htm

“We forgive because we have been forgiven by God (Ephesians 4:32). We forgive in obedience to God (Matthew 6:14-15; Romans 12:18). We forgive others to gain control of our lives from hurt emotions (Genesis 4:1-8). We forgive so we won’t become bitter and defile those around us (Hebrews 12:14-15)”.
Iona: Well I guess we are always interested in how they are feeling, I always pick up if they are not feeling right, like if something’s upset them. So we tend to ask them and talk about things.

Gary: We'll pray with them, and if there's a problem, we will want to address it and help them practically and normally but offer a Christian perspective as well.

Iona: And praise them, give them opportunities to do all the things that they want to do. Yeah. Encourage them in their gifting and good things that they like.

Johanna: So God is very much part of the conversation that you have with your children?

Gary: Yeah but not in a weird way I don't think.

Iona: No, not weird. Like Nathan in his exams. We prayed with him in the morning before he went. That sort of thing but we wouldn't do that everyday...When they were little we would pray with them at bedtime. Not now...

Gary: (interjects) They go to bed after us! (laughs)

Doing ordinary family activities together was a key aspect to the outworking of the caring relationships being described. Spending time together by reading, playing games, and holidaying was often cited. Some of the parents talked about how the Christian influence upon their parenting was expressed more in these kinds of ‘actions of togetherness’ rather than in words. Here, the creation of an accepting home environment was seen to give substance to their Christian faith. In this regard, referring back to my discussion in Chapter 3, truthfully-orientated Christian living was not an ‘add on’ to some kind of neutral, baseline ‘tolerant’ morality (operationalized in
parenting tasks/routines). It was a wholly integrated way of life. Ellen, for example described how it was in the ‘living out’ of values within everyday family life that children could see what mattered to parents and were socialised to it:

Ellen: I think that it is important to know that our children learn a great deal by watching and seeing how their parents and grownups in their world deal with things, work out their values. Our children will catch a great deal by how we live our lives, the way we interact with God, with one another, with our money, with how we use our time. They will get more from watching what we do than the words that we say and I think that we have to be a lot like Brighton rock, going through and through…You know, be real about it, because if not, your children will sniff it out. Live it out yourself. Don’t worry too much about always having to put it into words, you know, it’s actually about how you live and how it works out in your life that impacts your children long-term.

Catherine and Derek imparted another concrete example of how such ‘actions of togetherness’ within ordinary family activities appeared to induce an emotionally accepting, non-threatening parenting environment to the child. In the extract that follows they describe a potentially tricky moment when parental discipline was required during a sibling contact visit to one of their foster children (James) who stayed with them on a respite basis. Often in such instances previously physically maltreated children can respond with aggressive defiance due to their hyper-vigilance in the face of perceived threats to emotional and physical safety (Cicchetti and Carlson, 1989; Shields and Cicchetti, 1998; Kaplan et al. 1999). The example illustrates the challenges of fostering whereby children bring emotionally charged relationships into the family dynamics (Schofield and Beek, 2009). Yet, in the emotional security of the familiar, inclusive family activity, with the parents portraying a calm but direct communicative style to the two children, their foster child was able to respond confidently and with trust to the parental authority being displayed. He was able to
identify how the norms of their family life and their parenting approach were reasonable, and reassure his sibling (Josh) of the fairness of the disciplinary motivations. Importantly, also, for the foster carers, this was a joyful moment, for it was one showing the fruits of their obedience to God’s calling and his intervention in their everyday parenting. They perceived evidence of the impact of their relationship with God upon their parenting, and were reassured by it. This seemed to further equip their provision of caring parenting, for they spoke with positive language about the child and the challenging situation.

Derek:...We were playing Playstation, and [Josh] threw the controller on the floor. I turned round and said “No, we don't do that here. We don't throw that on the floor”. And he was about to go ‘oh, oh, oh’ (aggressive stance), about to really lose it and [James] said 'It's OK, they're alright here, it's OK”. His brother just went “OK” and picked up the controller. I just went “Oh my word, what just happened there?” We realised then that the love we'd been giving James and the acceptance, talking to him.

Catherine: And he knew that we were fair.

Derek: Yeah, we were fair. That was it. And he basically turned around to his brother and said “You can trust these people. They're fair. It's alright. Don't worry. It's fine”.

Catherine: He was fine wasn't he? One of those magical moments.

‘Encouraging their child’s relationship with God’

The previous example described the parents demonstrating Christian values in action rather than discussion with child. There were also examples of the parents respecting that their child also had a faith in God, and looking to support their relationship with
him. Faith was not seen as relevant to adults only. Many of the parents spoke of singing Christian songs with their children, reading a Children’s Bible together, discussing prayers and praying with their children, such as at bedtimes or meal-times, or at times of worry, distress and need of comfort. The parents often used the Christian terminology of ‘worshipping God’ with their children. Oftentimes the parents referred to the importance of their church community for nurturing their child’s faith relationship. Feeling unconditionally accepted in friendship with members of the church community, and supported by receiving prayer from them, was not just important for the parents but the children too. One example was provided by Carol, a single parent of a teenage daughter (Sarah) who had experienced the long-term effects of depression and eating disorder following a sexual assault by a family member. Through a child protection plan, police and social work services had ensured the safeguarding of the family and had now withdrawn their intervention. Sarah struggled to be motivated with the counselling services provided, and out of desperation Carol had turned to an inner city evangelical Anglican church to find some solace and ‘answers’ to their pain. Carol described how both she and Sarah would feel better after receiving prayer at the end of a service, so much so that they travelled several miles across the city to attend each Sunday, and then Carol additionally attended a small Bible Study group on a weekday. Carol emphasised that church-going and the receipt of prayer was a personal choice for Sarah. She was never coerced. Rather the giving of freedom to choose to believe in God and/or participate in church was actively pursued. Another parent, David, explained this Christian valuing of freedom thus:

David: With a foster child in our care we recognise that they are a guest as it were, our job is hospitality towards them. I have temporary guardianship of that foster child. And so, I want to care for all the needs that that child wants me to. So as they see our family and they ask questions about why we do what we do, my job is to explain that in an even handed way and let the child take it or leave
it basically because a key element of the Christian faith is the opportunity to choose... No one can force anyone to have engagement with God because part of the deal is that God gives freedom to human beings. So my job is to do the best I can. Model something different and if the child wants to engage on the spiritual side, asks questions, I am open and I'll talk about it but it is all very light handed, take it or leave it, walk away if they want.

Many of the parents asserted that the church environment was inclusive and fun for their children, having contemporary, lively music from live bands, and children’s groups engaged in creative activities appropriate to ages and stages of child development as well as the children’s different interests and abilities. Several of the parents were involved in leading the children’s groupwork, or were members of the live band and lead the sung worship. They were therefore enthusiastic about the positive benefits of church experience for children’s flourishing. Almost unanimously, they decried what they perceived as a stereotypical attitude from those with a non-Christian worldview towards Christian church-going as being enforced indoctrination to dreary, irrelevant, enjoyment-sapping, rule-based practices. They assumed and often discovered social workers to have these prejudices, as foster carers Gary and Iona summarised in relation to the assessment of them as parents in regard to fostering an under-five year old (Sonja):

Gary: They assume everything’s bad. There was no “You're Christians this means you'll have this or that positive attribute”, it was like “You're Christians so this means you're going to be like this.” So there was no balance to it at all.

Iona: And it was also like “Well the children are going to be bored”… Our church isn't like that. I suppose you have a picture in your head of people in pews, with an organ and sit still and shut up. Ours’ is the complete opposite of that and
there's a band and the kids have a great time in classes and you know all CRB-ed people. In fact Sonja was with me most of the time anyway because I was leading that age group at the time. So I think that they have a very different picture of what church is as well. That's the other problem. They think the children are going to be bored, be sat and be forced to go. That's not the way our church is. I'm not saying that's right or wrong, that's just the way it is.

While the parents did tend to expect a professional challenge to any overt expression of their faith position, many (like Derek) did wish that they could be open with the social worker about moral dilemmas within parenting situations. A few parents spoke about the potential usefulness of exploring their conflicted feelings that arose from the intersection of their Christian worldview with that of the norms of the secular liberal humanist healthcare system. One example of such conflicted feelings (and wish to have been able to express them) was in relation to a parent needing to have respite care for her child, but experiencing considerable anguish that she was not fulfilling her responsibility to God to care for her child in all circumstances. She felt that she had let God down by not coping because she believed that she had been given her child by God but had been unable to honour that gift. Keith, a parent in similar circumstances, spoke about his wife's ongoing emotional pain at feeling she had not fulfilled her responsibility to God when the complexity and severity of her teenage child's developmental needs occasioned a permanent move into residential care. These parents had the perception that a social worker most probably would not have understood the Christian dilemma of sacrificing individual wellbeing and tolerating suffering in order to be obedient (to God) in their care for children. Yet they saw that a discussion of the influence of beliefs could helpfully arise through probing questions about parental responsibility in the context of individual and familial suffering. Drawing on my reflexive memo written after the interview, I wonder whether social workers
are/were sufficiently aware or equipped to engage in such exploratory probing of spiritually motivated dilemmas when, from the parents’ accounts, they seldom even touched upon (or asked about) even the everyday practices of parenting in terms of whether or how it might be influenced by their Christian worldview. I noted that in my interview with Ellen she had been enthusiastically open with me about the importance to her of praying and singing with her daughter. She had also spoken about the helpfulness of one particular social worker, also a Christian, who, as outlined in Chapter 2, had enabled her to talk about matters concerning suffering. Yet, even she was pessimistic about the willingness or ability of social workers to dialogue with her about the influence of her beliefs:

Johanna: So praying and singing and those kinds of activities were important, so would you have expected a social worker to ask you about those things or not?

Ellen: [tilts head, smiles] Certainly no other social worker ever did. No other. Other areas of our life, school, they asked. They were very aware of that side of our lives but social worker, no, the only one in any way who did any faith stuff was the lady I described. Another social worker who I saw, it was very ‘just drop in and out visits’, definately came, bless him, just had to come and visit to go through things on a form. Which he did, but there was nothing like that at all. Even key times like when changing from nursery to school but I don’t remember much about him at all Johanna. Didn’t impact on me at all.

In mainly absenting talk about Christian belief from conversations, social workers ran the risk of missing what was most important to the parents, and also what was important to the children, and family life. Where talk did occur, it was often the parent advocating on behalf of the child to the social worker. Nowhere in the data was there an example of the social worker actively advocating a child’s faith (on their behalf). Yet,
notably, in not asking about the meaning of faith and truthful living to a child or young person, a social worker would not be able to see anything of the protective or vulnerability factors arising from it in their assessment of parenting. The following extract from my interview with Keith displays feelings of resignation to the situation:

Johanna: Do you think that you are possibly the only person that erm is speaking up or advocating for Abigail's faith, bearing in mind that she does have her own social worker? Do you think the social worker is doing enough to facilitate her beliefs in her life?

Keith: I am sure that they have not done anything at all [pause]

Johanna: You say that because?

Keith: Because Abigail’s social activities are minimal as it stands. There are Christian outlets out there, there are clubs and things, and erm, they have not been encouraged in any way at all.

Johanna: Do you think that the social worker talks to Abigail, I mean you have been at meetings with Abigail and the social worker, does the social worker talk about Christian faith matters with Abigail?

Keith: No.

Johanna: So in your next meeting with the social worker what would be a good way, in your view, for them to raise the matter about your Christian faith with you or with Abigail?

Keith: My conclusion at the last meeting was that I would continue to encourage Abigail for as long as I can.
7.3. REFLEXIVE CONSIDERATIONS

In summary, there was no differentiation between being a Christian parent or non-Christian parent in wanting the ‘best for their child’. However, the Christian parents were cautious about revealing the integrated nature of their Christian living in pursuing flourishing for their children. It was a wariness made worse by the social workers’ frequent absenting of Christian religious language and discussion. This wariness influenced the way the Christian parents approached their articulation of their lived out Christian values, both in terms of the attitude of fear and resignation that they would be misunderstood, and the language that they used.

Thinking reflexively about these data, I wondered why there seemed to be such similarity from the parent participants in their accounts of the prejudicial attitudes from social workers (and seemingly associated absenting of belief-talk) and in their accounts of motivated actions to protect their deeply vested interests. Why were their individual accounts (and indeed the overall picture) while fairly nuanced, not displaying an even more entangled variation of attitudes and behaviours? Why was the overall picture so negative, with just two parents citing positive encounters? I wondered whether my adopted methods had influenced the data, and considered specifically the sampling and the matter of volunteer bias. For methodological reasons it was important to purposively recruit participants with experience of the research object (social-worker-with-Christian-parent-communication), and for ethical and access considerations that recruitment had to be voluntary. Yet, had these participants been especially attracted to self-select for the study because of particular motives, such as being particularly willing to ‘finally give voice’ to their negative past experiences with a social worker? Given the sampling frame – being members of service user consultative groups – it might be reasonable to consider these parents potentially more motivated to see improved future scenarios of social-worker-with-Christian-parent communication than that of the wider study population because of prior (perhaps negative) experiences.
Moreover, the small sample size, whilst being appropriate to facilitating the qualitative research methods, potentially further limited the range of possible reflexions (and thereby possible variations).

The matter of interviewer effects (Denscombe, 2014) possibly also influenced the parents’ presentation of their reflexions. Specifically, had the parental responses to the unstructured interviews been influenced by myself, as interviewer, having outsider characteristics of being a registered social worker? Looking critically at the interview transcripts, and my reflexive memos (written directly after each interview), there were many times when I sought actively to show ‘reflective listening’, and when I emphasised that I wanted their perspectives to be voiced and accurately presented. Reflexively, I wondered, in hindsight, if I was trying hard to show that ‘I was not like the social workers that they described who lacked reflective listening’. Rather, I sought to show that I was the kind of social worker (such as described by two of the parents in the sample) who can show careful listening to their information and comfortableness (than dis-ease) with their religious language and its ontological commitment. Certainly, a strategy that I used within my improvised questioning was to repeat the religious language that they used, showing my relative comfort and acceptance, and thereby trying to ease any possible discomfort at my social worker status. Herein, the transcripts showed many times when I checked back to ask them if I had sufficiently grasped their own religious and spiritual understanding on a parenting matter they raised. The discussion illustrates how I was aware of and managed such thoughts and feelings arising from the research situations. This was through writing reflexive memos immediately after each interview within a reflexive diary that I would then revisit to separate out how my reflexions arose from an emic or etic perspective. Here, for example, my attention to finding ways to show religious literacy – in this case being able to identify religious language being used by participants whilst at the same time

51 Remembering that these were unstructured interviews seeking to follow participant leads than researcher-led prescriptions.
exploring the participants' own meanings of it – possibly came partly from my emic perspective as a Christian. I could recognise Christian religious language when it arose but I also recognised that there is diversity in meaning or application of it, so I could not be presumptive about any shared meaning between the parent and me. For the purpose of the data analysis, I had to be aware of blinkers of such familiarity so that I could capture and explore the relevance/meaning of participants’ particular choice of words.

Neither was I assumptive that the social workers being described had similar levels of religious literacy, for I knew from the start that religious literacy was not part of the qualifying social work curriculum (see Chapter 1 for this discussion). Indeed, my reflexive memos at the time - noting my thoughts and feelings – wondered about whether this was why the social workers were described as not showing more reflective listening or interviewing skills to seek elaboration. This arose more from my etic perspective as a social work lecturer who researches and teaches about social work communication skills, that (pertinent to these situations) include interviewing skills to seek clarification and elaboration to familiar and unfamiliar words used by parents within assessment work. I noted that such skills could have been used within those moments, though I recalled from research and practice experience that parenting assessment situations are often difficult (such as when the social worker’s authority role and purpose is not accepted and a shared agenda for the work has not been achieved). Indeed, it was from this etic perspective that I adopted another strategy within my own communication with the parents which was to limit (‘de-jargonise’) my use of professional (social work) language, and adjust my use of academic language to suit each participant. Of course this claim comes with caution for it was dependent upon whether I was conscious of doing so; I recognise that I am ontologically layered with personal and professional agential characteristics but still ontologically whole – it is not a simple matter of separating out aspects of my ‘self’.
This latter issue, of deeply layered but holistic agential ontology is pertinent too to the parents’ reflexions. When I asked the parents to explain to me about how their Christian worldview related to their parenting, they sometimes found it hard to find the vocabulary to ‘segment this off’ and express this in abstract terms (hence my finding concerning Christian parents requiring more religious literacy). However, when the parents gave examples of their daily actions, they gave embodiment to their motivations, in a way that was richly detailed. As discussed in Chapter 1, worldviews are better observed by a person’s actions than abstracted words, but yet the depth of personal meaning to those actions cannot be understood without questions. The combination of both (following practical examples with gentle improvised probing questioning) gave me more confidence that I had grasped something of their meaning of lived-out worldview praxis.

A counter argument to my critical reflexions of these data (whereby the parents’ accounts showed similarity and negativity and therefore possibly difference to the wider study population) were that the participants often gave their perspectives and told their stories without much probing from myself (outside of showing reflective listening). Sometimes the parents themselves initiated ideas, and they often talked at length. A measure of the parents’ comfort in expressing their views was not just in their data being so rich and detailed about their experience with the social worker, but in being prepared to reveal, in depth to me (even given my social worker identity) their Story of their parenting praxis, as seen in the theme ‘motivated richness to Christian parenting’.

Of course, one reflexive question to consider is whether the parents were more prepared to share their perspectives, and use their religious language with me because they knew or assumed I shared insider status as a Christian parent. As discussed in Chapter 6, p 197, in order to meet the key research aim of not prematurely silencing the service user voice (but to emphasise/ensure I had fully understood their own meaning) a key methodological decision taken was to disclose my Christian standpoint
when asked specifically for it, noting when asked for it, and whether or how it seemed to influence the information being given from thereafter. Looking critically across the data (including my reflexive memos of the feelings and thoughts raised in myself that I recorded immediately at the end of each interview) what seemed more influential to the parents was not necessarily my affirmation to them as having a Christian identity (when it occurred), but my status as a social worker. Whilst all the parents provided rich, detailed data (regardless of whether my Christian identity was disclosed) it was this (my social work status) that I felt I had to work particularly at in limiting the interviewer-effects (such as diminishing professional jargon, and being prepared to repeat their own references including their religious language when they used it, and checking their meaning using skills of reflective listening).

That there were similarities, therefore, gave me more confidence that there were representations held by the parents that were not simply negotiated/co-created/dreamt-up with/by me during the interviews or analysis, but held by the participants themselves before they came to the interview. Of course, the forum theatre data gave me the opportunity to question this further, by seeing if any of the representations claimed by the parents (of their social workers and their actions) were played out (or not) within the social-worker-with-Christian-parent communication action and reflexions. The next chapter presents the findings from the forum theatre data of the social workers’ perspectives.
Chapter 8: ‘Reporting the Social Workers’ Communication Actions and Reflexions’: Findings from the forum theatre data

8.1. INTRODUCTION TO THE CHAPTER

The aforementioned themes from the interview-based parental perspectives were put into dramatised dialogue, which, in Part 1 of the forum theatre performance, the social worker spect-actors watched, without active participation. This enabled them to ‘take in’ the parental perspectives of social worker-with-Christian-parent-communication. Part 1 was immediately followed by the script being re-performed in Part 2, but this time with the social worker spect-actors being encouraged to actively participate both in discussion about the communication dynamics taking place and in action by taking over the role of the protagonist or antagonist and change the communication action taking place. In this chapter:

• I present thematic findings drawn from my analysis of the Part 2 reflexive discussions and communication action, accompanied by insights from my reflexive memos of the dynamics observed among all the spect-actors including the social worker spect-actors and the Christian actors enacting the perspectives of the Christian parents.

• The six themes presented are: “Strong emotional reaction to perceived judgemental attitudes”; “Sticking with the formula” (looking for formulaic communication action); “The church issue” (social worker initiated communication about belief); “Keep them private or make them public” (keeping beliefs personal or making beliefs public); “Assuming indoctrination” theme (assuming conflict of interest); “Get real!” (assumption of naivety).
8.2. SOCIAL WORKER PERSPECTIVES: THEMES FROM THE FORUM THEATRE PERFORMANCE

8.2.1. Social Workers’ Theme 1 “Strong emotional reaction to perceived judgemental attitudes”

The first feature to the findings concerned the spect-actors’ strong emotional reaction to the social worker’s communication. This was most apparent in the immediate moments following the performance of Part 1. It took the form of irritation as indicated by the damning words used by the spect-actors at the approach taken by the social worker towards the parents. They gave particular emphasis to the social worker’s lack of attention to the body language exhibited by the parents. Herein the spect-actors considered that the social worker had not responded to indications by the parents of their feelings but had moved onto new questions too quickly without pausing to display understanding. These criticisms are displayed within the following extract of this early stage:

Facilitator: So how did that go?

Spect-actor 1: Horrendously

Facilitator: Horrendously, appalling? Why?

Spect-actor 2: The social worker did not have any regard to the body language, to what they were saying, to their facial expression, in their body. They looked really, erm, puzzled. She didn’t pick up on that. She jumped (said in animated tone) from one question to the next. No clarity. It was just, well, er

Facilitator: So everything really? (laughs)

Spect-actor 2: Well, yeah, everything, every single thing she did I didn't like. (Spect-actors make a lot of noise, talking at once)
The lack of time taken by the social worker to check shared understanding gave the spect-actors the impression that the social worker was too willing to rest upon her own assumptions of the meaning. Also, the spect-actors identified the social worker’s use of leading questions, linking this to the social worker holding an assumptive approach that they branded as ‘judgmental’ in style. As the following extract indicates, by labelling the social worker’s approach as ‘leading’, the suggestion was that the social worker had brought her presuppositions to the communication and that she seemed to be drawing out answers to support those presuppositions.

Spect-actor 3 (holds up hand): She made a lot of assumptions

Spect-actor 4: Judgmental

Spect-actor 2: Leading questions

Spect-actor 4: She didn’t stop to check and confirm that she even understood what was being said

Facilitator: Do you think she even understood what was being said?

Spectators (several speak at once, and most shake their heads): No

At this point of the performance my reflexive notes highlighted the high level of noise as the spect-actors appeared to engage with each other about the forum theatre. At this early stage, it was reassuring to see the spect-actors actively participating, and not just watching the performance. It looked like the forum theatre method seemed to be engendering the kind of embodied data that I was looking to collect. Nevertheless I was struck by the level of emotive criticism directed at the social worker, a factor indicating that the spect-actors were empathising with the parents, with none at all expressed for the social worker. Why, for example, was the social worker’s communication perceived as ‘judgmental’ and not viewed as, say, ‘awkward’, and why was there an expression of ‘irritation’ as opposed to, say, ‘disappointment’ or ‘bewilderment’? The level of
expressed emotion seemed to indicate an undercurrent of tension at the enacted dynamics. Possibly the spect-actors were dealing with their own unconscious feelings of not knowing how to deal with the social worker-parent communication situation, and so projected their frustration as anger towards the social worker? Possibly they perceived the social worker interaction as displaying an affront to a professional social work value of being ‘non-judgemental’? Perhaps the spect-actors saw a danger in the social worker being too quick to accept the content of the parental answers at face value, and without sufficient exploration potentially displayed ‘confirmatory bias’? Maybe the emotion was connected with the timing of the dialogue given that Part 1 of the performance ended with the mother suffering with low blood sugar, and the spect-actors may have identified with her as a ‘victim’? Clearly, there could be other reasons besides these, but to uncover the undercurrent of tension in and of itself seems an important finding. I looked to see whether and how the strong emotive response was evident elsewhere in the data. I found irritation and frustration to be an element of most of the themes in varying degrees. However, it was particularly within the next theme considered below – ‘sticking with the formula’.

8.2.2. Social Worker Theme 2 “Sticking with the formula (looking for formulaic communication action)”

There were many times when the spect-actors expressed a preference for a more mechanical, prescribed response to the communication action. This occurred despite the encouragement for a more improvised acting performance in response to the communication issues being raised. The first occurrence was early on in Part 2, at the moment of the first ‘freeze’ of the action by a spect-actor from the audience. The actors had just enacted the moments of introduction between the social worker and the parent, with the social worker engaging in ‘small talk’ by complimenting the parents upon the presentation of their home and asking about their children’s school. The spect-actor stopped the communication and emphasised that attention should be given
to greater clarity of the social worker’s role and purpose. There was a loud, harsh tone
to her interjection, as if she was cross at the social worker’s neglectful attention to this
aspect of early communication. In so doing she seemed to be emphasising a formulaic
sequential beginning for such meetings, as the following extract indicates:

Spect-actor 3: Freeze! I think that before she gets into the children and stuff the
social worker should state first the purpose of the meeting and then move on
from there.

Facilitator: State the purpose of the meeting, which would be?

Spect-actor 3: Which would be that she is there to assess them, possibly talk
about how some of the questions, well, that some of the questions she may ask
will be considered a bit intrusive but “I need to ask you these questions, stuff of
a personal nature”.

The facilitator encouraged the spect-actor to come onto the stage to take the role of the
social worker in order to thereby demonstrate her expressed preference for the
communication action of achieving clarity of purpose. The following extract of this role-
played interaction shows how the spect-actor subsequently carried out her introduction
in a more formal manner by referring to each other’s names and that of her employing
agency. In doing this, she emphasised her body language through smiling, shaking
hands, accepting refreshment and sitting in a position indicating a more ‘open’ posture.
She said that her purpose was to conduct “an assessment”, and then indicated that
she would expand on the process of that intervention. Interestingly, I observed that the
information regarding the clarity of purpose was actually rather minimal. Furthermore,
neither the nature of ‘assessment’ nor processes for it were clarified. Rather, the
exaggeration seemed to be upon the body language in projecting an approach that
was friendly and pleasant. Indeed, a comment from my reflexive notes (taken during
the performance) referred to the laughter of the audience when the spect-actor
convivially agreed to receive refreshment from the parents. I noted that the spect-actors appeared to be engaging with the performance and giving approval to the moment of sociability between the spect-actor and the parents. However, I also pondered that it could be laughter at the expense of the social worker – a needle at the social worker – as if she had been the villain of the action and that all would be well with this different-more-pleasant-but-formulaic approach.

Spect-actor 6: I’m (name). Nice to meet you Ruth, nice to meet you Phil (shakes hands and smiles at each of them as she says this)

Ruth (Mother): Are you sure I can’t get you a drink?

Spect-actor 6: Oh that would be fine, I’d like a glass of water (spectators laugh and some clap). Thank you very much (takes a cup of water from Ruth (Mother)). So nice to meet you. So, Phil and Ruth, my name’s (gives name) and I am from ‘blah blah’ department and I’m here, as you know, to take part in an assessment with you because I am aware that you are interested in foster care, is that right? (sitting at a more face-to-face angle than the social worker actor, and has arms open than crossed or in lap, and is smiling throughout).

Ruth (Mother): Yeah

Phil (Father): Yeah

Spect-actor 6: I suppose before we begin, I’ll tell you a bit about our service and what we will be doing with you. Etc etc etc, OK. Freeze! (spect-actors laugh because she said ‘freeze’ herself, then clap as she takes her seat in the semi-circle again)

A second moment of spect-actor preference for a formulaic communication action occurred when the social worker began asking questions about relationships with the wider family and had quickly initiated questions about family history of mental health
difficulties. A spect-actor called for the interaction to ‘freeze’, and gave as her reason that the social worker had dwelt upon the matter of “family background” in a rather superficial manner, and that so much more could have been explored. The spect-actor’s tone was loud and angry, giving an indication of the importance that she attached to this aspect of communication within parental assessment. It was almost as if ‘family background’ was a social work ‘buzzword’, with the (formulaic) expectation being an exploration of the quality of familial relationships. In response, the facilitator encouraged the spect-actor to come onto the stage to take the role of the social worker and enact the proposed communication action. As seen in the following extract, what followed was a more slowed down interaction, with the spect-actor displaying non-verbal communication signals and paraphrasing which demonstrated more interest in the parental answers. In actual fact, there was not a lot more information obtained, even though the spect-actor herself stated afterwards that she thought she had gone beyond a superficial approach. Nevertheless, several of the audience concurred with the spect-actor’s observation and attributed her success to “using open-ended questions”, “using her face, and [saying] mmm, and looking generally more interested”.

Thus in summary, the spect-actors seemed to be indicating that in such situations (in this case involving the talk about family background), a formulaic response is required and that the importance of the communication action lies in the friendliness of the formulaic approach taken. This seems understood to be how the questions are asked, with attention given to sufficient time and friendliness in body language when asking them.

Spect-actor 2: OK, so tell me a bit more about your family background.

Phil (Father): Well I’m from South West London, born and bred. Ruth’s a country girl. Moved to London from University and never left!

Spect-actor 2: OK, so where did you come from originally? Where did you live before you moved to London? (sits with hands in lap, smiling and nodding)
Phil (Father): I’m from South West London. Always from there. Ruth’s the stranger!

Spect-actor 2: Oh, yes, sorry.

Ruth (Mother): Oh yes for my sins. Just outside Bristol.

Spect-actor 2: OK. That’s really nice. And do you have a large family just outside Bristol? (moves right hand in a circle to indicate a ‘space’)

Ruth (Mother): No my mum and dad are still there and my brother’s not too far.

Spect-actor 2: OK.

Phil (Father): And my family are around here.

Spect-actor 2: OK, and what kind of relationship do you have with your family members? (moves hand out towards the couple, smiling)

Ruth (Mother): Yeah, fine

Spect-actor 2: Supportive?

Ruth (Mother): Well yeah fine. We don’t see them as much as we’d like but when we do its fantastic, and my dad’s a little frail and we usually take the kids up Easter time

Phil (Father): They are very supportive

Ruth (Mother): And my brother being so close. He’s got two kids and so we, yeah, we spend quite a lot of time with them. So that’s, yeah, that’s nice. (Spect-actor 2 is nodding).

Spect-actor 2: Freeze! Freeze myself! (spect-actors laugh)

Facilitator: So why did you stop there?
Spect-actor 2: Because I was getting a lot of information from them, getting more about them, getting to know them, who they really are, as opposed to the superficial information, which was being gleaned from before.

The spect-actors seemed also to regard ‘mental health’ as a ‘buzz word’ requiring a prescriptive, formulaic response. This was seen soon after the previous interaction within the role-play, when the actor resumed the role of the social worker, and she had asked the parents if any of their family members had experienced any difficulties with mental health. The mother responded with some brief information about her own mother having experienced a short period of postnatal depression, following which the social worker moved on to ask a question about a different topic (how the couple had met). One spect-actor ‘froze’ the interaction, her reasoning being that the social worker had undertaken too little exploration of the familial experience of the mental health difficulties, and that such information is deemed “vital” and could trigger further inquiries that would need to be “dealt with”. The request for ‘freeze’ was made in a loud manner and with a sarcastic tone, as if the spect-actor was displaying some annoyance at this omission. Many spect-actors laughed at the loud expression of annoyance, perhaps signifying their agreement of it. Yet, while the spect-actor(s) seemed to be positing, again, the need for a formulaic response (this time at the mention of ‘mental health difficulties’), their discussion revealed hesitation and lack of clarity about what form that response might take. As seen in the extract below, this seemed to centre on the idea that ‘mental health’ was a topic of a personal, sensitive nature, which would need some degree of sensitivity and skill in discussing it. Primarily, it appeared that the spect-actors were proposing a strategy of familiarity, as evidenced through the spect-actors considering the timing of such discussion. The preference was for it to come later in the meeting or at additional meeting(s), indicating that there would be greater rapport by then. With greater rapport, there would be more potential for a successful application of the aforementioned (formula of a) friendly approach. An
alternative option, posited by one spect-actor, was for the discussion of ‘mental health’ to ‘piggy-back’ questions about the physical health of family members, with ‘physical health’ viewed as a precursor to asking (what was perceived as) the more sensitive, uncomfortable questions about mental health. It was as if physical health was perceived as less difficult and safer to talk about in comparison to mental health. When taken together, it appeared that in the situation of uncertainty about how to communicate this sensitive topic, there was an over-riding concern to enact the formula of a friendly, relational approach. This enactment occurred through either avoidance (delayed to a later time) or disguise (piggy-backed onto a safer topic) rather than to approach the matter of ‘mental health’ in a more direct way.

Facilitator: OK, I’m going to stop you just there and I’m going to ask the group ‘should she be asking about the history of mental health within the family?’

Spect-actors: (a lot of voices speaking at once in response). Facilitator points to one spect-actor who has not spoken before inviting her to speak.

Spect-actor 9: Maybe a little bit later in the conversation.

Facilitator: A little bit later on in the conversation?

Spect-actor 9: Yes. It’s maybe a bit too soon.

Facilitator: A bit too soon. If she did want to raise it, has she raised it in an appropriate way?

Spect-actors: (some say yes, many nodding, some murmur)

Spect-actor 5: It’s a sensitive issue for some people

Facilitator: How can she raise it sensitively then?

Spect-actor 5: She can explain that part of her assessment is about sensitive topics which appear to be quite intrusive. They would get to know each other a
bit better because I’m sure that this assessment is more than just the day anyway.

Facilitator: Yeah, so obviously we are looking at a fictional section of it. It would be a lot longer. Showing you a cross section, if you like, of what might happen in that time.

Spect-actor 5: So if she is going on to ask about health then also ask about physical health. They mention that the dad’s quite frail and that’s going to have an emotional impact as well.

Facilitator: Come and do that?

Spect-actor 5: I’m all right (spectators laugh)

Facilitator: Because I think that’s an interesting way of looking at it. Physical health rather than first mental health.

In my reflexive notes (taken during the performance) I commented upon the air of awkwardness among the spect-actors towards the issue of communicating about ‘mental health’ seemingly evident in their contention that it was a sensitive topic and their reluctance to find ways to address it directly. The facilitator sought volunteers from the spect-actor audience to go onto the performance area and find a way of communicating about the mental health, including using their aforementioned formula of asking a precursor question about the familial physical health. The spect-actors were reluctant, a further signal of a lack of confidence in how to communicate the matter, particularly given that such performance was to occur in front of the audience. Indeed, such was the lack of confidence that the solution from the spect-actors was to suggest that one spect-actor took another spect-actor with her onto the performance area, in the manner of a social work student shadowing a qualified social worker. The sentiment was to offer the spect-actor the opportunity of having a second spect-actor as an advisor or supporter to the communication action. Reflecting upon this
discomfort, I wondered if this was an example of the spect-actors showing agency. Perhaps, they were trying to find a way through their discomfort and helplessness and thereby sought collegiate support for their communication attempts? At the time I also noted my own frustration that the facilitator was dwelling too long upon the communication action concerning ‘mental health’ as a sensitive topic rather than taking the opportunity to draw spect-actor attention to the potentially analogous situation of communicating about the sensitive topic constituting the focus of the research – communication about the Christian worldview. I was feeling concerned that time may run out before these issues were discussed in depth.

Looking back at my record of frustration at what seemed an obvious way to bring religious beliefs and practices into the forum theatre performance, I wondered if the connection had been equally obvious to the spect-actors anyway. Maybe, in fact, the spect-actors had made the connection and were stalling the discussion about how to communicate about religious beliefs. Perhaps they were sufficiently lacking in confidence to discuss this aspect that they employed the same formulaic delaying tactics as they had to the sensitive topic of ‘mental health’. Equally, maybe, they were anticipating the communication about religious beliefs and wanted support from other spect-actors for finding ways of responding to the subject. This might explain why a second spect-actor was proposed as an ally for the performance area. In the event, I chose to monitor the situation, staying within my observer role and not intervening but waiting to see if the matter would arise naturally within the resultant drama. I decided that if it did not, then I would break my observer role, indicate for the facilitator to come away from the performance area and request that the actors initiate a little of their religious belief language into the performance. Such practice is quite usual for a forum theatre performance - a facilitator often engages with the actors to focus in on a particular part of the script or encourage improvisation in response to spect-actor involvement. The opportunity to make my request came soon after, when the Facilitator
walked slowly towards me during the changeover of actor with spect-actor, causing no
disruption to the performance. I was relieved to see that it occurred in such an
unobtrusive manner.

It is important to note that while I saw the idea of ‘sensitive topic’ as a way for the forum theatre to initiate communication and discussion about religious beliefs, I did not have any anticipation about there actually being any similarity in resultant spect-actor communication action between the two sensitive topics. It was not until I went to the transcribed data that I saw that similar formulaic responses that had been taken to discussing the sensitive topic of ‘mental health’ and discussion of ‘family background’ seemed also to be taken to the sensitive topic of religious beliefs. The first example took place in the interaction that immediately followed. The spect-actor began by emphasising to the parents that she was listening to their responses. This was shown by her attention to her body language (positioning herself square-on and in an open stance, looking face-to-face with her hands in lap but palms up, and nodding a lot). Also, she used the communication skill of ‘putting feelings into words’ (“That’s lovely. It must be quite difficult for you to have to go see your dad with the kids”). ‘Putting feelings into words’ is a skill described by Shulman (2009) that involves the social worker tentatively proposing, as accurately as possible, the feelings that he or she perceives to be communicated by a service user and then asking the service user to confirm or disconfirm the accuracy. Such a skill enables the social worker to elicit feelings which may not be immediately at the surface or are difficult to express, and thereby show that he or she is ‘reflectively listening’ and ‘attending’ to their service user’s concerns (Woodcock Ross 2009 and 2016).

The combined listening approach appeared to result in the (actor playing the) mother responding to the warmth and attention, evident by the increase in detail provided in her response about her perspective of her father’s declining health. Interestingly, her husband interjected, seemingly showing his wariness at the detail that she was
providing, and whether it reflected well on their children’s wellbeing, and ergo, their parenting (“I think the children get on with it quite well as well”). However, the spect-actor responded again with the same listening approach, adjusting her body language (sitting with head to the side, leaning forward) and ‘putting feelings into words’ (“Oh that’s brilliant that you’ve got that close relationship”). Encouraged by this response, the mother responded with more detail about her support system, including this time, direct reference to how this stemmed from her church in emotional and practical ways. The spect-actor showed less of an attentive response to this introduction of Christian belief-based language. This time she seemed to revert to the formula of signalling in a friendly manner for the mother to continue by simply saying ‘yeah’, smiling, and nodding. The mother expanded on her previous statements, expressing her reassurance in having the church-based support system. Again the spect-actor provided a more minimally attentive, yet friendly response of simply smiling and acknowledging the significance to the mother (“That sounds fantastic”). The mother then used Christian belief terminology to explain further her reassurance in the support (“Yeah, so I feel like we’re very blessed, in that respect”). At this use of belief-based language, the spect-actor floundered, unsure of what to do or say next in her communication, and turned around looking at the spect-actor audience, seeking ideas from them as to how to proceed. The spect-actor audience, in return, did not come up with any ideas, perhaps because the formula of being friendly and relational had already been tried. The following extract shows the dialogue in sequence.

Facilitator: The line about the dad again…three-two-one-action!

Ruth (Mother): And, you know, my dad’s a little frail now so he can’t really visit us now, so we usually pack up the kids and visit him. Have pizza, and usually spend some time with him there.
Spect-actor 5: Oh that’s lovely. It must be quite difficult for you to have to go see your dad with the kids. (Sitting round in the chair, more face-to-face than the actor had been, hands in lap but palms up, nodding a lot).

Ruth (Mother): Well, yeah, obviously he was a very vital man (laughs). You know a couple of farms (laughter). Now, so it can be quite frustrating for him, I think, with not being able to be as active as he used to be but I think he’s made his peace with it. (Spect-actor 5 is sitting with head to the side, leaning forward).

Phil (Father): I think the children get on with it quite well as well.

Ruth (Mother): Well yeah, they’ve really rallied round him.

Spect-actor 5: Oh that’s brilliant that you’ve got that close relationship. And what about your self, do you get any support in helping your dad? (Extends and circles hand, nodding)

Ruth (Mother): Well we have, well, I feel very lucky to have a big support network. The church up there, and the church here which we are a part of, are incredibly supportive. We have a lot of friends who are very helpful, like childcare, but emotional support as well.

Spect-actor 5: Yeah (nodding)

Ruth (Mother): And my mum is just a stalwart, she really is, she just powers on. I do feel that he is in really safe hands. Yeah.

Spect-actor 5: That sounds fantastic (smiling)

Ruth (Mother): yeah, so I feel like we’re very blessed, in that respect.

Spect-actor 5: Oh that’s brilliant. Freeze! I’m just taking some advice...(turns to the spect-actor audience, who all laugh). I’m thinking about the health aspect. I’m confused. I thought that maybe you’d like to do that (looking at spect-actor 9).
Spect-actor 9: No! (spect-actors laugh)

Another example of spect-actor retreat to a formulaic response when the parents used belief-based talk occurred a little later in the role-play, when a different spect-actor came onto the performance area and the parents talked for a while, again, about how they receive emotional support from their church family. The spect-actor did not acknowledge their dialogue about church family-based support, but instead initiated a question about whether the parents have had contact with children of other religious faith backgrounds. In not validating or exploring their information, it appeared that the spect-actor seemed to have stopped listening to the parents’ perspectives of ‘what their church has to offer’ and chose not to look more deeply at why and how the parents find their church relationships so supportive. The spect-actor did not try to understand the meaning of their communication, but just accepted their comments at a superficial level. The father responded with a resolute, politically correct (‘social work acceptable’) statement about how his family respects religious diversity and that they would acknowledge any conflict of interest. The mother then provided examples of the diverse beliefs of some of their children’s friends, thereby evidencing her husband’s statement. In the light of the change in the spect-actor’s direction of the questioning, it was unsurprising that the parents seemed to respond in this more defended and guarded way. The spect-actor’s subsequent response, however, was even more superficial and perfunctory (“Different faiths are an enrichment I suppose”). She neither gave validation nor sought elaboration. On the one hand her response embodied a politically correct language of respecting diversity. In this regard, it could be seen as mirroring, or even triggered by the tone of the father’s previous comment. Certainly, as I discussed in Chapter 3, a central aspect of social workers’ training and development concerns such valuing of others’ diverse identities and practices. Social workers are required to identify and challenge oppressive practices and empower people to take control in improving their wellbeing. Thus, the spect-actor’s response could be
understood as being ‘formulaic’ by being framed in such politically-social-work-correct terms.

On the other hand, the use of the word ‘enrichment’ opened a window onto the spect-actor’s perspective to the influence of belief. This seemed to be that belief was an ‘added component’ to everyday life, rather than being a way of life. By ‘added-on’ I mean that it would simply add an element to everyday life that already exists. I will return to this ‘perspective of belief’ in a later theme, but for now it is important to note that the parental reaction was to maintain their position of being guarded and to reiterate a position of political correctness for valuing diversity (“And so it’s also something which can invigorate our lives in seeing things from different perspectives and working through that”). In the same vein, the spect-actor seemed to continue with her formulaic response. As opposed to engaging with what the parents had said, she asked a politically-social-work-correct question about whether the parents had experienced oppressive attitudes from other people for identifying as Christian (“Do you mind if I ask you, with your religion, have you had any, I don’t know, like, any narrow mindedness? People can be quite stereotypical of other religions, have you had any of that sort of experience?”) At this point the Facilitator ‘froze’ the interaction and asked the spect-actor for her reasoning for asking the question. As seen in the extract below, her answer displayed perfunctory, formulaic reasoning. She did not justify a linkage between her question and what the parents were saying either about their experience of their church family or their experience of children of different beliefs. She simply said that her reason for asking was that people often hold negative assumptive attitudes about religious beliefs and she wondered if the parents had experienced judgements made against them on the basis of such assumptions. Several of the audience expressed satisfaction with her answer and of the usefulness of it. While this could be read as a gesture of support to their colleague, their response suggested that they, too, were in accord with the formulaic reasoning. Indeed, one of the spect-actors
from the audience then took the formulaic reasoning further by stating that the question could potentially initiate discussion and judgement about the parents’ capacity for empathising with a child’s experience of adversity. The accent upon ‘empathising with adversity’ reflects an emphasis within social work practice for ‘holding the child in mind’ and encouraging parental empathy with children’s experiences (Simmonds, 2007; Horwath, 2010; Shemmings and Shemmings, 2014; Shemmings, 2016; Hughes, 2017). While, certainly, it is an important issue within parental assessment, the attention to it at this point in the communication suggests that the spect-actor was more motivated by this prescriptive reasoning rather than with finding a way of communicating with the parents about their beliefs. Thus, when taken together, these data seem to indicate that the spect-actors were more comfortable with these more formulaic responses in situations of uncertainty.

Facilitator: Why did you ask that final question? You asked if they had experienced anyone being judgemental or narrow minded towards them.

Spect-actor 13: Because I think it’s all part of experience. Everyone at some part of their lives has experienced something negative through, for whatever reason, has had some negative judgment made against them. I just think it’s quite important to ask about that, how they handled that because it does happen. It’s a sad fact that people will make sort of pre-judgments, especially about religion, things like that, so I just thought it would be good to ask them whether they’ve had any.

Facilitator: Does that take us somewhere? Is that a useful question?

Spect-actor 6: Yes (a lot of the other spect-actors murmur ‘yes’)

Spect-actor 5: It’s interesting to ask how other people deal with adversity because then when they have children who have faced adversity, whether through religion, through them being in care, whatever, then it will also reflect
upon how they'll support the children in dealing with adversity, so I think it is interesting.

8.2.3. Social Worker Theme 3 “The church issue (social worker initiated communication about belief)”

The predominant way in which the spect-actors referred to Christian beliefs was as ‘going to church’, which was also summarised as ‘the church issue’. The first example occurred immediately after the performance in Part 1, when the spect-actors were displaying their immediate reaction to the social worker-Christian parent interaction. One spect-actor used ‘the church issue’ as a phrase to summarise the communication about parental beliefs that she had just watched.

Spect-actor 2: And she immediately focused on, well, they gave her lots of information that she could have unpacked, but she immediately focused on the church issue, and started to sort of unpack that in an irritating way, a judgmental way.

The phrasing occurred again a little later on in Part 2, after the spect-actors had discussed the need for a more formal, structured approach to the introduction, and (what they perceived as) the need for greater exploration of issues relating to family background and familial experience of mental health difficulties. The parents had spoken about the support network that they have in their church family and the Facilitator had encouraged the spect-actors to find ways to discuss matters of their practising beliefs with the parents (“...that is specifically what we are looking at today, is the fact that they have a faith and how is that faith managed and discussed and talked about within that assessment”). One of the spect-actors suggested that there could be more exploration of the parental beliefs, whereupon the Facilitator encouraged her onto the performance area to find a way to communicate this. As the extract shows, the way that the spect-actor initiated the communication was not in relation to asking more
about the nature of the beliefs or the living out of beliefs in the practices of everyday life, but in relation to whether the family ‘went to church’. It was a phrase that she repeated, suggesting that either she found it to be a more comfortable way of speaking about Christian belief, or that she knew no other way to think or speak about it. Moreover, in asking about the extent of wider family involvement, and longevity of family tradition in ‘going to church’, she seemed to use the phrase to gauge the level of familial commitment to beliefs. However, the parents did not seem to share the spect-actor’s meaning behind her use of the phrase of ‘going to church’. Rather, they appeared to correct her by emphasising that ‘church’ is their family, rather than a place and a matter of ‘attendance’. The spect-actor did not pick up on their emphasis, perhaps signifying that, again, she did not understand the terminology. Indeed, she only became involved again in the communication when the parents spoke about the choir, which she seemed to seize upon as something that she understood and could inquire about.

Spect-actor 13: So is your wider family involved in going to church as well?
(quieter voice, leans forward, head slightly to the side, smiling)

Phil (Father): Very much so, my Mum is an active member of her church, the children are involved as well, that’s where we met, yeah

Spect-actor 13: So a lot of family history of going to church

Phil (Father): Our church is our family as a whole. Everybody mucks in together. Everybody is there to lend a hand. Lots of different things for young children to participate in.

Ruth (Mother): I run a youth group on a Sunday for 4 to 11 year olds so,

Phil (Father): We’re trying to get our sixteen year old to lead the choir as well, so...
Spect-actor 13 (interjects, moves head forward towards them): Does she do a lot of singing?

Ruth (Mother): She has a great voice

Phil (Father): Like her mother (Ruth) (laughing)

Ruth (Mother): Her Dad would say that! (laughing) (Spect-actor 13 joins in the laughing and smiles widely)

Later on in the performance, with the nature of the parents’ Christian beliefs or their living out of beliefs in daily life still yet to be explored, one of the spect-actors (from the audience) suggested asking the parents an open question about what it was like living in their family. The tack that the spect-actor suggested was to ask it from the perspective of a child coming to live with them within their family. In my reflexive notes (taken at the time of the performance) I noted that there was interest among the spect-actors for this idea, as if a satisfactory resolution to the matter of how to discuss religious beliefs with these parents might have been identified. However, as seen from the extract below, when the spect-actor took to the performance area and began asking her open question of the parents, she quickly followed it with a return to the phrasing of belief being about ‘church life’.

Spect-actor 12: Or you could just say ‘I’d like to get a further sense of what it might be like living in this family, from this child’s point of view. How would this child experience it? Really tell me that. Be honest’

Facilitator: Do you want to...

Spect-actor 12: No, but oh OK. (Spect-actor 12 says this smiling and with humour, gets up and sits in the chair of the social worker in the performance area. The spect-actors shift about in their seats, there is some murmuring among them and some some lean forward. They appear interested.)
Facilitator: OK, so from there, three-two-one-go!

Phil (Father): Obviously, if there were a conflict of interest we would have to discuss it as a family, see how we could move forward from that.

Spect-actor 12: OK well I think that sounds alright. I’m wondering as I’m sitting here how I would feel maybe if I was a child who was going to be erm moving into your house, having you looking after me (said in an inquiring, interested tone). How would, erm, the church fit into my life? You know, how would I fit into the church life?

As with the earlier example, the parents’ response to this apparent summarising of their beliefs as solely being about ‘attendance at church’ was to be defensive and to reject any notion of enforcement of it upon any children in their care. The potential for openness in exploration was lost. The spect-actor, however, tried again with a similar question, this time focusing in on the children’s church-based activities and asking whom the children would have contact with. She takes again the tack of asking from the perspective of the child, but once again phrases belief only in terms of ‘who would be at church’ (“Well, what are, look, I’m trying to put myself in the child’s role here (moves hands out wide) and I’m going to ask you what kind of people, tell me about the people, the kind of people, that you are most closest to, who would I see at the church. Maybe if I was ten, tell me about the youth group I could be involved with.”) The parental response, again, was to remain guarded. They provided information about how they were involved in the leadership of the groups (and so ensuring the safety from strangers) and how the groups were diverse and inclusive in membership (providing a politically correct answer of respecting diversity).

It appeared that the combined approach of seeking understanding of Christian belief as being a) ‘attendance at church’ and b) ‘from the child’s perspective of it’ achieved little communication from the parents except at a superficial, guarded level reflecting solely
what the parents thought safe enough to reveal. There was, however, one glimpse of how communication could improve. Having asked those previous questions, the spect-actor then seemed to draw on some knowledge about Christian practices, and asked a question about whether a child would be expected to pray and supported to do so. As seen in the extract below, while her question contained some negativity about the expected practice of prayer, the parents did engage with it and provided a level of detail about their perspective to prayer and encouragement of it. It seemed that the use of the Christian terminology and possibly also the exaggerated non-verbal communication for elaboration (moving both hands outwards) was critical in achieving this different level of response from the parents. Ironically, though, the spect-actor did not see this difference in response. When the Facilitator ‘froze’ the interaction and asked her reasoning for the direction that she had taken, and her perspective of its success in discussing beliefs, the spect-actor referred back to the original terminology of belief being a preference for ‘attendance at church’.

Spect-actor 12: So I am a child who is ten and I want to go to the group but I really don’t know how to pray or I don’t want to pray so do I need to do that if I go to the group? (Moves both hands outwards).

Ruth (Mother): I mean that I really think that our faith allows us, and the way we worship, allows you to worship in the way that you do. So you don’t have to have the creed down pat or anything like that, but if you feel that you can open your heart to it (moves hands together), there’ll be people around to support you, who will help you to grow in that faith. (Spect-actor 12 is nodding).

Phil (Father): Praying is a personal thing as well (moves hands outwards). You can have group prayer but your relationship with God is a relationship that you have personally (touches chest). And I think that as a ten year old, I think that maybe develop the relationship that they have with God (moves hand
outwards). Maybe how they see their relationship as meaningful, if that makes sense.

Ruth (Mother): Yeah, and I do try and make sure that it's an exploratory. They are looking for answers. They do question things. (Spect-actor is nodding and looks about to say something.)

Facilitator: Can I say freeze? How is this going from your perspective?

Spect-actor 12: Well from my perspective, it's gone pretty good. I just think that what I was going to say next was, 'well it seems that you're really trying to relay to me (moves hand around in circular movement) what your faith is about and your interest in attending church and wider community. It does sound positive, you know, but I really want to, at this early point, I do want to remain objective, I do really want to.' That's why it's easy, for me sometimes, to go from the point of view of the child and to try and help myself.

8.2.4. Social Worker Theme 4 'Keep them private or make them public' (keeping beliefs personal or making beliefs public)

There were only a few moments whereby the spect-actors referred to the religious beliefs in terms other than 'the church issue'. These occurred later in the performance. At these times, the reference was to beliefs and the discussion of beliefs as being personal positions relating to 'values'.

Facilitator: So specifically a line that Phil said 'your relationship with God is a personal one, the way that you pray', where he was getting much more in-depth about his faith. I would like to ask you as a group, would you feel out of your depth in that situation? Very honestly, would you be happy, would you feel comfortable, if that was the kind of topic being raised? I know it's a difficult question.
Spect-actor 14: Yes, some will, but we are talking about our own value bases aren't we? I mean some of the things you said there, depends on our own values doesn't it? So I might say 'I pray', but another person might say 'ooh talking to God'? (Some spect-actors mumuring). So that's where the balance comes up.

The spect-actor's reference to 'balance' illustrates this equating of belief to personal positions. It seemed to reflect his reflexive questioning about whether it was more a personal preference to engage parents in belief-talk rather than a publically approved action. Partly this was shown through his linkage of belief to being a matter of personal values, and to discussion of belief as being a personal choice based upon personal values. But perhaps the greater part was that he rested his reservation upon how others might view and understand it (that belief-talk was not just personal but open to misinterpretation). The inference was that in the face of such danger of misinterpretation, some degree of caution is required (the 'balancing'), particularly as the action (belief-talk) was not prescribed but a personal choice. However, this spect-actor's position, which displayed a reluctance to engage parents in belief-talk, conflicted with that of another spect-actor. In this case, this spect-actor also perceived belief to be a matter of personal engagement, but rather than belief-talk being cautionary 'off limits' because of dangers of misinterpretation, it was to be made public precisely to address issues of interpretation. For her, the personal has to be revealed in order to understand the meaning attributed to parental actions. Moreover, she asserted that such examination needs to occur not only of the parent, but potentially of the social worker themselves. In other words, to encourage the revelation of personal beliefs is professionally responsible behaviour.

Facilitator: So just taking that line, for example, when he said 'So the way you talk to God is a personal thing, where your relationship with God is a personal thing to you', and that was a lot more open and revealing than in our very first
scene, should you have to manage that? (Spect-actors make no response). Where should you go from there? Where might you go from there? Remembering that there is a hypothetical future child who is entering this assessment?

Spect-actor 15: You have to manage those kinds of things because you’re asking them, these applicants, to work with very difficult children who are going to present challenges and problems and often trigger things in your own self, your own values and your own beliefs. So you have got to be able to manage that because you have got to assess whether these individuals can work with the different challenges which are going to be presented to them. It’s uncomfortable but its something that you’ve got to try and manage. And then as a social worker you go back to your supervisor, your manager, and you say this happened, this was what was said, this is how I am feeling about it, but it is something as social workers that you can’t run away from. You’ve got to be able to manage that.

Although this spect-actor emphasised the need for belief-talk with parents, she did not view such discussion as being a familiar, engaging activity with positivity. The spect-actor was fairly strident in declaring it a challenging action that would cause the social worker and parent discomfort. She indicated two directions from which such discomfort would occur. The first direction was from the perception that the social worker would need to provide Christian parents with information about the challenges of parenting children with challenging behaviour, and that such behaviours may conflict with parental held beliefs. In the face of such value-conflict the parent may or may not be able to ‘manage’. Reflecting upon this, I noted that there appear to be assumptions underpinning this perception: a) that there would necessarily be a value-conflict, and b) that the parents will not already be aware that difficulties could arise. A second direction for the discomfort was that the social worker would have to make a decision
about the parents’ capacity to parent (to ‘manage’) based upon such discussion of the parental perception of the reality of such challenging parenting situations and potential for value-conflict. The sentiment of discomfort was not just in relation to the enormity of the decision being made (to be able to parent or not), but that in making this decision, a core feature would be an examination of the feelings raised for the social worker of the belief-talk and the way in which it might be influencing their perceptions of the capacity for parenting. In other words, there could be personal discomfort felt by the social worker of an exploration of potential value-conflict based upon their personally held beliefs.

8.2.5. Social Worker Theme 5 “Assuming indoctrination” theme (assuming conflict of interest)

Communication about belief seemed often to be influenced by the spect-actor linkage of it with indoctrination. As stated earlier, spect-actor initiated discussion about belief was primarily phrased in terms of ‘going to church’. ‘Going to church’, in turn, was often associated with the potential for a conflict of interest between a parent and a child. There appeared an inherent perception that ‘going to church’ was a parent-driven experience and that the children might be forced to engage in ‘going to church’ than it being a matter of choice or that it might be of benefit or enjoyment to the child. To be clear, this is not to say that a social worker should not question a foster carer about the freedom of choice being given to a child to engage in ‘going to church’ or any other faith-based activities, and to check the enjoyment and benefit to the child of the experiences, especially a future child who may or may not share the same religious worldview. This questioning is expected within the liberal framework to social work practice, and we would therefore expect to see questions about freedom and non-coercion within the data. It is also equally important to note that the matter of freedom of choice is also a structurally-mediated expectation arising within the Christian
worldview – stipulated in the Biblical narrative - as foster carer David explicated (referred to earlier and reproduced here):

“But [its important] to recognise [that] part of my faith means the offering of hospitality to people who don’t share my faith. That’s about our family creating space for people to agree or disagree with what we believe. So when we’ve looked after children from a different faith background, like a Muslim faith background, that has meant asking permission from the birth parent, like ‘What does it mean in terms of food? What does it mean in terms of hair cutting? We as a family participate in a church community on a Sunday, as part of the things that we do. We wouldn’t force that on a child, but if a child was happy to attend with us, we would make space for that. But if they didn’t, then we would find a way to accommodate that…. The way that we handled that with the foster child was ‘everything was optional’.”

“With a foster child in our care we recognise that they are a guest as it were, our job is hospitality towards them. I have temporary guardianship of that foster child. And so, I want to care for all the needs that that child wants me to. So as they see our family and they ask questions about why we do what we do, my job is to explain that in an even handed way and let the child take it or leave it basically because a key element of the Christian faith is the opportunity to choose… No one can force anyone to have engagement with God because part of the deal is that God gives freedom to human beings. So my job is to do the best I can. Model something different and if the child wants to engage on the spiritual side, asks questions, I am open and I’ll talk about it but it is all very light handed, take it or leave it, walk away if they want.”
However, what the performance data interestingly showed was that at no point did a social worker consider ‘going to church’ to be the child’s non-coerced choice, or child-driven, or a positive experience. The following extract provides one illustration of how these assumptions influenced the communication interaction. The spect-actor had just posited a way to explore the parents’ beliefs by asking more open questions of the parents (as she put it, “Maybe ask [the parents] a bit more about it [their faith/beliefs], like, are there whole families involved?”) The extract begins just after she had swopped places with the actor (playing the social worker) and had asked the parents about whether their wider family also attended church. The parents had responded by telling her that ‘church’ has meaning to them as a ‘family’ and that their own and their children’s social life revolved around this family. The parents accentuated the positivity and safety of the activities for the children. This gave an opening to the social worker to follow the parents’ lead but still enact their statutory role by exploring the different activities and practices that involved the parents’ own children (thereby showing more interest and gaining more information of the children’s experiences to work out whether and how such experiences were beneficial/protective or coercive/harmful). Social work questioning of this would have been appropriate in facilitating the assessment, enabling checks of the depth and accuracy of their answers. However, in the moment, the spect-actor referred to whether the parents anticipated including their future children in the same way (“With potential foster children, is that something that you would like them to be involved with as well, either of you?”) Although it was said in a warm and inquiring tone, the question was somewhat ‘out of kilter’ with what the parents had just said. They had just emphasised that their own children were benefitting from a variety of positive experiences and relationships. Why would they not want this for their future children? From this angle the spect-actor’s question appeared to suggest that the spect-actor had not listened to and disregarded the positivity of the parents’ answers (of the potential of the church in providing their children with safe, enriching activities). On the other hand it might be possible to read this social work
response as checking again whether a future child would have the freedom of choice and an absence of coercion, testing out whether the prospective foster carer has experience of dealing with a situation where one of their children might not want to go to church, and how they might deal with such a situation with a foster child (which could well happen). Reflecting upon my own practice experience, social workers have to be able to explain whether and how they have addressed these matters about freedom to fostering and adoption panels. I know that sometimes such panel members can be vigorous in their questioning of the social worker about this issue. As such it may not be surprising to find such issues being so much at the forefront of social workers’ minds during their communication with the parent, such that they miss opportunities to show reflective listening and encourage elaboration. A more simple answer might be that the social worker may simply not have had the skills to show empathetic responses at all, and in doing so repeating the earlier findings from Forrester et al. (2008) and Ferguson (2014) regarding the less emotionally warm, instrumentally-driven dialogue of some social workers with parents.

This idea of belief being a matter of ‘lifestyle choice’ differs from a perspective of belief as being about a worldview and as a way of living, with beliefs lived out in daily life. For these parents, parenting is ‘lived out belief’ with the provision to the children of safe, enriching activities being an aspect of that. Thus her question appeared a stark reminder to the parents of the purpose of her visit, which was to assess their parenting for future (foster) children, and a signal that this may not be possible unless they made a choice not to encourage their children’s participation in church-based activities or convinced her of the positivity of those activities and the children’s choice in participating. The extract (provided below) of their response shows how the parents responded to the latter. Their short, tentative answers showed wariness in displaying to the spect-actor their position of being pleased if the children showed interest in the church-based activities. Their exaggeration of the positivity of the activities and the
children’s choice for participation displayed their wariness of the information being misconstrued as indoctrination. Such was their caution in response that they did not presume that they could take a baby to their church activities and questioned the spect-actor for her approval.

Phil (Father): Our church is our family as a whole. Everybody mucks in together. Everybody is there to lend a hand. Lots of different things for young children to participate in.

Ruth (Mother): I run a youth group on a Sunday for 4 to 11 year olds so,

Phil (Father): We’re trying to get our sixteen year old to lead the choir as well

Spect-actor 13 (interjects, moves head forward towards them): Does she do a lot of singing?

Ruth (Mother): She has a great voice

Phil (Father): Like her mother (Ruth) (laughing)

Ruth (Mother): Her Dad would say that! (laughing) (Spect-actor 13 joins in the laughing and smiles widely)

Spect-actor 13: With potential foster children, is that something that you would like them to be involved with as well, either of you?

Ruth (Mother): (brief pause) Erm, er, it would be wonderful

Phil (Father): It would but

Ruth (Mother): There’s so much to offer

Phil (Father): Ideally it is what we’d like. However, it’s about choice. (Spect-actor 13 nods a lot). If it’s something they don’t have an interest in we’d certainly have to discuss it. See how we could move forward. (Spect-actor 13 nods).
Ruth (Mother): Obviously if there was a baby or a toddler they would come along

Spect-actor 13: Yes, you couldn’t leave them

Ruth (Mother): No, no

Having explained that they would give a child in their care the choice of engaging in the church-based activities, and the positive experience of those activities, the ensuing dialogue shows that the spect-actor seemed not to believe that the children would actually choose to participate. The spect-actor continued to assume the potential for a conflict of interest between the parents and their children about it. Belief (understood by the spect-actor as ‘going to church’) continued to be seen as a problem despite the parents saying that it would not be. This suggested an inherent prejudice of enforcement and indoctrination on the part of the social worker. Moreover, from the parents’ subsequent response there was a sense in which the parents had to account for their own children’s participation. Despite being disbelieved the parents responded again, this time highlighting how they had provided choice to their children, and stipulated their children’s own desires to participate. They repeated the positive benefits to membership of the church family by referring to the children’s friendships and the emotional support provided to the family. At the end of the extract, the father again emphasised that the parents would not force a child to attend the church-based activities. The fact that he felt he had to emphasise it once again, showed the degree to which he feared that the spect-actor was not listening to him (possibly even considered irrelevant for the information was again disregarded). One reading of this, therefore, is that the influence of the assumption of indoctrination was present not just for the spect-actor, but the spect-actor’s assumption seemed to be perceived, also, by the parents. Another reading, reflecting upon practice experience, is that the exploration of such issues will always feel personal/private and problematic for some prospective adopters – and perhaps that this adopter is projecting this on to the issue.
of religion. It could be the case that the social worker is just not being convinced that
the foster carer/adopter is actually open to considering potential difficulties, and so
persists with testing out whether the prospective foster carer/adopter has experience of
dealing with a situation where one of their children might not want to participate in
church, and how they might deal with such a situation with a foster/adoptive child. One
might also argue though, that an opening for sensitive, exploratory dialogue about the
influence of beliefs in everyday parenting had to be found, and simply repeating a line
of questioning might just reinforce entrenched positions.

Spect-actor 13: So your children that you have already, erm, has there been
any, erm, sort of friction with them going to church or have they always been
quite happy?

Phil (Father): I think so, they’ve always been happy to come to church.

Ruth (Mother): When they started at secondary school, they

Phil (Father): They were given the option, but they still decided that they wanted
to attend church. (Sits more forward in the chair). Pleasing for the both of us.

Ruth (Mother): I think that there’s so much of our social life, erm

Phil (Father): Big part

Ruth (Mother): Yeah, their friends are all there and it’s really like a supportive
place.

Phil (Father): Supported us emotionally (turns to look directly at his wife).

Spect-actor 13: Sometimes with the matching process, sometimes children from
different faiths can be placed with foster carers of a different faith (moves hands
one-to-the-other). Have you had any experience, sort of, of children of other
faiths? I mean have you come into contact with (gets very quiet in volume)
(spect-actor rests chin on hand, elbow on leg, looking at both of them)
Phil (Father): On occasion. We are respectful of every other religion and obviously if there was a conflict of interest then it’s, as I said earlier, it’s something we would have to compromise over. We wouldn’t force somebody to come to church with us if they…

Another example of an assumption of conflict when discussing religious practices occurred a little later in the performance, when the Facilitator asked the spect-actor audience whether it was a social worker’s responsibility to ask about religious beliefs (“Is it your job if someone raises the fact that they have a faith, do you ask them about that? Is it your job to be very positive about that?”) The immediate answer from one of the spect-actors revealed a perspective that such a discussion would be “interesting” as it would reveal more about an inherent “conflict of values” (Spect-actor 5: It would be interesting when considering the conflict of values, to go a little deeper and look at those conflicting values. Finding out what would be difficult”). There were a number of assumptions contained within the answer. First it assumed that there were two sets of values at play (in order for there to be a conflict) – one set on the part of the parents which differed from another set of set of values. The ownership of the second set of values is not identified, suggesting that it is perhaps obvious to the spect-actor audience. Drawing upon my developing discussion in Chapters 2-4, the taken-for-grantedness of the answer could be understood as the structural mediation of the secular liberal humanist worldview. The second assumption contained within the expectation of ‘value-conflict’ was that any exploration of those parental values would reveal difficult areas. When the Facilitator asked for ideas about how to go about that communication, the answer from another spect-actor was that an open question could be asked of the parents of their perspective of areas of difficulty which may arise from their conflicting values (“Spect-actor 12: Could you ask them to just expand on what they feel would be a conflict of interest? Just to hear their perspective”). Given that the parents had already emphasised, repeatedly, that they would not have a conflict of
interest, the responses showed again that the spect-actors were still not capable of hearing their perspective.

8.2.6. Social Worker Theme 6 ‘Get real!’ (assumption of naivety)

There were a few instances where the spect-actors seemed to perceive that the social work communication was going well if the parents showed capability to think about parenting and the needs of a child from ‘outside of their belief perspective’. The first instance followed soon after the parents had spoken about the support of their church family and the spect-actor (playing the role of the social worker) had asked about whether the parents had experienced contact with children of any other beliefs, and whether they had experienced any form of negative prejudice on the basis of having Christian beliefs. She had returned to her seat and the Facilitator was now addressing the audience, as follows:

Facilitator: Would you have concerns because they have raised that they have a faith?

Spect-actor 6: No, because I think she was quite, er [moves hand], in the way she addressed it. She kind of asked a question that took them out of the box of their Christian values. By asking that, she’s actually probing, thinking to herself, ‘well they are willing to adjust, to think about these things outside, whether it’s a child that has no faith or coming from another faith’. So it’s going down that road with them. So that they’ve had some thinking about that or they can gain some thinking about that.

Facilitator: What do you mean by that road?

Spect-actor 6: Well, they’re Christians and their immediate supportive network is from the same faith. So her asking that question, she’s kind of taken them out of just their faith into considering what else could be going on around them. As
to how a person doesn’t have any faith and how they could sort of work with that.

The spect-actor seemed to perceive that the parents, in having Christian beliefs, saw the world differently than people not of Christian beliefs. However, she did not consider this worldview in terms that portrayed acceptance, but as a view that was ignorant of the reality of ‘what was really going on’ in everyday life. Herein, she suggested that the parents’ lived experience was a separate space consisting only of other people sharing their beliefs and of a shared experience which was supportive. Whilst the potential supportiveness of this experience might sound positive, the spect-actor spoke about the need to take the parents “out of the box of their Christian values” and “out of just their faith into considering what else could be going on around them”. It was as if she thought it important that the parents took a ‘reality check’, whereby they took account of the experience and beliefs of others outside of their supportive Christian-only space. In this regard, she spoke about the need for the parents to “adjust” their worldview through “thinking about these things outside”. It was as if she perceived of the issue as a matter of tuning out of a less valid sphere of reality into a more valid one, perhaps in much the same way as tuning into a radio station to receive different dialogue and experiences. However, she did not seem to perceive the parents as willing or able to do this ‘tuning out of their worldview’ without guidance. For this she suggested “probing” from a social worker. Her comments showed some structural thinking about the entrenchment of such beliefs and impermeability of boundaries between worldviews. For the parents, the point was significant because it would mean that their capability in being able to show such ‘tuning in and tuning out’ could reflect upon whether they were able to parent for future children.

A second illustration occurred later in the performance, after a spect-actor from the audience declared that it is important for social workers to initiate discussion of parental beliefs because future children may present behaviours that may challenge
such beliefs and precipitate interpersonal difficulties between family members or intrapersonal difficulties for the child or parent. The spect-actor asserted that the capacity to manage a child’s behaviour is considered a vital part of parenting assessment, and so the parent and social worker should engage in self-examination about the potential impact upon self and relationships of challenges from children’s behaviour. Working with this assertion from the spect-actor, the Facilitator tried to engage the spect-actor audience in finding a way to initiate communication with the parents about these challenges. In doing so, she referred the audience to their experience of Part 1 of the forum theatre performance in which the social worker (actor) had used hypothetical scenarios of different challenges. She asked whether the spect-actors would use such hypothetical scenarios to seek parental perspectives within parenting assessment. The spect-actors in the audience answered affirmatively with a loud ‘yes’. My reflexive notes (taken at the time of the performance) noted that this was an interesting but contradictory response because the spect-actors had shown such a strong negative emotional response to the social worker’s questioning at the end of Part 1. They had found her questioning to be presumptive and judgmental. They had perceived her as not attending to the parents’ non-verbal communication of their distress at not being understood. Why did they now want to go back to the hypothetical questioning? From the dialogue that followed, it seemed that one possibility was that it was perceived as a way of bringing the reality of challenging behavioural scenarios into the communication.

Facilitator: OK. So if we have this couple, who have said ‘yeah’ they have a faith, and they’ve opened up a lot more and they’ve been more comfortable and they’ve been more open. How do you then address those issues with them? How do you raise some of those topics?

Spect-actor 16: Well you’d ask them questions like, for example, children’s challenging behaviours,
Facilitator: I was going to ask you to come up (laughter). (Spect-actor 16 gets up and sits in chair of the social worker in the performance area) Three-two-one-action!

Spect-actor 16: Are you aware of the different challenges that children, that foster children can present? You know, coming from different backgrounds, are you aware of these challenges? (sits legs crossed, hands together, looks directly at the couple)

Phil (Father): I’d say we are, yes.

Ruth (Mother): In what respect?

Spect-actor 16: For example, you can get some children, who, you know (moves hands up and down), bed wet, and it’s like a continuous, you know, it’s continuous. You get other children who swear a lot, and it might be against your religious beliefs, or you get children who smear. Do you know what smearing means?

Ruth (Mother): No, I don’t know what

Spect-actor 16: Well, smearing is when you have a child with a lot of problems, basically, who uses their own faeces and smears it across the walls. You have to be prepared because you have to clean that everyday. Would you be prepared to do that? (moves right hand to one side)

Ruth (Mother): Well, I think that we would. Those are challenges that you have presented but we haven’t looked through them one by one but we (looks at her husband)

Phil (Father): We are aware that these challenges might be presented to us, as we’ve just said. Fostering is something that we feel passionate about. We think that if this problem was presented to us, then we would find a way to get this
problem (Spect-actor sits forwarding, murmurs ‘mmm’ to show listening, hands are still on knee)

Ruth (Mother): We know that we are not going to get a baby in a basket with a bow on it, you know, that is untouched by issues, you know, the reason we want to foster is because we know that these children have had a hard time.

Spect-actor 16: The thing is, you seem very close, strong to me, (moves both hands outwards), to be strong together as a couple. Some of these children can actually test you as a couple, you know, and try to drive you apart (hands together then pulls apart). Have you thought of that?

Phil (Father): There’s no test that we can’t do, with the glory of God (says in a humorous manner) (Spect-actors all talk and laughter and clapping as spect-actor returns to seat)

Facilitator: Freeze! How did that go?

Spect-actor 16: It was just a basic thing, let them be aware, you know, that some children can be very challenging and it might come between their relationships because a lot of potential foster carers don’t know about these challenges. And some people call it bad behavior. But some of these children do not know any better. That’s what they’ve been doing, you know, troubled childhood. All sorts of reasons, so, you have to let them be aware.

The dialogue seemed to show the spect-actor trying to test the parents as to their awareness of the reality of the care needing to be provided to foster children. She emphasised the likelihood of the children displaying the behavioural effects of abusive and neglectful experiences (swearing, continuous incontinence, including bed-wetting and smearing of faeces). She questioned the parents’ knowledge of such challenges and their preparation for it. In doing so, she presented the information and questioning in a rather harsh way. It was not diluted. It was said assertively and without the
previously friendly tone. Indeed, in my reflexive discussion with the actors in the aftermath of the performance, the actors playing the parents said that they had felt this spect-actor to be aggressive towards them. Their perception of this aggression had stayed with them until the end of the performance, so strong had it been felt. Why had the spect-actor been so blunt and assertive and why had the parents perceived her as aggressive? In the context of the discussion, it was possible that the spect-actor was drawing attention to the likely reality of the parenting, and to ‘get down to business’ she was trying to ‘cut through the niceties’ of the previously friendly interchanges. Certainly for social workers there is considerable pressure for them to get their assessments correct.

However, the spect-actor’s questions did seem to contain assumptions that these parents were unlikely to be aware or tolerant of such ‘real’ challenges and that this lack of awareness and tolerance stemmed from their expectations of family life, as based upon their Christian beliefs. She assumed that as Christian parents, they would have expectations for children’s behaviour meeting particular standards (“You get other children who swear a lot, and it might be against your religious beliefs…”). Thus, for reasons of their Christian beliefs, she assumed a degree of naivety on the part of the parents, which was not just in relation to having awareness of the impact upon children of abusive experiences, but also (potentially) of their willingness to provide appropriate care. With the spect-actor’s questions containing what appear to be such obvious assumptions, delivered in such a direct manner, it is perhaps no surprise that the parents’ ‘read’ the spect-actor as being aggressive. The response from the parents was resolute - they were willing to rise to the challenge. Although they did not use the term ‘calling’, their statements referred to their reasons for wanting to parent and their solid belief in their success (“Fostering is something that we feel passionate about. We think that if this problem was presented to us, then we would find a way to get this problem”; “We know that we are not going to get a baby in a basket with a bow on it,
you know, that is untouched by issues, you know, the reason we want to foster is because we know that these children have had a hard time"). The spect-actor, however, did not seem to recognise their reference to 'calling', but instead pushed her point further by querying whether they had considered the possible impact upon their couple relationship of the children’s challenging behaviour. Again, the question seemed imbued with an assumption of naivety, regarding as irrelevant the parental statements that they were determined to find a way to overcome such challenges. Indeed, when she was asked for her reasoning for asking the questions, she was unwavering in stating that it was to make the parents more aware of reality.

The interaction had an impact upon the spect-actor audience. Immediately after the spect-actor had given her reasoning (to present a more realistic picture of challenges to the parents), one spect-actor declared her disagreement with the approach taken by the spect-actor. She stated that the spect-actor had “terrified” and “stunned” the parents by presenting the challenges so starkly one after the other. For her, the approach was overly interrogative with too much presented all at once. She seemed to be empathising with the parents, and perhaps ‘gave voice’ to the likely emotions of the parents to receiving such assertive and direct questioning from the social worker. In the light of this insight, it is little wonder that the actors (playing the parents) had felt the spect-actor (playing the social worker) to be “aggressive”. Nevertheless, other spect-actors in the audience maintained that an approach that brought such ‘reality of challenges’ into the discussion was entirely appropriate.

8.3. REFLEXIVE CONSIDERATIONS

In summary, the perception of the need to dispel any idealistic thinking and absent belief-talk on the part of the parents took such precedence that the social work spect-actors seemed able to bracket out empathy to the parents on the receiving end of questioning. In situations of uncertainty, and particularly when the parents used belief
terminology, the social workers adopted formulaic communication strategies to reduce tension, including an emphasis upon being friendly and pleasant with body language, reducing the reference to belief as merely ‘the church issue/going to church’, and the use of hypothetical questions. Perhaps this suggests further structural thinking on the part of the social worker, displaying an individual or corporate agential inability to think beyond belief as anything more than a personal choice and personal preference? Perhaps, equally, it is not structural thinking, but an emotionally-based response to ‘feeling uncertain’, particularly when having seen and experienced the pain of children and parents within parenting situations that had broken down, and in a practice context that makes social workers hypervigilant to ‘manage risk’ or risk public scrutiny of professional incompetence.

Critically reflecting upon these data, it was important to note that the social worker spect-actors received significant encouragement from the Forum Theatre method for improvised actions in response to the communication issues being raised. Such encouragement included: being inspired from having watched the Part 1 script; being reassured by the Facilitator; and being supported/boosted by the wider audience group of spect-actors. Yet, even with this encouragement, there were many times when the social worker spect-actors expressed preference for a more mechanical, prescribed response to the communication action. Indeed, my reflexive notes of the forum theatre highlighted the high degree of emotion emanating from both the parents and social worker spect-actors (tension, frustration, irritation, awkwardness), and I recorded my own feelings of uncomfortableness as I beheld the communication going fruitlessly back-and-forth in their activity of ‘not reflectively listening’.

How far were the spect-actors less or more consciously ‘missing the point’? Alternatively, was this due to the method not achieving what it could do in terms of powerfully ‘provoking’ deep embodied (felt) reflexion of the service user experience of
the communication to then agitate social worker “spect-actors” to move beyond their usual bureaucratized responses in examining agency (in this case communication agency)? Looking at the detail of the transcript once again, there were clear moments of many of the spect-actor audience engaging emotionally and not just abstractly with the unfolding drama. There were clear moments of different spect-actors articulating motivation to find a solution to different difficulties occurring within the interaction. One example was of a spect-actor suggesting a different tack to that which had been used before, and the spect-actor audience loudly verbalising interest for her idea, as if a satisfactory resolution might finally have been identified. Although the spect-actor’s phrasing/strategy reverted to pre-existing categories, the audience motivation had been there to seek to change the strategy. I concluded that in general, as far as I could tell, the finding that agential strategies were not attending to particular communication issues was perhaps not due to the transformative ‘power’ of the method, but dominant structures from the context maintaining the status quo and/or the absence of agential power to find alternative strategies.

The dramatised simulation – the scripted performance - did seem to be sufficiently ‘real’ to prompt detailed recursive reflexions. Yet, looking at the analysis and similarities within the findings, I did wonder whether the method had indeed managed to encourage sufficient and varied spect-actor reflexions of the communication action. Nellhaus (2010) suggests that the role of the performance ‘Facilitator’ is crucial in this regard, by prompting ‘spect-actors’ to become involved and enact agency, and to make explicit their implicit reflexive considerations through engagement in group dialogue. Yet, when looking specifically at the Facilitator’s interjections I was reassured. She was clearly experienced in the Forum Theatre method, as she had succeeded in engaging many of the audience and encouraged cross-audience reflexion and action to transform dialogue. A matter, therefore, that I had to consider was whether similarities within these data were influenced by volunteer bias. For example, had the participants
been attracted to self-select for the study because of particular motives? For example, there was a chance that some social workers may have been particularly willing to absent Christian belief-based talk and not want to invest changes to the status quo of their own practice actions. Other social workers may have had contrasting motives, sharing more similarity rather than difference to the parents’ faith commitments but not willing/able to voice them. Perhaps this was why there were a lot of similarities in the data. Alternatively, it could have been due to the spect-actor agents experiencing similar effects of relatively enduring structures. It is a point for consideration later.

The matter of research(er) effects (Denscombe 2014) might possibly have also influenced the social workers’ reflexions. The method did encompass role-play that some people can find embarrassing or exposing, even when it is delivered in such a dynamic and relevant way within a safe learning environment. I did not receive any negative feedback about the experience, so I am concluding that this may have been less an issue influencing and possibly limiting the findings.

More reflexions are provided in the following concluding chapter, where I draw the strings together from across the data to see whether and what tentative answers can be provided to the research question.
Chapter 9: Conclusions Chapter

9.1. INTRODUCTION TO THE CHAPTER

This thesis started with the observed phenomena - the action of social-worker-with-Christian-parent-communication - and in the manner of critical realist inquiry I proposed looking back/beneath for potential structural influences, with which agential entities mediate, for such action/effects to have occurred. Now it is that I draw the developing threads of understanding from the thesis together through the following three sections:

- First, I present what seems to me to be the best retroductive explanation of ‘what seems to be going on’ behind/beneath the communication dynamics.

- Second, I move forward to where I think we should go from here in terms of changes in social work education for practice.

- Third, I offer an overall reflexive summary of the study, its limitations and the opening for further social work research.

9.2. SO WHAT SEEMS TO BE THE BEST POSSIBLE RETRODUCTIVE EXPLANATION FOR THE FINDINGS PRESENTED (‘WHAT SEEMS TO BE GOING ON’)?

In summary, the findings from the parental interviews and from the forum theatre performance data of the perspectives of the Christian parents and social workers (respectively) indicated social-worker-with-Christian-parent-communication within statutory parenting assessment to be tense, awkward, apprehensive, emotionally dense communication situations. To summarise:

- Both parties brought assumptions of communication difficulties with them to the encounter:
The parents brought assumptions of their Christian beliefs and everyday living being misunderstood by social workers – they anticipated it to be so, bringing feelings of mistrust and apprehension from the start.

The social workers brought expectations of tense ‘value-conflict’.

- There was no differentiation between being a Christian parent to a non-Christian parent in wanting the ‘best for their child’ through providing parental space hospitable, safe, and accepting for children’s developmental flourishing. Yet, the social worker perspectives of Christian parenting differed from those expressed by the Christian parents themselves. As revealed in the ‘motivated richness to their Christian parenting’ theme to the interview data, the parents spoke of:
  - The intrinsic value of their children as ‘persons’, created by and gifted to them by God (placing an obligation upon parents for their child’s safety and flourishing);
  - Their vocational service (‘calling’) to reduce suffering and provide loving care to others (such as foster children), and thereby represent God agentially in the world (‘living out’ of their worldview in an integrated way across many aspects of their lives);
  - Their emphasis upon freedom and agency for their children in choosing Christian worldview living (church worship, ‘freedom to choose to be in relationship with God’ as central to the Biblical narrative).

- The Christian parents were mistrustful about revealing the integrated nature of their Christian living in pursuing flourishing for their children. It was a wariness made worse by the social workers’ frequent absenting of Christian religious language and discussion, and their apparent negative preconceptions of Christian values.
• The actions and reflexions of the social worker spect-actors within the forum theatre data repeated this finding, whereby the social workers’ need to dispel any idealistic thinking and absent belief-talk on the part of the parents took such precedence that the social work spect-actors seemed willing/able to bracket out empathy to the parents on the receiving end of questioning.

• Asymmetrical power relations were linked to the social worker role:
  o The Christian parents perceived the collateral damage for any potential misunderstanding being too great (not being able to continue to parent/foster). The social worker’s authority to make such judgements loomed large.
  o The social workers did not refer overtly to the ‘requirements of their role’ but did refer to routinized (‘role-bearing’) prescriptions for the conduct of the assessment encounter: referring to formulaic topics and (ironically) to be non-assumptive in questioning.
  o The social workers did not refer overtly to being in a position of power to offer, instigate or remove services, but did automatically take the lead in directing the interview according to their agenda.
  o The social workers spoke abstractly of the import for social workers to be ‘non-judgemental’, but in practice this was actually more about formulaic prescriptions for asking ‘non-leading questions’.

• The theme of ‘the way social workers are’ referred to how some parents simply did not think that the social worker was capable to engage in understanding Christian worldview living. This was not just to do with the social work role, but
the way in which it was enacted within communication and the personal presentation of the social worker.

- This mistrust influenced the way the Christian parents approached their articulation of their lived out Christian values, both in terms of the attitude of fear and resignation that they would be misunderstood, and the way they adopted strategies for reinterpreting the commitments to their parenting in politically-social-work-acceptable terminology (encapsulated in the theme ‘adjusting communication to be social work acceptable’).

- Thus, the parents exercised their agency by making intentional choices about what they would communicate to social workers about their parenting based on their personal priorities and deeply vested interests. In Archerian critical realist ‘speak’, seemingly, they exercised their personal emergent powers.

- The social workers ranged between being uncertain, ambivalent, and resistant of their role even encompassing engagement in belief talk within their assessments of parenting.

- The social worker spect-actors expressed preference for mechanical, prescribed responses to the communication action.

- In the situation of uncertainty about how to communicate about a sensitive topic (belief-talk displayed within the forum theatre as even more sensitive than others), the social workers’ reaction was to enact formulaic responses of:

52 Officious and procedurally focused.
53 Friendly, or sufficiently knowledgeable, or seemingly prejudiced.
54 For example, some parents found that if they kept the focus upon the positive benefits of church experience, such as for the child’s enjoyment, as opposed to referring to more deeper aspects of personal belief, that this was 'social work acceptable' language.
Friendly, smiling overtures, rather than to seek to discuss the matter in a more direct, explorative way.

Strategies of ‘avoidance’ and ‘disguise’, particularly taking the form of the notion of ‘the church issue’/‘going to church’.

Maintaining this notional phrasing (‘the church issue’/‘going to church’), despite the parents correcting the social workers (that ‘church’ is their ‘family’ rather than a ‘place’ and matter of ‘attendance’)

• In failing to either initiate or respond directly and empathically to explore the meaning of what a parent may have communicated about their belief-based parenting, the opposite seemed achieved: the parents became more guarded.

The matter of looking to identify some critical features of what seems to be going on behind/beneath these dynamics within the interview and forum theatre data is inevitably tricky, given that, as Wynn and Williams (2012) summarise, potentially several different complicated patterns to causal mechanisms can arise due to the open nature of systems. Nevertheless, I have caught hold of some key threads and in what follows I endeavour to make transparent my reasoning for how they might link together, referring the reader again to the horizons of what I already know (referring to the three chapters of the structural fields) before glimpsing further to what seemingly lies deeper/beyond to offer a tentative explanation.

A first matter was whether the difficulties in communication were due to a collision of worldviews, and associated difficulties in talking from and across worldviews. I want to take care not to hint at a ‘clash of alien civilisations’ type explanation here, for it is not one that sufficiently explains the nuances described by either the participants within my data or the intersecting structural inclinations considered in the earlier chapters. There were points of interconnection and compatibility, points of mutual understanding and
mutual agreement, reflecting a common humanity, in which we can recognise and can see people getting on with diverse worldviews. It is not Wittgenstein's "if a lion could speak, we could not understand him" because his worldview is so different. It is not the case that you can only understand a Christian by ‘walking in their shoes’ and ‘going native’ as a complete insider. It is not about a lack of potential for sufficient understanding, so what is going on?

Is it about language? Certainly, the social workers’ lack of knowledge of religious language, and particularly its rootedness to the underlying Christian worldview, was apparent in both the interview data and forum theatre data. Herein, in particular, the predominant way in which the social worker spect-actors avoided/absented belief-based talk and referred to Christian beliefs as ‘going to church’ seemed vacuous and inadequate. Do the contextual structural conditions shed light upon any apparent underlying reasoning for this linguistic communication strategy? Drawing upon the structural conditions discussed in Chapter 3 (of social work as an institution and set of practices), the social workers’ communication agency seemed almost certainly impeded by not having been provided with knowledge of religious/non-religious worldview language (from across different worldviews) within their qualifying education. That discussion pointed to social work education and practice being structurally mediated by secularising concerns that are associated with a secular-liberal-humanist ‘professionalising’ (a professional distancing) away from its (primarily) original Christian foundations. I considered this as particularly evident in the recent ‘disenchanted’ structural conditions of procedural and instrumental bureaucratic statutory frontline social work practice, and the social work educational outcomes for it (framed as ‘professional capabilities’), that are considered to be driven by pragmatic utilitarian neo-liberal state interests. As discussed earlier, neo-liberal organisational interests are not met by social workers trained to have independently, creatively thought out use of knowledge and skills to deliver bespoke interventions (such as, for
example, dialogic exploration of beliefs and associated parenting practices), but prefer
the use of pre-coded assessment frameworks and procedures to meet a managerialist
agenda of generating reliable responses of consistent quality and ‘manage risk’. Moreover, in this instrumentally driven practice context, it is a hardened Liberalism that
dominates, looking to implement a frontline statutory welfare response that places
responsibility upon individual parents to kowtow or face draconian measures of
enforced state intervention (see Chapter 3 for this discussion).

Where is the legitimacy for the operation of such unequal power structures within such
strong-arm tactics with families, and is this underlying the descriptions within my data?
The thesis (Chapters 3 and 4) pointed to potential legitimacy as provided by the
prescribed use of empirically-informed tools – tools which uphold social work’s
preferred epistemic criteria focus upon epistemic certitude, as cultivated by natural
science to accord with a naturalistic worldview of reality (that at base everything is
natural, self-creating and rationally defensible), and upholding as knowledge only those
claims objectively unblemished by the subjectivity of cultural values (and so able to
claim secure purchase of their ontology). For my purposes, this certainly suggests at
least a part-explanation of what seems to be going on in the data. It is possible to
conceive the social workers as closing down discussion of spiritual matters
prematurely, recognising that they lacked knowledge and confidence, but also lacking
the professional legitimacy to engage with belief-based talk with the instrumental and
empirical structural inclinations present in the practice context and their professional
qualifying education showing tendency to potentially influence their agential response.
The social workers, in their anxiety over how to proceed, and in the light of this
corporate agency and structural mediation, potentially found terminology that seemed
to them to be more ‘comfortable’ and ‘uncontentious’.
But why choose this particular terminology (‘going to church’) as ‘comfortable’ and ‘uncontentious’? My proposed explanation for this ties in with my earlier discussion about universalism as a liberal response to difference (in Chapter 3), whereby in an attempt to reduce contention and increase inclusivity belief-terminology becomes reframed to be relativised, private, nominal and neutral – domesticated and devoid of deeper transcendental ontological meaning. By reframing the terminology of the parents’ statements of their faith-based beliefs/parenting practices into the socio-cultural ‘life-style’ phenomenon of ‘going to church’ the social workers were able to represent religious praxis and belief in the form acceptable to the hegemonic epistemic criteria privileged by social work. Critical realists would argue that this is representative of both the epistemic fallacy and a ‘flat’ (as opposed to deep) ontology. It discounts the possibility for communication that bears reference to strata of reality that is non-naturalistic (such as seen here in the parents’ reference to transcendent spiritual reality) on the assumptive basis that: a) at base everything/anything ‘factually real’ is solely natural, self-creating and rationally defensible; and/because b) epistemic criteria cannot otherwise claim secure purchase of their ontology. As agents of a secular-liberal-humanist professional project, social workers likely operate such taken-for-granted structural assumptions of neutrality and naturalism. As such, there is a likelihood of them giving unquestioned default status to naturalistic explanations of the order-of-things, and accordingly giving no status for rational dialogue with religious adherents about religious explanations of natural and non-natural phenomena. In this light, it is possible to make sense of why the social workers appeared to be reducing entities and explanations of one stratum of reality (transcendental) to entities and explanations at another (socio-cultural). Thus, to offer a simple summary, another part-explanation for ‘what seems to be going on in the data’, is the structural mediation upon the social work agents of the empiricist inclination of social work (emanating from the naturalistic meta-narrative), that not only operates to bracket out communication of issues pertaining to transcendence (perceiving that at base reality is understood in
solely natural terms), but also reframes the belief-talk into relativised, private, nominal and neutral (socio-cultural ‘life-style’) terminology to reduce contention and increase inclusivity.

That the social workers might be operating such presumptions of neutrality and naturalness in such a taken-for-granted way helps explain why it was that even when corrected by the parents (that ‘church’ is their family rather than a place or matter of ‘attendance’) or even when repeatedly stipulated by the parents that they provided freedom of choice to their children (thereby effecting standard liberal tolerance) that the social worker spect-actors did not pick up on their emphasis, and continued with the ‘going to church’ terminology. It accounts for the parents’ perceptions of an inherent prejudice on the part of the social workers, pertaining to ‘Christian parents inevitably enforcing and indoctrinating their children’. Indeed, it was a perception that seemingly influenced the communication interaction somewhat dramatically within the forum theatre performance. Indeed, upon being disbelieved and continually ‘not listened to’, the parents responded by being guarded and deploying agency by altering their communication. It was not just within this forum theatre data set. The parental interview data displayed the appearance of apparent prejudicial attitudes (of the social workers assuming indoctrination), with most of the parents identifying preconceptions within social workers’ interrogative questioning style, and use of hypothetical scenarios and abstract belief-principles/positions that had little to do with their parenting situations or practices. Indeed, my reflexive notes of the forum theatre highlighted the high degree of emotion emanating from both the parents and social worker spect-actors (tension, frustration, irritation, awkwardness), and I recorded my own feelings of uncomfortableness as I beheld the communication going fruitlessly back-and-forth in their activity of ‘not reflectively listening’.

55 By this I mean those social worker spect-actors who offered their reflexive perspectives and engaged in the forum theatre performance at these points. There may have been social workers who withheld their perspectives because they did not share such prejudicial attitudes.
How far were the spect-actors more consciously ‘missing the point’? If so, then can this be explained as part of the aforementioned Liberalist preponderance for ‘strong-arming’ and authoritarian tone (Tuck, 2013; Ferguson, 2014), even given the social work profession’s traditional structural inclinations for identifying/addressing inequality and engagement in relationship-based practice? It does appear to indicate an additional aspect to what was going on in the data. The social work concern to close down parental discourse of beliefs – on the basis of controversy arising from the parental articulation of conflicting accounts of reality - seems also driven by a secular-liberal moral agenda to *authoritatively impose* liberal values of freedom and tolerance to smooth over such spiky issues for the ‘good of society’. This makes sense contextually. Referring back to my earlier ‘macro’ discussion of possible structural conditions (Chapter 2), the secular-liberal-humanist expectation of ‘valuing diversity’ is for the Christian expression of values to be sufficiently private and unobtrusive so as to co-operate and cause no offense to alternative cultural Others. For toleration as ‘Other’ a Christian perspective and way of life cannot convey negative public attention. Yet, statutory parenting assessment, of course, is simultaneously a publicly mandated activity but within the private environment of the family. As such, as seen here in the data, when the Christian parents moved from a position of privately holding a Christian worldview to disclosing it publically in their parenting assessment, it triggered the opposing trajectory of non-toleration, as seen here in the forum theatre data with the social workers displaying an awkward non-celebration of diversity. Referring to the discussion in Chapter 2, a secular liberal humanist (whose vision excludes a transcendent dimension) might find the disclosure of a belief system (whose plausibility structures it deems are irrational and subjective) as illogical and thereby uncomfortable. Unease steepens, and non-toleration accelerated if a Christian’s publically made position intensifies to asserting and defending Christian values as being ‘truth’, or raising criticisms of the secular status quo. Whilst this is legally
permissible and not in breach of human rights freedoms, the secular liberal worldview response is to find the controversial expression of it ‘bad taste’ (Griffiths, 2001) and to “clash with what seem to be common sense and simple decency” for it does not follow a normative stance for fostering civic virtue (in which freedom of public expression of religious values is expected to be sacrificed) (Netland, 2015, p. 232). This helps make sense of the forum theatre data, for the social worker spect-actor reflexions and actions clearly expressed awkwardness whenever the parents used belief-based language and referred to their Christian motivated parenting praxis. Moreover, drawing on both data sets, there were clear moments of non-toleration in both, when the social worker stopped reflectively listening and reverted to a formulaic strategy of using hypothetical scenarios to assertively question parenting responses.

Yet, the agential actions of the Christian parents described within both the interview data and observed within the forum theatre data show that religious worldviews cannot be simply side-stepped. In moments when the social workers seemingly closed down religious language on the basis of it being non-naturalistic and thereby awkward, ‘bad taste’, controversial, and not tolerable, the parents’ worldviews did not just ‘go away’ when they were ‘silenced’. It was not a matter of private life-style choice that they could easily ‘tune out’ of, like, from one ‘irrational’ or ‘fictional’ worldview into the ‘reality’ and ‘reality’ of the other (as seemingly prescribed by the social spect-actors reflexions in the forum theatre data). Rather, in those moments of ‘absence’, the parents were sufficiently guarded and alert to take the tack of pro-actively altering their language to align with politically correct expressions of liberal toleration (particularly ‘valuing diversity’ and ‘freedom of belief’). The parents were agents with deeply vested interests and seemingly recognised that they were in asymmetrical relationships of power with the social workers. Indeed, their presentation in the forum theatre data of being guarded appeared to behaviourally manifest what the parents in the interview data described as apprehension and fear. Those Christian parents described the collateral
damage for any potential misunderstanding as simply too high (not being able to continue to parent/foster). As agents of a Christian worldview that propounds obedience to God (as Creator and saviour) and security in their identity and vocation (as created to ‘image’ God's agapean care to others), what else could have been the underlying conditions to create the need for vigilant and diversionary actions? What was going on that made them so seemingly aware of the power dynamics and so distrustful of the social workers’ capability to adequately understand their parenting praxis as ‘truthfully’ living out their integrated worldview?

I propose that a part-explanation can be found by referring back to the earlier ‘macro’ structural discussions (Chapters 3 and 4) of the contribution that a Christian theoretical perspective and Habermasian theoretical perspective brings to understanding the deeper levels of social-worker-with-Christian-parent communication. That perspective highlights the importance for recognising that communication action always signifies something, that underpinning all communication action are essentially faith and/or political commitments/Stories. This includes the secular-liberal-humanist (post-Enlightenment) worldview that, ostensibly, tells its own Story that it is the sole provider of secure (hegemonic naturalistic) knowledge foundations for neutral, rationalistic communication. Yet, as discussed in Chapter 4, there can be no certain knowledge foundations beneath communication (and therefore no neutrality) because there are no secure knowledge foundations. To believe that there are is the product of the post-Enlightenment worldview, and is itself a faith commitment (MacIntyre 1984, p.22). Thus, moving back to the data of the parents altering their language, a potential part-explanation, therefore, is that the Christian parents, by virtue of themselves living-out an ontologically motivated integrated worldview, could see the operation of a different set of faith commitments/worldview (the secular liberal humanist worldview) in the communication action of the social workers (their non-toleration). Moreover, the parents could see that the social workers (as corporate agents) came to the
communication with assumptions that their professional secular liberal humanist standpoint was both normative and neutral. Consequentially, they were unlikely to hear the voice of the parents (to hear their God-Storied communication action) without colonising or silencing because that would mean recognising/expressing that their own communication action was ‘Storied’. This, I would proffer, is what, for example foster carer Catherine encapsulated by “the whole way that social workers are” and what another foster carer, Tim, meant by “the social workers go about in their silos” - that their awareness of the social workers’ corporate ‘silo-ed’ and assumptive communication agency is partly what underlay the parents’ strategies of diversion away from detailing/defending Christian motivations to their parenting praxis.

Indeed, the critical realist gaze, is not at the epistemological level of the communication, but rather at the deeper ontological level of what the communication action might ‘really’ be communicating about. Scratching even further beneath the surface of the contextual deliberations (the horizons of what I already now know), what are the awkwardness, prejudicial assumptions, and formulaic responses even more deeply communicating about, or ‘absencing’? Taken together, I wonder if part of what was actually being communicated was an awkward tentative awareness of the discussion actually being about transcendent ‘truth’ – the ‘real’ ultimate-order-of-things – in that at a personal rather than social work agential level, the social workers potentially shared similarities with the parents in having concerns of common humanity to face ultimate-questions-of-being-and-purpose: Who am I? Where am I? What is wrong? What is the solution? Perhaps (for some) the communication was about a heightened personal awareness of their inner conflicts and positions to such existential and transcendent matters? Relatedly, also, that such personal conflict arose within the paradoxical situation of professionally imposing liberal principles of non-toleration to the Other for publically articulating the same kind of existential issues (transcendent truth and truthful living in light of it) that were privately triggered in themselves even if
(for few, some, or most) their answers to the existential questioning differed. Herein, possibly, in such existential awareness, was a realisation that the Other was no longer so Other. Perhaps, rather, the Other was uncomfortably similar. Also uncomfortably similar was the same non-legitimising, non-tolerating discourse that this time became applied to oneself, but yet for reasons of being professionally illegitimate (and ‘off the menu’) for communication action, remained invisibly present in tense, awkward interchange. This tentative idea does not seem inconceivable in the light of Davie’s (1994) influential sociological findings of religiosity in the UK - that transcendent/existential matters were referenced even among those she categorised as ‘neither believing in a religious worldview nor belonging to a religious community’ (see Chapter 1 for my fuller outline of this study). In other words, in looking to make sense of what was going on within my data, the point I am raising is that the social workers’ corporate agential strategies to prematurely close down the belief-based language, do not sufficiently tally with a solely professional agential responsibility to impose secular liberal humanist principles of toleration. Rather, the communication of awkwardness also suggests action/inaction at the personal level, stemming from encountering matters of moral purpose, transcendence and truth.

If what was being communicated was an awkward tentative awareness of the discussion actually being about transcendent ‘truth’ (the ultimate-order-of-things), and this was at a personal agential level (because it triggered personal existential questioning) and not solely at a social work agential level (because it was professionally-normatively ‘non-legitimate’ or ‘non-tolerated’), then this sheds light on another aspect of what seemed to be going on in the data. It helps make sense of the second strategy that the social workers seemingly adopted when they encountered uncertainty of how to respond to the belief-based language of the parents, which was to seek reliance upon the formulaic communication action of adopting a friendly, smiley, relational style. If I refer back to the structural ‘macro’ perspectives of earlier
chapters (Chapters 3 and 4), then I can make sense of this in relation to the romanticist inclinations within responses to spirituality that followed the humanist drive to be sceptical of any external authority to traditional meta-narratives/explanations, and assert the highest form of knowledge as autonomous, personal experience. Basically, if I follow my understanding of the social worker spect-actors' communication action as incorporating sharp sentence of conflicting emotions within their personal inner space, as well as the tense, irritated, awkward feelings of the immediate socio-cultural space, then what the social workers may have been doing was to rely more on the authority of their own inner-directed and private experience of how to communicate. Are such emotions always to be deemed ‘correct enough’ to rely upon? Surely, there are clear dangers for any agential strategy that gives reliance to the authority of crude emotions but does not simultaneously require engagement in critical reflexivity over their appropriateness?

The main thrust of this explanation, therefore, is of communicative tension in talking about ambivalent and contested matters of ontological reality. If I direct the reader’s attention back to the ‘macro’ discussions in Chapters 2-4, widening the focus again in my parts-and-whole thesis, I used illustrations from the data to present my excavation of these ideas in relation to how social-work-with-Christian-parent-communication takes place across worldviews - that this is not a conversation about or between worldviews. The presence of structural conditions displaying empirical, utilitarian, romanticist, and secularist inclinations within the institution of social work (emanating from and exposing the profession’s mainly secular liberal humanist worldview commitments) appear to promote instrumental moral reasoning and dissuade dialogue about personal spirituality. These commitments marginalise communication of Christian worldview praxis, with social workers’ instrumental reasoning particularly operating to distort communication. From these ‘macro’ considerations, it seems that social work communication primarily colonises the Christian voice. Social work’s
traditional ethical allegiance to social justice – evident in the romanticist inclination - appears to temper the authoritarian tone. Yet, in the uncertainty of how to respond to the belief-based language of the parents, and in the presence of internal conflicting emotions, as well as the tense, irritated, awkward feelings of the immediate socio-cultural space, any such agential action upon romanticist inclinations to rely on the authority of their own inner-directed and private experience of how to communicate is risky, if not dangerous. Moreover, worryingly, for all the time that matters of conflicting theories of ontological truth remain ‘off the menu’ of professional social work education and practice, then critical reflexivity of such emotional responses will not happen (well, not in any pastorally/professionally supported and tutored way), and the risks of idiosyncratic, and potentially harmful practice to its practitioners and service users may ensue.

Moreover, in view of such ethical imperative for critical self-reflexivity, looking back to Chapter Four, I drew upon Christian theoretical concepts and Habermasian theoretical ideas to propose an understanding of communication action as signifying (bearing meaning to) the meta-narrative (Story) in which the person inhabits. In order to enable dialogue that is not distorted, social workers will need to take steps to grasp another’s narrative. To do this, they have to recognise that they also have a narrative.

9.3. So where do I think we should go from here?

Put simply, in summary the thesis points to a real problem for us as social work’s agents in our communication with Christian parents: Christian parents are telling us that generally they don’t trust us to be able to engage meaningfully with their ‘telling’ of integrated worldview living. They choose their words carefully, and they avoid engagement in authentic talk about their parenting praxis. Taking the lead from the social workers themselves, the parents predominately keep parenting topics to the secular liberal allowable (tolerable) level of socio-cultural phenomenon (such as the
vacuous ‘going to church’), being highly aware of the asymmetric power relations of the encounter, and on the surface join in with the occlusive representation (‘absencing’) of the ontological commitments to their parenting. Herein, the communication atmosphere is highly emotive: tense, fearful, apprehensive, suspicious, and sometimes irritable. As social work agents, this should concern us, for how can we make the informed decisions required of parenting assessment if the evidence is that we are considered so untrustworthy that the parents will not communicate? This is a substantial issue – we are not trusted – but why are we not trusted? The thesis points to taken-for-granted, generalised, assumptive preconceptions – prejudice – towards Christians, accompanied by a deep lack of religious literacy (knowledge of the contentiousness and complexity of secular, religious and spiritual worldviews and religious language), and lack of professional legitimacy for transcendental matters to be in social work assessment (unless translated into socio-cultural phenomenon). Social work readers may feel provoked by this statement – responding with “I’m not prejudiced!” - particularly those strongly committed to the profession’s traditional social justice agenda for identifying inequality and empowering the dispossessed. Yet, looking to the thick description of the thesis (with its micro empirical focus of the interaction, and the widened macro focus of the contextual structural features), if prejudice is not present then why are Christian parents experiencing this?

The substance and means by which the profession might address prejudice and increase religious literacy (by which I mean knowledge of the complexity of integrated secular, spiritual and religious worldviews and religious and secular language) is through social work training, and social work research. To conclude the chapter, and indeed the thesis, I consider each of these ‘ways ahead’ in turn. I note, however, that I do not approach this naively. I do not anticipate great or speedy changes in mutual understanding within either of these ‘ways ahead’, for the ‘bigger picture’ nature of problematic matters of mutual understanding has gone back (at least) to the
Enlightenment, with a largely 2000 year old constantly evolving worldview interfacing with a 200 year old modern worldview.

First, when looking to social work education about prejudice and religious literacy, a key issue that I have drawn out from similar debates within critical religious education (Wright, 2004; Dinham and Francis, 2016), is whether social work’s agents are willing to look to truly empowering the dispossessed and the colonised. For example, what if social work communication could come from a place of critical empowerment, recognising that secular, religious and spiritual worldviews are contentious in their claims to having differing, more truthful accounts of the ultimate nature of things to each other, but imperative to their adherents (such as the parents here) as they search for/engage in more-or-less truthful living in line with their ultimate commitments (their parenting praxis)? Relatedly, what if social work education for such a critically empowering approach could begin by perceiving worldviews as not being discrete and hermeneutically sealed but ambiguous in being open worldview systems of deep meaning with substantial identifying features ‘that go all the way down’, but which evolve and change in line with their community self-understanding, the demands of religious elites, or other demands of the changing socio-political climate? Certainly for Dinham, one of few social work academics engaging with ‘religion’, such a consideration is a component of accelerating religious literacy: “…we need to be released from the notion that we can and ought to learn religions as though they’re monolithic blocks of unchanging tradition, the same everywhere, for everyone at all times.”(Dinham, 2016). There is similarity but also variation within worldviews, nuanced seepage and shared interests, but what seems highly important is that those systemic worldviews still contain ontological commitments. Another point is that within this acceptance of ambiguity to religion must be the important recognition that secular,  

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56 This is an online source and so there is no page number.
religious and spiritual worldviews have their dark and their light. We cannot ignore that there are some extreme manifestations of dangerous ideologies and abusive actions by some individuals and groups. These include homophobic, sexist, racist, disableist actions, as seen in the reports of the clerical abuse of children, and faith-based abuse of children labelled as witches or evil-spirit possessed, and violent acts of terrorism. Thus, it is not about tolerating every expression of religion and belief, but it is about recognising that there are many individual and community expressions of religious worldviews that do not cut across liberal values, and occupy positions far away from (and in opposition to) such extremes. Moreover, it is also about recognising that extremes of dangerous ideologies and violent actions, including homophobic, sexist, racist, and disableist abuse are also held by some individuals and groups self-determining as ‘non-religious’.

I make this first point from being professionally reflectively aware that social work education rarely acknowledges or articulates that its professional competences for qualifying level, and knowledge and skills statements for post-qualifying level, are based upon a foundational meta-narrative that is itself founded on faith commitments, but which is deemed/pronounced normative and neutral by its agents. Student social workers, social work educators (and as seen here, foster carers and adoptive parents whose parenting is assessed) enter into this worldview portrayal of normativity and neutrality. They are expected to push their preconceptions aside, morally judging their own preconceptions Other and not normative nor neutral. One worldview appears to draw a curtain around the others. As considered earlier, this appears to occur without sufficient understanding of the detail and ambiguity of its own or other worldview commitments, or individual or community interpretation of them, which may indicate considerable more or less ‘valuing of diversity’ than prejudicial assumptions allow. As it stands then it would seem that this is not the original Lockeian liberal position of different worldview meta-narratives intelligently dialoguing in the pursuit of truth. My
point though is this: would it not make sense to disclose this state of affairs in a more open, and perhaps more supportive way with those whom we instate into our profession whom potentially come with an array of worldview preconceptions? Would not such prior reflective but educative open discussion help our profession and its agents to operate with more knowledge, confidence, and engagement in their communication with parents (being less like the earlier characterisation of 'silos')?

Second, relatedly, if worldviews are to be taught as being controversial (in their search for/enactment in the light of ultimate truth) and ambiguous (as open systems with substantial identifying features but evolve and change) then the social work profession must surely look to cultivate levels of spiritual literacy as critical practice. Here, again, the profession can learn from the debates from critical religious education (Wright, 2004; Dinham and Francis, 2016). For example, improving religious literacy cannot just be based upon teaching a selection of facts or elements (about religious traditions for example) at the cost of other ones. To privilege the public knowledge of empirical studies over private knowledge derived from communities of faith or from personal experience is to commit the epistemic fallacy - all explanations warrant inclusion and adjudication. So, processes of critical emancipation need to be integral to teaching and learning methods. Boal’s Forum Theatre method of participatory street theatre (1979), as utilised within my thesis here57, presents promise of an emancipatory approach to learning that centres on empowering the dispossessed, and which provides a way for critical reflection. Through a process of first watching a dramatised performance (to promote an audience’s conscious recognition of structurally induced problems) and then facilitating audience engagement in processes of critical reflection and role-play (in the developing drama) the method seeks to produce transformative practice actions that advance service user agency.

57 For which I drew from the work of: Houston et al. 2001; Boehm and Boehm, 2003; Kaptani and Yuval-Davis, 2008; Woodcock Ross, 2011 and 2016.
As seen in the thesis here, the dramatised script (performed in Part 1) provides a way for the asymmetric power relations of different worldviews to come into consciousness, and draws attention to the power differential (such as the ‘absencing’ or ‘silencing’ effects) of one or more hegemonic meta-narratives. Having watched the drama and been ‘moved’ and ‘provoked’ by it, the facilitator encourages the audience to critically reflect on the action and seek to improve it, drawing out how their reflexions rest upon particular presuppositions and ‘what matters to them’ in light of their prior commitments. The role of the facilitator enables the reflection within an environment that is open, safe, and welcoming to different worldview perspectives, verbally reassuring the audience that clashes will inevitably arise, but using such moments to highlight ambiguities of worldviews. The method does not just stop at reflection, but moves to action, encouraging the audience to ‘try-out’ and evaluate practice action strategies that can improve the communication by diminishing the power differentials within the dramatised scenario. This ‘demand’ for action, which follows the consciousness-raising of the drama, brings momentum for transformation. Potentially, it pushes for more than a status quo approach of reductionist practice actions that (as seen in the thesis here) reduce belief to a (naturalistic) socio-cultural level of asking just about life-style (‘going to church’) and pushes for explanations and actions that go beyond the (romanticist) personal experiential level of ‘it feels right’. Moreover, with rehearsing being in-built within the method, there are plentiful opportunities to increase practitioners’ inner confidence in ‘living with the ambiguity’ and managing the internal and social conflicts of the communication arising from consciousness of that ambiguity and conflicting worldview accounts of integrated living.

Third, looking back to the thesis findings, it seems possible to highlight some very practical tools for social-work-communication-with-Christian-parents that social workers can draw upon in social work education and practice environments. First, it seems key
that a social worker prepare for the communication in order to promote empathic skills of ‘reflective listening’ to display acceptance of difference (and not apply generalised categories of otherness), and to be able to engage in conversations whereby sensitive and controversial issues concerning spirituality are likely to be felt if not also spoken about. Although not writing about spirituality, previously I have referred to such preparatory work as the skill of ‘preparatory empathy’ (Woodcock Ross, 2011 and 2016), drawing on the work of Lawrence Shulman (2009) in highlighting it as an important component for the beginning stages of communication in establishing a ‘shared agenda’ between the parties concerning the purpose for the work. Without a ‘shared purpose’ there is the danger of dual conflicting agendas, or a hidden agenda, and resultant communication being ‘illusory’ (Shulman, 2009). An important aspect for ‘achieving a shared purpose’ (Woodcock Ross, 2011 and 2016) is this preparatory work of considering the kinds of communicative tensions and communication obstacles that might be manifested within the communication. This is not to be presumptive, but to enhance vigilance, so that if such feelings or behaviours manifest, there is a greater chance that the social worker might identify them and seek to show empathy by demonstrating ‘reflective listening’ to them. The important issue that this thesis has identified, is that some of those communicative tensions run very deep at a structural level, with only their effects tangibly ‘grasped’ as feelings or behaviours, but still percolating the communication action. Thus, taking time to prepare, such as in preliminary workshops (using, for example, Forum Theatre), to identify such structurally percolating-agential interplay will be crucial in recognising potential effects of the deep ontology of the communication environment, and thereby avoid the flat ontology of reducing communication to merely the agential level.

Certainly, when looking to the published UK social work literature of statutory parenting assessment, neither the skills of ‘preparatory empathy’ nor of ‘achieving a shared purpose’ appear to have been explicitly applied to the matter of communication about
integrated (‘lived out’) secular, religious or spiritual worldview living, but my findings here suggest those skills could be useful. For example, the data identified parents coming to the communication encounter with feelings of apprehension and fear, not just at the social worker’s authority arising from their statutory role in assessing their capability to parent, but as a professional who they could not trust to ‘hear’ and understand their Christian worldview parenting praxis. Recognising that such feelings are quite likely present, social workers can prepare to use communication skills to address them, such as ‘reaching for service user feeling’ (a question openly asked, such as ‘how do you feel about that?’) or ‘putting unarticulated feelings into words’ (the social worker tentatively proposing, as accurately as possible, the feelings that he or she perceives to be communicated by the other person, then seeking confirmation of the accuracy) (Woodcock Ross, 2011 and 2016). The latter could most usefully be expressed within opening statements that display empathy for the parents’ potential apprehension at the situation of communicating with a social worker, and to openly emphasise their preparedness to be willing and capable to engage in belief-based talk, recognising that it might be controversial and awkward for them both but highlighting that they acknowledge its vital importance to the parents in their parenting praxis. In this action, the important communication issue is to name the ontology: ‘I don’t think you think truth is relative’ (merely socio-cultural ‘lifestyle’ phenomena or autonomous private experience), and ‘I think that that you are endeavouring to live truthfully according to your beliefs’. Taking the initiative in openly naming/talking openly about the controversial matters of ‘truth’ and the ‘transcendent/ultimate-order-of-things’, may well encourage more openness in the communication from the parents.

Indeed, in view of this preparedness to be/display ‘openness’, arguably a related feature of this beginning stage is for the social worker to self-examine the idea that they themselves might be bringing potentially prejudicial preconceptions to the communication encounter. This, as Dinham states, is about questioning ones
“disposition”: “...what emotional and deeply held assumptions are brought to the conversation and what are the affects of these deep, ‘in the bones’, positions” (Dinham, 2016). An aspect of this is to recognise that Christian parents come to the encounter, not as indoctrinated cultural ‘dupes’, but as people who have intelligently and freely made their decision about their worldview beliefs and everyday praxis. Indeed, often, and particularly in the case of fostering and adoptive parenting assessment, the parents are professionals in their own right, who bring considerable knowledge and experience, and expect it of other professionals. Thus, for the social worker, an important communication issue is to guard against unknowingly imposing one’s own religious, spiritual or secular views by considering the framing of their questions. For social workers this means recognising when certain predetermined or customary questions or details might be being emphasised at the cost of other ones that the parent might regard as equally significant. I say this knowing that within parenting assessment a social worker has to judge whether a child will be safely cared for, in terms of likelihood for being/not being ‘at risk of significant harm’, and exploratory questions will need to be asked to determine this. Yet, what this thesis has shown is that if care is not taken in the delivery of that exploration, then communication becomes guarded and superficial, and ultimately more like game playing.

Fourth, a matter for social work educators to consider is to raise the status of ‘social work communication’ in the curriculum, and address its current position as situated within just one (‘Intervention and Skills’) of the nine professional capabilities of social work’s Professional Capabilities Framework (British Association of Social Workers, 2018, online source). The thesis as a whole, in utilising the philosophical principles of ontological realism/ontological depth, epistemic relativity, and judgemental rationality, has pointed to the need to be sceptical of seeing ‘social work communication’ merely

58 This is an online source and so there is no page number.
59 This is an online source so there is no page number.
as a set of technical-rational skills. Social work communication is potentially better understood as ‘communication capacity’\textsuperscript{60}. Social work communication is not just about ‘skills’ but does have deep linkages to structural forces. This necessitates a move towards more critical pedagogy in teaching methods, and away from training style delivery. It means recognising that the structural context for communication plays a large part for the capacity for communication agency – it is not solely down to the individual – and to see it reduced and conflated to the individual is indeed oppressive. This is not to say that agential factors do not play a part – it is similarly important not to be downwards conflationary and see communication as determined solely by social-structural influences.

9.4. OVERALL REFLEXIVE SUMMARY OF THIS STUDY, ITS LIMITATIONS, AND THE OPENING FOR FURTHER SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH

So what can I say about the status and generalisability of my tentative explanation in meeting these exploratory aims? The first thing to highlight is that for critical realists, any powerful explanation can only come out of a powerful description (Danermark \textit{et al.} 2002; Sayer, 2004). Rather than distinguishing cause/effect relationships from patterns apparent in empiric data, recognising the epistemic fallacy in doing so (deep reality being more than the patterns and parameters of human knowledge as discussed in Chapters 5 and 6), critical realists pursue rich descriptions of relations between structural and agential entities at different levels of ontologically layered complex reality, such as social contexts, cultural motivations, behavioural patterns, internal thoughts, beliefs and feelings (Wilson and McCormack, 2006; Davies, 2008). In recognising reality as a complex open, laminated social system, these kinds of causal explanatory analyses look deeper than the level of (empirically experienced) surface events for such inter-connected agential-structural mediations, and are not reliant upon

\textsuperscript{60}This point about communication skills being better understood as ‘communication capacity’, than merely a set of technical-rational skills is also made by Lefevre (2018).
controlled comparison groups or closed systems. Critical realist inspired explanations seek to discern/describe ‘what’ constitutes social phenomena, as well as the ‘how’ and ‘why’ such social phenomena occur by logically and transparently discerning (applying the principle of judgemental rationality) the generative structures and mechanisms that appear to give rise to it (Moren and Blom, 2003). At the same time, in acknowledgement of the principle of epistemic relativity in addition to that of ontological depth, such explanatory statements can never claim completeness, being only partial ‘transitive’ representations of a complex, open systemic reality, moving ever closer towards but not entirely ‘intransitive’ reality itself (Sayer, 2000; Bergin et al., 2008).

From the point of view of my study, critics not sympathetic to such critical realist positions may well argue against the potential application of theoretical inferences to agents and contexts beyond my own perspectivism (as the researcher) or the individual particularities of the research study situations (Blaikie, 1993). In retort, the critical realist argues that while it is not possible to claim outright epistemic certainty, neither is it possible to claim out-and-out scepticism, because this would obviate examples of existing knowledge of reality that are, for example, adequate enough to perform brain surgery upon infants. In other words, human knowledge is fallible and can be misguided, but it is not necessarily always erroneous, and (provisional) statements about reality can be made (Gunton, 1983; Groff, 2004; Cruikshank, 2007).

Thus, in recognition of contingency to my knowledge-claims, the issue of transferability is not one of impossibility but still requires caution, particularly in research situations such as mine that have small samples, recruited on a purposive, volunteer basis.

My explanation was built on the shoulders of a thick description. However I recognise that any potential for me to claim such critical-realism-inspired-moves towards increasing understanding, and/or the findings to offer transferability, requires me as the researcher to not just consciously recognise that I was a centrally positioned instrument, but to point to how and where this occurred (as far as I am consciously...
able). Reflecting back upon the thesis as a whole, there are many moments where I have endeavoured to attend to the influence of ‘self’ in the sequential chain of research activities leading to the retroductive explanation. This first occurred when I sought to make wise decisions about the original research questions. Referring back to Chapter 1, when I drew out the rationale for the study from the policy and practice context, I also gave a detailed personal and professional standpoint position. Both discussions reinforced the need for a structure-agential interplay focus, for attention to the matter of ‘worldview’, and for active inclusion of the voice of service users (those of the Christian parents, not just the social workers). I also drew upon those discussions to delimit the boundaries for the case study approach, recognising that boundary-markers to the contextual environment had to be set somewhere and chose those most likely to be relevant and fruitful (Wynn and Williams, 2012). Certainly, in terms of relevance, there was good theoretical rationale for using the subject material of ‘worldviews’ (both Christian and Post-Enlightenment) as a boundary-marker to increase service user perspective inclusion (as discussed in Chapter 1). It was a decision that I kept under review as the study unfolded and as I sought to listen with the data inferentially rather than (at least knowingly) deductively imposing a priori understandings. A concrete example is contained within one of my reflexive memos made during the processes of data analysis, when I had noted the rich understandings arising from the angle of ‘worldviews’ and had wondered if my relative comfort in using this subject material (‘worldviews’) probably did also stem from my personal and professional biography (as described within the personal/professional standpoint). I had gone on to wonder about this matter of ‘relative comfort’ because I did feel considerably self-conscious at the public self-disclosure. I wondered if this reflected a similar position of vulnerability to potential public misunderstanding that my participants spoke about in their interviews. In the event, it was a personal reflexion that added weight to the parent interview findings rather than limitations, for it caused me to take care to report the data with careful attention to accuracy.
Reflexive processes were also evident in Chapter 6 ‘Methodology’, where I had to consider which research methods showed most potential to materialise critical realist underlaboured methodology for the research question(s) whilst also giving upmost attention to ethical considerations arising from the practical circumstances of the research situation. This meant drawing upon my professional social work and published research knowledge to find a way to uphold critical realism’s concerns for emancipatory practice through ensuring no harm to the participants, whilst simultaneously maintaining integrity to the phenomenological aspects of critical-realist-principled inquiry (to get as close as possible to the phenomenon). It was never going to be ethically appropriate to stop social workers within their real-life interactions with service users to examine detailed communication strategies, thoughts and feelings, for the parenting assessment would be compromised. Some readers might argue that my solution – interviews with service users (volunteers recruited from consultative groups) followed by the Forum Theatre performance (volunteers recruited from social worker (Practice Educators) and student groups) – compromised the potential of the data to represent actual real-time social work parenting assessments. I would argue that the adopted methods went a good way in meeting their potential in eliciting richly detailed findings (understanding) of the symbolic action of social-worker-with-Christian-parent communication, by paying attention not only to the immediate concrete behaviours (the ‘speech-act’ communication) within real-life-based simulated drama61, but additionally by eliciting reflexions of communication-actually-in-action, the way that such action signifies contextual and experiential understandings (Vanhoozer, 2007).

A related key aspect was my reflexive deliberations of the degree of rigour but also flexibility adopted in the deployment of those methods to maintain integrity to the

---

61 As grounded in the parental reflexive accounts of their lived experiences of the very moments of parenting assessment.
critical realist linkages. At the end of each of Chapters in which I have presented the findings – Chapter 7 (‘Findings from the Parent Interviews’) and Chapter 8 (‘Findings from the Forum Theatre’) - I provide more detailed reflexions of my deployment of the methods, with particular consideration of whether I had captured sufficient variation of the individual participant perspectives, and/or whether issues of volunteer bias and researcher-effects (particularly of my emic role as a Christian parent and social worker, and etic role as a University Lecturer and researcher) had influenced the participants’ presentation of their reflexions in either of the data-sets. I concluded that on balance, my concern of volunteer bias or interviewer-effects seemed mitigated by the level of rich detailed data provided, often unsolicited, and the participants’ being prepared to reveal, in depth to me (even given my social worker and University Lecturer identity) their reflexions of parenting assessment experiences. Yet, given such small samples there was less of a range of diversity of insights, and presents a factor requiring caution in transferability to other practice and research contexts.

Looking at my reflexions upon the data analysis, what I attempted to do was to formulate a meaningful interpretation of the participants’ actions and their accounts of their experiences of reality. Responding to Sayer (2000) and Bergin et al., (2008) I recognised (as above) that while I could claim no more than partial representations of them, I could provide transparency of my reflexive deliberations. I did this through interweaving the deliberations within and throughout my presentation of the findings, rather than merely providing a summary statement in the Methodology chapter (Chapter 6). Thus, the reader will see my reflexive questioning of issues arising from the data, and I hope, be sufficiently assured by my openness and rigour to accept my interpretations as meaningful and useful.

Looking back now, overall, at how the methodology unfolded, I can see the benefit of having one data-set (the parent interviews) completed and analysed before the other
data-set (the forum theatre performance). Having one followed by the other gave me the opportunity to question my interpretation of the representations claimed by the parents (of their social workers and their actions). I could see if those representations were played out (or not) within the social-worker-with-Christian-parent communication action and reflexions. Where they were then this gave me more confidence that they were not simply negotiated/co-created/dreamt-up by me during the interviews or analysis, but held by the participants themselves before they came to the interview. In other words, there was a degree of triangulation offered by the methodology that I had not anticipated, but did find useful in the analysis. For example, having the finding from the parent interview data that parents perceive social workers bringing negative preconceptions of ‘being a Christian parent’ to their parenting assessment being confirmed by then seeing the social work spect-actors acting out the preconceptions within the forum theatre data provided a powerful description of the phenomenon.

In hindsight, what would have improved these data? The forum theatre data, though working well at ‘provoking’ social worker spect-actor reactions and reflexions across the whole group, did have less depth of individual social worker reflexions. In analysing the data there were times when I wished for more detail about how particular responses or ‘absences’ related to individual personal or professional characteristics. For example, not one of the social workers volunteered their own worldview belief-position at any time, yet, I knew that some of the social work spect-actors had previously self-defined as Christians themselves. How were they managing this ‘absence’, or were they less consciously ‘missing the point’? As I did not know exactly which students had self-defined, I did not know if and when they interacted with the forum theatre performance, and I could not gauge whether such religious-based characteristics were relevant to their actions or absence of actions. It would have been an interesting finding. Yet, given the sensitive topic of religious belief, and my ethical rationale for the group to be experienced by participants as psychologically safe (see
Chapter 6 ‘Methodology’) it would not have been ethically appropriate to stop the performance and ask a spect-actor if they held Christian or non-Christian beliefs. In hindsight, I wondered if these data would have been improved by being followed-up with individual interviews. Looking to other research studies in which group-based methods (such as focus groups) are followed by individual interviews, the answer would seem to be negative, with participants seemingly maintaining consistent impressions of themselves in both contexts and remembering the way the matter had been discursively described (Fielding, 1994; Lambert and Loiselle, 2008). However, the option of individual interviews being held before the forum theatre performance is potentially a possibility from a methodological point of view. Then again, in the light of social workers constituting hard-to-access research populations, there would need to be considerable commitment from social work organisations and individual practitioners to participate in both research methods in order to uphold the integrity of the methodological design. I would note that a sufficient level of academic and practitioner commitment to this research area has hitherto been fairly negligible, and interest would need to increase.

Does this all mean that my arguments and conclusions are only relevant to social work with Christian families, or whether there is wider applicability? I would argue that there is wider applicability. The finding that we need effective communication at a deeper ontological level, and that communication takes place across diverse worldviews is not just relevant for different religious faith positions with ontological commitments (that is, not just Christian worldviews), but also non-faith positions and worldviews. The forum theatre method offers a methodology that can explore such depth of communication within safe learning environments, affording a degree of innovation to teaching and learning about cultural competence and reflective listening. The rich, detailed data derived from its use in the project here, shows its capability for enabling insider, silenced perspectives to be brought into the communication context and how it can
challenge practitioners to move beyond bureaucratized understandings to find creative and innovative ways of overcoming communicative barriers, or at the very least bring to light such barriers and tensions that might previously have been obscured. There are other areas arising from the study that indicate further research. For example, investigations could be carried out to see if the dominant finding about tension in talking about ambivalent and contested matters of ontological reality arises from data generated with differing samples of social workers and Christian parents. My social worker sample did contain social workers of varying longevity of professional social work experience, with some just on the brink of qualification (notably, though, they had all undertaken assessed work placements in the research area). Those social workers that were professionally qualified brought professional experience from across different children and families practice contexts, but at the time of the data-collection they were all working in the field of adoption and fostering. These data may reflect specificities of their most recent practice interests and contextual focus – adoption and fostering – rather than other aspects of child protection more widely practiced. To elucidate these potential similarities and difference, future research could focus upon containing samples of social workers from other child protection contexts, and then comparing the results with my study.

Similarly, future research investigations could be conducted with samples of parents that are more ethnically and age diverse than I achieved here. Indeed, despite choosing a geographic area that included an inner City area, I was disappointed that my sample did not also contain parents from black minority churches. It may be the case that this was a limitation of the sampling frame – volunteers from service user consultative groups – and that an altered or alternative sampling frame could be more successful in purposively recruiting a greater diversity of parents.
A third area that would seem to warrant further examination is to broaden the contextual focus. I took three 'structural' fields to be boundary-markers to the contextual landscape. I am aware that in such a nuanced landscape of communication about religious faith there are likely to be many more fields or boundary-markers of interest. I stayed with the three fields because they were clearly very fruitful, but this is not to say that other fields might also be fruitful for future investigations. Certainly, more investigations are keenly needed in this area. To this end the study may be seen to have met its exploratory aims, which were to contribute research knowledge to a highly important social work practice dilemma that had hardly got out of first gear in terms of research focus: understanding how and why social workers, despite saying that they have appropriate knowledge, still express and demonstrate a lack of expertise, knowledge and confidence in their communication with Christian parents within statutory parenting assessment. I hope to have acceptably (Easton 2010) and innovatively broken this new ground by employing the philosophical tools of critical realism to generate a tentative explanatory understanding of tensions seemingly going on at a deeper level to underlie and frustrate social-worker-with-Christian-parent communication.
Chapter 10: Bibliography


Clark, G.H. (1958). ‘Can moral education be grounded upon naturalism?’ Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society, Fall: 21


Daily Mail (Rebecca English) (2012) ‘Queen stands up for Christianity: 'Church of England is misunderstood and under-appreciated' Daily Mail, 16th February 2012, available at: https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2101606/Queen-stands-


Huffman, D. S. (2009). How then should we choose? Three views on God’s will and decision-making, Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel.


Nahon-Serfaty, I. and Ahmed, R. (2014) New Media and Communication Across Religions and Cultures (Advances in Religious and Cultural Studies), IGI Global


Appendix 1: Ethical Approval

EXPLANATION OF FULL ETHICAL APPROVAL PROCESSES

This appendix contains the original documents submitted for ethical approval, and the documentary evidence of the review outcome (giving full ethical approval). There are a number of documents here and I will now explain their inclusion.

First, the duration of the research project covered a period in which I transferred registration of doctoral study from one University institution (Kings College London) to another (Institute of Education, University College London). This was in order to continue supervision with my principal supervisor (Professor Andrew Wright), who had changed employer. Hence, full ethical approval was granted by the Social Sciences, Humanities and Law Research Ethics Subcommittee (SSHL RESC) at KCL, and honoured by the Institute of Education, UCL when I transferred my study. I had completed data-collection at this time. The reference number is SSHL/11/12-1.

Second, the duration of the empirical research project also covered a period in which I had to change employment twice (from Oxford Brookes University to the University of Greenwich). The issue for my study was that my data-collection had to be situated within my employer institution (‘the host institution’). In the event, both ‘host institutions’ accepted the full ethical approval provided by KCL and gave permission for their sites to be used for the study. The process entailed submitting information to the research ethics co-ordinator of each ‘host institution’. This change of ‘host institution’ did not incur any difficulty to the study, and in fact enabled the sampling frame to be extended and enrich the study. Indeed, over the course of the empirical study I extended the sampling frame several times to meet the theoretical aims of the sampling. There was then the matter of ethical approval for all such extensions to the sampling frame. I took
care to apply for ‘Modification Requests’ to the original SSHL RESC ethical approval for each of these extensions and changes. Figure 4, below, summarises the features and dates of the ‘Modification Requests’ in chronological order (please note that I have annotated the names and personal addresses/contact details of the people involved to respect personal data and provide confidentiality – I can produce the original documents if required):

*Figure 4: Summary of the features and dates of the Full Ethical Approval and ‘Modification Requests’ in chronological order*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evidence of Ethical Approval from KCL SSHL REC</th>
<th>Features of Full Approval/Modification Request</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. 1a. Letter of Full Ethical Approval 13.1.2012</td>
<td>I have included a copy of the original application to evidence the care taken to attend to the sensitive issues that characterise the study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1b. My original application to KCL SSHL REC for Full Ethical Approval.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Modification Request Approval 30.4.2012</td>
<td>This request/approval was to extend the sampling frame to include adoptive parent groups and to service user consultation groups of two other social work degree programmes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Modification Request Approval 26.6.2012</td>
<td>This request/approval was to extend the sampling frame to include two adoptive parent groups aligned to the Christian organisation ‘Evangelical Alliance’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Modification Request</td>
<td>This request/approval was: to add the University of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approval Date</td>
<td>Details</td>
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<td>----------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Approval 12.5.2014</td>
<td>Greenwich as a second research site (‘host organisation’); to extend the sampling frame to encompass the service user consultation group, and the social work students at the University of Greenwich; to update the exclusion criteria and researcher contact details accordingly on the participant Information Sheet.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Modification Request</td>
<td>This request/approval was simply to authorise an extension to the empirical study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approval 22.5.2014</td>
<td>This request/approval was to extend the sampling frame to the University of Greenwich Practice Educators (qualified social workers).</td>
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</table>
1A FULL ETHICAL APPROVAL FROM KCL SSHL REC

Dear Johanna

SSHUL/11/12-1 Specialist Social Work Communication Skills for discussing beliefs, needs, lifestyle and practices with service users who are Christian.

Review Outcome: Full Approval

Thank you for sending in the amendments/clarifications requested to the above project. I am pleased to inform you that these meet the requirements of the SSHL RESC and therefore that full approval is now granted.

Please ensure that you follow all relevant guidance as laid out in the King's College London Guidelines on Good Practice in Academic Research (http://www.kcl.ac.uk/college/policyzone/index.php?id=247).

For your information ethical approval is granted until 13 January 2015. If you need approval beyond this point you will need to apply for an extension to approval at least two weeks prior to this explaining why the extension is needed. (Please note however that a full re-application will not be necessary unless the protocol has changed). You should also note that if your approval is for one year, you will not be sent a reminder when it is due to lapse.

Ethical approval is required to cover the duration of the research study, up to the conclusion of the research. The conclusion of the research is defined as the final date or event detailed in the study description section of your approved application form (usually the end of data collection when all work with human participants will have been completed), not the completion of data analysis or publication of the results. For projects that only involve the further analysis of pre-existing data, approval must cover any period during which the researcher will be accessing or evaluating individual sensitive and/or un-anonymised records. Note that after the point at which ethical approval for your study is no longer required due to the study being complete (as per the above definitions), you will still need to ensure all research data/records management and storage procedures agreed to as part of your application are adhered to and carried out accordingly.

If you do not start the project within three months of this letter please contact the Research Ethics Office.

Should you wish to make a modification to the project or request an extension to approval you will need approval for this and should follow the guidance relating to modifying approved applications: http://www.kcl.ac.uk/researchethics/applicants/modifications.html

The circumstances where modification requests are required include the addition/removal of participant groups, additions/removal/changes to research methods, asking for additional data from participants.
extensions to the ethical approval period. Any proposed modifications should only be carried out once full approval for the modification request has been granted.

Any unforeseen ethical problems arising during the course of the project should be reported to the approving committee/panel. In the event of an untoward event or an adverse reaction a full report must be made to the Chair of the approving committee/panel within one week of the incident.

Please would you also note that we may, for the purposes of audit, contact you from time to time to ascertain the status of your research.

If you have any query about any aspect of this ethical approval, please contact your panel/committee administrator in the first instance (http://www.kcl.ac.uk/research/ethics/contacts.html). We wish you every success with this work.

With best wishes

Yours sincerely
APPLICATION FOR ETHICAL APPROVAL

Please tick the Committee you are applying to:

Sub-Committees (RESC)

PNM RESC □
(Psychiatry, Nursing & Midwifery)

SSHL RESC X□
(Social Sciences, Humanities & Law
High Risk)

BDM RESC (Health) □
(Biomedical & Health Sciences, Dentistry, Medicine
and Natural & Mathematical Sciences)

Research Ethics Panels (REP)

For SSPP, Humanities and Law (non-high risk only)

E&M REP □
(Education & Management)

GGS REP □
(Geography, Gerontology, SCWRI)

Humanities REP □
War Studies Group REP □
Law REP □
(Law & Department
of Political Economy)

Notes for all applicants

• Please read the guidelines before filling out the application form and refer to the specific guidelines about each section when filling in the form. ([http://www.kcl.ac.uk/research/ethics/applicants/](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/research/ethics/applicants/))

• Refer to the Guidelines for the submission deadlines for your Committee and the number of copies to submit (including electronic versions if applicable).

• All applications should be submitted by 5pm on the deadline day.

• All Sub-committee applications should be submitted to the Research Ethics Office, 5.11 Franklin Wilkins Building, (Waterloo Bridge Wing), Waterloo Campus, King’s College London, Stamford Street, London SE1 9NH.

• All Research Ethics Panel applications should be submitted to SSPP Ethics Administrator, K0.58 Ground Floor Strand Building, King’s College London, The Strand, London WC2R 2LS.
SECTION A – TO BE COMPLETED BY ALL APPLICANTS

1.1 RESEARCHER
Researcher’s Name: Johanna Woodcock Ross
Researcher’s Department & School: Education and Professional Studies
Status: ☐ Undergraduate ☐ Taught Postgraduate ☐ MPhil/PhD Specialist Doctorate ☐ Staff Research

If Student:
Name of course/qualification: MPhil/PhD

If Staff:
Researcher’s Post:

1.2 CONTACT DETAILS
Email: johanna.ross@kcl.ac.uk
Telephone:
Address:

Please note – there was a change of address in July 2011 as the researcher left the University of Plymouth to take up a position at Oxford Brookes University.

1.3 SUPERVISOR - COMPLETE FOR ALL STUDENT PROJECTS (Including PhD)
Name of Supervisor: Professor Andrew Wright
Supervisor’s Post: Professor of Religious and Theological Education
Supervisor’s Department (if different to student):
Supervisor’s email address: Andrew.wright@kcl.ac.uk

1.4 OTHER INVESTIGATORS, COLLABORATORS, ORGANISATIONS
The research study will be taking place at the researcher’s place of work, Oxford Brookes University. The researcher will obtain full ethical approval from the Chair of the Oxford Brookes’ Research Ethics Committee subsequent to KCL, giving full ethical approval. Written evidence of the full ethical approval from the Chair of the Oxford Brookes’ Research Ethics Committee will be supplied to the R&D at KCL. Also, both a letter to the Head of Department at Oxford Brookes, and a letter to the Chair of the Service User and Carer Consultative Group is attached to this form.

2. PROJECT DETAILS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2.1 Project Title</th>
<th>Specialist Social Work Communication Skills for Discussing Beliefs, Needs, Lifestyle and Practices with Service Users who are Christian (Pilot Study &amp; Main Study)</th>
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<td>Shortened Version: Specialist Social Work Communication Skills with Service Users who are Christian</td>
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<th>2.2 Projected Start Date of Project</th>
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<td>This should be when you intend to start work with participants</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Your sponsor will be assumed to be King’s College London unless stated otherwise. NB: Do not put</td>
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<p>| 2.4 Sponsoring Organisation | Kings College London |</p>
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<th><strong>2.4. Fund</strong></th>
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<td>(e.g. self-funded, King’s College London, ESRC, AHRC, EU)</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>2.6. DOES THE STUDY INVOLVE HUMAN PARTICIPANTS OR FOR OTHER REASONS REQUIRE ETHICAL APPROVAL?</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>NB:</strong> It may be the case that research does not involve human participants yet raises other ethical issues with potential social or environmental implications. In this case you should still apply. Please consult with the Research Ethics Office (<a href="mailto:rec@kcl.ac.uk">rec@kcl.ac.uk</a>) if in doubt.</td>
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<td>✔ Yes</td>
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<th><strong>2.7. OTHER INFORMATION RELATING TO RISK</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>Will the study place the researcher at any risk greater than that encountered in his/her daily life? (e.g. interviewing alone or in dangerous circumstances, or data collection outside the UK).</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
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**If applicable:**

| Yes | ☐ No | ✔ |

**If you have ticked yes to either of the above:**

- Yes, and I have completed a risk assessment which will be co-signed by the Head of Department; I will have discussed the risks involved with my supervisor or Head of Department and agreed a strategy for minimising these risks. |

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<th><strong>2.8. OTHER PERMISSIONS, ETHICAL APPROVALS &amp; CRIMINAL RECORDS BUREAU CLEARANCE REQUIRED</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>ANOTHER REVIEWING BODY/PERMISSIONS</strong> Are any other approvals by another reviewing body <em>(including other ethics committees, gatekeepers and peer review)</em> required? If yes, give details and say when these will be obtained. If they have already been obtained you should provide a copy of the approval with the application otherwise you will need to supply it when ready.</td>
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<td>✔ YES</td>
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**The research study will be taking place at the researcher’s place of work, Oxford Brookes University. The researcher will obtain full ethical approval from the Chair of the Oxford Brookes Research Ethics Committee subsequent to KCL giving full ethical approval. Written evidence of the full ethical approval from the Chair of the Oxford Brookes’ Research Ethics Committee will be supplied to the REO at KCL.** |

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<tr>
<th><strong>CRIMINAL RECORDS BUREAU</strong> Is Criminal Records Bureau clearance necessary? If so, please confirm that clearance will be sought before commencement of the project.</th>
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<td>✔ YES</td>
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<th><strong>2.9. HUMAN TRIALS QUESTIONNAIRE</strong></th>
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<td>Does a human trials questionnaire need to be submitted?</td>
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(See [http://www.kcl.ac.uk/about/KCLresearch/ResearchEthics/ethicsproposal Whilst it is not always the case that any adverse event will result in the researchers being made aware of an adverse event, it is the researchers’ responsibility to ensure that all adverse events are reported to the REO in a timely manner. |

If yes, confirm that the Human Trials Questionnaire will be submitted prior to the start of the study. | ✔ YES | ☐ NO |
communication about such issues of faith within the social work literature, but this literature is limited, unresearched and does not a) focus on specific or ‘specialist’ communication skills, or b) focus specifically on Christianity.

This exploratory research study aims to elicit specialist social work communication skills for discussing beliefs, needs, lifestyle and practices with service users who are Christian. The study sits within broader aims of responding to the challenge for educators to: a) better integrate communication skills training with practice learning in order to prepare social workers for the real-life challenges of practice, b) begin to bridge the knowledge gap of relevant ‘specialist social work communication skills’ for those real-life challenges in different practice settings and c) increase service user involvement in the design and delivery of such work (Diggins, 2004; Trevithick et al., 2004). Indeed, communication skills are considered so fundamental to social work that they are a cross-cutting theme to be embedded within several if not all of the capabilities of the new Professional Capabilities Framework for Social Workers qualifying in England (DfE 2010). The specific research questions are:

1. What are the differences and similarities between service user and social work perceptions of issues of communication about Christian lifestyle, beliefs, needs and practices in social work practice settings in the UK?

2. What are the differences and similarities between service user and social work perceptions of the type and nature of communication skills required to communicate with service users about Christian lifestyle, beliefs, needs and practices in social work practice settings in the UK?

3. What linkages can be drawn between: a) the specific requirements from UK policy, and b) the existing social work literature about communication with social work service users who are Christian, and c) perceptions of social workers and service users themselves, in order to identify the specialist communication skills for social workers to communicate with service users who are Christian about their lifestyle, beliefs, needs and practices.

Ethical approval is being sought, first, for a small pilot study to refine the research methods and increase the potential for validity within the subsequent main study.
Provide a brief outline of the step-by-step procedure of your proposed study, in no more than 1 page where possible. (An example of a flow chart that could be used is in the Guidelines.)

This exploratory research adopts a qualitative case study approach to collect and analyse qualifying social worker perceptions (their observations and analysis) of their communication with social work service users while they are 'communicating-in-action', as well as collating their critical reflections of 'communicating-on-action' immediately after it occurs. Both types of critical reflections are required to ensure that the totality, reality and detail of the exact practice moment are not lost. As it is not ethically appropriate to stop social workers in the middle of their real-life interactions with service users to examine detailed communication strategies, thoughts and feelings, dramatised simulations of such interactions will be used within designated workshops. Specifically, the Forum Theatre method will be used to capture the perceptions of communication-in-action as the method facilitates conscious and embodied (left) recognition of collective problems (in this case identifying specialist communication) and develops realistic and dialogue-based strategies for action (Boals, 1979; Houston et al., 2001). Each workshop will involve two paid-experienced actors performing a scripted role-play to an audience of qualifying social workers, with the researcher adopting the role of 'facilitator' to invite and prompt audience interaction with the actors, ensuring that: a) interaction and discussion occurs with the role-play and b) that the discussion focuses on eliciting communication issues, and the type and nature of communication skills. The researcher has published work on her successful use of the Forum Theatre method to elicit communication skills in the manner described here (Woodcock Ross, 2011).

Script-writing will be achieved through the investigator conducting one hour unstructured qualitative interviews with volunteer social work service users recruited from a Service User and Carer Consultative Group of a social work qualifying degree programme. The volunteer service users will be asked to reflect upon the 'typical' issues of communication between themselves and a social worker concerning the service user's Christian faith. If consent is provided the interviews will be audio recorded and the recordings stored securely. The researcher will identify key themes from the recordings and write 3 scripts that capture the themes but do not contain any identifiable features of the service users concerned. One script will be used for the pilot study, with other scripts revised in light of any required changes arising from the pilot. Once all the scripts are written the audio recordings will be destroyed. The audience of qualifying social workers will be final stage social work degree students (at the point of qualification) volunteering participation. All of the 2 hour Forum Theatre workshop performances containing the 'perception of communication-in-action' will be video recorded, and then transcribed and analysed by the researcher. The 'reflection-on-action' will be collected through the qualifying student social workers' responses to a short semi-structured questionnaire immediately before and immediately after each of the workshops. This questionnaire will contain a combination of closed and open-ended questions to facilitate qualifying social worker reflection of communication issues and the type and nature of communication skills required in practice. Students will receive and respond to it by email before the workshop. After the workshop, qualifying students will be presented with a copy of their completed questionnaire with additional questions seeking their perspective on whether and how their understanding of 'specialist communication skills' had changed, and the way and extent to which the method helped this. They will then be asked to revisit their answers in light of this analysis. The first performance will constitute the pilot study. This may identify small required changes to be made to the delivery format and questionnaires for the other two performances. Copies of their own individual questionnaire will be made available to the qualifying students for use in their Personal Development Plans, thereby constituting a meaningful reward for their participation in the research.

The researcher will use the analytic tactics of Constant Comparative Analysis on which she has published (Woodcock and Tregaskis 2006; Woodcock Ross et al. 2009; Woodcock Ross 2011) to identify and compare 'instances', which demonstrate experiences, definitions or perspectives of communication issues and skills as they appear at any point across the two data sources. This will involve categorising and labelling ('open coding': Strauss and Corbin,1990) potentially theoretically relevant concepts and relationships, then questioning emergent themes by making connections between service user concerns and (student) social workers' concerns and responses, sensitising her to the range and dimensions of the categories and relationships ('axial coding': Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The service user volunteers will be invited to record their views on the degree to which the researcher has captured their perspectives in the final analysis of the performance transcripts. Existing UK policy and social work academic literature will be used to augment and contextualise findings from the conducted empirical research. Copies of the final write-up of findings will be provided to the Service User Consultative Group and publicised on the alumni electronic notice board for the social work participants. The Service User Consultative Group will cite their involvement in the research as key evidence of the way they influence the teaching and learning of qualifying social workers for purposes of renewal of group funding. This constitutes a meaningful reward for their participation in the research. Other financial reward is impossible as they receive government provided income benefit.
5.1 PROJECTED NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS

Number: 4 Service user volunteers to enable the researcher to write each of the 3 scripts (n=12 service user participants), and 20 qualifying social workers for each of the 3 performances. The pilot study involves 1 script and 1 performance.

If applicable: How many will be male and female? If a large number of service user volunteers are interested, then the first 6 female and first 6 male will be selected.

Justification for the sample size: There needs to be sufficient number of service user perspectives to provide a range of possible ‘instances’ from which to formulate key themes for each script, but to retain some of the individual ‘voices’ of the service users (with no identifying features). In terms of the qualifying social worker sample, the Forum Theatre method requires an audience that is sufficiently intimate so as to create an atmosphere of safety in which to disclose and discuss
perspectives, but also one large enough to offer a range of possible 'instances' for themes to emerge.

If an upper age limit is needed you must provide a justification.

**Upper Age Limit:** None

**Lower age limit:** The research is centred within children and families social work ('Children's Services') and so the service user sample will consist of participants able to verbally express their perspectives about communicating to a social worker about their Christian faith and issues concerning parenting and family life. The researcher will not include service users who are under 18 years old. This study does not come within the category of involving adults lacking the capacity to consent as governed by sections 30-34 of the Mental Capacity Act 2005.

5.2 SELECTION CRITERIA

Inclusion criteria for service user participants: To be a user of social work Children's Services; and/or to have previously been a user of social work Children's Services; to self-define as being a practising Christian; to be 18 years old or over; and to be a member and/or linked to the Service User Consultative Group of the social work degree programme. This study does not come within the category of involving adults lacking the capacity to consent as governed by sections 30-34 of the Mental Capacity Act 2005.

Inclusion criteria for qualifying social work participants: To be in the final stage of the qualifying degree programme in social work; and to be practising in the role of social worker while on practice learning placement in a Children's Services practice setting.

5.3 RECRUITMENT

Describe how participants will be (i) identified and (ii) approached.

Recruitment of service user participants: The researcher will write to the chair of the Service User Consultative Group of the social work degree programme to request a slot in the next monthly meeting of that group in order for the investigator to describe the aims, objectives and processes of the research, give out copies of the Information Sheet and invite volunteer participation in being individually interviewed. A copy of the recruitment letter is provided as an appendix. At that meeting the researcher will read out the Information Sheet and emphasise that that those interested in participating and those seeking further clarification should contact her using the details on the Information Sheet after the meeting to ensure confidentiality of information and participation.

Recruitment of social work participants: The researcher will attend the beginning of a teaching session for final stage social work students of the qualifying degree programme in social work to describe the aims, objectives and processes of the research, give out copies of the Information Sheet and invite volunteer participation. At that meeting the researcher will read out the Information Sheet and emphasise that that those interested in participating and those seeking further clarification should contact her using the details on the Information Sheet after the meeting to ensure confidentiality of information and participation. In section 6.4 of this form, the researcher sets out the practical steps that she is taking to ensure that participants do not feel obliged to participate in the research and the processes by which she will keep their involvement in the research confidential (in line with KCL's Research in the Workplace' guidance: http://www.kcl.ac.uk/research/ethics/training/standard.htm).

5.4 LOCATION

State where the work will be carried out e.g. public place, in researcher's office, in private office at organisation.

The interviews with the service user participants will take place in the researcher's office at the University on a day when the service user is already at the University for other business for the Service User and Consultative Group. This is to minimise disruption for the service user, and reduce expense costs. The workshops with the social work participants will take place in a classroom at the University on a day when teaching is scheduled for other points in the day in order to minimise disruption for the students. This selection of a time period outside of the established teaching timetable emphasises to the social work students that there is a separation of the activities undertaken as part of the participants' normal professional relationship with the researcher from activities undertaken as part of her research.

6.1 INFORMED CONSENT

The researcher will attend a Service User Consultative Group meeting and teaching session for final stage qualifying social work students to allow discussion of information and engender trust and stake in the study. In both instances, an information sheet will be read out explaining the research process, right to withdraw, details for contacting the applicant; details for contacting the researcher's supervisor (KCL) and third party at the host institution (Oxford Brookes); an undertaking that participants' names will be confidential to the researcher and how the information relating to service users and qualifying social work students will be sufficiently anonymised so that identification cannot occur. It will also state the way in which data will be
stored securely and for how long. It will be stated that where information reveals a person being at risk of significant harm, that information will be passed on to relevant local authority safeguarding personnel. In order to ensure that social work student participants do not feel an obligation to participate (arising from the dual role of the researcher and her normal professional role as senior lecturer), the researcher will emphasise to the social work student participants that participation will not affect any teaching received or assessments being marked, and that there is the opportunity for the participants to withdraw from the study at any time up until the final report. The participants in the research study should be able to give their own informed consent and a consent form will be used. No adults over the age of 16 who lack the mental capacity to give informed consent will be recruited into the study. Thus, this study does not come within the category of involving adults (aged 16 or over) lacking the capacity to consent as governed by sections 30-34 of the Mental Capacity Act 2005.

The data being gathered and analysed in this research ('religious beliefs or beliefs of a similar nature') constitutes 'sensitive personal data' as classified by The Data Protection Act, 1998. In compliance with The Data Protection Act, the Information Sheet seeks the participants' explicit consent with the following tick box option:

'I consent to the processing of my personal information for the purposes explained to me. I understand that such information will be treated in accordance with the terms of the Data Protection Act 1998.'

Copies of the Information Sheets to be used are available as appendices to this document.

6.3 RIGHT OF WITHDRAWAL

The Information Sheet clearly states the right to withdraw from participation at any time during the research process up until the point at which the data has been included in the final report (June 2014). The request for withdrawal of participation and data to be made by contacting the researcher or the researcher's supervisor or a third party at the host institution through email or post or by telephone. This is stated on the Information Sheet.

6.3 RISK CHECKLIST

Where you have ticked 'Yes' on the risk checklist, provide details of relevant qualifications and experience with reference to those sections. This must include the researcher and/or supervisor as well as other collaborators (if applicable) involved in those sections marked as presenting risk. (Do not submit a CV)

A. Does the study involve participants who are particularly vulnerable or unable to give informed consent or in a dependent position?

The social work service user participants will be recruited from an already established Service User Consultative Group for a social work degree programme. While users of social work services come from a range of social and cultural backgrounds as a population group they tend to be over-represented in terms of marginalisation, mental disadvantage and having received less education than the rest of the population. Thus, when seeking informed consent, the researcher will take practical steps to ensure that all aspects of the Information Sheet are understood. She will facilitate verbal discussion to explain the research process and the way in which confidentiality and anonymity will be assured and circumstances in which confidentiality might be breached. A consent form will be used. The written consent will be obtained immediately before the interview takes place.

Participation in the research is entirely voluntary, and it should be noted that the social work service users involved in this study are members of a Service User Consultative Group whose function is to provide service user perspectives in the teaching, recruitment and administration of the degree programme. Therefore, the service users recruited for this study will be familiar with telling their individual narrative about the services they have received from a social worker.

The researcher is a qualified social worker (BA, CQSW) and is registered with the General Social Care Council, although she is currently employed as an Associate Professor (Senior Lecturer) in Social Work. She has researched and published on the areas of communication skills, and the assessment of parenting. She has taught communication skills for over 15 years to social workers including the use of specialist total communication to vulnerable groups (Woodcock Ross, 2011). She is professionally capable of communicating the information adequately to the service users concerned.

D. Could the study induce psychological stress or anxiety?

The interviews with the social work service user participants, and the forum theatre with the qualifying social worker participants (stage 3 students) will involve the recall of events between a service user and social worker that has the very small chance of potentially inducing 'flashbacks' or minor deterioration in mental health. The researcher will provide contact details of counselling services to social work service user participants at the end of the interview and to qualifying social work participants at the end of each workshop. Furthermore, the recall may include previously unidentified information which would require disclosure to the participant and local authority safeguarding services concerning the participant’s physical or mental health, or that of another person who the participant has identified as being at risk of significant harm. As a registered, qualified social worker (BA, CQSW), the researcher is professionally trained and professionally accountable for
ensuring safeguarding procedures are followed in the situation of being informed that a person is being significantly harmed or at risk of significant harm. In this instance the researcher will report the matter to her supervisor and also to the local authority safeguarding services.

NB: If you ticked yes to any point in E i-vi of the checklist, you must also complete and submit Section B of the application form.

6.4 OTHER ETHICAL ISSUES

Please consider whether there are other ethical issues you should be covering here. Further, if applicable, please also add the professional code of conduct you intend to follow in your research.

Issues concerning the conduct of the research into researcher’s own workplace and issues concerning the relationship between the researcher as recruiter and potential participant.

The researcher will be studying and carrying out research as a KCL postgraduate student whilst continuing in an additional professional role as Senior Lecturer in Social Work (at Oxford Brookes University). The following practical steps will be taken to address possible conflicts of interest which may arise from her research taking place at her host institution.

First, the qualified social worker participants are Stage 3 students on the brink of qualifying as social workers. The researcher will be a Senior Lecturer within the School of Social Work and Social Care. Participation in the research is entirely voluntary, but it is feasible that the social work student participants could feel obliged to participate. To counter the possibility of such perceived pressure to participate, the researcher will attend the beginning of a teaching session to discuss the research. She will read out the detail of the Information Sheet, and emphasise to the participants that participation will not affect any teaching received or assessments being marked, and that there is the opportunity for the participants to withdraw from the study at any time up until the final report. She will choose a teaching session that is not her own, in order that the participants see a separation of the activities undertaken as part of the participants’ normal professional relationship with the researcher from activities undertaken as part of her research. A third party will be present (the lecturer delivering the teaching session) to reiterate that there is no pressure to participate, and that participants can request to withdraw data via communication with the third party in case they should feel reluctant to ask the researcher face-to-face, or by telephone or email.

Second, copies of the Information Sheet will be handed out to each social work student. The researcher will emphasise that those people interested in participating and those seeking further clarification should contact her using the details on the Information Sheet after the meeting to ensure confidentiality of information and participation. This practical step allows participants to take a positive step if they wish to participate rather than having to decline an invitation. Written consent will be obtained through the option of returning the consent form using email (using electronic signature), or by signing the consent form immediately prior to the commencement of the Forum Theatre workshop(s).

These issues concerning a possible conflict of interest which may arise from the research taking place at the researcher’s host institution are not as relevant to the recruitment of the social work service users. The social work service users are members of a Service User Consultative Group whose function is to provide service user perspectives in the teaching, recruitment and administration of the degree programme. However, when attending the Service User Consultative Group meeting to explain the research process, the researcher will emphasise the separation of the activities undertaken as part of the researcher’s professional role from the activities undertaken as part of this specific research study. Copies of the Information Sheet will be handed out to each participant. The researcher will emphasise that those people interested in participating and those seeking further clarification should contact her using the details on the Information Sheet after the meeting to ensure confidentiality of information and participation. As with the social worker (student) participants, this practical step allows participants to take a positive step if they wish to participate rather than having to decline an invitation. Written consent will be obtained immediately before the interview takes place.

Issues concerning the degree of confidentiality and anonymity that can be assured and circumstances in which confidentiality might be breached

The researcher will have proper regard to participants’ expectations of confidence and privacy. Audio recordings of the interviews with social work service user participants will be stored as MP3 files and appointed fictitious IDs. The original recordings on the audio device will then be deleted. The audio recordings as MP3 files (digital data) will be stored securely (encrypted and accessed only through researcher’s individual password on her own computer). These audio recordings as MP3 files will be destroyed once the scripts have been written. The Forum Theatre performances with audience participation by the qualifying social worker (student) participants will be recorded with a camcorder. These video recordings will be transcribed and anonymised (removing identifiable features). The recorded video data will be destroyed upon completed transcription. The
data from the pre and post questionnaires will be anonymised by assigning fictitious IDs and removing identifiable features. These data will be archived securely (encrypted and accessed only through researcher’s individual password on her computer in her locked office).

An information sheet will be given to all potential participants explaining the research process, right to withdraw, details for contacting the researcher, the third party (university lecture) and researcher’s supervisor, and an undertaking that participants’ names will be confidential to the researcher and that all information relating to service users will be anonymised so that identification cannot occur. It will be stated that where information reveals a person being at risk of significant harm, then the researcher will notify her supervisor and pass that information on to relevant local authority safeguarding personnel.

A consent form will be used as a written record participant’s acceptance of the degree of confidentiality and anonymity that can be assured and circumstances in which confidentiality might be breached. These consent forms will be stored securely within a locked filing cabinet within the researcher’s locked office.

Issues arising should the host institution wish to see the research data

As the recruitment of the potential participants (both qualifying social work student participants and social work service user participants) is through the host organization (Oxford Brookes University), it is important that the researcher states clearly from the beginning of the research process exactly what information the host institution will have access to. This information will be contained within a letter to the Head of Department/School of Health and Social Care (copy attached as an appendix), and subsequently within an application to the Department/School’s Research Ethics Committee/Board prior to the research taking place. Specifically, in order to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the information provided by the participants, the host institution will not be allowed to access any of the raw data, in either the recorded MP3 file, or video recorded format, or transcribed text-based format, or pre or post questionnaires, or copies of the consent forms.

The host institution will be provided with a copy of the final report, and the host institution will facilitate dissemination of the final report to the qualifying social worker (student) participants through advertising the availability of the final report on the Alumni notice board of the host institution’s password accessed intranet. A summary of findings from the final report will be presented to the social work service user participants at one of the scheduled service user consultative group meetings held at the host institution. The researcher will emphasise that that those people interested in receiving a copy of the final report should contact her after the meeting to ensure confidentiality of information and participation.

In all this correspondence, the researcher will remind the host institution and individual participants of the differentiation within her dual role – that she is studying and carrying out the research as a KCL postgraduate student whilst continuing in an additional professional role as Senior Lecturer in Social Work (at Oxford Brookes University).

Code of conduct:

The host institution, and the General Social Care Council requires the researcher to fulfil requirements to have a CRB check upon appointment as a social work academic, and this process has been undertaken by the host institution. The dual nature of the researcher’s role means that a second CRB check for the purpose of carrying out this research is probably not required, as she will be conducting the research with the same participants as she would be having contact with in her normal professional role. However, if the KCL Research Ethics Committee or the host institution determines that a second CRB check is required for this separate research study then of course the researcher will follow this process.

As a qualified social worker (BA, CGSW) registered with the GSCC, the researcher must adhere to the GSCC Code of Practice in being professionally accountable for ensuring government safeguarding procedures are followed in the situation of being informed that a person is being significantly harmed or at risk of significant harm. Thus, should this instance arise, the researcher will immediately report the matter to her supervisor and also to the local authority safeguarding services.

6.5 Benefits & Risks
Please describe any expected benefits and risks to the research participant.

Benefits:

1. Social work service users belong to the Service User Consultative Group because they feel strongly about having the opportunity to influence the teaching, learning, recruitment and assessment of social workers in order that those future social workers are better able to meet the needs of the service users for whom they are providing a service. This research falls within these objectives – it provides another vehicle by which the service users can influence the teaching and learning of social workers. The Service User Consultative Group will be able to cite the Group's involvement in the research as key evidence of the way the Group influences the teaching and learning of qualifying social workers for purposes of renewal of Group funding. This constitutes a meaningful reward for their participation in the research. Other financial reward is impossible as it will negatively impact upon their receipt of government provided income benefit. A summary of findings from the final report will be presented to the social work service user participants at one of the scheduled service user consultative group meetings held at the host institution. The researcher will emphasise that that those people interested in receiving a copy of the final report should contact her after the meeting to ensure confidentiality of information and participation.

2. The benefit for the social worker (student) participants is participation in embodied, engaging learning about specialist communication skills for their social work practice. Copies of students' own individual questionnaire will be made available to the qualifying students for use in their Personal Development Plans, thereby constituting a meaningful reward for their participation in the research. The researcher and the host institution will facilitate dissemination of the final report to the qualifying social worker (student) participants through advertising the availability of the final report on the Alumni notice board of the host institution's password accessed Intranet.

Risks:

1. The interviews with the social work service user participants, and the forum theatre with the qualifying social worker participants (stage 3 students) will involve the recall of events between a service user and social worker that has the very small chance of potentially inducing flashbacks or minor deterioration in mental health. The researcher will provide contact details of counselling services to social work service user participants at the end of the interview and to qualifying social worker participants at the end of each workshop. All participants will be advised of the potential of this both verbally (at the Service User Consultative Group Meeting for service user participants or teaching session for social worker participants) and in the Information Sheet.

2. The recall may include previously unidentified information which would require disclosure to the participant and local authority safeguarding services concerning the participant's physical or mental health, or that of another person who the participant has identified as being at risk of significant harm. In this instance the researcher will report the matter to her supervisor and also to the local authority safeguarding services. All participants will be advised of the potential of this both verbally (at the Service User Consultative Group Meeting for service user participants or teaching session for social worker participants) and in the Information Sheet.

4.6 CRIMINAL OR OTHER DISCLOSURES REQUIRING ACTION

Is it possible that criminal or other disclosures requiring action (e.g. evidence of professional misconduct) could be made during this study?

YES ☑ NO ☐

If yes, detail what procedures will be put in place to deal with these issues. The Information Sheet should make it clear under which circumstances action may be taken by the researcher.

The interviews with the social work service user participants, and the forum theatre with the social work student participants will involve the recall of events between a service user and social worker which may include previously unidentified information which would require disclosure to the participant and local authority safeguarding services concerning the participant's physical or mental health, or that of another person who the participant has identified as being at risk of significant harm. In this instance the researcher will report the matter to her supervisor and also to the local authority safeguarding services. All participants will be advised of the potential of this both verbally (at the Service User Consultative Group Meeting for service user participants or teaching session for social worker participants) and in the Information Sheet.

7.1 Will travelling expenses be given? If yes, this should be stated on the Information Sheet

YES ☑ NO ☐

7.2 Is any reward, apart from travelling expenses to be given to participants? If yes, please provide details and a justification for this. It is recommended that participants are informed of the compensation on the information sheet.

YES ☑ NO ☐
7.3 Is the study in collaboration with a pharmaceutical company or an equipment or medical device manufacturer? If yes, please give the name of the company and indicate what arrangements exist for compensating patients or healthy volunteers for adverse effects resulting from their participation in the study (in most cases, the Committee will only approve protocols if the pharmaceutical company involved confirms that it abides by APhE (The Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry) guidelines. A copy of the indemnification form (Appendix C) should be submitted with the application.

YES ☐ NO ☒

7.4 No fault compensation scheme if your study is based in the UK you must offer the no-fault compensation scheme to participants unless there is a clear justification for not doing so (if this is the case this must be stated and you should be aware that the Sub-Committee reserves the right to make this a condition of approval).

YES ☐ NO ☒

YES, I am making the scheme available to participants ☒

NO, the study is based outside the UK and so the scheme is not applicable ☐

NO, the study is within the UK but the no-fault compensation scheme is not offered for the following reason:

8a. Confirm that all processing of personal information related to the study will be in full compliance with the Data Protection Act 1998 (DPA) including the Data Protection Principles.

YES ☐ NO ☒

8b. What steps will be taken to ensure the confidentiality of personal information? Give details of anonymisation procedures and any physical and technical security measures. Please note to make data truly anonymous all information that could potentially identify a participant needs to be removed in addition to names. NB: Personal data held on mobile devices must be encrypted (see Table 3.1.2 Cumulative Guide to Questions 1-12, 19-20) in .

Audio recordings of the interviews with social work service user participants will be stored as MP3 files and appointed fictitious IDs. The original recordings on the audio device will then be deleted. The digital data will be stored securely (encrypted and accessed only through researcher’s individual password on her own computer). The audio recordings as MP3 files will be destroyed once the scripts have been written. The Forum Theatre performances with audience participation by the qualifying social worker (student) participants will be recorded with a camcorder. These video recordings will be transcribed and anonymised (removing identifiable features). The recorded video data will be destroyed upon completed transcription. The data from the pre and post questionnaires will be anonymised by ascribing fictitious IDs and removing identifiable features. These data will be archived securely (encrypted and accessed only through researcher’s individual password on her computer in her locked office at the Marston Road site (Headington Campus) of Oxford Brookes University).

A consent form will be used as a written record participant’s acceptance of the degree of confidentiality and anonymity that can be assured and circumstances in which confidentiality might be breached. These consent forms will be stored securely within a locked filing cabinet within the researcher’s locked office at the Marston Road site (Headington Campus) of Oxford Brookes University.

8c. Who will have access to personal information relating to this study? Confirm that any necessary wider disclosures of personal information (for instance to colleagues beyond the study team, translators, transcribers and auditors etc) have been properly explained to study participants.

Only the researcher will have access to the personal information. However, information may be disclosed during the interviews with social work service user participants or from the Forum Theatre performances which would require disclosure to the participant and local authority safeguarding services concerning the participants’ physical or mental health, or that of another person who the participant has identified as being at risk of significant harm. In this instance the researcher will report the matter to the participant’s supervisor and also to the local authority safeguarding services. All participants will be advised of the potential of this both action both verbally (at the Service User Consultative Group Meeting for service user participants or teaching sessions for social worker participants) and in the Information Sheet.

8d. Data and records management responsibilities during the study. The Principal Investigator is the named researcher for staff projects and the supervisor for student projects.

I confirm that the Principal Investigator will take full responsibility for ensuring appropriate storage and security for all study information including research data, consent forms and administrative records and that, where appropriate, the necessary arrangements will be made in order to process copyright material lawfully.
6. Data management responsibilities after the study

State how long study information including research data, consent forms and administrative records will be retained. What format(s) the information will be kept in and where the data will be stored. For example, where within King’s College London?

The consent forms and administrative records will be stored as hard copies (including printed out emailed consent forms) securely within a locked filing cabinet within the researcher’s locked office at Oxford Brookes University (the host institution where the researcher is based). Storage will be for 5 years.

Audio recordings of the interviews with social work service user participants will be stored as MP3 files and appointed fictitious IDs. The original recordings on the audio device will then be deleted. The digital data will be stored securely (encrypted and accessed only through researcher’s individual password on her own desktop computer). The audio recordings as MP3 files will be destroyed once the scripts have been written. The time period for this storage of MP3 Files (until deletion) is March 2013.

The Forum Theatre performances with audience participation by the qualifying social worker (student) participants will be recorded with a camcorder. These video recordings will be transcribed and anonymised (removing identifiable features). The recorded video data will be destroyed upon completed transcription. The time period for this storage of video data (until deletion) is June 2013.

The data from the pre and post questionnaires will be anonymised by ascribing fictitious IDs and removing identifiable features. These data will be archived securely (encrypted and accessed only through researcher’s individual password on her desktop computer in her locked office). Storage will be for 5 years.

The departmental address for the location at which the research data will be stored after the study is: Department of Social Work and Public Health, Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, Oxford Brookes University, Marston Road site (Headington Campus), Jack Straw Lane, Oxford. OX3 9PL. The contact website address for the department is: www.swph@brookes.ac.uk

NB: Any personally identifiable data that is held on any mobile device should be encrypted. This includes data stored on USB keys, laptops, notebooks, desktop computers, smart phones, workgroup servers and relevant emails.

In addition, confirm whether the storage arrangements comply with the Data Protection Act 1998 and the College guidelines.

YES [ ] NO [ ]

Will data be archived for use by other researchers?

YES [ ] NO [ ]

If you intend to share anonymised data with other researchers, you must make this clear on the information sheet.

YES [ ] NO [ ] Only the Consent Forms, all other identifying features will be removed.

9.1 RESEARCHER/APPLICANT

I undertake to abide by accepted ethical principles and appropriate code(s) of practice in carrying out this study. The information supplied above is to the best of my knowledge accurate. I have read the Application Guidelines and clearly understand my obligations and the rights of participants, particularly in so far as to obtaining valid consent. I understand that I must not commence research with human participants until I have received full approval from the ethics committee.

Information Sheet and recruitment procedures for obtaining informed consent are appropriate and the ethical issues arising from the project have been addressed in the application. I understand that research with human participants must not commence without full approval from the ethics committee.

If applicable:
The student has read an appropriate professional code of ethical practice [ ] The student has completed a risk assessment form [ ]
Appendix 2: Formal Confirmation of Upgrade from MPhil to PhD

Screen print of confirmatory email containing post-upgrade report

Post-upgrade report in larger scale
Appendix 3: Confirmation of Exemption from Research Training Modules

LETTER CONFIRMING EXEMPTION FROM RESEARCH TRAINING MODULES (AS CONFIRMED AT UPGRADE)

King’s College London
University of London

Centre for Theology, Religions and Culture
Department of Education and Professional Studies
Franklin-Wilkins Building
Waterloo Road
London SE1 9HN

020 7848 3148
andrew.wright@kcl.ac.uk

18 November 2010

Johanna Woodcock Ross
Associate Professor
School of Social Sciences and Social Work
University of Plymouth
Drake Circus
Plymouth PL4 8AA

Dear Johanna,

MPhil/PhD Programme: Research Training

I am pleased to confirm that we will credit your prior learning on the Masters in Social Research, including the ESRC recognised modules on research training. Consequently, it will not be necessary for you to undertake the two years of foundation study at King’s College. I can provide a hard copy of this letter on request. I look forward to working with you from next January.

Yours sincerely,