Social Work and Poverty: An Exploration of Social Workers’ Attitudes and Understanding

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DECLARATION

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Social work and poverty: An exploration of practitioners’ attitudes and understanding.

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Name of candidate: Milton Nyamtowo    Signature:            Date:10th May 2020
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

The context of this study is the dilemma that most service users of social interventions and practice are poor and yet poverty is marginalised within social work practice. The study therefore set out to explore social work practitioners’ understanding of poverty, attitudes towards poverty and social work and poverty relationship. A qualitative methodology was adopted, involving five focus group discussions and twenty-eight semi-structured interviews within three Local Authorities referred to as research sites. This was more than the originally anticipated sample.

A narrative literature review undertaken concluded that social work definitions are contested and this, coupled with regulation of social work, limits social work effectiveness in addressing poverty as it is not one of its major remits. The review identified that poverty is a significant issue affecting most service users and associated with most social problems involved in social work interventions and practice. The review discovered that social work practice pathologizes poverty and generally attributes causation of poverty to service users’ lack of capacity to take advantage of opportunities within the market and provided by the state and a lack of motivation to overcome their problems at the expense of structural factors that either cause or exacerbate poverty. This resonates with individualistic social work frameworks which are risk-averse, reactive, punitive, authoritative, and ineffective given the scale and impact of poverty which seems to be increasing. This is aggravated by the neo-liberal socio-political environment and managerialist social work environment characterised by low morale, high caseloads, paucity of much needed resource for social work interventions. The literature review established that social workers’ attitudes towards poor service users are largely ambivalent and negative.

The research data reveals that poverty is a significant and prevalent issue amongst most service users and associated with most social problems handled by social workers. Research participants expressed that there is no shared understanding of poverty, that definition of poverty is important in how it is understood and influencing how poverty is addressed. It emerged that poverty is marginalised in social work education and practice. Research data revealed that poverty is taken as background music and normal. It emerged that poverty is not viewed as a risk factor on its own. Participants revealed that social work lacks capacity, knowledge, and skills to address poverty. Social work education and training does not equip social workers with functional knowledge and skills to address poverty in practice. The research revealed social work professionals’ attitudes are generally negative, stereotypical, and judgemental towards service users. Government policies aggravate service users’ experiences and circumstances. The participants expressed an understanding that thresholds of social work interventions are high and therefore act as barriers. Participants expressed that poverty is an uncomfortable subject to discuss with service users given stigmatisation associated with being poor. This therefore results in service users hiding their financial struggles. It emerged that service users who are poor are discriminated against and punished to experiencing poverty and that this goes against main social work values. The findings echo findings undertaken by many academics and researchers in social work poverty and therefore add to the body of knowledge in social work and poverty.

The study recommends that that consideration should be made that poverty is taught as a main course in social work education and as a post-graduate course for social work in practice. It is also recommended that social work should promote poverty discourse at the policy level with a view to influencing structural change. It is also recommended that adequate funding be provided for poverty practice, family support and early intervention and prevention. It is also recommended that that government policies that impact negatively on service users be evaluated. Service users should play an integral role in all these recommendations.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

The theme of this thesis is social work and poverty with particular emphasis on exploring practitioners’ attitudes and understanding. As such, the thesis will investigate the relationship between social work and poverty, social workers’ understanding of poverty and social workers’ attitudes towards people who are poor and poverty.

Three factors stirred my desire to undertake this research. The first is my personal background and experience of poverty. I was born in Zimbabwe into a family of nine children and poor parents. My parents struggled to finance my education and had to contend with negative influences from wider family members who tried to discourage them from educating my siblings and me. I was brought up at a commercial farm and factors such as poor working conditions, among them low pay, oppressive labour laws and child labour associated with my background, compounded these influences. My educational journey was characterised by challenges that included walking long distances to school and working manual jobs during holidays to buy textbooks and uniforms. This resulted in me being socially excluded at school. My resilience and perseverance in education coupled with my determination is largely responsible for my academic and professional achievements to date. This laid the basis of much of my involvement with poverty and fuelled my passion.

The second influence is my educational and professional experience. My motivation to study social work involved an aspiration to help the poor and reduce inequality. This resonates with Sheedy (2013, p.2) who states that,

when I entered social work in the mid-1970s as part of a wider policy of graduate recruitment to the profession, there was a sense among many of us that through social work we had an opportunity to change our society towards greater equality, a redistribution of power and resources and a more economically and socially just world.
The reality of contemporary social work practice represents a challenge to my aspiration and Sheedy’s reflection above. These influences have set the stage for my encounter with poverty as an academic issue and as a practical issue within social work practice.

The third factor revolves around my passion in relation to poverty and social work practice. There is evidence that in practice, social work has an ambivalent relationship with poverty. This arouses my desire and curiosity to seek answers to this dilemma as it resonates with my professional experience. Davis and Wainright (2005) observed that even though most social work clients are poor, social work attitudes are ambivalent, confused and at the extreme hostile to service users living in poverty. This contention suggests tensions inherent within social work practice largely due to its contested nature (Dominelli, 2004). In the UK, austerity measures and welfare reforms, adopted by successive governments but accentuated by the Coalition Government (2010 to 2015) and the current Conservative government significantly impact on social work practice within children and families in addressing poverty (Backwith, 2015). This thesis will explore practitioners’ narratives regarding government policies considering evidence of high thresholds for social work intervention, increased service users’ needs and reduced resources at the disposal of social workers. As noted by Backwith, Austerity policies and cuts in funding for public services come at a time of rising need with the population increasing at both ends of the age range, young and old, the groups most reliant on social care (Backwith, 2015).

The social work and poverty relationship raises a number of debates in relation to issues of social work functions among social work commentators relevant for this thesis and the underpinning research study as to whether social work should aim for radical practice transformation to address poverty and fundamental social work ethos or address social problems as they arise.

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) (2014, p.224) definition of social work states that the,
The British Association of Social Workers’ ethical code highlights fundamental assertions regarding the role of social work in the alleviation of poverty in addition to a specific commitment to help those living in poverty (Krumer-Nevo et al 2009). Cox and Pawar (2006) contend that poverty with its associated problems is commonly regarded as the world’s severe problem. Poverty therefore presents a challenge to social work’s ethos to achieving effective social change, development, social cohesion and the empowerment and liberation of children and families as highlighted in the 2014 IASSW and IFSW social work definition. I will address issues of social work definitions and functions further under the literature review section. The issue of the relationship between social work and poverty is complicated by the issue of the social work profession suffering from poor public image and reputation as evidenced by how the media portrays social work during child abuse tragedies and child protection (Warner, 2014).

There have been historic social work milestones and changes prompted by public events or tragedies when the issues of definition and functions have been under the spotlight. For example, the Seebohm Committee was established in 1965 to review the structure and duties of Local Authority personal social services in England and Wales and to consider changes needed to secure an effective family service; this led to the creation of the Social Work Task Force in November, 2008 (Dickens, 2011). Ayre and Preston-Shoot (2010, p.2) argue that in England at least, despite the best intentions of those driving legal and policy changes forward, the outcome of the particular approaches to reform has been to substantially diminish the capability of children’s social services to respond effectively to the complex challenges they face. One of the effects of the changes is the generation of more activities and tasks designed to meet performance targets to demonstrate achievement at the expense of direct work with the families and sometimes against social work values and ethos.
The problems of defining the functions of social work date back to when social work evolved as a profession. Horner (2012) asserts that this is from when the social work profession was associated with charity activities characterised by religious institutions caring for and meeting the needs of the disadvantaged such as the sick, children and people who are poor to a modern professional activity delivered through national or local government structures regulated by regulatory and national standards and statutes. Featherstone et al (2012) contend that political, legal, and economic contexts have set the parameters for social work practice resulting in many needy families being excluded from services with practitioners narrowly focusing on child protection and family support being marginalised.

According to Thompson (2005, p.12), ‘social work is a political entity and so, of course how it is defined, conceptualised and implemented is therefore a contested matter.’ Sheedy (2013) bemoans some social work students’ lack of substantial interest and understanding of politics and the political control of social work practice and finds this puzzling and challenging. This is evidenced by the impoverishment of most service users due to hostile government policies and evidence of marginalisation of social work in tackling poverty. There is no substantial evidence of passion and capacity by social workers to engage with political and structural issues. Sheedy’s view resonates with my passion and belief that knowledge of poverty and politics is fundamental given the significance of poverty in social work history and practice and the fact that poverty is marginalised within social work practice. In the United Kingdom, ‘issues of poverty, poor housing and homelessness … dominate the lives of many people and frequently … (bring) them into contact with social workers’ (Ferguson and Woodward 2009, p. 22). Sheedy (2013, p. 59) argues that the effects of poverty span housing, employment, relationships, physical and mental health, longevity, and mortality.

Social work interventions generally prescribe expectations and actions for service users so that they change to suit the political, social and economic contexts and ideology as opposed
to advocating for structural changes and challenging neo-liberal policies that disadvantage poor service users and widen inequalities. Sheedy (2013) argues that much practice has historically assumed that lack of money and resources is the presenting problem caused by personal, emotional, and psychological deficiencies. This is interesting given the evidence that poverty affects parental and physical well-being that in turn affects their ability to parent (Wellbourne, 2012).

Younghusband (1981) contends that from its beginning, social work has been intertwined with poverty and deprivation. However, despite this specific and long-standing association, it is puzzling that in the United Kingdom social work does not have an official remit to address poverty (Wellbourne, 2012). In many countries, social workers are mostly engaged in direct practice, providing impoverished families with both material and emotional support (Featherstone, White & Morris, 2014). This begs for social workers and management to understand the impact of structural causations of poverty, inequalities derived from power, status, and wealth (Backwith, 2015), and the need to advocate for structural solutions as opposed to preoccupation with individualised casework. This underscores the importance and relevance of knowledge of poverty as an issue explored by this study. (Sheedy, 2013, p. 63) asserts ‘the way in which social workers and other professionals respond to the consequences of poverty will depend on their orientation towards the nature and cause(s) of this phenomenon, which in turn should be derived from a detailed knowledge of experience of living in poverty and not solely from an evaluation of dominant discourses on the issue’.

Social work’s marginalised role in addressing poverty, coupled with tensions prevalent in social work practice raise questions about the political will and the impact of state control of children and families’ social work practice as well as state’s culpability in causation of poverty and its tackling within working families in general and poor social work service users in particular. Whilst it is worth pointing out that not all social work users are poor, poverty is rooted in social work involvement and makes the poor susceptible to being referred and being
subjected to surveillance (Morris et al, 2018). ‘There is an association between social work interventions with children and families and poverty’ (Wellbourne, 2013, p.107). Social work is the profession most associated with families living in poverty (Parrot, 2014). This context therefore not only begs a question as to why poverty is not a social work concern within children and families’ social work practice but fires my curiosity to explore the relationship between poverty knowledge or lack of it, attitudes towards the poor or poverty and the relationship between social work practice and poverty.

The above context also underpins exploration of social work’s role in addressing poverty afflicting most social work users with a view to contributing towards the body of knowledge in relation to social work and poverty. The research study explores whether contemporary social work practice under the current political and economic climate is equipped to address poverty.

Adams (2002) notes that complexities arise from the links between social policy, legislation and social work as well as the debate about the legalistic model whereby social work is defined in terms of statutory duties and the ethical duty of care model based on social work’s values. Parton et al (1997, p.11) argue that ‘we may be in danger of expecting social workers and social services departments to resolve problems that are well beyond their remit and responsibility’.

Current social work practice’s pre-occupation with legal, procedural and performance obligations may result in social work ignoring action to combat the effects of poverty in service users’ lives (Parrott, 2014). Adams (2002, p. 32) argues that ‘this dichotomy (the tension between the legalistic model and the ethical model) highlights the intrinsically contested territory of the seemingly most straightforward aspect of social work-how social workers should practice, in light of their powers, duties and responsibilities as laid down in legislation.’ Parrott (2014) argues that social work must be influenced by a clear ethical perspective based on social justice.
Social work practice requires a balance between values and the law as the basis of competent practice (Braye and Preston-Shoot, 1990). The literature review will explore evidence that highlights that the emphasis on achievement of prescribed performance targets goes against social work values and ethos. It is argued by some social work commentators that social work practice treats and accepts poverty as normal and Parrot (2014) intriguingly portrays poverty as background music to social work practice.

Advocacy is one of the fundamental traditional roles of social work and necessary to promoting social change and development as espoused by the social work definition and given the inequality within society and the widening gap between people who are rich and poor. Schneider and Lester (2001, p. 65) define social work advocacy as the representation of a client(s) or a cause in a forum, attempting systematically to influence decision making in an unjust or unresponsive system(s). Beckett & Horner (2016) argue that the definition above highlights how central advocacy is to social work practice and that social workers are engaged daily in attempts to influence decision-making of unjust or unresponsive systems on behalf of their service users. It is therefore concerning that there is evidence of some ambivalence by social work practitioners in contributing towards a social work and poverty discourse as compared to other issues such as safeguarding, even in light of some evidence that children and families subject to child protection interventions are living in poverty (Bywaters et al, 2015, p. 2016).

Perry (2003) notes that there is significant evidence that social work does not have a good record of understanding or combating poverty. Krumer-Nevo, Monnickendam & Weiss-Gal (2009, p. 227) argue that ‘the flight of social work practice from the centrality of poverty stands in contrast to its centrality in the perspective of people living in poverty’. Lavee & Strier (2018) presents data from a study undertaken in Israel on social workers’ emotional labour working with families in poverty. The data portrays the strong negative emotions experienced by social...
workers because of struggles and challenges of dealing and association with the system that compels them to deal with a growing clientele population and very limited concrete means or support to meet their needs. Within this context, Lavee & Strier (2018) highlight that the research study participants felt that they were abandoned and even abused by a system in which they are expected to deal with the urgent social problem of growing poverty without adequate material resources or emotional training. It is therefore necessary that social workers should not only be supported but to be enabled to fostering of knowledge in relation to poverty and effective attitudes towards the poor and tackling poverty. Enosh & Bayer-Topilsky (2014) note that recent studies have shown that social workers’ personal attitudes and beliefs regarding families and children in poverty affect their decisions.

However, I am also cognisant of the fact that a social work practitioner’s capacity to play an effective role in facilitating social change and empowerment as postulated in the social work definition is, however, constrained by structural and organisational limitations such the question of control of decisions in relation to the nature of social work practice and delivery of children’s services (Adams, 2002). This is significant given the evidence that contemporary social work practice is driven by performance targets and compliance to prescribed organisational procedures (Munro, 2011) and the impact of managerialism to social work practice.

1.2. Structure of the thesis

The second chapter will review the relevant literature for the research question. This will involve exploring location of poverty in social work theory, social work values and principles, contemporary practice and social workers attitudes towards people who are poor and poverty. Examination of these issues will help explore how such issues relate to or impact on social work practice in addressing poverty.
Location of poverty in social work theory will be explored with a view to examining how this relates to how poverty is or is not tackled. The literature review section comprises several sections and subsections as outlined by the table of contents. Factors that impact on social work practice such as assessment, thresholds of eligibility in social work interventions, managerialism and the ‘troubled families’ programmes as a case study of social work practice will be explored with a view to their influence to contemporary social work practice and poverty practice. Social workers attitudes towards people who are poor, and poverty will also be explored. Existing knowledge and research in understanding of poverty and attitudes towards poverty will also be explored.

The third chapter will focus on the methodology. This chapter will argue that philosophical paradigms relative to the research namely constructivism and interpretivism are relevant to qualitative research as opposed to positivism.

This chapter will highlight that a qualitative research design was suitable to the research question, aim and objectives. This will include outlining the context of the research study, research design, the sample size and how the research participants were selected.

This chapter will describe the two main research methods used, namely focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. Three Local Authorities constituted the research areas, namely two predominantly rural county councils with some urban settlements and one urban county council. Limitations of the study methods will be discussed and how these were managed. Ethical considerations will also be discussed.

The fourth chapter will present findings and analysis of themes that emerged relating to practitioners’ understanding of poverty. These themes include prevalence of poverty within service users, the challenge of defining poverty, poverty and other problems and conception of poverty as intergenerational.
There fifth chapter will present findings and analysis relating to ‘poverty practice’. This will comprise of themes relating to barriers to poverty practice and poverty practice. These themes generally overlap focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews.

The sixth chapter will discuss implications of the findings outlining their significance, reliability, validity and generalizability. This chapter will also review whether the study met its aims and objectives, its contribution towards the body of knowledge on social work and poverty. The seventh chapter will outline conclusions and recommendations.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Literature review method

I used the narrative review method to identify sources relevant to the research topic. Narrative literature is useful for highlighting theoretical and conceptual literature or ideas in one’s area of research (Kitely and Stogdon, 2014). The narrative literature review in this instance focused on research studies that were relevant to social work and poverty. Rumrill and Fitzgerald (2001) describe the narrative literature review method as interpretive and qualitative in nature. This resonates with my research design and the philosophical paradigms adopted, as described in the methodology.

One of the main objectives of this research study was to explore the relationship between social work and poverty. The implications of existing theories, concepts, models/paradigms and ethics of social work are explored as a key objective for understanding how social work practitioners understand poverty (Baumeister and Leary, 1997). Related to this, the nature of (ontological) poverty as represented across the research and related literature is explored, alongside the epistemological questions of the nature of that knowledge, the coherence, contradictions, gaps and strengths – and the implications of social work action and ways of relating to service users in circumstances of poverty (Baumeister et al, 1997).

The narrative literature review method has its limitations such as subjectivity surrounding the determination of which studies to include, the way studies are analysed, and conclusions drawn (Rumril & Fitzgerald, 2001). Consideration of criteria such as relevance, trustworthiness, generalisability and ethics (Orme and Shemmings, 2010) helped to address the question of subjectivity. I widened the search and then narrowed to literature relevant to the research topic, goal and objectives. My search results indicated relatively few studies on social work practitioners’ attitudes towards and knowledge of poverty in the United Kingdom. In order to achieve the objectives highlighted above, I used ‘Discover’ (Resource Discovery
Platform) that searches multiple databases simultaneously including the SocINDEX. I also searched SocINDEX separately as the subject coverage of this database is relevant to my research area. Discover is specific to the University of Bedfordshire. I used search terms or descriptors such as “social work” AND poverty, “social work*” AND attitudes and “social work” AND knowledge AND poverty. These searches brought up over 166,000 results comprising of journal articles, news, magazines, reviews, primary source documents, theses, eBooks, research reports, policy documents, guidance, and other grey literature. I then added filtered by “peer review” and “academic journals” that resulted in 124,000 articles. I then limited the search to “Great Britain” OR “United Kingdom” and this reduced the result to 24,672 which I reduced to a manageable level by looking at the abstracts of the articles. The asterisk, for example “social work*” helps to widen the search and pick up social work; social workers and alternative word endings and this resulted in 34,442. Other filters included language (English only). I also searched on the Scopus database and this had the advantage of extra functions such as citation analysis, indicating how many times specific articles had been cited by other authors or researchers, demonstrating the impact of the research. This information is not found on Discover. I also used Google Scholar search engine that brought up 18,200 results which I narrowed by changing the date range.

I also identified key authors such as Gupta, A., Morris, K., Walsh, J., Bywaters, P., Shildrick, R., Walker, R., and Featherstone, B. from the searches above and snowballing.

### 2.2. The place of poverty in social work theory

This section will explore social work definitions, theories and models which constitute a theoretical base and knowledge that underpins social work practice and its relationship with poverty. Rutter & Brown (2013, p.13) describe knowledge as ‘theoretical methods, models and frameworks which explain the world we are in, what social work is and how we do it, as well as research evidence’. Rolfe (2001) states that theory refers to a way of
arranging knowledge in a descriptive, explanatory, or predictive framework. Beckett & Horner (2016) argue that theory can and should inform practice, but it is in the process of testing, modifying, and comparing different theories in practice that social work skill evolves. The next section explores social work definitions.

2.2.1. Defining social work

There is consensus among social work commentators that definitions of social work are contested (Dickens, 2011) and this creates tensions in terms of what is expected of social work as a profession and what happens in practice. Within the context of the focus of this thesis, such expectations inevitably include whether and in what ways poverty is constructed as a legitimate focus for social work intervention.

The most recent global definition, adopted in 2014, by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) in Melbourne, Australia to replace the 2001 definition states that the social work profession is a practice based and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion and the empowerment, and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance well-being’ (IASSW & IFSW 2014, p. 224).

Although poverty is not explicitly mentioned, the definition highlights relevant and contested issues in the social work and poverty debate such as social cohesion, social change, development, empowerment, and the liberation of people. The principles of social justice and human rights, which I will explore further in this section, are also fundamental to the debate about the relationship between social work and poverty.

IFSW is an international professional social work body comprised of national professional associations of which the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) is part. The British
Association of Social Workers’ ethical code and social work’s definition include unequivocal statements regarding the role of social work in the alleviation of poverty in addition to a specific commitment to help those living in poverty, many of whom are social work clients (Krumer-Nevo et al, 2009) and commitment to oppose all inequalities resulting from irregular access to material resources, political power and public participation (BASW & CIWP, 2019). Lymbery (2001) argues that the impact of poverty and the persistent existence of inequality and oppression within society are the main issues that need to be addressed at the structural level. However, Lymbery (2001) notes that such structural issues are difficult to be influenced by a social worker at an individual level and therefore suggest it could be much better for BASW to take a lead on such issues.

IFSW’s objective is to be instrumental towards an attainment of a just world through setting and reviewing international social work standards and policies that encourage good practice outcomes. How and to what extent this is attainable is a challenge given the contested and contextualised nature of social work within specific regions as highlighted by Cox & Parwar (2006) below and without addressing poverty directly and explicitly given evidence of its increase and prevalence within social work service and its devastating impact on children and families (Lymbery, 2001). This is complicated by the evidence that social work has no good record in tackling poverty (Lister, 1998). The new IFSW definition advocates for engagement with people and structures to address life challenges. Horner, 2006 p.23) asserts,

To almost all contemporary observers, poverty was the root of homelessness, drunkenness, ignorance, immorality, apathy and despair, which in turn led to mental illness, child maltreatment and neglect...- in other words, the issues that were to become the primary concerns of social work and that the eradication of poverty would lead to eradication of the consequent social ills.

Morris et al. (2018) evidence that respondents in their study acknowledged that poverty, unemployment, poor housing, domestic abuse, substance, and mental abuse were widespread and interrelated issues. It is notable that the perception of poverty and social work approaches are predominantly individualistic. It is important that social work interventions
should consider structural sources of oppression as well as emphasising macro as opposed to micro approaches focused on individual service users (Ornellas et al, 2018).

Whilst IFSW postulates global social work objectives, social work practice is contextualised. According to Cox & Parwar (2006), American social work is inclined towards addressing the needs of individual service users. In China social work focuses on the mobilisation of masses to address social problems. Latin American social work is social justice orientated, whilst in Africa, social work is becoming increasingly focused on social development. These differences therefore reflect the profession’s responses to changing regional needs, profiles or outlines and service users’ resource needs at regional, national, and local levels (Cox & Parwar, 2006). Cox and Parwar’s classificatory model therefore raises questions about the attainability and efficacy of global social work’s purpose. Cox & Parwar (2006) do not mention poverty explicitly in their classifications. It is reasonable to argue that this amounts to a tension as poverty is practically associated to the issues mentioned above. It is reasonable to assume that the social justice element in the Latin American social work model and the social development are linked to poverty and the IFSW social work definition above. Social work in England resonates with Anglo-American social work framework that tends to put more focus on individual and family problems ignoring structural factors (Houston & Campbell, 2001). This resonates with tenets of neoliberalism and managerialism. Coulshed & Orme (2018) assert that globally, social work practice is characterised by varying orientations in terms of priorities or trends in different regions due to cultural, historical, and socio-economic conditions. I will not explore the various orientations in depth as it is beyond the scope of this thesis as the focus is on England.

The revised IFSW definition suggests some shared identity and ethics. However, the local, national and regional contexts and structures highlight characteristic features that impede the accomplishment of unity or global purpose within social work practice raising questions of the
realistic nature of a social work profession working to a universal mandate or to local contexts (Ornellas, Spolander and Engelbrecht, 2018).

Payne (2005a) describes three different approaches to social work. It is therefore necessary to explore how the approaches relate to tackling poverty afflicting the majority of social clientele. The Socialist-collectivist approach seems consistent with the ethos and principles of the IFSW definition. Payne (2005a, p.9) suggests this approach,

Sees social work as seeking to promote cooperation and mutual support in society so that the most oppressed and disadvantaged people can gain power over their own lives.

It is reasonable to argue that this seems a suitable social work approach capable of responding to poverty effectively in England given an acknowledgement of the detrimental effects of inequalities on all aspects of social life and of their certainty in a neo-liberal economic system (Featherstone, Morris & White, 2013). Ornellas et al (2018) postulate that under the Socialist-collectivist framework, the social worker realises that only social transformation can empower the disadvantaged and the oppressed service users with the aim of enhancing greater social equality. However as argued above there is evidence that this is a challenge for the social worker to influence individually.

In a comparative mixed method review of frontline practice in England and Scotland, Morris et al (2018), found that practitioners described poverty as deep-rooted, fundamental, and “generational”. The ‘generational’ description in the finding depicts poverty in cultural terms and suggesting it is passed from generation to generation and realisation of the ineradicable and structural nature of poverty. This highlights the complexity of poverty characterised by its description on one hand poverty as deep-rooted and fundamental, suggesting political and structural factors and the “generational” on the other hand suggesting cultural and pathological factors.
The second approach outlined by Payne is individualism-reformism. Payne (2009) describes social work activity as geared towards service users’ social welfare needs on an individualized basis. This also resonates with the pathological/deficit model of social work and is not suitable for addressing poverty within a neoliberal environment. Davies (1994) asserts that modern state social work in the UK is more inclined towards the ‘individualism-reformism’ approach and argues that various social workers’ roles are embraced by the theory of maintenance which does not seek to challenge the fundamental structure of society. Findings by Morris et al (2018) suggest that social work’s responses to poverty have been characterised by complexity and contradiction. The dominance of the pathological or deficit practice models does not augur well for the promotion of social change and development as well as social cohesion, empowerment and liberation of the people as espoused by the IFSW definition.

Birkenmaier, Berg-Weger and Dewes, (2014, p.2) assert that the primary mission of social work, according to the National Association of Social Workers code of ethics is ‘to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed and living in poverty’ (2008). However, findings by Morris et al (2018) showed that some practitioners who yearned to deliver anti-poverty practice described feeling either overwhelmed by poverty or unable to change social and material circumstances.

The third approach is ‘reflective-therapeutic’ (Payne, 2009, p.15) or the Interpretivist-therapeutic (Howe, 1987), and is geared towards promoting and facilitating personal growth in order to enable people to endure the suffering and disadvantage they experience. Howe (1987,) states that in this instance, social workers whose practice conforms to this model are ‘Interpretivist’, or seekers after meaning’ and operate upon the assumption that orderly relationships arise through interpersonal negotiations. Ornellas et al 2018, p.229) state,

This framework focuses on individual change and psychological functioning as the basis for intervention, with a strong emphasis on the individual and their capacity to
cope with personal struggles and suffering, independent of the social and economic circumstances in which they are embedded.

This is a dominant approach in contemporary social work interventions in the UK that also echoes with the American individualistic social work inclination and the deficit model in which the focus is on ameliorating clients’ mistakes, choices, actions and inactions (Featherstone, Gupta, Morris, & Warner, 2016). Morris et al (2017) argue that such an approach negates the contribution of poverty to social problems. This differs from the Socialist-collectivist approach which promotes cooperation and mutual support with a view to empowering oppressed and disadvantaged people. However, Payne (1996) suggested that social work practice holds components of the three approaches in various depths with one or another being influential at different times. Woodrofe (1962) exemplifies that the reflexive-therapeutic approach was influential in the early part of twentieth century in America whilst Bailey and Brake (1975) illustrate that the socialist-collectivist approach was integrated into the radical social work literature in England in the 1970s and the early 1980s.

Ornellas et al (2018) identify a further approach to service delivery, the neoliberal – managerialist social framework. Within this framework, social work practice is treated as a business whose aim is ‘to provide an excellent and quality range of services to a diverse range of customers’ (Garrett, 2013, p.5). The focus is on performance management and measurement, individual empowerment, and the implementation of managerialist techniques (Ornellas et al, 2018). This approach accords with the regulation of social work, which is discussed below. Morris et al (2015) argue that organisational and systematic barriers characterised by deadlines and timeframes, erode professionalism with pernicious consequences for practitioners and families. One of the contradictions of this approach in the context of rising need is the declining sphere of direct work and long-term engagement (Featherstone, Gupta, Morris, & Warner, 2016).
It is necessary to explore definitions and theories of poverty below as the research topic focuses on the relationship between social work and poverty.

2.2.2. Definitions/theories of poverty and social workers’ understanding of poverty.

Social workers’ understanding of poverty is important as understanding informs how poverty is addressed and its location in social work practice (Payne, 2014). Morris et al (2018, p.367) evidence a disconnection between the “abstract and action” in social work practice, whereby any hypotheses about the consequences of poor socio-economic circumstances failed to manifest themselves in family assessments, case work and decision making.

Wellbourne (2012) asserts that whether social work becomes a major player or not in poverty depends on its ability as a profession to create for itself professional expertise in this area.

Strier and Binyamin (2010) assert that definitions and theories employed by social workers and their organisations influence the reasoning behind intervention in relation to poverty. Alcock (2006, p. 64) argues that

‘issues of definition, measurement, cause and solution are bound up together and an understanding of poverty requires an appreciation of the interrelationship between them all’.

Bertound, Brown & Cooper (1981) argue that the way in which policy responds to poverty can be categorised according to whether it is directed towards the individual in poverty, cultural, social, environmental, or structural in scope. Lister (2004) argues that concepts of poverty have pragmatic effects as they support indirect justification, which in turn underpin policy directions.

There are several theories that underpin and influence social work practice in relation to perception, alleviation and tackling of poverty. Lister (2004) states that disagreement over the
definitions of poverty are pronounced and connected with disagreements over both the causes of poverty and solutions to it. Wellbourne (2012) echoes that poverty may be defined in different and problematic ways.

Two general definitions in the poverty literature are absolute and relative poverty. Alcock (2003) describes absolute poverty as sometimes an impartial and even a scientific definition based on the idea of livelihood or survival, as contrasted with relative poverty that is more prejudiced and clearly acknowledges an element of judgement.

In 1995, the Copenhagen World Summit on Social Development adopted the following definition of absolute poverty:

‘a condition characterised by service deprivation of basic human needs including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, and education information’ (Dorling et al., 2005, p.9).

Lister (2004) highlights that Townsend criticises the restricted subsistence concept of needs, disconnected from their social context upon which absolute definitions of poverty were based. Davidson & Erskine (1992) argue that whilst people living in poverty share a lack of ownership of resources, the causes of this lack of resources and the consequences of poverty itself differ between divergent groups hence the need for social workers to be cognisant of diversity and how this impacts service users. Adams (2002) contends that judgement about poverty levels contain a subjective element and that the standard varies through history and from society to society.

Wainwright (1999) argues for a broad definition of poverty that not only recognises material deprivation but a lack of social, cultural, and physical resources. Gupta & Blewett (2008) assert that in their findings, service users and professionals expressed a profound message that poverty is not just about want of money but also the ensuing impact on people’s dignity and self-respect. Monnickendam et al (2010) state that lack of income remains the most important
element in the definition of relative poverty. This debate highlights the subjective nature of the relative definition of poverty.

Featherstone et al (2017) argue that whilst lack of material resources is at the centre of the difficulties experienced by families, definitions also have to engage with rights and relationships, how people are treated and how they regard themselves. Gupta et al (2016) contend that the belief that poverty is shameful, and a reflection of individual failings is a main feature of media and policy constructions of poverty. This leads to a dilemma given the significance of anti-discriminatory principle in social work training and practice.

Backwith (2015) argues that whilst these definitions are still used at a global level, relatively very few people in the UK live on the edge of starvation. Backwith’s assertion sounds reasonable and logical given that UK is a rich country and therefore reasonable to assume that nobody should starve. However, the emergence of multiple food banks and how people are resorting to food they provide suggests otherwise. Findings by Morris et al (2018) evidence that food-bank usage was described as increasing.

Relative poverty according to Adams (2002), in contrast, tends to be defined in more flexible terms integrating the experience of the poor and can progress in comparison with different yardsticks, perhaps representing living standards in different groups or societies. All relative definitions of poverty are based upon comparison, often with some concept of common living standards in the community in question or being researched (Dixon & Macarov, 1998). The Council of Ministers of the European Community in 1984 defined poverty as the persons, families and groups of persons whose resources (material, cultural and social) are so limited as to exclude them in the minimum acceptable way of life in the Member State in which they live’ (Council of the European Communities 1984, Council Decision on Specific Community Action to Combat Poverty 85/8/EEC as cited by Dixon & Macarov (1998, p.7).
Dixon & Macarov (1998) argue that although this definition is vague, the momentum is clear enough as it is based on a comparison with some measure of common living standards. Peter Townsend’s view on ‘relative deprivation’ according to Dixon & Macarov, (1998) underlines the significance of social involvement. In the UK, Townsend described relative poverty as one where material consumption and social participation in a wide range of customary social activities is impeded by lack of resources. Backwith (2015) highlights that in the UK, government poverty statistics have been based on relative poverty ever since Townsend espoused it. It can be argued that this suggests an element of denial by the government about the existence of absolute poverty.

Dixon & Macarov (1998, p.8) argue that theoretically, there is likely to be disagreement about the appropriate levels of comparison, and at the practical level it assumes a considerable volume of accurate and updated information about income and consumption patterns. Backwith (2015) argues that the valuable point is that relative poverty guides policy makers and practitioners in the right direction and gives a yardstick by which progress can be measured. Backwith (2015,p.5) asserts,

The rediscovery of poverty and its redefinition as relative deprivation underlines the point that, because poverty is a social phenomenon, its forms will change as society changes.

Whilst poverty measurement in the UK has focused on low incomes, Townsend & Gordon (2002) argue that there is need to look beyond the narrow focus on per capita consumption expenditure and at both the effects of low family income and the effects of inadequate service provision for children.

Wellbourne (2012, p.103) argues that how and by whom poverty should be tackled, are therefore not straightforward issues as there is an evident lack of agreement about the kinds of approaches that are likely to be of use in solving the problem. It is reasonable to argue that social workers have a critical role, given their association with the service users who are poor
and the association of poverty to most social problems that social work interventions grapple with. Adams (2002) asserts that there is no adequate set of social policies readily available and guaranteed to rectify problems of poverty. Poverty literature shows that poverty is a wide, multi-dimensional, critical, complex, and a political issue whose definition continues to provoke debate.

Gordon and Townsend (2000) argue that poverty definition and measurement cannot be taken as value-neutral and its definition determines how policy interventions and strategies are formulated and implemented. This suggests there is an element of judgements in how poverty is defined and assessed. Flaherty et al (2004) argue that there is a danger of being stuck in the definitional and measurements debate and forget the need to question the source of the standards being used. Mantle and Backwith (2010, p. 3) highlight that poverty impacts on the lives of individuals and is associated with about every social ill one can think of and with which social workers grapple.

Backwith (2015) states that there are two ways of measuring relative poverty both derived from Townsend’s work. Townsend (1979, p. 251) describes the first, which is the use of a poverty index with a list of signals composed of items that include all the major areas of personal, household, and social life. However, Backwith (2015) questions whether there is a poverty threshold.

Townsend (1979) argues that his method provided an objective poverty threshold of 150 percent: a line against which the number of people in poverty could be counted based on how people on low incomes lived. Gordon & Pantazis (1997) state that one criticism of Townsend’s method was that in compiling the poverty index, there was no questioning of why people did not have the items, whether it was by choice or failure to afford them. In relation to social work practice, this resonates with social work practice dominated and characterised by
individualised pathological models underpinned by managerialistic practices and procedures in an environment of rising service demand and dwindling resources.

The second way, according to Backwith (2015) and Lister (2004), of measuring poverty is by income-based poverty lines: people whose income is below a given amount are considered poor. Backwith (2015) notes that there are several such poverty lines but the most widely used is the Households Below Average Income (HBAI) measure which is usually set at 60 percent of the average (median) household income. He states that there are two versions of HBAI standards: before and after housing costs. Aldridge et al. (2012) assert that people who campaign against poverty are inclined to use the after-housing costs measure as it offers a better picture of how much income people must spend. The after-housing measure seems to be most applicable given the evidence that housing is a significant and prevalent issue amongst service users and associated with poverty (Morris et al., 2018). Backwith (2015, p.18) asserts that the HBAI poverty line is arbitrary in that it is not solely based on any calculation of how much money households need to avoid being in relative poverty.

Whilst there is evidence that most parents and children involved with social work interventions are living in poverty (NSPCC, 2008) and that that poverty is a key indicator of children and families getting involved with social services (Schorr, 1992), it is concerning that there has been insufficient attention given to developing an evidence base for measuring and understanding the relationship between poverty and child abuse in the UK (Morris et al., 2018). Hooper, Gorin, Cabral and Dyson's (2007) research in understanding the association between poverty and the risk of maltreatment, note that compared to other research on parents in poverty, there were high levels of stress in a sample in research by Hooper et al. (2007) reflecting the impact of poverty and associated issues such as poor or overcrowded housing and also the frequency of other forms of misfortune such as childhood abuse, domestic violence, breakdown in relationships, bereavement and mental health issues (Featherstone, White & Morris, 2014). Evidence of how toxic trio (mental health substance misuse and
Poverty responses directed at individuals experiencing poverty are informed by pathological or deficit model that regard poverty as a manifestation of service users’ own making resulting from a range of factors such as self-defeating behaviours, lack of motivation, underutilisation of market or employment opportunities or cultural factors. According to Parrott (2014), individualistic theories interpret social risks such as poverty as individual risks that can only be explained and addressed through the individual resonating with the individualism-reformism approach and the reflective-therapeutic approach. Featherstone et al (2017) highlight that over the last three decades, there has been a clear shift across varying welfare systems within a neo-liberal environment towards locating causes and solutions of inequality and maltreatment with the individual. Parrott (2014) highlights that studies have shown that the attitudes of social work students remain largely focused on individual explanations of social problems such as poverty. Featherstone et al (2017) assert that there is an extensive account of explaining causes of maltreatment as lying in the individual psyches or inter-personal dynamics whereby poverty has neither no role nor a leading factor.

Whilst the need for individualistic interventions cannot be realistically discounted, it is professionally disconcerting that individualistic frameworks overlook structural issues and blame the victim. Parrott (2014, p. 21) states that ‘individualistic conceptualisations of poverty generally lead to poor practice and the stigmatisation of service users. Backwith (2015) argues that casework which is the predominant method in British social work, focuses on individuals and their families and that there is a deep-rooted inclination of overlooking external, social, and political factors. Strier & Binyamin (2010) argue that alternative social designs that can
contribute to an anti-oppressive approach to poverty could be more effective. Radical social work explored within the thesis is a relevant approach associated with the promotion of anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive approaches.

Parrott (2014) states that the cultural conceptualisation of poverty is mostly attributed to those families who have a long history with social services and their poverty is attributed to attitudes that are considered acceptable moral norms of work. Adams (2014) assert that the theory of the ‘cycle of deprivation’ fits in the category that has been used by governments to respond to poverty. The ‘The troubled families programme’, announced by Prime Minister David Cameron in 2011, is an example of how individualised or cultural conceptualisation locates blame on individuals and communities overlooking structural factors. Morris et al (2018) evidences that the respondents in the mixed-method comparative study demonstrated a disposition to focus on stigmatizing cultural explanations associated with underclass narratives. Morris et al (2018) describe a phenomenon of territorial stigmatisation and how this is linked to moral decadence and risk.

The social environmental conceptualisation of poverty according to Parrott (2014) views the failure of the social environment as a significant explanation for poverty as opposed to people experiencing poverty as being necessarily responsible for their plight. Some of the issues may be related to lack of employment opportunities, negative societal attitudes, or discrimination (Backwith, 2015).

The structural conceptualisation of poverty resonates with the radical social work and Marxist ideologies. Parrott (2014, p. 32 argues that “structural explanations for the existence of poverty explore the way existing social relations in society result in persistent inequalities in wealth and income.”
Parrott (2014: viii) argues that theories that understood poverty as a structural problem rather than individualised, were less likely to emerge in social workers’ accounts which in turn had a negative impact on what social workers considered appropriate in terms of their practice. Ferguson & Woodward (2009, p.16) argue that any approach that locates the sources of the people’s problems primarily in the structures of the society in which they live, and which encourages social workers to challenge these structures in their day-to-day practice, is likely to be viewed less favourably by governments and funding bodies than those approaches that instead highlight clients’ individual inadequacies. Ferguson & Woodward (2009, p.16) highlight that this has been especially true under the Conservative and the New Labour governments of the last three decades when radical approaches and collective approaches in general, including community development, have waned from the agenda of many social work courses and agencies. Featherstone, Gupta & Morris (2017) who argue that there is a compelling need for social workers in children’s services to learn and develop accounts that understand the suffering encountered by families, echo this. They further assert that a variety of theoretical and practice tools to support professionals are currently not available. BASW (2015) asserts that social work is increasingly disempowered and bureaucratised during changes and cuts.

Parrott (2014) and Backwith (2015) therefore argue that it is critical for social workers working with people experiencing poverty to understand structural reasons for poverty that influence policy makers. Parrott (2014, p.32) advises that it is important for social workers acknowledge that differences in policy can and are achieved by human intervention at all levels.

There is need, however, to formulate strategies to ensure that social workers and their employers embrace this challenge and take it up as an opportunity to evaluate existing theories and strategies with a view to generating research grounded contemporary knowledge and theories. Schiettecat, Roets & Vandenbroek (2014, p. 656) argue that
Only an in-depth understanding of and sensitivity to the complexities of family life and the ways in which policies and practices influence children's lives can serve the ways in which (child) poverty is challenged.

This is critical as echoed by the proposition by Morris & Shepherd (2000) that the fundamental social work skills of empathy, partnership and inclusion are becoming marginal in social work with children and families.

2.2.3. Impact of poverty on problems faced by social workers in practice
Barnardo’s (2013) highlights that poverty constitutes the single deadliest danger to the wellbeing of children and families and can affect children socially, educationally, and personally. Welbourne (2012, p.89) asserts ‘the experience of poverty in childhood is clearly damaging and … permeates every facet of children’s lives’. Welbourne (2012) advocates for a broader perspective and framework that locates poverty as a risk factor for children. In practice, research evidence suggests that poverty is not taken as a risk factor (Morris et al, 2019). Davis and Wainwright (2005) argue that social workers in Britain do not consider poverty to be a significant factor affecting other hardships and do not focus on its mitigation despite the knowledge that poverty is a risk factor for children (Wellbourne, 2012). Featherstone et al (2014) state that Hooper et al (2007) found in discussion with professionals that poverty was often overlooked as they focused on drugs or alcohol problems and on individual attitudes, values and priorities. Statistics and facts about child poverty presented below highlight the magnitude of poverty and underscore the need for government to consider making tackling of child poverty a priority within children and families social work practice.

Dekker et al (2000) state that the UK has high levels of poverty and disadvantage especially for children. According to Jin et al (2011), in 2008/09, 2.8 million (22%) were in relative poverty whilst 2.2 million children (17%) were in both low income and material deprivation. At the same period, 1.6 million children (12%) were in absolute poverty and around 12 per cent of children lived in persistent low income (Jin et al 2011). Child poverty is currently projected at around
40% and the Institute of Fiscal Studies predicts that child poverty will increase by 7% between 2015 and 2022. This is disturbing given the rating of the UK as one of the richest countries in the world. Tackling child poverty and formulating effective social work strategies and intervention is arguably in children’s best interests.

Wellbourne (2012, p. 56) argues that despite social workers’ knowledge that neglect is damaging to children, even without the ‘decisive incidents’ that often trigger legal intervention, the focus of social work and legal practice remains very much on incidents; ‘dramatic manifestations’ that act as a ‘catapult’ that take a neglect case into the legal arena.

Rogowski (2013) argues that child abuse is a social creation as the construction of victims and perpetrators of poverty and how poverty is addressed are shaped by the social context and by social divisions of class, gender, and race. Backwith (2015) asserts that there is a class prejudice in that the link between poverty and some forms of abuse is related to the fact that poor working-class families are subjected to greater surveillance than middle class families. Sheedy (2013, p. 50) argues that the powerful in society are protected from challenge by pathologising the individuals who are the victims of decisions made by the same power brokers. This calls for serious debate and scrutiny of the relationship between social work and poverty.

Wellbourne (2012) postulates that the extent to which poverty affects children is dependent on the ability of their parents to protect them from its damaging effects. Poverty often affects parental mental capacity and physical well-being, which consequently affects their ability to parent (Welbourne, 2012). There is evidence that the range of psychological and social pressures associated with financial and social stress make it harder to be a parent (Welbourne, 2012). This underscores the need for family support rooted in addressing poverty to enhance parental capacity.
Dominelli (2004, p.97) states, ‘According to the Framework for Assessment … poor children in a one parent family living on low income have a one-in-ten chance of being subject to care proceedings’. ATD Fourth World (2004) reports that children taken into care following child protection measures often come from poor families. Vornanen et al (2011) echo that there is likely to be an association between poverty and increased referral to child protection services and legal interventions to place children in care.

Smith and Middleton, (2007) state that research shows that much of poverty analysis, in terms of childhood poverty has been framed within an adult debate of economic distribution and material resources. Daly and Leonard (2002) argue that little is known about children’s perspectives and experiences of living in low income households. There is need for devising effective tools that facilitate talking to children about poverty in a way that is non-stigmatising, non-alienating, non-threatening and allows them to participate as their own agency.

International Movement ATD Fourth World, 2004 p.45) argue that the above means that Public policies aimed at combating child poverty focus only on preparing children for adult life in terms of work and citizenship; they fail to consider how children in situations of deprivation and social exclusion interact with children around them.

Featherstone (2012) argues that the welfare and benefit reforms and austerity measures by the Coalition Government and the current government, which have seen cuts in public services spending, are affecting families and people who are poor hard as well as impoverishing women and children and yet social work remains silent or ambivalent. There is evidence that the welfare and benefit reforms, coupled with public spending cuts, are also affecting frontline social work roles (Munro 2011). Featherstone et al (2017) argue that at the practice level, local procedures and guidance could be augmented with clear and main attention to issues of poverty and inequality, not as a backdrop to concerns about children.

2.2.4. The medical model and social work problems
The medical model has developed since the mid nineteenth century when the patient could be cured of their illness or have their difficulties lessened through medical intervention (Maclean & Harrison, 2015). Within social work practice, this model therefore classifies service users’ problems as pathologies that require expert social work interventions to address them with a view to enabling service users’ effective functioning. Maclean and Harrison (2015, p. 42) state that the medical model emphasizes a normal mind and a healthy physique. The medical model has been a traditional feature of social work practice that locates the difficulty within the individual client or family and resonates more with the reflexive-therapeutic social work framework discussed above on social work definitions. The focus is on the service user and not on structural factors such as poverty.

Featherstone et al (2014) assert that in a child protection model, whereby child protection is a statutory responsibility and whose major focus is risk averse, the role of practitioners as ‘experts’ is to engage with families with a view to assess and treat social difficulties consistent with some logic and assumption of the medical model. The child protection model focuses on the assessment of risk to children by caregivers and family and gives priority to procedures and risk-averse practices (Lonne et al, 2009).

The medical model therefore leads to fragmented help being offered according to specialisations and makes social work too technical and bureaucratic (Payne 2005a). Featherstone et al (2014) argue that the narrative of isolating the child from his/her family in a child protection narrative is fraught with danger especially in a neo-liberal environment characterised by unequal societies. Featherstone et al (2017) argue that for families, the focus on smaller timescales for parents to manifest their ability to change has severe implications.

In child protection practice, causes of abuse and neglect are in individual client’s psyches or inter-personal dynamics or choices made by individuals (Featherstone et al 2017) and this resonates with the medical model and the reflexive-therapeutic view. Poverty is not assessed
as a risk factor as evidenced by findings by Morris et al (2018) in their mixed method study whereby it was identified that there were different procedures or processes by which consideration of family poverty was obscured, blocked or avoided in individual case work and social work decision making. During assessment and social work intervention, the service user is expected to acknowledge their pathology or pathologies according to the expert assessment or analysis and comply with prescribed solutions or recommendations. Failure to comply is interpreted negatively by experts either as lack of insight, lack of motivation, resistance or neglectful and could lead to control and punitive measures or interventions (Featherstone 2004). Some of the prescribed solutions within social work practice relating to problems associated to poverty include, service users being advised to apply for crisis loans, seek benefit advice, budget wisely, avoid behaviours and choices that are construed as unwise or beyond their means, prioritise or seek support from voluntary agencies. These prescribed solutions are meant to address professionally diagnosed pathologies which could amount to labels within social work practice.

MacLean and Harrison (2015, p. 43) argue that the labels ascribed to service users are viewed negatively in society and that service users are expected to fit into the society and criticised, excluded or blamed if they cannot fit. Research has also shown that social workers’ emotions are influenced by the “theory of cultural poverty,” which emphasizes the intergenerational inheritance of pathological patterns, suggesting that acceptance of this theory affects their approach to and handling of families living in poverty.

There is research evidence that suggests that there is an element of shame associated with social work and poverty. Chase and Walker (2015) assert that shame forms an essential part of how poverty is recognized and addressed in policy and practice contexts in which the medical model is a tool used by social work practitioners. Gupta et al (2016) argue that the social and psychological pain of shame reported by people afflicted by poverty is important and that shaming debates are known to reduce confidence of service users. It can therefore
be argued that this is likely to affect engagement and relationship of social work clients with social workers or social work interventions.

The medical model is widely used within contemporary social work practice in which poverty is pathologised. Morris & Shepherd (2000) assert that attitudes and values of professionals that inform family access to services, especially the viewpoint that holds families responsible for the problem that led to their involvement with social work interventions, undermine partnership working.

2.2.5. Crisis-centred approach and marginalisation of poverty

Crisis-centred is one of theories used within social work practice given that most social work interventions are event and crisis driven. It is therefore necessary to explore the social work task and how this addresses the presenting problems and marginalises poverty arguably associated with it. Thompson & Thompson (2016) state that a crisis is defined as a turning point in somebody's life, a critical moment where the situation will either get better or get worse, but it does not stay the same. Thompson (2009) states that the social work task in relation to crises is to help to positively manage energies involved before they start to disappear as the crisis subsides. It is not suitable in addressing poverty, as its focus is to effect a change in relation to the crisis or risk over a short period.

In a mixed method comparative study by Morris et al (2018), it was identified that duty and assessment social workers consistently and frequently employed the term toxic trio. Toxic trio denotes a combination of mental health, alcohol and drug abuse and domestic violence related problems which could be triggers for social work crises intervention. Crisis-centred approach may be used in child protection work to achieve results when specific problems or crises occur (Payne, 2014). Crisis-centred theory is therefore applicable in emergency practice settings.
such as mental health and more consistent with the reflexive–therapeutic framework and its focus on helping service users to cope with their personal difficulties. Adams & Dominelli (2002) argue that there is an element of social control in which tasks or failure to complete them become sticks with which to beat the service user or provide evidence of their incompetence or lack of motivation. Payne (2014) argues that in such cases, however, supportive work, the provision of services, longer-term efforts to bring about change or longer-term supervision to prevent deterioration or risk will often be required. Morris et al (2018) affirm that their analysis identified evidence in social work practice of a conscious indifference to poverty and detachment from families and their communities.

Payne (2014) states that whilst many social workers find the clarity of the processes involved in this model attractive, there is a danger they oversimplify the complexity of the issues in people’s lives. The model’s structured nature and their focus on the concepts of ‘crisis’ or ‘task’ mean that they may define social problems in pathological terms and according to the practitioner’s assumptions (Payne, 2014). Practitioners may, as a result, fail to identify the broader social issues and structural failings that have led to the problems (Payne, 2014). The data from the mixed method comparative study of frontline social work practice in England and Scotland states that when respondents were asked to pinpoint patterns in the circumstances of families involved with children’s services, respondents in practically all cases listed perceived and specific risk factors instead of wider socio-economic fashion or circumstances (Morris et al, 2018). Crisis intervention focuses on presenting problems such as substance and alcohol abuse ignoring socio-economic factors such as poverty that could be the underlying cause.

Thompson (2011a) argues that crisis intervention theory would be more suitable if it emphasized the development of support systems to prevent or resolve the crises. One of the problems with Thompson’s point is that there is not enough time in many agencies to develop a support system around a client within the period of a crisis before practitioners have to move
on to the next case without a longer-term plan being in place (Payne, 2014). The current social work environment within the UK characterised by increasing service users’ needs, high caseloads, service and funding cuts and inadequate financial and human resources compound this as well as undermining social workers’ endeavours to address the roots of family troubles (Morris et al, 2018).

Payne (2014) states that there is a political critique around agencies’ potential misuse of such a model of practice, to the disadvantage of clients who may need more extensive provision. Its effectiveness in dealing with the presenting problems may result in society avoiding longer term and more deeply seated responses to social oppression (Payne, 2014). Gambrill (1994) argues many forms of brief therapy- provides a minimal response to severe social problems and therefore conceals resource inadequacy and the failure of political will to respond realistically to deep-seated problems of poverty and social inequality.

2.2.6. Ecosystems perspective and its engagement with poverty

The ecosystems perspective is an often-used framework within children and families social work practice (Birkenmaier et.al, 2014, p.26). The ecosystems perspective uses concepts from systems theory and ecology. This perspective examines the exchanges between children and individual service users, families, groups, communities, and their environment (Birkenmaier, 2014:2016) in which social workers are significant intermediaries especially between the family and state (Walsh & Mason (2008). Systems and ecological theories are therefore fundamental in social work as they focus on people’s social connections, relationships and social justice or social change (Payne 2005b). It is therefore necessary to explore the extent and how poverty is located within the ecosystem perspective.

Wilson et al (2008) state that the ecological model, which underpins the Framework for Assessment, is very helpful in engaging families in thinking about their strengths and requires
attention to be given to environmental factors such as income, employment and housing (Gupta & Blewett (2008). The framework of assessment (2013) was originally promulgated to address increasing government’s concerns about poor assessment. It is now rooted in practice.

An ecological perspective is defined by Barker (2003: 136) as ‘an orientation in social work...that emphasizes understanding of people and their environment and the nature of their transactions’. Birkenmaier (2014, p.26) states that systems theory utilises parts to form complex activity in the social environment while the ecological theory seeks to explain how people adapt to and influence their environment (Birkenmaier, 2014, p. 26).

Systems and ecological perspectives became popular during the 1960s and 1970s and have been influential on the theory and knowledge base of social work (Healy, 2012). However, there is evidence that practitioners’ understanding of what constitutes a family and relationships is contrary to that of the lived experiences and perceptions of families themselves. Morris (2013) posits that her analysis of interviews in a study which examined experiences of vulnerable families with complex needs revealed that families were aware of who they considered as part of their family including relationships that had at times broken down and resisted perceptions by household which generally excludes extended family networks. Morris (2013) states that families recognised a major difference in how they perceived their way of family relationship and interactions and how professionals judged their ways of being a family. This tension is telling and has implications on how and to what extent social workers’ engagement with ‘family’ are at odds with the families’ understandings and experience of family relationships and interactions. Strudsrod et al (2018) argue that social workers’ awareness of diversity in family structures and practices are not always reflected in their practice decisions. Morris et al (2015) argue that identities become shaped by initial risk judgements. This could turn into a barrier to families engaging with social workers openly in sharing poverty experiences and disadvantages for fear of shame and being judged. Gibson
(2015) argues that service users’ or families’ attempts to present a positive image to social workers is understandable and asserts that this could be through avoidance, manipulation or stage management which unfortunately only attract punitive response.

Birkenmaier (2014) asserts that put together, the two perspectives of ecological and systems describe the functioning and adjustment of human systems in a lively exchange with each other. Social work’s main purposes in utilisation of this approach according to Healy (2012) are to enhance service users’ problem-solving and coping mechanisms and link service users with systems that support them with resources, services and opportunities without examining the cause and impact of poverty and inequality amongst service users. This echoes with the individual-reformist approach whose focus is meeting of individual needs whilst maintaining a fine fit between a service user and the environment without seeking social change (Ornellas et al, 2016).

Payne (2014) argues that critical theory complains of the limited usage of systems and ecological ideas in social work in that the systems ideas in social work focus on how systems maintain, reproduce and adapt themselves, rather than promoting radical and significant wider change in these systems especially in relation to poverty and inequality. Dominelli (2004, p.107) highlights ‘moralization’ and ‘normalisation’ as techniques used in social work and argues that material and financial rewards used to ensure that poor families rectify their moral failings are part of the moralisation technique. Dominelli (2004, p.107) asserts that spreading accepted norms of living into households that request support constitutes part of the normalisation process. Parker & Parker (2014) argue that systems’ thinking does not explain the reasons why things happen and does not really provide a model of intervention.

Whilst the importance of support networks is critical for service users, it can be argued that the expectation on service users to identify and utilise their family and wider support networks, is used prescriptively and it can be argued as a substitute for requisite resources.
Featherstone et al (2014) express their disappointment at the evident paucity of significant hands-on practical support provided to families. Evidence shows that the ecosystems perspective is limited and ineffective in enhancing service users’ problem solving and coping mechanisms as it does not tackle structural barriers such as inequalities and poverty.

Morris et al (2017) argue that families are no longer regarded by social workers as suffering adversity as presumed by the 1989 Children Act but instead construed as intentionally failing to exercise good judgement in utilisation of opportunities to become hardworking families or making poor lifestyle choices. This conception echoes with the professional focus on the active interaction between the service user and their external environment, victim blaming and marginalisation of the severe impact of structural factors and barriers. Gupta & Blewett (2008, p.462) assert that simply put, social work practice which fails to recognise the impact of ecological factors on family life, can understand parental behaviour through the prism of the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor. Poverty is one of the critical ecological factors given its association with most problems grappled with by social workers and yet regrettably, poverty is not an issue that is explicitly explored and addressed in relation to how it affects other dimensions of the ecological model or assessment framework and its marginalisation within social work practice. Morris (2013) in her study of families using multiple services states that though poverty was an absolute reality of family life, it was hardly, if ever, identified by professionals or families as the main reason for service intervention.

Morris et al (2017) contend that less attention has been given to how contemporary social work practitioners conceptualise families in their reasoning or their investigative and protective functions. Morris & Featherstone (2010) postulate that there is little, if any evidence of the development of tools and resources to support extended family members in their engagement with highly interventionist state processes and yet there is an expectation that the family can and should contribute to the future well-being of children and their extended network. This lack of support creates a dilemma for extended families and likely sets them up to fail, for example
in relation to Special Guardianship Orders (SGO) whereby prospective family members have to undergo rigorous assessments to prove their suitability including financial capacity to care for a child/ren. Local Authorities seem to find SGOs attractive as this seems resource led given that SGO carers are paid low allowances as compared to those paid to foster carers. The tension is that SGOs become less appealing to family members and yet seemingly and arguably the most suitable environment for children. Featherstone et al (2014) argue that therefore the importance of the family ecology is possibly marginalised in the minds of practitioners and policy makers.

Featherstone, Morris & White (2014) argue that those who are poor under neoliberalism are considered as architects of their own poverty and their circumstances are used against them as an indicator of risk in relation to themselves and others. Given the shame experienced by poor service users and their families and the consequential punitive measures, it is therefore understandable for families to be reticent in disclosing their financial struggles with professionals or hide their poverty. Featherstone et al, (2014) argue that for highly vulnerable families living in poverty, living in communities with few resources and dealing with other disorderly and challenging lives, research has struggled to reflect or represent their lived experiences.

2.2.7. ‘Cycle of deprivation’ and poverty

The cycle of deprivation theory is relevant and worth exploring as it explains some perceptions of patterns of poverty by professionals, policy makers and government officials as they persist over time. Wellbourne (2012, p.102) asserts that the idea of ‘cycle of deprivation’ dates back to the Conservative government of the 1970s, when ‘breaking the cycle’ was a policy aim (Joseph,1975) and has continued to influence planning and intervention since then. This section will also explore how this view has shaped government initiatives and how poverty is located therein. Bailey and Brake (1975) state that the cycle of deprivation theory describes
poverty as a pattern of poverty being passed down from generation to generation through the familial or community culture generating destructive or negative attitudes and personality structures, in a particular fatalistic apathy and a resistance to change.

The cycle of deprivation theory accords with the pathological in which carers’ or families’ mistakes and difficulties are used to determine a professional view (Morris & Shepherd, 2000). Ferguson et al (2009) argue that social workers influenced by the deprivation cycle theory see poverty as the result of personal pathology characterised by clients and families being blamed and considered not optimising available opportunities and engaging in various forms of self-defeating behaviour. It is evident that the attitudes towards the people who experience poverty are largely negative and that poverty is explained in individualistic and cultural terms.

Alcock (1993,p.29) states,

Keith Joseph, a Conservative Minister of Social Services, is noted by a number of authors as one of the proponents of the ‘cycle of deprivation theory’ in which the inadequate parenting, lowered aspirations and disadvantaged environment of families and communities became internalised as part of values of some children as they grew up.

Morris and Featherstone (2010) postulate that the Respect Action Plan under the Labour government of Tony Blair whose focus was on so called ‘anti-social’ families perceived to present with chronic levels of risk and costly to society resonated with the ideas promoted by Sir Keith in which the need for targeting was advocated by Tony Blair in his speech on 4th September 2006. This was a targeted programme at 4 percent of families who presented with different complex needs and considered not responsive to existing programmes (Morris et al, 2013). It was noted that interestingly individualised ways of working were employed within a framework of control (Morris and Featherstone, 2010). Poverty and inequality were not a focus of this programme.
Gupta & Blewett (2008), in their project with service users, academics and practitioners, evidence that families spoke of being blamed for being in poverty, with a prevalent subject that their failure to cope on benefits must be their fault as other people cope on benefits. This also resonates with the so-called dependency narrative that portrays benefits claimants as choosing to be dependent on benefits as opposed to seeking employment. It is reasonable to assume that this view influenced the rationale behind the Coalition government’s welfare and benefits reforms (2010-2015), such as cuts to benefits to non-working families, strategies to get back the unemployed back to work and bedroom tax, intended to address or reverse the so-called dependency culture. It is therefore necessary that the impact of such policies is evaluated to assess their impact on people who are poor.

Alcock (1993) argues that according to the ‘cycle of deprivation’ thesis, when children of service users who are poor reached adulthood, their expectations and their abilities were lowered and they more readily expected and accepted the poverty and deprivation of their parents and acquaintances. Lewis (1968) notes that advanced forms of the ‘cycle of deprivation’ theory have narrated the families and communities as developing a culture of poverty through which people learn to manage with their deprivation as well as accept it. This view accords with the reflexive-therapeutic social work framework in which people are supposed to cope with their individual difficulties and suffering unfettered by the social and economic factors in which there are rooted (Ornellas et al, 2018). The current government’s flagship employment strategy for the unemployed and benefit claimants is touted as a possible way of addressing poverty. However, evidence of a significant number of people in employment experiencing poverty raises questions about this assumption and how the strategy of getting people into work relates to other government policies such as childcare. Featherstone et al (2014) argue that whilst work could be a critical means of alleviating family, difficulties in relation to childcare, travel costs and time poverty make it difficult for people in low income employment to sustain employment.
In terms of parenting, Pringle (1998) contends that poverty and other manifestations of social exclusion can affect parents ‘actual as well as discerned capacity to care for their children in various ways’. Ghate & Hazel (2002) echo that poverty makes the parenting chore very testing. Morris et al (2018) argue that the perception whereby people are categorized with the cultural presumption commonly ascribed to low-income families results in practitioners pathologizing parental behaviours and focusing on stigmatizing cultural descriptors associated with underclass narratives. Morris & Shepherd (2000) argue that this is embedded in a view that regards families as dysfunctional and unable to make safe plans and underpinned by a deficit model of family functioning. Failures or problems of some individual family members are applied to all members of the family, whether they are known or not (Morris et al, 2000).

Alcock (1993) argues that in reaching one target, targeted antipoverty strategies have a limitation of inevitably missing many others. Alcock (1993, p. 253) postulates that the assumption behind the use of targeted resources to employ professionals to ‘help the poor to help themselves’ is inevitably based, in part at least upon a pathological model of the causes of urban poverty in affluent society, stemming from the culture of poverty and deprivation theses.

Adams et al (2002, p.39) assert that social work interventions appear to be one of those services that people seek to avoid wherever possible and where entanglement has come to be associated with failure and stigma. According to Adams et al (2002, p.39), moral judgements about worth and deservedness structure social work practice with the working-class poor just as was the case a century earlier. This resonates with Alcock’s (2007, p.285) view that for instance, social security policies were intended to prevent an underclass developing as an impoverished group cut off from the rest of society. One can argue that presumably the government’s view was that an underclass had already developed.
The next section will therefore explore location of poverty within social work principles and values.

2.3. The place of poverty in social work values and principles

This section will explore the relationship between main social work principles such as anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice as well as other social work values such as social justice, human rights, relationship-based practice and advocacy and poverty in social work. This involves taking account of theory, practice, and research and how these relate to the place and position of poverty in children and families’ social work practice.

2.3.1. Anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive social work principles

The concepts of anti-discriminatory practice (ADP) and anti-oppressive practice (AOP) have been part of social work practice since the late 1970s (Cocker & Hafford- Letchfield, 2014). Thompson (2010, p.228) asserts that anti-discriminatory practice became an integral component of social work, largely but not exclusively due to the influence of the radical social work movement to address discrimination.

According to Cocker & Hafford- Letchfield (2014), anti-discriminatory practice is a term used to describe how social work practitioners seek to reduce individual and institutional discrimination, particularly on the grounds of race, gender, disability, social class and sexual orientation. Pierson & Thomas (2001, p. 26) state that anti-discriminatory practice refers to social work that is specifically aimed at the unfair, discriminatory treatment suffered by specific groups in society and aims to support individual users and to assist them to tackle discrimination in their own lives as well to challenge discrimination when found in the media,
in local communities and in public stereotypes. Of relevance to the research topic is the evidence that suggests that social work service users have a common characteristic in their experiencing of poverty. Gupta & Blewett (2008) in their findings from a project involving service users, academic and practitioners, found that family members underscored the impact of poverty and other forms of exclusion on their family’s functioning due to factors such as race and disability. Gupta & Blewett (2008) evidence families’ experiences of ‘povertyism’ whereby families who took part in their project spoke of being discriminated against and oppressed due to being in poverty compounded by feeling powerless.

Cocker et al (2014, p. 225) assert that anti-oppressive practice is a term used in social work to affirm oppression in societies, economies, cultures, and groups and is used to enhance practice that actively seeks to reduce, remove or nullify the influence of that oppression. One practitioner in a study by Morris et al (2018) described the impact of poverty as oppressive. Data by Morris et al (2018) suggests that the relationship between poverty, service demand and the socio-economic location of practice were close that for numerous practitioners constituted a standard environment regarded as commonplace and unrecognized. This resonates with the ‘poverty-blind’ approach in which poverty is seen as a norm and professionals lacking knowledge, understanding and appreciation about the impact on children and families (Gupta and Blewett, 2008). Thompson (2001) describes anti-oppressive practice as social work practice that aims to challenge the sources of oppression in society, whether public stereotypes, discrimination, social and economic disadvantage, or unequal distribution of power. Dalrymple and Burke (2000, p.14) define anti-oppressive practice (AOP) as

a radical social work approach which is informed by humanistic and social justice values and takes account of the experiences and views of oppressed people. It is based on an understanding of how the concepts of power, oppression and inequality determine personal and structural relations.

Dominelli (2010 p.161) summarises the main values reinforcing anti-oppressive practice as ‘ideals of equality, egalitarian power relations, social justice, empowerment, human rights and
citizenship. Anti-oppressive practice calls for social workers to challenge service users’ structural contexts (Sheedy, 2013), a view that accords with this thesis. Ferguson et al (2009) advocates that anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice should extend to challenging the issue of poverty affecting service users and this also highlights the significance of advocacy in social work. However, the practice challenge is inherent in the dilemma pertaining to disempowered and demoralised individual social workers and service users challenging poverty and social exclusion deep rooted in strong social economic processes and structures (Backwith, 2015).

Anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice concepts are sometimes used interchangeably. Pierson & Thomas (2001) state that anti-oppressive practice has tended to absorb and replace anti-discriminatory practice. Pierson and Thomas (2001) argue that some distinction is still evident. Anti-discriminatory practice addresses those areas where users face discrimination as well as challenging public stereotypes and prejudices experienced by specific groups where-as anti-oppressive practice focuses on the extreme differences in power between service users and those in powerful positions in service provision and decision making about services (Thompson, 2001). Pierson & Thomas (2001) postulate that anti-oppressive practice begins with the realisation that individuals’ lives are entangled in social relationships shaped by structures and attitudes that that are rooted in society at large. Pierson & Thomas assert that this recognition marks the beginning of the capacity to change both those same social structures and individual lives. It is debatable whether mere recognition is enough. Evidence shows that challenging structural factors is a challenge for social workers as individuals. These definitions and descriptions highlight the significance of systemic issues such as discrimination, oppression, inequality and power differentials, issues which are relevant to social work and poverty.

Sheedy (2013) argues that critical social work implies a set of practice principles based on questioning and analysing society and a social service delivery from a position of resistance
to factors which subvert, coerce and deprive and oppress people. Dominelli (2014, p. 86) asserts that social workers have focused on valuing social justice and social change in micro-level relationships and attempted to work with clients in ways that are ameliorative and respectful of difference. Social workers need to focus on social justice and social change at macro-level relationships.

Thompson (2012, p.8) argues that social workers are the professionals who are between their clients and the wider state apparatus. It is therefore important that social work finds ways of engaging effectively with structures and policies that discriminate and oppressive service users. Thompson (2010) further argues that social work practice which does not take account of oppression and discrimination, cannot be good practice.

2.3.2. Social justice

Social justice is an important value and principle to social work as highlighted in the global IFSW social work definition and accords with anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice especially in relation to service users experiencing poverty. Birkenmaier et al (2014) assert that the social justice value has important implications for social workers and their practice as it requires a response to the injustice that is inherent in society. Sheedy (2013) argues that whilst there is need and breadth for the successful use of anti-oppressive practice to individual situations, there is little evidence that this has incremental impact on wider social injustices and inequalities.

There is evidence that society is disgusted by the poor rather than by poverty (Shildrick, 2018). According to Birkenmaier et al (2014), social justice refers to the way in which resources are distributed to its members by society, including material goods and social benefits, rights, and protection. I would argue that the reference to society in this definition suggests that responsibility is generalised rather than the government that drives the dominant political and
economic ideology or systems and should therefore have the will power to ensure social justice is done and take responsibility to act accordingly.

Birkenmaier et al (2014, 27) argues that although there are various theories of social justice regarding the criteria of distribution of wealth, the social work profession generally accepts an egalitarian focus that is concerned with the fair distribution of both material and non-material resources (Rawls, 1971) and equal access of all people (Reichert, 2011). Rawls (2005) argues that real equality of opportunity is a crucial principle of social justice in terms of inequalities in income and wealth.

Thompson (2012, p.15) identifies two approaches of social justice, i.e. the narrow and broad. The narrow conception centres on wealth distribution and its association with a traditional focus on class inequalities and the primacy of economic inequality. Lister (2004) as quoted by Thompson (2012, p.15) asserts that there is a major emphasis on poverty and the need to eradicate it. Thompson (2012) argues that this contrasts with the idea of challenging social exclusion.

The second and broader approach according to Barry (2005) is concerned with a wider range of social inequalities such as gender, race, age, disability, religion, language, sexuality, and any form of inequality based on social category.

Ferguson (2008) argues that it is the second, broader and more holistic sense of social justice that anti-discriminatory practice is concerned with. I believe that social work should play a pivotal role in either approach as poverty is clearly located in the narrow one and associated with other characteristics of the broader approach. Featherstone, White & Morris (2014) argue that their findings suggest that the social work profession has soaked up and now employs wider social and political discourses about the failing poor and the harmful nature of needs.
According to Adams et al (2002), social justice has provided a thread of historical continuity through social work practice and that this resonates with social work and its value base, empowerment approaches and a range of progressive social work paradigms. (Dominelli, 2002b, p.4) states, ‘those endorsing an emancipatory approach to social work have an explicit commitment to social justice and engage in overt challenges to the welfare system if it is seen to thwart this goal. However, in relation to social work practice reality on the ground, Walsh & Mason (2018) argue that despite social workers’ recognition of diversification of family forms and the complications of life for the families with whom they are involved, this is not consistently reflected in their practice decisions.

### 2.3.3. Human rights-based approach

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Social Workers (IASW) regard it vital that social workers have a clear and unqualified dedication to the advancement and protection of human rights and to the satisfaction of basic social aspirations (United Nations, 1994). It is therefore appropriate that this section examines the human rights-based approach in relation to social work and poverty.

Healy (2008) posits that the principle of human rights provides a powerful and comprehensive framework for social work practice; it not only affirms needs but also endeavours to satisfy those needs. The social work profession globally comprehends human rights to denote those rights set forth or derived from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and (BASW, 2015). Birkenmaier et al (2014, p. 27) highlight that many social workers evaluate their practice based on its contribution to an environment in which universal rights are highly developed. Morris et al (2018) argue that it is a challenge to encourage social work to carefully consider current practices and the values they reveal and to (re)connect responses to poverty with the professions’ everlasting commitment to human rights and justice.
Birkenmaier et al (2014, p. 27) assert that a moral foundation for social work practice and an on-going commitment to the belief that all people should have basic rights and access to broad benefits of their societies is guaranteed by the human rights which are threatened by poverty or its impact. However, it is argued that social values are frequently endangered in periods of economic recession and social work itself being confronted by marginalisation and bureaucratisation in the wake of changes and cuts (Donald & Mottershaw, 2009).

BASW (2015) describes a human rights-based approach as empowering people to know and claim their rights and enhancing the capacity and responsibility of individuals and institutions who are accountable for respecting, protecting, and fulfilling rights. However, it is necessary that a conducive environment is created for social workers and social work practice given the effects of neoliberal and managerialistic techniques on social work practice. It is argued that social workers need to be conscious that their actions can either assist service users gain more control or undermine their efforts and further disempower them (Sheedy, 2013). This therefore necessitates an acceptance of the complexity of poverty and discrimination and recognition of the effect of social and economic policies rather than a needs' driven and individualistic approach (BASW, 2015).

According to Ife (1997),

contemporary social work today grapples with the issue of ensuring global social work practices are ethical and value human worth, while faced with the demands of government policies that in many cases have the potential to control and oppress the disadvantaged.

This quotation highlights the tension found in relation to the global appeal of social work values and the control function and regulation of social work locally. BASW (2015) argues that social work values can be eroded when there is poverty and discrimination.

Birkenmaier et al (2014) assert that human rights and fundamental freedoms enable citizens to completely develop and use human qualities, intelligence, talents, and conscience and to
satisfy their needs. Birkenmaier et al (2014) further state that human rights and fundamental freedoms are basic for humankind’s increasing demand for a life in which the inherent dignity and worth of each human being will receive respect and protection. It is reasonable to argue that social work is a human rights-based profession whose values can be undercut when there is lack of consciousness and understanding of human rights and their connection to inequality and poverty among neighbourhoods devastated by poverty (Donald & Mottershaw, 2009).

Healy and Link (2011) assert that the social work profession can take up the challenge initiated by many of our global colleagues in making human rights a central debate and in exploring its relevance more thoroughly to our everyday work. This should include the debate on the magnitude and impact of poverty as well as need for social work involvement. BASW (2015) argues that this demands an examination of the structural causes of discrimination and poverty instead of only poverty manifestations and of the impact of governmental action or non-intervention (BASW, 2015).

Sen (1999) argues for a human rights-based approach to poverty, noting that it raises fundamental ethical questions about how people in poverty are regarded, treated, and dealt with, which are relevant to the research topic. BASW (2015) asserts that there is increasing proof that a rights-based approach can make a notable contrast in practice by ensuring that both the standards and the principles of human rights are integrated into policy making as well as daily running of organisations and social work practice. Donald and Mottershaw (2009, p.43) argue, “the language of human rights shifts the burden of responsibility off those experiencing it, focusing instead on the role of duty bearers, especially the state to ensure basic material needs are met”.

2.3.4. Relationship-based practice
Relationship based practice is a vital component of social work practice and a key theme that arose in Gupta’s & Blewett’s (2008) collaborative project. Gupta & Blewett (2008) reveal that family members involved in their collaborative project emphasized the importance of developing relationships in accordance with the value base of social work. The families endorsed relationship-based social work within a structure that recognises and seeks to address discrimination and oppression.

Trevithick (2010) states that an approach that uses the relationship as a pivotal factor is sometimes referred to as relationship- based perspective. Trevithick (2010) asserts within social work practice, relationship -based perspective has tended to be associated with client-centred or psychosocial approaches or to casework. McNeill et al (2005, p.27) argue that the quality of the therapeutic relationship between social worker and individual or family is significant to achieving successful outcomes. Trevithick (2010) argues that however, as practitioners struggle to balance divergent demands and tasks, it can be difficult for them to realise how important they are to the people they work with.

Trevithick (2010) argues that, however, like all practice approaches, the quality of the relationship formed depends to a greater degree on the knowledge, skills, values and qualities brought to the work and the culture within which the work is located. The social work role in relation to family support requires knowledge of local provision and effective relationships with practitioners from a range of settings and with different knowledge and understanding. The existence of multiple charitable organisations which support service users with financial and material provisions underscores the need for knowledge of such provisions and importance of effective relationships. This is significant given the lack of resources characterised by social work practice, hence the need for joined up working, cultivating relationships with the voluntary sector and others to meet pressing needs of service users.
Trevithick (2010) asserts that the relationship perspective is paramount with regard to government policy and practice, whereby the relationship between people, organizations and other areas of life in concepts such as joined up services, joined up thinking are observed and in concepts such as partnership, empowerment and choice. Trevithick (2010) states these policies signal a commitment to enhance the quality of the relationship between available services, those who deliver services and service users. However, there has been challenges in relation to effective multi-agency and partnership working as evidenced by findings of several enquiries prompted by tragic events (Munro, 2011).

Morris et al (2018) in their evaluation of social work change programme in one local authority reveal that families talked in detail about the nature of their relationships with social workers and other social care professionals signifying the importance of relationships to them. Families revealed that good relationships involved being able to put people at ease and relate regardless of background (Morris et al, 2018). Gupta & Blewett (2008) suggest that it is important for social workers to acknowledge impact including low self-esteem, sense of hopelessness and powerlessness on service users, all of which are likely to result from experiencing poverty and inequality.

Morris et al (2018, p.243) state,

"Workers needed to be able to empathise with caregivers’ experiences of frustration and ambivalence without wanting to ‘jump in’ and ‘fix’ the situation, whilst also being able to ‘read’ when families were in distress or reaching crisis point”. This accords with some emotions discussed under the concept of emotional labour and underscores the importance of organisations investing in effective strategies to deal with emotional impact experienced by workers due to working with service users experiencing poverty.

In social work practice, the building and cultivation of effective relationships and trust with service users is difficult given the alienation and stigmatisation caused by service users association with authoritarian interventions. BASW & CWIP (2019) assert that many systems are designed to strengthen negative judgements about people in poverty, sustaining an idea
that they are not trustworthy. Featherstone et al (2014, p.137) assert that lack of relationship building with families characterised by recurring short term interventions that were perceived as negligent breaking of relationships left families resistant to further interventions and more importantly building an account about service use that would permeate their responses to further provision and practice.

Relationship building is difficult for social workers due to lack of time to undertake direct work which is vital in social work practice for nurturing effective relationships. It is a matter of public record that much time is now spent in offices, writing up electronic case records, signposting and managing the services that need to be provided into families, mostly by other professionals and agencies. Featherstone et al (2013) assert that eighty-six percent of professionals’ time is spent on system driven tasks, with only fourteen percent in direct contact and argue that even the direct work percentage is difficult with communication dictated by the forms and the need for data and information.

Broadhurst et al (2010) argue that it is not necessarily the social worker’s duty to undertake the direct ‘therapeutic’ work anymore but that of other agencies in an environment where the increased focus on joint multi-agency working has resulted in the erosion of social work’s traditional role and function of helping.

Ravi Kohli’s research into the response of social workers to unaccompanied asylum seeking children provides evidence of how, even in highly regulated bureaucratic systems like the UK, practitioners who are emotionally accustomed to the needs of the child and prepared to act on their behalf with agencies, including and perhaps especially those who process their right to be in the country, can make a significant difference to their lives (Kohli, 2007). Kohli (2007) conceptualises the journey effective social workers take children on as being provided through producing safety, a sense of belonging and ultimately success. This demonstrates the
importance of practitioners’ engagement with and challenging bureaucratic systems and structures and how the end should justify the means.

Writing about the needs of children in care, Luckock (2008) argues that the worker needs to take the young person in care on two kinds of journeys: one is ‘to stable and permanent family and social life in childhood and beyond’; the other involves ‘the journey to adulthood in its own right’ (Luckock, 2008:2). Ferguson in Ayre & Preston-Shoot (2010), asserts that the social worker as an intermediate participant today has to undertake a variety of roles, being a tour operator, helping children and families to steer their ways around different services and agencies, while supporting a continuously involved emotional engagement for the child and young person.

Whilst there is evidence that relationship-based approaches have been promoted, the focus remains on risk and child (Featherstone et al, 2014). This is compounded by an environment characterised by working under pressure, lack of time and other resources, resulting in a tendency for social workers to perceive poverty and social exclusion in pathological narratives resulting from service users’ personal failings (Backwith, 2015). Featherstone et al (2014) contend that it is important for practitioners to understand how ‘othering’ and distancing processes work in unequal societies. Lymbery (2001) argues social workers should encompass the values of empowerment, advocacy, and anti-oppressive practice as part of everyday practice of a social worker’s mindset. Lymbery (2001) warns that this is not easy but imperative for social work to redefine its relationship with its service users. It is necessary for advocacy to be explored below.

2.3.5. Advocacy and social work practice

The Advocacy charter published by Action for Advocacy (2002, p.2) defines advocacy as ‘taking action to help people say what they want, secure their rights, represent their interests
Advocates and advocacy schemes work in partnership with the people they support and take their side. Advocacy is seen as a way in which oppressed people can secure choice, justice, support, protection, social development, access to services and a general sense of empowerment (Henderson and Pochin, 2001, p.145). This resonates with core values and principles of social work profession and hence critical in practice.

Ferguson and Woodward (2009) assert that while it is apparent that there is plenty of advocacy taking place in the UK, it seems that few agree about what advocacy is, how it is best achieved or how much use it is (Henderson and Pochin, 2001).

It is reasonable to argue that social workers need to play an active role advocating for their clients, fighting oppression and discrimination, and addressing structural causes of poverty given its impact people experiencing poverty and inequality. Ferguson and Woodward (2009) argue that successful advocacy is that which truly aligns itself with the needs and rights of the oppressed and marginalised people.

However, findings by Morris et al (2018) revealed that there was a position of moral ambiguity occupied by their respondents due to ethical and practice dilemmas presented by poverty. Morris et al (2018, p.371) assert that the causes of the moral confusion are obviously the profession’s values of confronting oppression and injustice requiring social workers to contest the very same discourses they have adopted. However, the challenge in advocating effectively for services or involving service users in advocacy, is that social workers must juggle advocacy with other tasks as well as meeting the needs of several stakeholders such as managers, clients, colleagues, funders, and commissioners. Beckett and Horner (2016) argue that other stakeholders tend to be more powerful than service users resulting in social workers ignoring the views of the people it is supposed to serve.

Morris et al (2018) highlight that social workers avoided including poverty in individual assessments based on an approach that circumvented stigmatising families whilst
concurrently apportioning elements of a stigmatising underclass discourse and drawing back from poor neighbourhoods.

2.4. The place of poverty in social work education and training

This section explores social work education and training. This involves examining structural changes, context of the changes and the content of social work education and training and how this relates to poverty and inequality.

2.4.1. Social work education and training:

Changes in social work training from certificate to diploma and degree programmes and from under the auspices of Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW) to General Social Care Council and to Health Care Professions Council and now to Social Work England evidence the political and regulatory influences in social work education. Qualifying workers of the Diploma in Social Work were required to develop consciousness of structural oppression, to understand and challenge stigma and discrimination at both institutional and individual level (Featherstone et al, 2014). This resonated with some elements of radical social work such as anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice, which though relevant to poverty and inequality, seems ineffective in contemporary social work in understanding poverty and addressing it. It is argued that there is a tension at the centre of social work education between the emancipatory rhetoric of commitment to anti-discriminatory practice and its inferiority to the enhanced levels of managerialist controls characterised by focus on the notion of ‘competence’ (Humphries, 1997) based on national occupational standards. Adams et al (2002) note that the base of knowledge of the competence-based practice approach promoted in social work education includes the wide range of roles referred to in occupational standards (England: TOPSS). The standards are specific as to what standard of performance a social worker must meet when undertaking a function within their practice as well as the need to demonstrate knowledge and understanding. This makes the
standards technical and prescriptive thereby limiting social workers’ creativity and strategic thinking in understanding poverty and how it should be effectively addressed. Parker & Parker (2010) state that during the first decade of the 21st Century, social work education underwent a major transformation to ensure that qualified social workers are educated at least to honours degree level and develop knowledge, skills and values under the competency framework first introduced in Social Work in 1989. Trevithick (2010) explains that some of the developments introduced since 2000 have radically changed the organisation of social work practice and social work education in the UK. These changes in line with the modernisation agenda included the introduction of the new degree in social work (Trevithic, 2010).

Yellory (1995) has argued that the focus on competence within social work training and its education has shifted the balance between the technical elements (rules and procedures) of social work and undetermined aspects which require the exercise of professional judgement, towards technicality. A competence-based approach uses task analysis to define what social workers do and how they perform rather than on their qualities or professional judgement and grasp of relevant issues such as poverty which has profound impact on children and families as evidenced by its association with problems dealt with by social workers (Adams et al, 2002). Dominelli (1996) argues that this therefore could unfortunately result on social workers losing their innovative capacity in practice or thinking strategically about the development of social work in their understanding of poverty and how this impacts on how it’s currently addressed or ought to be addressed.

Dominelli (2004, p. 88) argues that, social work training in the UK has become a political football field flicked through the regulatory approaches of the new managerialism as evidenced by changes to social work training and organisations involved due to regulatory changes initiated by governments in which the state sought to control its workforce through performance management techniques. This history also evidences the influence of external environmental factors such as negative media publicity that ensues especially when tragic
events occur prompting enquiries and resulting in changes to social work practice. Leonard (1975) asserts that the history of social work education and practice is, in part, a history of massive ideological distortion. Leonard (1975) further argues that conceptualizations about social work are primarily social products and reflect the particular socio-economic base upon which social welfare institutions have grown and that at the same time, the oppressive functions of these institutions are best served by concealing their ideological functions and political purposes not only from the social work clients but from social work practitioners as well. This resonates with a contention by some commentators that poverty is political.

Social work’s theoretical base is dominated by knowledge borrowed from other disciplines (Payne, 1997). Whilst this has a potential to produce a rich and diverse knowledge base, Trevithick (2010) argues that social work is susceptible to fashions and as a result, knowledge drawn from too many diverse sources can lead to fragmentation and an incoherent knowledge framework leading to a ‘knowledge pile rather than ‘knowledge base’ (Sheldon, 1995, p.6). Featherstone et al (2014) argue that there is an urgent need to evolve forms of organisational learning and social work education, which safeguards social workers from becoming passive repositories of knowledge or policies. It is therefore important that such theories are evaluated, and contemporary theories generated to inform effective practice with a view to contributing towards the body of knowledge in social work and poverty. For example, Bailey & Brake (1975) assert that social workers using the casework approach see poverty as the result of personal pathology characterised by service users’ inability to utilise available opportunities and resources and due to self-defeating behaviours. Gupta & Blewett (2008) affirm that despite poverty and social exclusion being recurrent features of families involved in the child protection system and a key issue associated with children coming into the care system, poverty has received narrow discussion on numerous social work training courses outside the confines of the social policy lectures.
Hooper et al. (2007) suggest that social work education in anti-oppressive practice needs to pay more attention to the ways in which poverty and 'accumulation of disadvantage over years, or even generations' (Hooper et al. 2007:109) affects service users. Backwith (2015) argues that due to working under pressure, lack of time and other resources, there can be a tendency for social workers to conceive poverty and social exclusion in pathological terms resulting from service users' personal failings. Dominelli (2004) recommends that 'British social work education needs an even more radical overhaul' and that its value base and commitment to be a catalyst for change at both personal and structural levels must be affirmed.

It is critical that social work education and training promotes and facilitates generation of relevant theoretical knowledge as a basis for sound and effective practice including tackling of poverty. Gupta & Blewett (2008) assert that social work should be based upon a vigorous research informed foundation. Morris et al (2014) suggest that research skills should be put at the centre and organisational culture and that this nurture an evolvement of a learning culture. Social work education is one of the themes explored in this research.

In relation to poverty, Dominelli (2004) highlights divisions between proponents of radical social work movement who advocate for social work involvement in eradication of poverty and an alliance of employers and leading new Right politicians whose desire is for social work to be an element of control and acquiescence. Dominelli (2004) asserts that one issue at stake was in relation to the social work training and education whereby an alliance of employers and leading New Right politicians sought to regain control over social work training and education to ensure that it paid less attention to critiques of society and identifying structural inequalities highlighted through research, social science and client experiences. Another issue relates to how increasing awareness of oppression and discrimination in the late 1980s influenced social work education in terms of anti-oppressive and anti-racist practice to the dislike of powers that be and criticisms of social work fomenting deviance (Dominelli, 2010).
Dominelli (2010, p. 70) asserts that British employers do not have confidence in the training that social workers receive and that there is nothing new to this. (Dominelli, 2010; 70-71) sums it up by asserting tensions between education and training, including those of liberal education and specific tasks; different expectations about what can and should be delivered in training at any given levels; insufficient time to cover all the material required; government reluctance to fully fund training of sufficient length and depth; and decisions about social work education and training being determined by political convenience rather than professional or service based purpose. It is reasonable to argue therefore that social work training does not equip social work students with requisite knowledge to scrutinise and challenge the impact of structural factors on problems dealt with in practice of which poverty can be argued to be the root cause.

Sheedy (2013) argues that the issues of inequality and exclusion locates social work at the core of political life and therefore bestows on the social work profession some duty to be democratically active through challenging rather than accepting the status quo. This is echoed in the proposal by Beddoe and Keddell (2016) who recommend that the education of social workers must shift students from resentment to enlightened resentment whereby resentful reactions to poor family circumstances are turned into advocacy for change.

This issue requires addressing with a view to consideration of radical transformation of social work education and practice if government is objective and sincere in its assessment of social work as a failing profession. It is therefore important that social work training is geared towards equipping social workers with effective and requisite knowledge and skills.

2.5. The place of poverty in social work practice and factors which impact on it

This section will examine how poverty is located or marginalised in contemporary social work practice given the prevalence of poverty within service users. Emotional labour involved with
social workers interaction with poverty in their practice will also be explored. Radical social work practice will also be explored due to its influence on social work values and approaches concerned with poverty and inequality. The section will also explore other functions or factors critical in social work practice such as assessment, thresholds, and managerialism. Poverty practice is operationally described in this thesis as interventions focused at addressing poverty. Such interventions are also interchangeably referred to as anti-poverty or poverty aware practice. The ‘Troubled Families Programmes’ is explored as a case study of the current government’s intervention and how it relates to social work interventions and poverty.

2.5.1. Location of poverty in contemporary social work practice

It is important to outline the scale and impact of poverty within social work and service users. Mantle & Backwith (2010) echo that poverty affects the lives of individuals and relates to every social problem with which social workers engage. Becker (1997) asserts that it is the poor, nine out of ten being recipients of state benefits that social workers work with. Ferguson et al, 2009 and Featherstone (2004) argue that poverty remains high, society is divided, and that most people who use social services in Britain today belong to one fifth of the population designated as poor. Poverty therefore presents a threat to the effective realisation of the social work ethos of achieving effective social change in practice given its impact on service users and significant link to most social problems that social workers generally grapple with. Family support that focuses on poverty could therefore be an effective means of addressing most problems experienced by service users.

Adams (2002) argues that the division between the legalistic and the ethical model highlight the controversy and tensions surrounding how social workers should practice, considering their powers, duties and responsibilities as laid down in legislation. Parrott (2014) argues that a clear ethical perspective based on social justice must inform social work practice. Social work practice therefore requires a balance between values and the law as the basis of
competent practice (Braye & Preston-Shoot, 1990) otherwise there is a danger that poverty can be taken as the norm and acceptable (Parrott, 2014). Social work values and ethics should therefore be reflected in law and social workers should be accountable to the law to ensure that discretion is used consistently and responsibly.

The social work definitional debate is complicated by the tendency in England to focus on how it is defined and regulated. Thompson (2005, p.12), argues that ‘social work is a political entity and so, of course how it is defined, conceptualised and implemented is therefore a contested matter.’ The role and function of social work is therefore determined by the political climate that is influenced by political, structural, and economic ideology. The way social work practice is regulated gives children and families' social workers statutory powers of coercion whereby service users are forced to comply either through courts or statutory multi-disciplinary arrangements with certain parental obligations, processes, and investigations (Beckett & Horner, 2016). This accords with the control agent function which popularly stirs muscular and uncertain public emotions (Beckett & Horner, 2016) thereby highlighting tension between social work’s ‘care’ and ‘control’ functions. It can be argued that the risk-averse nature of social work practice makes the ‘care’ function trivialised by the ‘control’ function which is generally construed as oppressive. Safeguarding is a noticeably clear and prioritised function within children and families’ social work practice as opposed to addressing poverty under child in need which is voluntary and therefore not a priority. The current preoccupation of social work practice with legal and procedural obligations at the expense of social work ethics and values may result in social work ignoring action to combat the effects of poverty in service users’ lives (Parrott, 2014).

Webb (2006) further argues that under neoliberalism social policy, need and risk became converged, with social work taking on a role in risk regulation and as expert mediator for problematic populations and vulnerable people. It can be argued that on one hand, the increasing regulatory framework results in social workers focusing less on fundamental social...
ethics and values. On the other hand, social workers as expert intermediaries are influenced by a professional or business approach to the achievement of their expert objectives. Social work practices concerned with risk management and interventionist approaches (Morris, White, Doherty and Warwick, 2017) marginalise poverty and disadvantage. Risk management and interventionist approaches are consistent with the neoliberal-managerialist framework (Garrett, 2013) whose focus is on performance measurement, individual empowerment, and the implementation of managerialist techniques. Social work practitioners predominantly attribute risk to individual deficiencies and overlook structural conditions that could be responsible for the creation of such deficiencies, poverty, and disadvantage.

Featherstone et al. (2014) assert that in terms of a child protection paradigm, which is central to the work of social workers, the focus is on assessment of risks posed to children by family and caregivers and that the services are characterised by managerialism in which prime concern lies with procedures and risk-averse practice. Featherstone, Morris & White (2014) argue that systems that are pre-occupied with timescales, targets and standardised responses are less likely to be effective in terms cultivating a trustful working relationship and that a language of child protection separates the child from their family and that this is extremely dangerous, especially in very unequal societies in which the poor will suffer from disadvantage and inequality. This generally alienates the family relationships, interaction, and practices which the ecosystem perspective is supposed to promote and enhance. Johns (2009) argues that as compared to child protection and care proceedings, there is no ready prescription for resolving the complex problems confronted by social workers on the ground, most of which are associated with poverty.

Morris and Shepherd (2000) argue that the main location of core social work values and skills has been replaced by the debates about the arrangement and planning of services. The regulation of social work practice sometimes conflicts with and militates against significant social work goals and principles such as alleviation of poverty (Sheedy, 2013). Dominelli
(2010) argues that whilst social work status remains controversial, current debates revolve around the extent of its professional remit such as in this instance addressing poverty and whether some of its functions fall within the remit or are more appropriately located within other related disciplines.

Sheedy (2013, p. 69) asserts that since the days of the Charity Organisation Society (COS) which was founded in 1869 in Britain and Ireland, social work practice has been orientated towards seeing poverty as being the problems of the poor themselves. Social work has since then been separated from the provision of financial support except in certain preventive circumstances (Jones, 1998) let alone addressing poverty. Sheedy (2013) argues that social work has struggled with ambiguity and paradox for decades mainly due to being state controlled under the control of neo-liberal politics, the associated organizational processes of managerialism and regulation and the considerable theoretical views informing its methods of practice.

Neoliberalism has dominated people’s political and economic life since the origination of the New Right Wing in western politics in the 1980s (Sheedy, 2013). Sheedy (2013) asserts that the fundamental goal of neoliberalism is to transfer the balance of economic, social, and political power strongly towards capital and its institutional advocates. Lymbery (2001) asserts that one of the characteristic features of neo-liberalism has been the denigration of the value and purpose of state organizations providing welfare in which social workers are generally the interface. Featherstone at al., (2017) assert that within the neo-liberal ideology, the state’s role in providing welfare or protection from the market is renounced since such intervention is perceived as encouraging recipients to become dependent and discouraging them from seeking employment.

Kemshall, (2002) notes that social work shifted under neoliberalism from concentration on need to risk. Featherstone et al (2014) assert that in the 1980s and 1990s under neoliberalism,
the poor were seen as architects of their own poverty and that their poverty was perceived as an indicator of risk to themselves and others. Gupta & Blewett (2008) contend that social work practice that fails to acknowledge the effect of ecological factors such as poverty on family life can understand parental behaviour through the spectrum of the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor. The role of the state in general and particularly social work in many welfare states became reorganised into offering the poor tools to transform themselves and reduction of support for needs (Featherstone et al, 2014). The neo-liberal champions the free-market, inequality, individualism, least state involvement, and the monitoring of the poor and deviant (Mullaly, 2006). Featherstone, Morris and White (2014) argue that inequality results in individuals feeling unvalued and low in status within their environment.

Social work involvement within the neo-liberal environment focuses on enabling service users to utilise and take advantage of the existing and potential opportunities. Featherstone et al (2014) contend that distances between groups (i.e. the rich and poor) are intensified, including between social workers and their service users. It can be argued that the punitive narrative that locates responsibility for economic and social difficulties within families, and parents for developing practical or impractical ways of dealing with their poverty (Morris et al, 2018) influences social workers. This is likely to alienate social workers from their service users.

Morris et al, (2017) postulate that minimal family support provided by the state and punitive or intrusive interventions become more likely if the family is poor and disadvantaged. Individual-reformist and reflective therapeutic approaches in which social work interventions focus on helping the individuals cope with their difficulties such as poverty and maintaining fit between the individuals and their political and socio-economic environments (neo-liberal). Morris et al, (2018) from their findings argue that process and procedural demands compounded by risk averse practice cultures result in social work priorities shifting attention from the impact of families’ social and economic conditions. They further assert that such an approach results in a punitive narrative, which locates blame for economic hardship within the family whereby
parents are expected to come up with practical means of addressing their poverty. This contradicts the IFSW call for greater engagement with structural sources of oppression and disadvantage.

Whilst the term family support seems helpful in social work practice, Featherstone et al, (2013) argue that there are some dangers or tensions surrounding the use of the term ‘family’ in the context of diversity as evidenced by the use of moralising or authoritarian approaches to those assessed as ‘deviant’. Morris, (2012) highlights interesting issues and tensions surrounding ‘family’ as a term and argues it should emphasize connectedness and relationships as opposed to the language of child protection that locates the individual and children outside their families. Bywaters et al, (2018) argue that austerity policies have impacted on the capacity of families and Local Authorities to provide children’s wellbeing and resulted in narrative around child protection becoming risk averse. Morris et al, (2018) expressed that analysis of their study data divulged how various system pressures such as caseloads, timescales and budget cuts diminished social workers’ efforts to address root causes of family problems. It is therefore alarming and disturbing that within such a bleak and divided milieu that poverty should be taken as normal and acceptable by not only social work practitioners but by politicians and policy makers. Morris et al, (2018) argue that poverty is a child protection matter and that current child welfare interventions are torn apart by inequalities. Morris, (2012) asserts that proponents of family support therefore call for supporting of family practices rather than particular family structures.

Clark, (2000) suggests that the core values of social work are concerned with conflict and dilemmas that arise in practice from the dual role of care and control. Some practice tensions that resonate with the academic debate are: the extent to which social workers exercise social control or promote social change; promotion of change or acceptance of their clients and the dilemma between encouraging clients to adjust to their circumstances or challenging their circumstances (Birkenmaier et. al, 2014, p.12). Adams et al, (2009) states that a holistic
approach to social work practice requires a focus on the social and political structures that shape service users’ lives and the mechanisms that impact on services users’ experiences of services.

These tensions have sometimes obscured the identity of professional social work and posed a dilemma as to how to respond to issues of a structural nature such as poverty (Birkenmaier et.al, 2014: Beckett & Horner, 2016). Reingold & Liu, (2009) state that studies show that social workers engaged with the poor face an emotional duality: compassion along with judgement, involvement along with avoidance and solidarity along with rejection.

Whilst poverty is an everyday reality for social work service users, models and debates about poverty or anti-poverty social work practice and policies are underdeveloped (BASW &CWIP, 2019). Morris et al, (2018, p.370) summarise the relationship between social work practice and poverty by stating that “poverty is the wallpaper of practice: too big to tackle and too familiar to notice”.

2.5.2. Emotional labour and social work practice with service users experiencing poverty

Lavee & Strier (2018) assert that social workers in many countries including England, are mostly engaged in direct practice supplying impoverished families with material and emotional support. It is therefore critical that this section considers the emotional impact of practitioners’ work with families living with poverty, different practices of emotional labour used by practitioners to deal with the emotional impact of their work with poor and corroboration of the emotional effect of institutional and structural policies on practitioners' well-being and capacity to their clients growing demands (Lavee & Strier, 2018), given its relevance to the research topic.
Hochschild (1983) defines emotional labour as the intentional transformation of practitioners’ feelings in accordance to their role, and based on institutional, organizational, or political framework guidelines. Morris et al (2018) found in their study that numerous social workers struggled to decide on the extent to which social work practice ought to engage with poverty. Given the prevalence of poverty and its association with most problem, it is therefore disturbing to fathom that social workers must contend with this difficulty every day. Lavee & Strier’s (2018) study revealed a variety of negative emotions experienced by social workers associated with dealing with poverty such as stress, frustration, anger, anxiety, fear, and helplessness. Wagaman, Geiger, Shockley & Segal (2015) postulate that there have been recent calls for greater understanding of the political and institutional contexts in which social workers function and the need to investigate emotions involved.

Lavee & Strier (2018, p.505) state that using Hochschild’s sociological perspective of emotional labour, studies have focused on the significance of emotional labour for social work practice, the complexity of social workers’ emotional labour in different institutional settings, the emotional labour entailed in social work problem solving, and the characteristics of emotional labour with different populations. However, Krumer-Nevo (2015) contends that there has been less heed taken in understanding the role of emotions in social workers’ daily practice in their work with families afflicted by poverty.

Reingold & Liu (2009) highlight that studies show that social workers involved with the people experiencing poverty face an emotional duality: compassion vis-à-vis judgement, involvement along with avoidance and solidarity against rejection. Featherstone et al (2017) assert that families report feeling judged on home visits about issues beyond their control such as no food in the fridge or no carpeting. Conneely & Garrett (2015) postulate that the duality above could suggest the significant emotional battles faced by social work practitioners in reconciling the need to build empathetic, meaningful and lasting working relationships with the families in the context of very restrictive and oppressive institutional policies. The case study by Morris et al
(2018) showed how different system constraints such as caseloads, timescales and budgets eroded efforts by social workers to address the basic causes of family problems.

Empathy is one of social work’s fundamental skills and emotions (Lavee & Strier, 2018). Morris & Shepherd (2000) state that empathy is defined as the values and attitudes that facilitate a social worker to acknowledge, connect with and comprehend the experiences of others, particularly those of service users. Gerdes, Lietz & Segal (2011) outline several elements to empathy such as emotional response, self-other awareness, viewing a situation from another’s viewpoint and the regulation of emotions, which are important elements given the detrimental impacts of poverty economically, socially, culturally, emotionally, and psychologically, including the feeling of shame.

Lavee & Strier (2018) argue that moral judgements can impede empathy. These moral judgements are influenced by political, social, and political values (Morris & Shepherd, 2000) especially the neoliberal ideology dominant within many countries. Hochschild (2013) posits that practitioners categorize service users, the people who are poor or their families as worthy of empathy or not; ‘deserving’ if seen as striving to help themselves and engaging in the labour market and ‘undeserving’ if seen not to demonstrate devotion to the neoliberal main values of self-sufficiency and independence (Altreiter & Leibetseder, 2015). Morris & Shepherd (2000) argue that expansion of selectivity and categorization in social work with children and families has resulted in the collapse of key social work skills and an increased opportunity for particular values and attitudes to decide qualification for services. It was prudent therefore, that the study explored some of the factors which influence practitioners’ attitudes or emotions towards service users afflicted by poverty as will be highlighted within the findings’ chapters.

Lavee & Strier (2018, p. 505) state that based on critical (Krummer-Nevo, 2014), feminist (Dominelli, 2002), radical (Lavalette, 2011), structural (Mullaly, 2006), and anti-oppressive (Strier & Binyamin, 2009) theoretical approaches, studies highlight the political, gender
informed, contextual and power related nature of poverty. According to Lavee & Strier (2018),
the dominant theoretical framing about social work emotions vis-à-vis poverty points to
emotional impact in terms of burnout theory (Maslach, 2003) whose main signs are emotional
fatigue, frustration, and depersonalisation (Savaya, 2014). This is echoed by findings by Morris
et al (2018) which evidenced workers detaching from poverty as a mechanism to cope with
the emotional impact. Morris et al (2018) argue that what practitioners appear to express
during the study maybe a coping mechanism, or an othering process (viewing the poor as
others) used to manage the emotional strain of carrying out work that is viewed as unpleasant.
The fact that poverty does not feature prominently in their statutory remit compounds the
emotional impact. It could be argued that findings by Morris et al (2018) that showed constant
movement by practitioners between acceptance and denial of the association between poverty
and maltreatment are a way of dealing with their emotions compounded by lack of
organisational support.

McFadden, Campbell & Taylor, (2014) assert that social work with families suffering from
poverty requires a high level of emotional investment which usually drains a social worker’s
emotional capital. Ellet, Ellis & Westbrook (2007) argue that moreover, in the context of
increasing levels of poverty, social workers must play a key role in the management of
emotional situations with families in poverty and this requires support from institutions and
organisations that deploy social workers to undertake interventions which can be argued to
be lacking in a neoliberal socio-economic environment and managerialistic driven social work
practice. Morris et al (2018) posit that there is a lack of processes, systems, or resources to
support social workers in understanding and addressing the impact of poverty such as shame,
suffering and inequality.

Lavee & Strier (2018, p.505) argue that commodification of feelings through the institutional
process implies the strong emotional investment of the employees, which in many cases can
be detrimental, resulting in burnout and job stress. Practitioners feelings are thus treated as
commodities and this leaves social workers to resort to their own devices to manage the emotional impact associated with their daily encounter of poverty or its impact on service users. Morris et al (2018) assert that within their study, social workers acknowledged the impact of poverty and deprivation on families theoretically but did not connect or were not supported to join up this conceptual analysis with their practice, arguing their main business to be risk assessments separated from socio-economic conditions. Morris et al (2015) argue that systemic barriers for both families and social workers can converge, undermining professionals’ aspirations to provide relevant and appropriate support to families.

Lavee & Strier (2018) assert that research has also revealed that social workers emotions are also affected by the “theory of cultural poverty” which stresses the intergenerational inheritance of pathological patterns, indicating that belief in this theory affects their approach to and dealing with families living in poverty (Castillo & Becerra, 2012) and increases the stigmatisation and othering of the families.

2.5.3. Radical social work and its relationship with poverty anti-poverty practice

Radical social workers were driven by a belief that social work could and should do more than simply calming the poor and maintaining the status quo in an unequal environment (Ferguson et al, 2019). The radical approach resonates with Payne’s socialist-collectivist framework as the social worker acknowledges that disadvantaged and oppressed people can be empowered only through social change (Ornellas, 2018). It is therefore important that I explore radical social work, its history, its ideology and why it has not gained prominence in practice in this section. This is relevant considering evidence of high poverty levels and the increasing gap between the poor and the rich (Dean & Melrose, 1999) within a neoliberal socio-economic
environment and social work practice underpinned and driven by individualistic and pathological models.

Ferguson et al, (2009) state that radical social work evolved out of a worry by a small number of social workers in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the UK about the impact of levels of poverty and inequality on the lives of their clients and how this contributed to other problems such as housing and homelessness. This was compounded by limitations of approaches such as the traditional casework dominantly used in social work practice that overlook impact of structural factors. Bailey and Brake, (1975) argue that traditional social work approaches such as casework, have willingly and unwittingly reinforced authority in local or national government. In a mixed methods comparative study of frontline practice in England and Scotland, Morris et al (2018) showed that practitioners revealed that there were processes by which focus on family poverty was concealed, obstructed or avoided in individual case work and social work decision making.

Ferguson et al, (2009, p. 3) argue that ‘the dominant body of ideas since their articulation in 1970s, radical analyses and perspectives have had a considerable impact on social work theory and practice’. Thompson, (2010) posits that radical social work had been primarily concerned with problems that appear to have been caused by structural factors namely unemployment, poverty, ill health, inadequate housing, or homelessness. Thompson, (2010) argues that radical social work was therefore an important driving force for contemporary sociologically informed understandings of the moral- political basis of social work.

Radical social work was influential in promoting socio-political factors onto the social work agenda in the late 1960s (Thompson, 2010). Bailey and Brake, (1980) assert that radical practice champions understanding of the position of the oppressed in the context of the social and economic structure they live in. Morris et al, (2018) assert that there is a lack of processes, systems, or resources to help social workers to understand and address the consequences of
poverty. Proponents of the radical social work approach argue that statutory social work practice does not regard tackling poverty as its primary purpose, and this gives weight to the argument that poverty is political and accords with the underclass thesis characterised by cultural narratives (Morris, 2018). Morris et al, (2018) argue that their data reveal a tendency by practitioners to conceptualise poverty in cultural terms and this resonates with the intergenerational theory due to focus on negative cultural indicators associated with underclass narratives. There is evidence that the underclass discourse has entered social workers’ narratives about families and communities with which they are involved (Morris et al, 2018).

Thompson, (2010) asserts that divisions in society and how there are linked to issues and processes of unfair discrimination and oppression were given special importance in radical social work.

Thompson, (2010, p. 226) argues that,

Radical social work helped the profession move away from judgemental notions such as ‘the problem family’ or ‘the dysfunctional’ as well as ‘pathologising’ individuals by highlighting structural and socio-political factors as root causes of social problems.

However, the above review of the literature shows that dominant social work approaches are underpinned by some judgemental overtones and attitudes which determine interventions employed hence the relevance of exploration of attitudes towards poverty in this study.

Morris et al, (2018) argue that agency requirements to assess for magnitude and type of need prevent an evolving social work approach that allows for the recognition of the context of the particular need and facilitates empathetic practice to evolve, as the focus is directed at management of individual risk associated with poverty rather than addressing socio-economic conditions impacting on those experiencing poverty.
Bailey et al, (1975) assert that radical social workers are critical of the systems perspectives explored above and its possible use because of its connection, defence, and maintenance of status quo. The systems perspective is used by social work to maintain the dominant system (Ornellas et al, 2018) and fails to challenge political and structural issues related to inequality and poverty. Payne, (1991) argues therefore that traditional social work plays a social control function in which the interests of the oppressed communities and service users are subordinated and service users are coerced into complying with social arrangements serving the needs of capitalism rather than their own (Sheedy, 2013).

The social work literature reveals that there is little evidence of radical practice within contemporary social work practice. This is not surprising given the formidable nature and dominance of the neo-liberal political and economic ideals which presume that human wellbeing can be best advanced by promoting individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills (Harvey, 2005) upon which service users are judged. Lorenz, (2005) suggests that social work rather than being a victim of neoliberalism, has possibly at times been a willing intermediary and uncritical of its role in promoting neoliberal ideals such as individualism. Morris et al (2018) discovered that social workers were limited by tight decision timescales in the capacity to address the complexities of poverty and assert that their data also revealed system and organizational influences that affected practice cultures resulting in disregarding of familial economic circumstances.

Radical social work experienced a decline in the 1980s. In the UK, the then newly elected right-wing governments attacked radical social work’s ideology as social work was seen as one of the movements that sought to promote radical, economic, and political ideologies or values which were contrary to those in power and the leaders of Charity Organisation Society. The settlement movement aimed to promote social harmony through active citizenship and social reform on behalf of the poor (Ferguson, 2008). Clement Attlee and other campaigners promoted political activism, advocacy, and community action strategies to address the needs
of local communities and poor working-class people (Ferguson et al, 2007). Community work and community action prompted the emergence of movements such as the disability movement in the 1980s and insisted that social workers be involved with trade unions and link with other groups of workers. Ferguson et al, (2009, p. 28) argue that more than any other profession, social workers were seen as ‘soft’ on precisely those groups such as unemployed people, lone parents, young offenders, whom the Conservatives and their media allies wished to brand as ‘scroungers’ and ‘the underclass’. Adams et al, (1998) highlight that the attacks in the 1980s and 1990s resulted in the social work profession playing down its radicalism and becoming increasingly defensive. Gradual professionalisation of social work characterise part of the shift from community work and poverty.

Radical social work has its weaknesses. According to Thompson, (2010), radical social work was then associated with authoritarian simplification (dogmatic reductionism) which is described as the tendency to adopt very rigid and oversimplified perspectives on some complex issues. Thompson, (2010) notes that this was characterised by little scope for debate of the complexities involved at the peak of the radical social work movement. For example, there was strong conviction around language use that resulted in people becoming silenced and careful about what they said in fear of the consequences of inadvertently using the wrong terminology (Thompson, 2010). Thompson, (2010) argues that many people involved in the radical social work movement adopted a politically scathing perspective without considering the implication of this and therefore fell into the trap of adopting the dogma uncritically.

Thompson, (2010, p. 231) gives an example of oversimplification through emphasising on class during the emergence of social work, where it was argued that socio-economic class is the predominant factor in creating inequality in society and therefore amounts to discrimination and oppression (Corrigan and Leonard, 1978). Critiques from both feminists and anti-racist activists helped to push the radical social work movement beyond this form of class-based reductionism through widening the debate to other factors such as gender and race: however,
in many ways that was replaced by feminist and anti-racist forms of reductionism (Ferguson et al, 2009).

Thompson, (2010, p.228) postulates that radical social work, in a sense, prompted the development of anti-discriminatory practice by critiquing the medicalized approach which recognises only the personal levels and not the cultural or structural and raising awareness of the major impact of wider socio-political factors on people's lives including the structural inequalities that lie at the heart of much discrimination oppressed groups encounter.

2.5.4. Social work poverty practice

Given the fact that poverty is prevalent among social work clients and associated with most problems dealt with by social workers, it is important to explore how poverty is addressed within social work practice. There is no consensus on terms of terminology, however, for the purpose of this thesis, I refer to social work interventions to address poverty as poverty practice which can be referred to as anti-poverty practice (Morris, 2018) or poverty-aware (Krumer-Nevo, 2016).

Becker, (1997) asserts that poverty still has an ambiguous role in both policy and practice as it is often not named in agencies’ working remit with users and that social work practice methods lack passion to address and fight poverty which amounts to a barrier for poverty practice. Krumer-Nevo et al, (2009) posit that social workers do not consider supplying of material assistance as “real” or “professional” social work. Dhooge and Becker, (1989) argue that whilst social workers are concerned about clients’ poverty and its impact on their practice, they are unclear to what extent they should respond. Whilst I have a strong belief that social work should have a pivotal and effective role in addressing poverty, there is need to be realistic and hence exploration in this research whether social work has the capacity to embrace this
role in the face of current government policies such as welfare and benefit reforms, austerity and outsourcing as well as its regulation.

Sheedy, (2013) advocates that social work needs to become part of the solution to poverty rather than part of the problem and avoid being compliant with the UK government’s social authoritarianism. Sheedy, (2013) argues that structural thinking will drive the impetus from notions of individual causation by the poor to the state and those with power and wealth in society.

Rogowski, (2013) argues that child abuse is a social creation as the construction of victims and perpetrators of poverty and how poverty is addressed are shaped by the social context and by social divisions of class, gender, and race. Backwith, (2015) asserts that there is a class prejudice in that the link between poverty and some forms of abuse is related to the fact that poor working-class families are subjected to greater surveillance than middle class families. Sheedy, (2013, p. 50) argues that the powerful in society are protected from challenge by pathologising the individuals who are the victims of decisions made by the same power brokers. This calls for serious debate and scrutiny of the relationship between social work and poverty.

Horner, (2012, p.41) argues that grounds for concern about children have significantly moved from poverty and the absence of available parental or family care to the focused nature of ‘significant harm’ based upon various forms and neglect. There is evidence of poverty being associated with responses such as child protection and care proceedings. This makes social work not only an instrument of punitive and oppressive practice but also working against core social work principles such as anti-discriminatory practice and values such as caring and empathy. This is concerning considering evidence suggesting that children are one of the categories of the population that are more vulnerable to poverty. Sheedy, (2013) contends that whilst the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW 2001) makes a
rather striking statement that social work, in solidarity with the disadvantaged, tries to relieve poverty and free the vulnerable and oppressed people in order to promote their state of wellbeing, it is unsafe to assume this is the reality due to structural factors.

Horner, (2012) suggests that the formulation of the ‘every child matters agenda’ (ECM), a Green Paper presented to parliament in 2003 as part of New Labour’s modernisation agenda was an attempt to address effects of poverty such as inequality. ECM outlined 5 outcomes which mattered most to children and young people. All the Five Outcomes of Every Child Matters (namely, Be Healthy, Stay Safe, Enjoy and Achieve, Make a Positive Contribution, Achieve Economic Wellbeing), could be directly or indirectly linked to poverty. However, the previous Coalition Government and the present Conservative Government abandoned this without proffering any alternative. The discontinuation of the ‘every child matters agenda’ coupled with the abandonment of the pledge made by Blair on 18th March 1999 to end poverty by 2020 raise questions about the government’s political will to improving children’s outcomes. It is noteworthy that Labour Government cut child poverty on a substantial scale from 1998 to 2010 (CPAG).

Wellbourne (2012, p.99) asserts that the intervention of the state in family life under particular circumstances is commonly construed as desirable and that there is little support for the view that the state should not intervene in cases of child abuse for example. It can be argued that the regulated and performance management social work regime prioritises child protection even within the context of early help. Featherstone et al (2013) postulate that the focal point is of the individual child who needs protection from a range of abuses which are frequently explicitly situated in the failings or omissions of parents, characterised by the drive to remove children early in accordance with the risk-averse approach. There is therefore need for reconsideration and discourse in terms of how social work can be effectively involved in early help and addressing root causes such as poverty.
Featherstone et al (2014) provide some examples of community approaches to social work as espoused by Holland et al (2011) and relevant neighbourhood level initiatives under the New Labour government such as Sure Start, practical support provided to communities. An interesting feature of research by Holland et al (2011) (cited by Featherstone et al, 2014), was the exploration of community parenting in Caegoch in which adults were seen to be willing to intervene to care for, or regulate other people’s children. The community parenting was supported by social and spatial layout of the estate (Featherstone et al, 2014). It is noteworthy that high levels of poverty rooted social and economic problems of Cageoch (Featherstone et al, 2014).

Holland et al (2011) explored different spheres of safeguarding in Cageoch: the semi-formal sphere included the local community development project and a family and early years’ project run by a large voluntary organisation, whereas the formal sphere was the statutory safeguarding sector such as social workers (Featherstone et al, 2014). Enabling features that facilitated positive relationships between the overlapping spheres were their availability and approachability which also facilitated access to practical and emotional help (Featherstone et al, 2014). This is important given the shame associated with contemporary social work interventions and poverty.

The patch-based model in the Canklow Estate also adopted a community development approach whose aim was to reduce the pressures on local parents and their children through increasing the scope of activities and informal social supports availability. Backwith (2015) states that the Barclay Report (1982) which examined roles and tasks of social workers in England and Wales stimulated what Holman (1983) calls the ‘summer’ of community social work in the 1980s. Typically, this involved the decentralisation of social services into neighbourhood-based ‘patch’ teams serving relatively small populations (Backwith, 2015). According to Stepney and Popple (2008), a patch team would probably consist of two or three qualified social workers, community care workers, occupational therapists, and local people,
paid and voluntary, engaged in various caring and community activity roles. Backwith (2015) asserts that while there was much variation in how the patch system was implemented, its main aspects were: ‘a stress on working with people to develop their informal networks; emphasis on early intervention; a concern with preventive action; the desire to utilise and enhance local resources; and ultimately the empowerment of community members for the common good’ (Stepney and Popple, 2008, p.115).

Featherstone et al (2014) advocate that social workers need to change their geographical location removed from their catchment areas, and this would constitute a radical transformation from the current settings. Featherstone et al (2014, p. 106) suggest that it is crucial to reconsider the idea of the individual social worker visiting as an outsider to screen and intervene and to discuss the importance of practices of ordinary help that are rooted in working within specific communities and neighbourhoods. Jack and Gill (2010) assert that community-rooted approaches formulated to enhance the conditions in which many families live have been marginalised by safeguarding practice.

There is evidence of the effectiveness of patch-based community social work (CSW) (Backwith, 2015). Holman (1993) cites research showing that the community social work project on the Canklow estate in Rotherham resulted in a marked reduction in the number of children being taken into care or on supervision orders and a drop to almost zero (p.75) in the number of children on the child protection register. According to Backwith (2015), Holman (1993, p. 75) ascribes these changes to ‘no longer feeling stigmatised and threatened, families came at an early stage of their difficulties to the (CSW team). The locally run group boosted members’ confidence as well as relieving some environmental stress’. Stigmatisation and oppression within social work practice are issues that need serious attention and tackling as highlighted by research findings (Morris, 2013; Morris et al, 2018 & Gupta & Blewett, 2008). Mantle & Backwith (2010) advocated for community-oriented social work (COSW) as an effective poverty aware approach to social change. Sheedy (2013, p.107) posits that central
to COSW is social work’s direct involvement in local communities through political campaigning, advocacy and community organization including preventive strategies such as engaging with credit unions and helping form supportive collectives of community members. Whilst the tenets to the model sound appealing, there is no evidence of how it fits into generic social work practice, organisational structure, and its effectiveness.

Backwith (2015) asserts that the patch-based community social work has now been overtaken by three decades of more or less uninterrupted neo-liberalism during which social inequality has become ever more acute and a shift towards managerialism and ‘redefined community (social) work away from mobilising people towards services controlled by local authorities’ (Dominelli, 2006, p. 62). Backwith (2015) states that centralisation has been compounded by the dominance of crisis-driven, reactive interventions in children and families. Backwith (2015) concludes that the summer of community social work was, indeed, brief and since then individualistic methods have been dominant in practice and argues that social workers generally have much less scope now to adopt CSW methods than they did 30 years ago. This resonates with an assertion by Morris et al (2013) that professionals spend much time on system driven tasks as opposed to direct work and therefore makes implementation of community social work impossible within the current environment unless a radical shift is made.

Featherstone et al (2014, p. 144) assert that vulnerable families face difficult times, with reduced availability of family support and increased pressure on professionals to intervene early in family life where there are concerns about children’s wellbeing. Backwith (2015) contends that compared to what it has been in the past, the capacity of social work to respond to poverty and exclusion is restricted, especially in statutory services.

Featherstone et al (2014) outline some helpful techniques that have been promoted in recent years, such as motivational interviewing to counter resistance (Forrester et al, 2007),
need to be located within a broader engagement with ethical questions about how current
cchild protection systems deal with multiply-deprived families in an unequal society and with
the dynamics of shame and harm to self and others that flow from such inequalities. Gupta &
Blewett (2008) state that families in their project endorsed strengths-focused practice.

Early help and intervention which has been characterised by rhetoric rather than action could
be an effective way of supporting children and families (Morris et al, 2013 & Bywaters et al,
2017). Davies (2012) asserts that a social work approach that recognises poverty in
determining access to services might prevent a reactive approach where referral and
intervention happen at a late stage.

Empowerment and advocacy are both concerned with a shift of power or emphasis towards
meeting the needs and rights of people who are generally discriminated against or oppressed.
Thompson (2009) argues that there is a need for a professional approach sensitive to the
complexities and elusiveness of the ways in which forms of discrimination operate. Lymbery
(2001) suggests that it is critical to ensure that oppression and poverty remain central to the
social work agenda.

The ‘the troubled families programme’ will be explored as a government’s targeted programme
on deprived families in England.

2.5.5. Assessment

Parrott (2014) points out that assessment is at the centre of social work practice and as such
provides a crucial step in determining with the service user the nature of the problems that
they feel are important to them. Morris (2013) asserts that the reason for intervention
influences the focus of attention in the assessment. Assessment timescales are measured as
part of performance targets and therefore significant efforts are made to ensure that
timescales are adhered to. It is therefore important to examine assessment practice and its effectiveness in general and in relation to how poverty is assessed and addressed.

Assessment in social work takes different forms depending on the issues involved, background and purpose. Beckett & Horner (2016, p.31) argue that risk to children is a concern that cuts across all the approaches to assessment. Cleaver et al (2003) assert that social workers and other professionals do struggle in practice to make sense of the complex interchange between poverty, social deprivation, parental capacity and children’s development resulting in these components being missed or not being sufficiently considered.

The social worker also fulfils agency function by gathering information during the assessment process to determine whether threshold criteria are met (Milner & O’Byrne 2009) using organisational guidelines and procedures. Beckett & Horner (2016, p. 22) argue that internationally, the assessment of children and their families is affected by the institutional surroundings such as the development of social services and of assessment procedures. The tools and theories used by social workers for assessment strengthen organisational core business centred around performance targets and strategic objectives (Morris et al, 2018) in which poverty is marginalised. Respondents such as Independent Reviewing Officers in a mixed method study by Morris et al (2018) were especially critical of assessments of low-income families and the opportunity to offer families socio-economic support. The respondents contended that tight timescales limit social workers in their ability to engage with the complexity of family poverty and that system and organisational pressures influenced practice cultures resulting in the discounting of families’ economic circumstances (Morris et al, 2018). Sheedy (2013) states that since the advent of the Charity Organisation Society (COS), social work service has been alienated from the giving of financial support except in specific preventive circumstances and has been geared towards a conception of poverty as a problem created by the poor themselves.
Lymbery (2001) asserts that evidence indicates that social workers grapple with openly assimilating the impact of poverty in their assessments and interventions. This could be to reasons ranging from poor understanding of the impact, uncertainty in terms of dealing with the impact to prioritising statutory remit in which poverty is marginalised. Featherstone at al (2018) have evidenced that addressing poverty and inequality is not regarded as core business for practitioners or policy makers. Featherstone, Gupta and Morris (2017) argue that children’s social work practice should shift from an exclusionary focus on assessing and dealing with individualised risk factors in order to fully engage with and discern the social reasons of many of the harms that are prevalent in families. This results in social work being reactive and focusing on the symptoms as opposed to the root causes.

Parker and Bradley (2003) assert that assessments have often followed resource-led pathways rather than the broader needs led approach. Given the paucity of resources within social work practice in general compounded by funding cuts and austerity, assessment practice therefore runs the risk of being a gatekeeping exercise that excludes most families in poverty due to its focus on risks.

Poverty is not assessed or regarded as a risk factor on its own in social work assessment practice. Morris et al (2018) evidence in their study that poverty was not recognised or described as a risk for children. Gupta & Blewett (2008) in their project reveal that families spoke of being blamed for being in poverty and having difficulties and being judged about issues that are not child protection matters.

Parker & Parker, (2014, p. 7) argue that assessments are rarely, if ever, free of prejudice and join the chorus that particular perspectives of social workers influence the way assessments are conducted and analysed.

2.5.6. Thresholds of eligibility in children and families social work
It is necessary to explore thresholds of eligibility for social work and practice given their importance in the policy and practice context. Thresholds are described as crossing points that determine social care involvement or the provision of resources mainly through levels of need and risk in children and families social work practice (Welbourne, 2012). Thresholds are applied in social work practice when considering whether to involve external agencies or to invoke certain internal procedures (Davies, 2012). This section will examine the location of poverty within thresholds and how this influences how poverty is addressed or marginalised.

Munro (2010) contends that “social work’s concern with thresholds is problematic in working with children and families” as there is focus on deficits and degrees of severity rather than a concern to assess according to need and provide services. Wellbourne (2012, p.57) argues that high levels of demand for services almost inevitably lead to thresholds becoming a tool for excluding applicants from services rather than identifying who would benefit from what services. Social work interventions are generally provided when circumstances have worsened for children and families involved indicating a tension between early intervention and late intervention. Davies (2012) asserts that a social work approach that pays more attention to poverty in determining access to services might avoid a reactive approach characterised by repeat referrals and late interventions.

Morris & Shepherd (2000) argue that suitability filtering and assessment processes demand that professionals make a succession of judgements about families either due to the need for rationing limited resources and /or for the purpose of further direction towards formal or informal services. This is also evidenced by existence and operations of access to resource panels in oversight of resource requests and allocation. Resource panels practically serve as gatekeeping and rationing processes or structures pre-occupied with managing risks rather than addressing the root causes. This resonates with managerialism discussed below which treats social work as a business to be managed efficiently.
It is reasonable to argue that thresholds are resource led. These decisions are determined by political, social, and professional values over which social workers have limited or insignificant control.

Morris & Shepherd (2000) echo that the rationing process must necessarily remove those seen as having either insufficient need or inappropriate need. Wellbourne (2012:56) asserts that this is not surprising when demand for resources outstrips supply, but it has created a deep-rooted culture of divisions; eligibility and ineligibility that resonates with the traditional poor laws’ approach to welfare where services users are categorised into deserving and undeserving and division between service users and providers of services whereby providers of services play more of a controlling role than provision of services.

Featherstone et al (2014, p. 81) argue that the pursuit for standardisation continues and whether this is through consistent ‘thresholds’ or ‘timescales’, it is the wrong approach as thresholds are dynamic and bend in response to demand and resources. Parker & Parker (2014) assert that the constraint of resources and the setting of eligibility criteria to restrict access to services resonates with the issue of reduction of individual situations to a set of problems and causes which may suggest that there are clear ‘right and wrong’ actions and situations that can be observed and assessed. Horner (2006) argues that there is also a systematic and oversight trend that arises from the specification of assessment procedures, eligibility criteria, budgetary control and the contract culture in which poverty is marginalised. Morris & Shepherd (2000) argue that replacing existing fixation with selectivity and eligibility criteria with social work core values such as empathy, partnership and inclusion would result in user led or needs led services.

### 2.5.7. Managerialism

It is important to explore managerialism and how it impacts and influences social work practice in addressing poverty as it is one of the concepts or approaches that has taken a dominant
role in social work and has been criticised for erosion of effectiveness, creativity and decision making of frontline social workers as public servants (Jagannathan & Cammasso, 2013). Jagannathan et al (2013, p.48) contend that managerialism is premised on the idea that central government can and should control local government- for example through performance indicators, targets, and stars. Managerialism was heralded by the introduction of a contract culture in local government service provision under the Conservative government after 1979 (Horner, 2012).

Tsui & Cheung (2004) describe managerialism as a set of beliefs and practices that assume that better management will resolve a wide range of economic and social problems and argue that managerialism itself is a reflection of the powerful dominance of market capitalism and that this resonates with the neo-liberal ideology in which poverty is seen as an individual responsibility. Identifiable elements of managerialism within social work practices include control of professional power through new regulatory frameworks and evaluation methods (Clarke, 1998a), making gatekeeping and rationing decisions the main part of the social work role and implementation of more managerial control over the form and content of casework (Harris, 1998). Lymbery (2001) contends that managerialism resulted in the reduction of social workers’ level of freedom, professionalism, and morale. Poverty is unfortunately an issue not prioritised by the managerialist techniques as it is not a statutory remit, and this is compounded by limitation of social workers creativity by managerialism.

Managerialism objectives generally conflict with social work objectives of facilitating effective change and empowerment of service users as highlighted in the 2014 IASSW/IFSW definition. Jones and Novak (1999) assert that there has been relentless increase in destitution and inequality over recent years and therefore coupled with the demoralisation of social work, has resulted in reduction of social work effectiveness in responding to poverty and inequality. Jagannathan et al (2013, p.49) contend that proceduralisation and bureaucratization of social work practice is bound to fail as the issues at stake in social work practice are too complex to
fit into such as a rigid and simplistic framework. There is evidence that social work has been characterised by governments as a failing profession and the question is whether those critiques see proceduralisation and bureaucratisation as some of the causes?

Featherstone et al (2014) argues that management emphasis on the significance of risk characterised by risk-averse conflicts with social work care ethics as need has been reframed as risk. Featherstone et al (2014) argue that poverty becomes formulated as proof of pathology or individual deficit in a neoliberal project. This therefore suggests that poverty is a function parental character flaws and that parents are putting their children at risk by being poor.

2.5.8. The ‘troubled families programme’ as a case study of social work practice and poverty

Levitas (2012b, p.5) describes ‘The ‘Troubled Families’" as the coalition government’s flagship family intervention programme which is targeted at some of the most excluded families in England. The families are estimated to be 120 000 based on 2007 research based on at least five of the following criteria: no parent in the family in work, family lives in overcrowded housing, no parent has any qualifications, mother has mental health problems, at least one parent has a long-standing limiting illness, disability or infirmity, family has low income (between 60% of median income) and family cannot afford a number of food and clothing items’. There is evidence that these problems are associated to poverty.

The definition of ‘troubled families’ raises questions in terms of the labelling, rationale, ideology, focus and the theoretical models informing the conception. Backwith (2015) states that the seven aspects of social exclusion locate poverty with related problems such as poor health and housing within individual families. It is therefore intriguing that poverty is not acknowledged as the root cause of this programme. The programme’s criteria resonate with
identification and targeting of a category of families as resistant to change and failing (Featherstone et al, 2014).

According to the Department of Works and Pensions Secretary (2011), 5.3 million people suffer from multiple disadvantages. Experience of multiple risk factors can make an escape from poverty difficult and service intervention more complex, putting families at greater risk of sustained poverty and creation of vicious cycles, which become difficult to break unless root causes are addressed. The intergenerational model underpinned by the pathological framework underpinned formulation of this programme and it resonates with individualistic social work frameworks which mainly focus on individuals or families in question to change as opposed to structural changes.

Featherstone et al (2014) assert that policy changes for vulnerable families reveal a trend of categorisation of family types whereby we can discern emergence of political narratives that attribute particular responsibilities and failures to specific categories of families. This also resonates with victim blaming and labelling.

At the start of the programme, Cameron, the then Prime Minister by contrast not only, emphasized characteristics which are much more likely to be seen as pathological (substance misuse and crime) and claims these families are not only to blame for their own problems but also that they are the ‘source of a large proportion of the problems in society’. This is testimony to stigmatisation and shame experienced by service users whose majority of whom are poor. Featherstone et al (2014) assert that the so-called ‘dangerous families’ who are perceived to pose specific risks to children have been transformed into problem families that present risks to society, to future well-being and within this may pose risks to individual family members.

Featherstone et al (2014) assert that ‘The Troubled Families Programme reflects the broader changes in political discourses about families and parenting, with a shift towards notions of problem families and away from families experiencing problems.'
The government perceived social workers and social work interventions as part of the problem that needed to change. The perception that social work needs to change is clearly discernible and less contentious than what needs to change, basis for that change and to whose benefit. In fact, evidence has shown that social work has been subject to several changes resulting in social being subject of tighter controls and procedures. When the Coalition Government’s ‘troubled families’ programme was initiated, social workers were challenged to help dysfunctional families break ‘a grim’ cycle of abuse. Government’s Adviser, Louise Casey challenged social workers to take a more hands-on approach and focus more intensely on lives of individual families (BBC News Politics 18th July 2012). She charged that currently social workers are simply circling around the families, assessing them, and prodding them but not getting in. It is unfair and flawed that structural factors are overlooked at the expense of social work practice and the so-called ‘troubled families’. The government seems to blame everyone but itself.

This resonates with some theories highlighted above such as the cycle of deprivation. Under this programme, families need to meet five out of seven criteria. Backwith (2015) argues that the discourse promoted by the Coalition Government portrays troubled families as pathological and undeserving, emblematic of the dependency culture, which their welfare reform strategy sought to eradicate as well as being reminiscent of Murray’s underclass thesis. This approach paints a picture of negative attitude towards poverty and people who are poor and therefore places social workers in a dilemma in terms of challenging the structural barriers, policies and environment and hence resonance of poverty being construed as too big a problem by Morris et al (2018). Ironically, the government has paid lip service to addressing deficits in social work practice and missed the opportunity to incorporate effective radical social work approaches discussed above which could make social work practice transformative and empowering.
The ‘troubled families’ initiative demonstrates the complexity of social work practice and poverty. The programme is prescriptive as it suggests that the families have to be helped to break the cycle and Casey’s (2011) caricature of social workers' practice as ‘prodding troubled families on’ raises more questions than answers. Arguably, the criteria are determined by policy makers who view both service users and professionals as failing. It is therefore important that such programmes are evaluated with a view to learning lessons and formulation of programmes effective in addressing poverty and social exclusion.

Backwith (2015) argues that the ‘Troubled Families discourse’ is clearly not intended to win public sympathy for the families concerned. Backwith, (2015) argues that as social workers are in the forefront of local implementation of the Troubled Families programme, it is important both to be aware of such discourses and not let one’s judgement and values be swayed by them.

### 2.6. Social workers’ attitudes towards people who are poor and poverty

It is critical that practitioners’ attitudes towards the people experiencing poverty and poverty be explored due to its relevance to social work and poverty. The way social work practitioners view and understand poverty and service users living with it, its causes and effects is critical not only for social work practice in relation to poverty but also for the research in question.

Parrott (2014, p. 20) asserts that “when social workers engage service users in their work, the attitudes and beliefs that they hold are crucial in enabling effective help”. It is reasonable to suggest that attitudes and beliefs are also helpful in building effective and trustful relationships with service users which is critical in discussing impact and experiences of poverty with service users devoid of shame. Morris et al (2018) acknowledge the complexity of the concept and argue that the features arise from practice culture and attitudes towards poverty, and / or the perceived powerlessness of social workers to address poverty.
Halloran (1967, p.14) notes that the concept of attitude converges with other psychological concepts and therefore is difficult to define. Halloran (1967, p.14) defines an attitude as ‘a mental and neutral state of readiness, organised through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individual’s response to all objects and situations with which it is related’. Social workers’ personal experiences are therefore an important factor according to this description in their understanding of poverty and how they respond to it in practice as well as their perception of service users who are poor. Halstead & Taylor (2000) define attitudes as inclinations to make judgements and behave in an expected way. Allport (1935) underscores the worthiness and the all-important nature of the concept of attitude in social psychology and arguably in social work practice given critical dilemma surrounding the issue of poverty as highlighted above.

Halloran (1967, p.67) posits that an attitude is a state of being ready, leading an individual to understand things and people around him/her in certain ways, which is to be more ready with certain classifications and explanations than with others. This suggests the link between social workers’ mental disposition in terms of poverty, how they understand it and factors influencing it. Morris et al (2018) show evidence that whilst some respondents from a particular site discerned that awareness of poverty was pivotal, tackling poverty was considered too big a problem for their role resulting in their attention to poverty being consistently undermined, obscured or abandoned all together.

Parrott (2014) states that research undertaken on the attitudes of social work practitioners and students provide a mixed view of how poverty is understood. Davis and Wainwright (2005) observed that social workers’ attitudes could be considered ambivalent, confused and at the severe end hostile to services users living in poverty. This resonates with dominance of individualised and cultural conceptions of poverty influencing social work focus on individuals as the source of the problem or issues as opposed to other factors. Gupta & Blewett (2008)
assert that pathologising clients is narrow and a pre-occupation with individual service users, which fails to recognise wider structural factors.

Halloran (1967, p. 15) states that another element of attitudes is that these are not inborn and argue that they are learnt; they progress and are arranged through experience. This experience can be professional and personal. Social work environment, organisational culture and systems are therefore important elements for professional experience in terms of facilitating formation of non-judgemental attitudes and learning. Parrott (2014) highlights that an early study by Becker (1997) argued that social workers had a diminished view of poverty, holding largely discriminatory views of how people become poor, utilising individualistic theories to interpret service users’ experience of poverty.

Evidence currently suggests that these factors are predominantly geared towards driving performance management, managerialist techniques and rationing of services. Morris & Shepherd (2000) assert that attention to structures, not skills, not only diminishes professional involvement but also hinders skill development. Morris, Archard, Laird & Clawson (2018) in their study of independent evaluation of a social work change programme in one local authority, found out from family interviews that in a context of dearth of supportive provision, the attitude and skill practitioners brought to assist families was seen as paramount by families.

Another aspect of Allport’s definition according to Halloran (1967, p.14) is that attitudes possess motivational qualities that can inspire a person to seek or avoid the things upon which they are formed. Morris et al (2018) evidence that their data revealed a constant manoeuvring by respondents between acceptance and denial of the association between poverty and child abuse. This resonates with Halloran’s (1967, p.14) assertion that attitudes are not just hidden states of readiness standing by for the presentation of an appropriate object or their trigger but are dynamic. It can be argued that the marginalisation of poverty within social work can
impact on how poverty is understood, prioritised, and addressed within social work practice. The issue of attitudes in social work practice should therefore not be trivialised.

Halloran (1967) asserts that if attitudes are learned, there is an expectation that their progression follows the general principles of learning such as conditioning. Factors that influence social workers’ attitudes including personal, professional, and organisational will therefore be explored within research findings. Learning, according to Halloran, is described as the acquisition of knowledge and skills considered essential in various settings. It is therefore necessary to explore social workers knowledge of poverty in the next section.

2.6.1. Existing knowledge and previous research on children and families, social workers’ understanding and attitudes towards poverty

This section will explore and examine relevant studies undertaken on social workers’ understanding and attitudes towards poverty, methodology used and their major findings. This will help examination of existing knowledge and identify how my research study complements existing knowledge and research base. Morris et al (2018) assert that there are few studies undertaken to examine the influence of socio-economic factors on social work decision making.

Searches for current studies on social workers’ knowledge of poverty and attitudes towards poverty showed that there are a few studies undertaken in relation to social work and poverty focusing on specific areas such as child welfare/protection interventions, service users’ perspectives in social work training on family poverty, vulnerable families experience of multiple service use, with a view to making comparisons and informing the research topic.

Morris et al (2018) undertook a mixed method comparative study of frontline practice in England and Scotland about how social workers describe, discuss, and are influenced by social and economic circumstances when arriving at decisions to intervene because of care
and protection concerns. The mixed method study involved observation of various meetings such as strategy discussions, initial child protection conferences and looked after child reviews, gathering of ethnographic field notes, conducting semi-structured interviews with key informants, and holding focus groups. The study involved more than a dozen Local Authorities in England and Scotland.

In this study, practitioners described poverty as entrenched, systemic, and “generational” (Morris et al, 2018). The case study sites were acknowledged as generating high social work demand as in referrals to children’s services. The relationship between service demand, poverty and the socio-economic geographies of practice were found to be familiar for many such that they constituted a standard scenery which was seen as unremarkable and overlooked (Morris et al, 2018). Upon discussion of poverty, poor home conditions, fuel poverty and access to food were highlighted as stresses experienced by families in the case study sites. Respondents also acknowledged that poverty, unemployment, poor housing, domestic abuse, substance misuse and mental health were prevalent and interconnected issues. Poverty or deprivation was found to be associated with several social problems or “chronic” issues (Morris et al, 2018). One participant described the impact of poverty as oppressive.

Practitioners were able to articulate how they had developed their own analysis of the relationship between socio-economic conditions and the harms that families experienced. This suggests a lack of a coordinated system in assessment of poverty compounded by a lack of coherent organisational knowledge base in understanding and addressing poverty as evidenced by poverty being described by practitioners as too big a problem for social workers. The research revealed that it also became obvious that there were various mechanisms by which attention to family poverty was obscured, blocked or avoided in individual case work and social work decision making. Morris et al (2018) argued that this caused a disjuncture between the “abstract and the action” in social work practice, where any hypotheses about the
effects of poor socio-economic circumstances failed to manifest itself in family assessments, case work and decision making. The study data reveal that some respondents such as independent reviewing officers were especially castigatory of assessments of low-income families and the opportunity to offer families support with socio-economic conditions. The Independent Reviewing Officers expressed that tight decision-making timescales hindered social workers in their capacity to engage with the complexities of poverty.

The study data revealed that social workers rarely considered the root causes of family troubles and the role socio-economic hardships played in these. Analysis of the case study data revealed how system pressures, such as caseloads, timescales and budget cuts, undermined social workers’ attempts to engage with the roots of family troubles.

The data also revealed system and organisational pressures that influenced practice cultures leading to the discounting of families’ economic circumstances. Morris et al (2018) argue that there was suggestion from the data that there was a deliberate organisational relegation of economic support in comparison with risk assessment and parenting capacity work. Morris et al (2018) argue that this array of factors at times resulted in punitive narratives that located responsibility for economic and social hardships within the family.

In terms of assessment, the data revealed that the assessment tools employed by social workers and the practice theories adopted strengthened the notion of core business and this resonates with the arguments made earlier regarding regulation of social work and managerialistic practice and procedures. The data revealed that the fieldwork observations of investigations, assessments and of case plans coupled with summaries of case studies at each site suggested that assessment frameworks were either partially used marginalising socio-economic factors or directed practice attention to risk factors disconnected from any social determinants.
Morris et al (2018) assert that cultural explanations of poverty were commonly applied to make sense of the association between poverty and “risk behaviours” and this resonates with the deficit or pathological social work approach and “inter-generational” conception of individual and communities.

The research analysis identified evidence of a deliberate detachment from poverty in case work and dissociation from families and their communities. This resonates with some literature review findings on emotional labour in relation to coping mechanisms or an othering process for managing stress related to unpleasant work. Morris et al (2018) assert that this disengagement from the geography of family circumstances is interesting and a particularly conspicuous characteristic of the data. The data revealed that many social workers struggled to decide on the lengths to which practice should engage with poverty. It was also revealed that another feature across the data was a persistent movement between acceptance and denial of the interconnectedness between poverty and child maltreatment.

Morris et al (2018) assert that the small number of respondents who aspired to deliver antipoverty practice described feeling either overwhelmed by poverty or merely unable to change social and material circumstances. Morris et al (2018) capture the context and dilemma by asserting that poverty is a wallpaper to practice: too big to tackle and too familiar to notice.

Gupta and Blewett (2008) describe a research project involving service users, academics, and practitioners. The project brought together service users, academics, and practitioners to jointly develop and deliver a module for social work education that sought to examine perspectives of families afflicted with poverty and involved with children and families social work services. This research contributes towards the enhancement of social work education in relation to inclusion and involvement of service in the outline, delivery and evaluation of programmes (DH, 2002). This was a joint project between ATD Fourth World (an anti-poverty
organisation that works with families and institutions to improve lives of people afflicted with poverty), Family Rights Group and academics from Royal Holloway, University of London.

A working group comprising of 10 family members, who were living in poverty and who had experienced social work intervention in relation to their children, was also established to facilitate achievement of the project’s aims. Attention was made to the diversity of the group with half of the group membership being from black and other minority ethnic backgrounds. Gupta & Blewett (2008) highlight that attention to process and relationship was a main principle of the project and this helped to reinforce the importance of partnership-based practices. The authors state that much of the discussion in the middle sets of meetings explored what needed to be included in the content of the teachings. Royal Holloway tested the teaching on the Post Qualifying Child Care Award and family members have continued to deliver the training on this and other qualifying social work programmes.

According to Gupta & Blewett (2008), a compelling message from the group of family members was that poverty is not just about lack of money, but also the resultant impact on people’s dignity and self-respect. Participants identified a variety of profound effects with emotional as well as practical importance for their parenting capacity and children’s development when discussing the impact of poverty on family life. Some of the effects relevant to this thesis highlighted by families include families feeling being judged by what they have got and how their home looks, fear of getting deeper into poverty and living in fear of social services. The messages above highlight discrimination and oppression experienced by family members due to experiencing poverty. The families described feeling discriminated, less valued and being treated without respect and feeling as ‘second class’ citizens- ‘povertyism’ (Gupta & Blewett, 2008). ‘Povertyism’ was described as discrimination and oppression experienced by families due to being in poverty. These experiences and feelings were linked to forms of oppression such as racism, imbalances in power and powerlessness. Other examples of how families felt ‘povertyism’ is sustained by professionals and agencies include a ‘poverty-blind’ approach
characterised by poverty being seen as the norm and professional lack of knowledge, understanding and acknowledgement of the impact on children and families. Families also expressed that they are blamed for being in poverty and not coping on state benefits as well poor parents being treated differently from middle class families who were more powerful and respected. Family members also reported experiences of stigmatization and othering processes that escalated the shame and suffering of poverty. This project is relevant to this thesis as it sought to engage service users to develop and deliver a training programme on the realities of family poverty with the overall aim of contributing to the development of social work practice that seek to challenge the pernicious effects of socio-economic deprivation or poverty.

Morris (2013) in her article draws on a small-scale study undertaken to examine the experiences of highly vulnerable families with complex and enduring needs. This study sought to explore how families understand how they are understood at the point of engagement, assumptions made about family knowledge and how families share and withhold information about their needs and experience. This resonates with other studies explored above in examining perspectives and experiences of families with a view to filling in gaps in knowledge of existing social work practice.

The research was commissioned by a local authority with the objective of understanding better how services for complex families can be arranged and developed. Fifteen family members from seven families presenting with a range of long-standing needs and risks participated in the initial round of interviews. The family decided who should be present during the interviews without any limits.

All the families involved in the study had behavioural management problems, involvement with mental health services, care and protection services as well as domestic violence services being often used. The families’ geographical area was characterised by high need and low
resources. More intriguing and relevant to this thesis is the fact that poverty was a conspicuous reality of family life but was rarely cited by families or professionals as the main reason for service intervention. The study employed in-depth qualitative family interviews and the analysis of the family accounts used a form of grounded theory. The coding of material was data driven and it made it possible to capture unanticipated themes. Morris (2013) outlined the weaknesses of the sampling and data gathering methods as well as the difficulties involved. However, the underdeveloped nature of existing knowledge about family experiences justified the exploratory approach by the study (Morris, 2013).

The analysis of the interviews revealed that families were certainly aware of who constituted their families including those with whom relationships had at times broken down. Families resisted the definition by household, and this completely differed from the existing approaches to practice with families (Morris, 2013), for example whereby fathers who have moved out of households were not included in regular practices.

Morris (2013) highlights that families viewed a notable contrast between how they understood their way of ‘doing family’ and professionals assessed them in their ways of being a family. It was argued that the gap between family analyses of their family life and that of professionals is significant and underscores the need to evolve practice to better understand a child’s lived experience within their family life.

Families shared that the powerful nature of the responsibilities and powers of safeguarding professionals hindered the willingness of families to reveal the true extent of their needs. The family narratives showed that one result of their experience of multiple service was frequent opportunities to reinforce a negative or positive ‘family story’ about a service. Families shared that they hated numerous incidents of sharing information about their needs and family and expressed their frustration at the absence of continuity of provision and unwillingness of professionals to openly share amongst themselves.
Families were also opposed to services being provided in isolation other services as well as secret sharing of information. Morris (2013) argues that future practice development should be concerned with how families manage and arrange their day-to-day reality with better grasp of family practices where families have multiple and complex needs.

Bywaters et al (2017) describes a collaborative project undertaken by researchers in seven Universities in the UK. The Child Welfare Inequalities Project adopted an integrated methodology that involved a combination of literature-based analyses of policy and evidence, quantitative studies in each country and in-depth case studies of policy and practice in few Local Authorities in England and Scotland augmented by focus groups in Wales and Northern Ireland.

Bywaters et al (2017) show that the Department for Education do not provide analysis of data according to the level of deprivation of the Local Authority (LA). However, on the contrary, it was concluded that the main strategy LAs employed for managing demand was greater emphasis on early help and integrating services, the reality not matching the rhetoric. The researchers showed that as the result of the trend of cuts between 2010-2011 and 2014-2015, by 2014-2015, LAs were spending 41% of the total children’s services budget on Looked After Children compared with 32% in 2010/2011. The examination revealed an acute squeeze on prevention and family support in deprived areas. The analysis showed that service demand was increasing and that between 2010 and 2016, the numbers of children involved with state services during the increased substantially due to economic factors and risk averse culture. It was found that in the wake of austerity policies impacting on families and local government, powerful political and professional voices have focused on individual responsibility of parents and LAs in children’s welfare. Gove (2013) rejected the notion of seeing families as victims of social injustice of economic forces and inequality and described such analysis as widespread and dangerous. It was found that the report of the National Audit Office (NAO) into Children in
Need (2016) did not find any relationship between the LAs reported spending per child in need and the quality of services as measured by Ofsted judgements. The NAO (2016) report showed that there were wide inconsistencies between LAs in Ofsted judgements as evidenced by referral and repeat child protection plans which showed that children in various parts of the country do not have access to the same help or protection. The research therefore shows inequalities in child welfare and child protection systems.

The study found that families in deprived neighbourhoods are much more likely to be subject to children’s services interventions. However, it was found that in England, this is disproportionately the case for families in LAs responsible for areas that have relatively low deprivation. Deprivation and austerity policies were found to be linked with differential pressures on families and LAs. Bywaters et al (2017) found there has been intensified stresses on families across much of the economic spectrum over the years accompanied by unprecedented cuts in overall LA budgets that local prioritizing of children’s services has been unable to deflect since 2010 in England. It was found that from 2013 to 2016, LAs with high deprivation received substantially worse Ofsted judgements in relation to the quality of their children’s services than those with low deprivation. Bywaters et al (2017) argue that this evidence challenges politicians, policy makers, managers, practitioners, educators and researchers to reflect whether such inequalities in children’s life chances are acceptable and if not what can be done to ensure that child welfare and child protection services reduce and do not reflect or strengthen social inequality.

2.7. Conclusion

This subsection will briefly outline highlights of the literature and how this understanding will be turned into a focus on data collection and analysis. It has emerged that whilst poverty is prevalent amongst most service users of social work practice, poverty is marginalised in social work education and training in England. Literature review has shown that social work
education and training is linked to dominant political and socio-economic ideology. Neoliberal and capitalist ideologies have been dominant in England for over three decades and despite several reforms, poverty has not gained prominence in social work education and training. This compounded by a managerialistic social work organisational framework has influenced the way social work is defined and practised. It emerged that poverty is marginalised in its assessment and addressing evidenced by the fact that it does not feature as a social work remit despite its prevalence and association with most problems dealt with by social workers.

The literature review has revealed that individualised and pathological social work frameworks are underpinned by social work theories that view people experiencing poverty as architects of their poverty individually, psychologically, and culturally. Structural causes have not been challenged and not been addressed within social work’s understanding of poverty and within poverty practice. This is evidenced by marginalisation of poverty within thresholds of eligibility which have served as gatekeeping criteria rather than facilitation of addressing of the root causes of problems tackled by social workers which have an association with poverty and therefore excluding many in need. Resource constraints compounded by austerity, managerialism and regulation have resulted in thresholds being resource led as opposed to being needs led.

Literature review has shown that poverty is understood in individual, cultural, social environment, and structural terms. It has emerged that understanding of poverty is critical to how poverty is addressed. Evidence has shown that social work is directed at individuals and communities and that structural causes do not feature in social work assessments and not a focus of interventions.

There is evidence that social workers’ attitudes are judgemental, and this is linked to the political, ideological, socio-economic environment, social work education and personal background. It has emerged that people who are poor are discriminated and oppressed by
social work practice contrary to anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive principles which are central to social work. It has emerged that social work interventions are reactive, muscular, and punitive and characterised by stigmatization of service users, most of whom are poor. ‘The troubled families programme’ which has been reviewed as a case study is a case in point of prescriptive interventions that marginalise and pathologise poverty.

The literature review has highlighted that there have been several studies held in England in social work and poverty relevant to the research topic. This research will therefore reflect these in its data collection and analysis of the findings. The study will adopt a thematic analysis with main themes emerging from the qualitative research. The issues outlined above in relation to social work poverty will be explored using the qualitative research design underpinned by constructivist and interpretivist paradigms as these are more suitable for exploration of understanding of poverty and attitudes towards poverty. Focus group discussions and semi-structured interview guides will capture main themes outlined above with a view to identifying how and whether these themes emerge in my research data.
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The first section of this chapter sets out the context of the research study in relation to lessons and themes from the literature review. The following sections will look at the research questions and objectives of the research, discuss constructivism and interpretivism philosophical paradigms and their suitability to the research design. The methodology section will discuss the research sample, describe the research sites A, B and C and limitations of the methodology. Further sections of this chapter will discuss methods used in the research study namely focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews including the strengths of the research approach as evidenced by comments from research participants. The analysis section will discuss thematic analysis concept and analysis of research themes using NVivo 11 software programme, ethical considerations. The last sections will examine reliability, validity, and generalizability of the research study.

3.1. Context of the research study

Most social work clients are affected by poverty issues and yet, social work attitudes could be considered indecisive, unbalanced and at their uttermost antagonistic to service users living in poverty (Davis and Wainwright, 2005). There is evidence of some irresolute attitudes of social work practitioners in contributing towards a social work and poverty discussion or debate as compared to other issues such as child protection. Perry (200, p. 7) notes that “there is considerable evidence that social work does not have a good record in understanding or combatting poverty”. This begs the question ‘why’ despite some well-documented evidence of the longstanding and complex history of the relationship between social work and social services with the poor and poverty alleviation. This therefore aroused my desire to explore social workers’ attitudes towards poverty, social workers’ knowledge or understanding of poverty, its causes, effects, and impact on social work on the assessment function and social work interventions.
Social work has no statutory remit in addressing poverty and therefore the research study seeks to explore and analyse the relationship between social work professionals’ attitudes towards and knowledge of poverty and how this influences how poverty is perceived and addressed within children’s and families’ social work practice in England. This echoes with the contested nature of social work definitions, the individualised focus of Payne’s (2009a) social work frameworks i.e. individualism-reformism, socialist-collectivist and the reflective-therapeutic and the fourth framework of neoliberal-managerialist (Garret, 2013). Social work is a regulated profession whose practice is influenced by a number of factors including policy, significant events and legislation, as evidenced by what Dickens (2011) refers to as watershed moments that have shaped social work historically in one way or another. The issue of regulation of social work and its functions as dictated by the state becomes an interesting line of enquiry of the study. My role as a social worker and academic inspires my interest and passion to examine the relationship between children and families’ social work practice and poverty in light of the above dilemma and explore whether social work should have an active role to play in addressing poverty.

Adams (2002) asserts a social workers lack of decision-making leverage in relation to the functions of social work practice and delivery of services limits social work practitioner’s capacity to play an effective role in facilitating social change and empowerment as the control of such decisions lie in the hands of managers at different levels of seniority in respective organisational hierarchical structures, access to resource panels and government. Krumer-Nevo, Monnickendam & Weiss-Gal (2009, p. 227) argue that ‘the flight of social work practice from the centrality of poverty stands in contrast to its centrality in the perspective of people living in poverty’. I argue that social work practitioners should play an effective role in the poverty discourse and in combating poverty, given the long association between social work and poverty. Social workers should therefore be equipped with knowledge and unequivocal attitudes towards services users living with poverty influenced by sound knowledge base and basic social work base. Sheedy (2013, p. 34) asserts,
If the ethical and moral basis of social work steers it to focus on helping people function to their own satisfaction on a day-to-day basis in the face of deprivation, loss, exclusion and oppression then it has to be about addressing those factors which contribute to these situational determinants.

On the other hand, legislative, political, and economic factors are pivotal factors of the jigsaw puzzle underpinning government policies such as austerity measures and welfare reforms adopted by the former coalition and current governments. This is further compounded by the tensions and ambiguities within social work practice. It is necessary therefore that the research study explores the impact of such dynamics on social work practice in relation to addressing poverty. This thesis argues that alternative forms practice or approaches such as radical, social, and community-oriented approaches reviewed in the literature need to be considered in contrast to the traditional, reactive, and prescriptive casework approach. This resonates with the issue of knowledge and theoretical base underpinning social work practice.

3.2. The research question and objectives

This research explored poverty within service users, social work interventions and practice as highlighted by the research question.

The main objectives of this research study are:

- to contribute to social work practice and body of knowledge in terms of complexities within the relationship between children and families’ social work interventions and addressing poverty.
- to explore social workers’ understanding of poverty and the nature of association between poverty and child abuse and neglect.
- to explore social workers’ attitudes towards people who are poor and poverty.
- to examine social work professionals’ role in the poverty discourse at policy level or ground level and its impact on social work practice and poverty,
• to explore social workers’ experiences of poverty and alternative ways of addressing poverty.

3.3. Research philosophical paradigms

According to Badden & Major (2013), a paradigm is a belief system or worldview that guides the researcher and the research process. This involves consideration of ontological and epistemological issues. Epistemology according to Bryman (2016) concerns what is regarded as appropriate knowledge about the social world (p 16) and that in social sciences the central consideration is whether the social world can be and should be studied according to the same principles, procedures and ethos as the natural sciences. Ontological issues relate to whether the social world is regarded as something external to the social actors or as something that participants are in the process of creating. Kumar (2014, p.132) contends that differences in philosophical perspectives in each paradigm, combined with the aims of a study, largely determine the focus, the approach and mode of enquiry, which in turn determine the structural aspect of a study design. Interpretivist and constructivist philosophical paradigms discussed below underpin the exploratory course of this research.

3.3.1. Constructivism

In this research study, constructivism is an ontological position which suggests that social occurrences or events and their significance result from social actions (Bryman, 2016). In this research therefore, the relevance of constructivism was exploration of formation of social workers’ understanding of poverty and their attitudes towards poverty and the poor and how these in turn relate social work practice in terms of addressing poverty. The study therefore sought to listen to social work practitioners’ views and experiences through focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. This resonates with Holstein and Gubrium’s assertion as cited in Weinberg (2002) that the constructivist paradigm assumes that meaning is socially constituted, and that specific knowledge is produced from actions undertaken to
secure it. In this research study, interviewing participants and interactive focus group discussions were a social encounter in which rich and detailed knowledge shared within this was constructed. Holstein and Gubrium as cited in Weinberg (2002) posit that an interview is not just an impartial process of interaction but a process of interaction in the research study. Silverman (1993) asserts that interviewers or researchers are part of the construction of meanings purportedly located within respondents or participants. Both I as the researcher and the interview participants were necessarily active and meaning was actively assembled in the interview encounter (Holstein and Gubrium as cited in Weinberg, 2002). I as the researcher had an interest in the exploration of poverty knowledge and social workers’ attitude and the research questions and prompts were framed to seek social workers’ understandings and experiences. Holstein and Gubrium as cited in Weinberg, 2002 affirm that respondents are not only objects of knowledge or treasures of information awaiting revelation but are constructors of knowledge in collaboration with interviewers. According to Sarantakos (2005), constructivist viewpoint acknowledges multiple ways of interpreting a specific set of data and hence the need for probing, seeking clarification and observing participants’ non-verbal cues within interviews or focus group discussions and interactions within a focus group for example. This resonates with Punch’s view, (2014) that that specific real-life situations are constructed.

Sarantakos (2005) notes that social narratives of the world and feelings are based on culturally defined and historically situated understandings and personal encounters. This perspective is relevant to this research as social work practitioners’ experiences and their meaning were explored in an interactive manner. The semi-structured interviews and focus groups were designed to complement each other and to triangulate information.

Holstein and Gubrium as cited in Weinberg, 2002 suggest that researchers should take a more active perspective and acknowledge and take advantage of researchers’ and respondents’ interactive contributions to the formulation of interview data. I was as the research able to
prompt of follow up points of interest to the research as was the participant in giving examples, showing emotions, or talking of other issues. This meant we both consciously and conscientiously attended to the interview process and its outcome in ways that were flexible to the social construction of knowledge.

Holstein and Gubrium as cited in Weinberg (2002) notes an element of bias in terms of analysis of interactive interviewing as compared to more conventional perspectives of interviewing and states that the active approach seems to invite unacceptable forms of prejudice. This criticism shows the very strength of interaction within the interviewing process could amount to a weakness in terms of subjectivity. Holstein and Gubrium as cited in Weinberg (2002) asserts that this criticism only applies, however, if one takes a narrow view of explanatory practice and meaning construction. They argue that prejudice is a relevant notion only if the subject is an accomplished, passive object that the interview process might somehow spoil but that if interview responses are seen as outcomes of interpretive practice, they are neither accomplished nor refined. The research participants were made aware of the research questions and issues of interest and the basis for their interaction was willingness and interest in the area given that they freely volunteered or were given the choice to withdraw at any point. The participants appreciated the opportunity and felt listened.

Holstein and Gubrium as cited in Weinberg (2002, 123) argue that any interview situation, regardless of how its official standing, controlled or regulated, relies upon the interaction between participants. Kumar (2014) asserts that it is challenging to rule out researcher bias in qualitative studies due factors of flexibility and lack of control. I would qualify control as total as it is arguable that the researcher can control some elements in the facilitation of discussion amongst focus group participants for example in the focus group discussion in my study, I had some form of control through ground rules and ensuring that the discussion was not dominated by some participants at the expense of other participants. I was also able probe and enhance interaction amongst participant by seeking clarification and probing.
Silverman (2013) intriguingly points out that research problems are not neutral and argues that how a research problem is formulated certainly mirrors an explicit or implicit commitment to a particular model of how the world works and that in qualitative research, there are rival models. According to Silverman (2013, p. 107), the most notable perception of constructivism is its inclination on the verbal and constructive characteristics of knowledge: that is the realization that facts are socially constructed in particular contexts. Silverman (2013, p.107) asserts that in some respects, this defines the constructionist model, which is concerned with the questions of ‘what’ and ‘how’ that inform so much of qualitative research.

### 3.3.2. Interpretivism

Bryman (2016:26) asserts that interpretivism is a term given to an epistemology that contrasts with positivism.

According to Denscombe (2017, p. 8), the Interpretivist paradigm is primarily concerned with formulating intuition into people’s beliefs and their lived experiences or involvement using qualitative data. In this research, interpretivism is a suitable philosophy given that the research study sought to explore and gain insight into social workers’ beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions in relation to poverty as well as their lived experiences in dealing with or addressing poverty.

Blaxter, Hughes and Tight (2010) state that interpretive approaches to social research see understanding of the social world as culturally derived and historically situated and this is relevant in that understanding was context specific to the research sites and social workers were able to reflect and explore the issue of poverty within the historical trends of their social work practice. Payne (2005a) argues that this this philosophical position believes that human beings, in this case social work practitioners, are independent and free to follow their will as part of the world in relationship with other human beings.
Denscombe (2017, p. 8) asserts that the Interpretivist paradigm is generally doubtful about the prospects of achieving objectivity, arguing that researchers’ thinking will inescapably be influenced to some extent by their own experiences and identities as members of the social world within which their research takes place. This research looked at how and why of social work interventions in relation to addressing or not addressing poverty in terms of possible mechanisms, causes and plausible theories and this resonates with the Interpretivist paradigm (Denscombe, 2017).

Blaxter et al (2010) asserts that interpretivism is often associated to the work of Weber, who suggested that the social sciences are concerned with understanding as opposed to explaining which forms the basis of seeking casual explanations, a distinctive feature of the natural sciences. Bryman (2016, p. 26) argues that interpretivism is established upon the view that a strategy that acknowledges the differences between people and the objects of the natural sciences and therefore needing the social scientists to grasp the subjective meaning of social action is required. This view suits the exploratory nature of the research objectives to an extent, which views the world in a flexible and context specific way. This resonates with the fact that this research does not aim to generalize research findings and the fact that interpretivism tends to align with qualitative methods.

3.4. Methodology

Kerlinger (1986) describes a research design as a proposal, framework and a procedure of investigation designed to obtain answers to research questions or problems. This research study adopted a qualitative research design because of its suitability and relevance to exploration of social workers' attitudes towards and knowledge of poverty within children and families' social work practice. Qualitative methodology is the preferred and relevant approach given that participants’ experiences and actions about poverty and social work practices were some of the issues that needed exploration (D'Cruz & Jones, 2004).
The qualitative research design provided a framework for the research participants to describe and explain their attitudes, values, knowledge or theoretical base, actions and omissions within their social worlds or contexts. Qualitative methodology was suitable to this research study as it did not seek to generalise but rather to explore social workers’ experiences of addressing poverty and the contexts in which social work practice with children and families occur (D’Cruz & Jones, 2004).

This position was largely due to the preferences of perceiving issues or themes through the eyes of social workers being studied (Bryman, 2016). The qualitative methodology therefore gave me, as the researcher, the framework to provide a great deal of descriptive detail about the context within which social work interventions and behaviours occur as well as when reporting the research findings (Bryman, 2016).

The qualitative design provided a research framework that involved as little prior pollution of the research sites as possible.

The qualitative research was much more diverse than quantitative in its ways of reasoning, methods and in its data (Punch 2014), as it allowed me to hold focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews at three research sites that will be discussed in respective sections below. Qualitative methodology was suitable for the sample of at least six to eight social work professionals per focus group involved in one of the five focus group discussions and twenty-eight semi-structured interviews. This was also suitable for the research questions and the in-depth research discussions (Blaxter, Hughes & Tight, 2001). Rich and detailed accounts or research information was enabled using qualitative questions namely what, how, why, when and where of issues or themes, importance and atmosphere within the focus group and semi-structured interview guides (Berg, 2001).
3.4.1. The research sample

This research study originally set out to involve at least twenty-four social work professionals working within children and families from diverse settings with a range of views in three focus group discussions of six-eight practitioners per focus group and individual semi-structured interviews. The rationale behind having focus group discussions first was the need to explore perceptions, experiences, and understandings of a group of six to eight practitioners who have experiences in relation to children and families’ social work practice and poverty (Kumar, 2005). Focus group discussions were a good way of exploring attitudes, opinions, knowledge or perceptions and experiences in relation to social work practice amongst practitioners and through a flexible interaction between focus group members and the researcher (Kumar, 2014). Focus group discussions were meant to bring out of the participants some experiences and themes that would be explored further in detail with individual research participants in semi-structured interviews.

The selection criteria included practitioners’ willingness to participate in the research study, experience of dealing with poverty in their social work practice and/ or having awareness or interest in poverty.

In total, eight Local Authorities were approached at different times through their respective gatekeepers to facilitate access to prospective participants from different levels of authority i.e. frontline social workers and managers. Attached to the access request was a student information letter which contained my request, research objective and outcomes as well as what was expected of the prospective participants. The student information letter is attached as appendix 1. I also attached the University Ethics Committee Approval Letter (Appendix 2).
Five Local Authorities were unable to accede to the request for access due to lack of capacity for a few reasons, one of which was preparation for Ofsted Inspections. The research proposal intended to have a separate focus group consisting of managers so that their presence would not inhibit effective participation of frontline practitioners as well as to ensure no harm, confidentiality, and anonymity. Therefore, one focus group discussion to this end, was held with managers from different services and teams at research study site A.

Out of the eight local authorities approached, three Local Authorities (two predominantly rural with some urban settlements and one urban) agreed to take part in the research study. I will refer to two rural predominantly rural Local Authorities as sites A & B and the urban local authority as site C within the thesis. In the end four focus group discussions of between six – eight front-line practitioners were held and one focus group discussion with Managers and Independent Reviewing Officers/ Child Protection.

Chairpersons from Quality Assurance and Specialist Services. Different teams were represented, namely Children Looked After, Child in Need and Child Protection, Children with Disabilities, Early Intervention and Prevention and Independent Reviewing at Site A. In total, thirty-five participants were involved in focus group discussions. Twenty-seven semi-structured interviews were held with individual participants who took part in one of the five focus group discussions.

The sample size of six to eight was neither too small nor large for a focus group discussion. About six to ten people in a focus group is usually considered optimal as more than the optimal number could impede the extent and the quality of the focus group discussion (Kumar, 2014). The sample size enabled me to build rapport with the research participants through telephone and email communication with the participants before the focus group discussions and semi-structured interview during the arrangements of focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. Rapport entails mutual understanding based on respect and trust between
researcher and the participants (Gray, 2004). It was therefore critical that I provided prospective participants with information on how focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews would be held, time involved, permission for tape recording of focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews and other ethical issues as well as addressing questions from the prospective research participants.

It was important that questions at the beginning of focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews were structured to facilitate building of rapport and trust. During focus group discussions, I started by thanking participants for their willingness and participation in the focus group discussion before conducting introductions. I then reiterated the reason for having the focus group discussion i.e. discussions of professional experiences as social work practitioners in relation to perception of and addressing of poverty. I implored the need for the participants to share honest and open thoughts during the discussion. I then went through ground rules. Please see appendix 3 for the focus group questionnaire guide. My introductory questions were meant to introduce participants to the topic of discussion with a view to making them feel comfortable and as experts in the topic under discussion. The first question for example was: Can you please tell me…?

This led into depth exploration of issues during focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. The exploratory questions consisted of what, how and why questions with a view to addressing core issues of the research topic. The questions were open-ended, and this enabled me to probe and follow up. This was followed by an exit question, which was meant to check whether there was anything else the participant wanted to say which might have been said during discussion, missed or overlooked.

Some of the factors taken into consideration were issues of confidentiality, anonymity and the right for participants to opt out at any stage of the research process as well as support or counselling due to distress that might have been caused by focus group discussions or semi-
structured interviews. Research participants were assured of consideration for any counselling or debriefing that might have been required due to research study. I ensured that by paying attention to any signs of distress during discussions and interviews and followed up with participants after discussions or interviews. Fortunately, there were no signs of distress and therefore there was no need for counselling.

The focus group discussions were followed by semi-structured interviews with respective participants who volunteered to participate in interview discussions. The rationale for using focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews in this study was for the two methods to complement one another. The focus group was meant to enable group discussion where participants were able to interact with each other about issues and topics of interest. The focus group by the nature of number of participants and time involved could not cover a large range of issues but enabled me to explore important topics. This also generated some emerging themes that I followed up with semi-structured interviews with the same participants involved in one of the focus group discussion within a research site. Semi-structured interviews enabled me to explore topics and emerging themes in depth. In a focus group discussion, I explored participants’ perceptions, experiences and understandings with a group of social work practitioners within children and families social work practice whilst in semi-structured interviews, individual participants involved in focus group discussion earlier were enabled to represent their personal views and experiences in a detailed manner. In this way, each method complemented one another.

3.4.2. Context of the research sites

The research study took place within three Local Authorities which will be hereafter referred to sites A, B and C that agreed to support to support the study. This section will briefly describe the sites.
3.4.2.1 Site A

Site A is a large county council which is predominantly rural with some urban settlements. Site A is one of the Local Authorities rated as good under the new Ofsted inspection framework in 2014 (Ofsted report, 2015).

Research study participants were drawn from independent and reviewing service, assessment, safeguarding, looked after children and children with disabilities team.

3.4.2.2. Site B

Site B is the second County Council which is also predominantly rural with some urban settlements. The county is considered according to the ‘Index of Multiple Deprivation’ as one of the least deprived areas of England, however, it is important to state that the general prosperity of the county is not evenly spread, and that all districts have pockets of considerable deprivation within their boundaries including child poverty, overcrowding and dependence on welfare benefits. Around 13% of children are reported to live in poverty. A single point Ofsted inspection of Children’s Services undertaken in 2015 was judged good.

Research study participants were drawn from assessment, specialist safeguarding, and children looked after teams.

3.4.2.3. Site C

Site C is in the City of London. Approximately 31% of the local authority’s children are living in low-income families. The most recent Ofsted Inspection outcome was judged as good (Ofsted report, 2017).
Research participants were drawn family and social work teams, looked after children teams and independent and reviewing service. The participants ranged from social work practitioners who are newly qualified to those with extensive and high experience.

### 3.4.3. Limitations

Qualitative research is often criticised as being impressionist and subjective (Bryman, 2016). Bryman (2016) asserts that this means that qualitative findings rely much on the researcher’s often unsystematic views about what is significant and important and upon the close personal relationship that the researcher frequently strikes up with the participants.

In focus group discussions, I faced a limitation of some participants not turning up for some focus group discussions. This is a limitation I had somehow anticipated during the planning stages. I therefore managed this limitation by ensuring that suitable dates and convenient venues were selected for focus group discussions and interviews. I also managed this problem by over-recruiting the number of participants so that I ended up with an optimal number if some participants could not turn up. I also exercised some patience in instances whereby some participants turned up late for the focus group discussions for one reason or another.

Due to the small-scale nature of my study compounded by the qualitative design, my research findings are not generalizable to all social workers beyond my research sites or sample. It is often suggested that the scope of the findings of qualitative investigation is restricted (Bryman, 2016). The research participants were conveniently selected and not through a probability procedure and therefore not representative of all social work professionals (Silverman, 2013). Bryman (2016) asserts that qualitative findings are generalizable to theory rather than to population.
The research study is difficult to replicate given that there are hardly any standard procedures to be followed (Bryman, 2016). In this research, I was the main instrument of data collection and Bryman (2016) argues that what is observed, heard and what is the focus of the data collection are very much products of my preferences.

The section below will look at methods. Most methods of data collection can be used across studies that are classified as qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods (Kumar, 2014). Kumar (2014:170 argues that the distinction is mainly determined by the restrictions imposed on the philosophy underpinning the enquiry, freedom and flexibility in the structure and approach in gathering data, and the depth and freedom given to you as a researcher in probing to obtain answers to your research question.

3.5. Methods

Methods in this section relate to the tools I used for data collection and analysis. The choice of focus group discussion and semi-structured interviews as tools of gathering data in this research data was mainly influenced by the degree of depth and freedom these two data collection tools would give me in exploration and probing of attitudes towards and knowledge of poverty amongst social workers within children and families' social work practice. These methods resonate with qualitative design and philosophical paradigms discussed above.

Kitzinger (1994) highlights that focus groups are useful in determining participants’ views and attitudes as well as priorities in a particular social context as it focuses upon how meanings are constructed, negotiated, changed and experienced within the group interaction.

3.5.1. Focus group discussions

Focus group discussions consisted of five groups of six to eight participants involved within children and family social work practice. The focus groups were organised according to levels
of decision making to enable balanced discussions in each focus group discussion. I did manage to have six managers into a management group at Site A and held four focus group discussions with frontline practitioners within the three sites namely one at Site A, one at Site B and two at Site C. I held more focus group than three I had initially planned for in my research proposal. This was because the number of people who volunteered for the research study was enough for the five focus groups I had in the end.

At all sites, I communicated with prospective participants who volunteered willingness to take part in the research after being granted access by respective gatekeepers. I then communicated the purpose of the research, what it involved namely focus group discussions of about six to eight practitioners per group at a suitable venue and suitable dates for participants and a duration of one to one and half hours through a student information sheet appended (as appendix 4). I also requested prospective participants to volunteer for semi-structured interviews, through written consent, that would be held after focus group discussions in which they would have taken part.

Initially at Site A, nineteen prospective participants expressed willingness to take part in the research, ten frontline practitioners and nine managers. This sufficed for two focus groups one for front-line practitioners and another for managers. I then sent written consent requests that nine practitioners and nine managers duly signed for both focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. This was then followed by email and telephone communication with participants to thank them for their willingness and written consent as well as negotiating their availability for focus group discussions, suitable venues and discussion of logistical issues and any questions about the research study. The negotiations and planning took more time than I had imagined and anticipated. The negotiations with Site A started towards the end of 2016 and I managed to hold two focus discussions in March and April 2017 with managers and practitioners respectively. Six managers took part in their respective focus group and three did not turn up for one reason or another. Seven front line practitioners participated in their
respective focus group discussion in April 2017 and two practitioners did not manage to attend. This was anticipated and both groups consisted of optimal numbers that enabled effective and interactive discussions.

I submitted a request for access at Site B in November 2016 and the Director granted access in February 2017. A meeting was held with Managers in March 2017 at which I explained my research study, what it entailed, support required from the Sites and expectations of the prospective participants in terms of time and participation in the research study. The negotiations were characterized by significant communication breakdown between managers and led to a significant delay in undertaking the focus group discussion. Twelve practitioners initially expressed willingness to participate in the research. I then communicated with the prospective participants, thanking them for their willingness and requesting for written consent. A member of the Administration Team at site B helped with practical arrangements of focus group dates, time, and venue. Ten front-line practitioners signed and returned the consent form for both focus group discussion and semi-structured interviews. The focus group discussion was held in August 2017 and was attended by eight front-line practitioners and two did not attend for one reason or another.

I made the request for access to Site C through the Director in November 2016 and he expressed his willingness to support and delegated to respective managers. I then communicated with the managers and provided student information sheet, consent form as well as clarifying questions they had about the research. There was communication breakdown caused by one manager moving roles and lack of follow up from the other two managers. I patiently and diplomatically followed up until I got a breakthrough in June/July 2017 when I was asked to fill in an ethics form, which I gladly and quickly completed and submitted with requisite attachments. Twenty prospective participants initially expressed willingness and eighteen signed written consent. The Local Authority then supported by planning for the two focus groups of front-line practitioners, which I undertook in July 2017.
Eight participants attended the first focus group discussion in the morning and six participants attended the second focus group discussion in the afternoon.

Focus group discussions were not easy to organise in terms of finding suitable dates with managers and prospective participants. I therefore negotiated with a degree of flexibility, compromise and patience. I over recruited for focus groups with the anticipation that some participants would fail to turn up in order to make up for those participants who dropped at the last minute or those who failed to turn up on the day.

All the five focus group discussions at Site A, B and C followed a question outline of eight questions. The focus group discussion guide was used to ensure that flexible and focused discussions were held. The focus group discussions started with my opening remarks, introductions, purpose of the focus group discussion. Ground rules were laid down to ensure that participants were freely encouraged to express their views and share their experiences. I tried to ensure that all members were afforded an opportunity to participate and contribute to the topics of discussions.

This was followed by reassuring participants about confidentiality of their contributions and that the findings will not name or identify participants, reminding the participants that the discussions will be recorded so that issues raised will not be missed. Discussion of relevant themes and questions were then held as per focus group outline.

Participants were able to discuss with other research participants as well as the researcher in an interactive and dynamic way suitable to research aim and objectives. I did exercise some degree of control in the form of specific questions on the focus group guide and diplomatically controlling some participants who consciously or unconsciously tended to dominate the discussions and encouraging those members who seemed reticent or reluctant to speak or contribute to the discussions. This enabled discussion of relevant issues and themes linked to
research objectives such as exploration of alternative forms of children and families’ social work practice. The themes discussed included:

- participants understanding and experience of dealing with poverty within their practice.
- social work knowledge and skills in relation to dealing with poverty; social workers’ attitudes towards the poor and poverty.
- understanding of thresholds and how poverty is located or addressed.
- conception of poverty as a risk factor in assessment and intervention.
- government policies in relation to definition of poverty and social work practice.
- exploration of social work education, personal circumstances and professional development and effect on addressing poverty.

The focus group discussions took around one and a half hours. The focus group discussions were very enlightening, and the participants expressed views that they found the discussions helpful and helped them to reflect on social work practice in relation to poverty and social work practice in general.

I was able to ask engagement, exploratory and exit questions as per the focus group question outline as discussed in methodology section. I managed to facilitate interactive discussions through encouraging participation of all participants to focus group question with probing open-ended questions. In this way, the focus group discussion enabled the use of various ways of communication and data gathering. I was able to concentrate on facilitation of the focus group discussions as they were tape-recorded, and this also enabled me to take notes of some highlights and issues raised during the discussion. Focus group discussion encouraged a variety of communication methods and hence tapped into a range of experiences and understandings (Oak, 2009).
The number of focus group participants was reasonably small with the number of participants ranging from six to eight. The composition of the groups was designed to provide reasonable balance in relation to issues of diversity of participants’ awareness and experience to ensure that the issues were viewed and discussed from all relevant perspectives. Experience of participants within front-line practitioner groups varied from students on placements, newly qualified to senior practitioners with significant experience and this provided a rich forum for discussion and experiences.

I tried to ensure that focus group discussions were conducted in ways that avoided or minimised researcher bias by not asking leading questions and to allow focus group to flow among the focus group participants. I tried to ensure that my prompts and questions did not lead or influence focus group discussions. The focus group discussion provided an interactive environment, which allowed participants to react and build upon the responses of other group members (Silverman, 2004:80).

The discussions enabled gathering of divergent and convergent views. The time allocated for focus group discussions enabled effective discussions of questions and themes to some enough depth within a group setting. One and a half hours could only allow discussion of several themes to some extent and hence the need to follow up the themes and emerging themes in greater depth with semi-structured interviews, discussed in the below section, with participants who took part in focus group discussions.

### 3.5.2. Semi-structured interviews

Focus group participants were asked if they would be prepared to take part in semi-structured interviews. Planning of semi-structured interviews with individual participants followed completion of focus group discussions at respective sites (A, B and C). The planning involved ascertaining of participants’ willingness to take part in semi-structured interviews, availability
and suitable venues as well as offering any clarification needed. Semi-structured interviews allowed discussions of major issues related to this study in greater detail using a semi-structured questionnaire guide. The semi-structured questionnaire guide was formulated in a way that started with rapport building, which allowed interviewees to describe their role, personal and professional background followed by questions.

The semi-structured interviews enabled me to refer to an ‘outline’ of the topics relevant to the research questions and relevant themes. The order in which the various topics were dealt with and the wording of the questions were left to my discretion (Corbetta, 2003). This allowed freedom to digress and probe as and when necessary while at the same time ensuring that all the relevant themes or topics were dealt with and all the necessary information collected.

Questions discussed in the interviews include:

- interviewee’s description of a case/s in his or her practice involving poverty and how this was addressed on not addressed.
- social work practice skills and knowledge base in relation to how poverty is addressed.
- views or understanding of thresholds and how they influence social intervention or lack of it.
- understanding and experience of the nature of relationship between children and families’ social work and poverty.
- views on how equipped social workers are in dealing with poverty.
- extent to which poverty is considered in assessments and social work interventions.
- barriers to effective social work interventions in relation to poverty.
- what could be done differently.

Semi-structured interviews explored the issues raised in focus group discussions as well as emerging themes in greater detail. Please see semi-structured questionnaire guide appended as appendix 5.
The semi-structured interviews also enabled me to probe informants to illustrate and elaborate on their initial responses. Audio recording and note taking were used to ensure that research data was effectively captured.

3.6. Analysis

This section describes how the research was analysed. Thematic analysis was used in the with a view to analysing the data in a methodical way that would result in credible answers to the research question and objectives rooted within the study. Braun & Clarke (2003) define Braun & Clarke (2006, p. 6) define thematic analysis as a method of identifying, analysis and reporting patterns or themes within data assert that thematic analysis should be perceived as the bedrock for qualitative analysis. According to Guest, MacQueen and Namey (2012) argue that thematic analysis needs more researcher involvement and understanding as it extends beyond identifying specific words or phrases. Guest et al (2012) assert that thematic analysis focuses on identification and description of implicit and explicit ideas or themes. Braun & Clarke (2003) states that one of the advantages of thematic analysis is its flexibility and this resonates with qualitative research.

This analysis involved developing codes representing themes identified through literature review and relevant to the research question of exploration of social work poverty relationship and relevant to addressing study goals and objectives. Guest et al (2012) describe that developed to represent identified themes and then linked to the raw data for further analysis. Guest et al (2013) assert that reliability is of primary concern in thematic analysis as compared to word-based analysis as the interpretation is based on codes and using the codes to solid pieces of text which makes it rich in meaning. It is worth mentioning that that although thematic is widely deployed in qualitative research, there is no certainty about what thematic analysis is and how to go about it (Braun & Clarke (2003).
I decided to use Nvivo11 programme, after discussion with my Supervisors, for the processing of the research study. The main purpose of using the NVivo software package was to code data into a coding frame to generate further analysis (Silverman, 2013). The analysis process started during fieldwork as evidenced by noting and recording emergent patterns and possible themes during focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This enabled me to fill in the gaps in the transcribed notes.

I arranged for the data to be transcribed from the audio recordings for verbatim data for the five focus group discussions and twenty-seven semi-structured interviews by a professional transcription company. This was an important consideration to facilitate transformation of data into findings. The use of NVivo 11 facilitated in the reduction of the volume of raw information and enabled sifting the trivial from significant, identifying significant patterns and construction of a framework for communicating the meaning of the data (Patton, 2015). I went through each transcript upon receipt from the transcription company to ensure that there were numbered and anonymised as well as quality assured, using some notes taken down during respective focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. The transcripts were then uploaded onto NVivo in a format compatible with the software. This process was time consuming but of significant necessity and importance.

I went through focus group and semi-structured transcripts several times to immerse myself in the data. This gave me insight into the main and emerging themes and language used. These themes became the basis for my analysis. Patton (2015) asserts that no formula exists for the transformation of data into findings. This was necessary as NVivo could not do the thinking for me as I needed to do the thinking (Silverman, 2013).

Using NVivo 11, I initially identified and then assigned codes. I then went through five focus group transcripts first and then twenty-seven semi-structured interviews classifying the responses under different themes. Learning and using NVivo 11 though painstaking at first
was an interesting learning curve. The initial coding of themes resulted in many codes as NVivo allowed more than one code to be applied to any section of the text. I then converged the multiple codes into six parent codes. During the coding process, I created memos of emerging patterns and issues as well commenting on the process. The coded themes will be used for analysis of the research data.

The themes were in part based on the themes identified prior to the research study fieldwork, which were in turn generated from literature review. Technically analysis of the research data using Nvivo11 started later than planned due to the delay in completion of my fieldwork due to access and logistical challenges. However, use of NVivo provided much needed speed to analyse five focus group and twenty-seven semi-structured interviews. Silverman (2013) states that using computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) in the initial stages of analysis, the rapidity with which CAQDAS can help the researcher and analyst identify patterns in large volume of texts can be useful. NVivo software usage also provided some rigour including the production of counts of phenomena and searching for divergent or negative data as it involves sifting through all the transcripts (Silverman, 2013). This resonates with issues of validity and reliability of research findings.

Logistically the process of using NVivo 11 management software involved familiarisation with the programme from YouTube and training facilitated by the University. I then liaised with the IT staff to have NVivo 11 installed on my personal laptop. This enabled me to familiarise myself with the software using YouTube videos as advised by my Supervisors as the software installed on my laptop was limited to fourteen days due to licensing technicalities. During the trial period, I learnt to generate nodes and themes, and these were multiple initially. The multiple nodes were then grouped into six parent nodes. The use of memos during fieldwork and analysis using NVivo software was effective in facilitation of analysis decisions, emergent ideas, breakthroughs and what I learnt about analysis. I managed to have access to University
Computers which I had unlimited access. The NVivo 11 software package helped me to formulate and save my research project on the computer.

3.7. Ethical considerations

I obtained ethical approval from the University of Bedfordshire. Local Authorities A and B were happy with the University of Bedfordshire ethical approval and I did not need to fill in any extra ethical approval forms. Local Authority C asked me to fill in their ethical approval form to which I attached University of Bedfordshire ethical approval letter.

Ethical means ‘in accordance with principles of conduct that are considered correct, especially those of a given profession or group’ (Kumar, 2014:282). Bryman (2016:125) asserts that discussions of ethical principles in social research, and perhaps more specifically about transgressions of them, tend to revolve around certain areas that recur in different guises. In research any dilemma stemming from a moral quandary is a basis of unethical conduct (Kumar, 2014). Below are the ethical considerations that were observed and addressed in my research study.

3.7.1. Seeking informed consent

Access as discussed under methodology was sought from respective Local Authorities gatekeepers or Directors. In Local Authority A, my request for access was considered by the Ethics Committee to which requisite paperwork in the form of my ethics application form and the University of Bedfordshire ethical approval form together with the student information were attached. My request was then disseminated to relevant departments and teams after access was granted by the Ethics Committee. In Local Authority B, the Director upon consideration and granting access in liaison with the Local Authority’s gatekeepers, delegated my request to two Heads of Services with whom I had meetings before meeting 3 Team Managers. The Team Managers then approached their respective workers. The Director of Local Authority C
expressed his willingness to support my request and passed it on to relevant Heads of Service who in turn liaised with three Team Managers. I was also asked to complete an ethics form which I gladly did. My request was then sent to prospective research participants.

I made it clear during my negotiation of access with Local Authorities and participants that participation is voluntary, and that no participant should be forced into helping with the research. This was ensured through provision of adequate information to the prospective researchers.

Seeking informed consent was one of the major ethical considerations for my research study. Kumar (2014, p. 285) asserts that informed consent implies that prospective participants are made fairly aware of the type of information a researcher wants from them, the purpose of the information sought, what purpose it will be put to, how they are expected to participate in the study and how it will directly or indirectly affect them. The principle meant that prospective participants should be given as much information as might be needed to make an informed decision about whether or not they wish to participate in a study.

Bryman (2016:129) contends that it is extremely difficult to present prospective participants with all the information that might be required for them to make an informed decision about their involvement. In my research study, I provided succinct information about the research and myself, ethical proposal and consent form. I believe this was enough in relation to the type of information highlighted by Kumar above for prospective participants to give informed consent. This resonates with Denscombe’s guidance (2017, p. 344) that researchers should provide participants with adequate information about the research.

A formal way to confirm that participation is based on informed consent is to use a consent form (Denscombe, 2017: 344). I therefore requested for written consent for participation in the focus group discussions as well as semi-structured interviews. The written consent letter
addressed and guaranteed participants’ right to anonymity, confidentiality, and avoidance of harm. However, there was a caveat that addressed the limitation of confidentiality in the event of safeguarding concerns and dangerous practice.

Prospective research participants were asked for their consent and their willingness at the point of both focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. The consent letter made it clear that the research participants did not need to answer any questions that they do not wish to and to explain that they had the right to withdraw consent at any point in the research study. Consent was also sought for tape-recording the focus group discussions and the semi-structured interviews.

Prospective participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the research at any stage and the participants had therefore the opportunity to opt out during direct communication with them, during focus group discussions or semi-structured interviews. This was also reflected within the written consent forms.

3.7.2. Confidentiality and disclosures of harm or illegal activity

Confidentiality was ensured by not naming Local Authorities which participated in the research study hence reference to them as Sites A, B and C during the research study as well as in the writing of the thesis and publication of research findings.

Participants were re-assured of confidentiality during the planning and negotiation stages and names were not shared with respective Local Authorities Leadership or Management Teams. I made an undertaking that research data (in the form of recordings and written transcripts) will be encrypted, password protected and locked away in a safe storage with adequate security measures in place where data would need to be signed for and accessed only by the researcher.
Participants were re-assured of confidentiality through ground rules and participants did not know what other participants had said in their focus group discussions or semi-structured interviews.

Individuals were neither named nor identified in any materials arising from the focus group discussions or semi-structured interviews as the transcripts were anonymised. Denscombe (2017:343) advises researchers to respect participants’ privacy and sensitivities and avoid undue intrusion when collecting data. I ensured that details of service users or other sensitive data about practice or research participants would not be disclosed and if the data were erroneously disclosed, I ensured that it was redacted in the data and anonymised.

There was a limit to confidentiality which was explained in the student information sheet in the event of disclosure of information of harm to service users or dangerous practice. I explained that this would be first discussed with individual participant/s and then shared with relevant Local Authority.

3.7.3. Ensuring safety of the researcher and participants

During my research planning, I considered any would be threats to prospective participants in relation to their personal safety and I ensured that health and safety information such as fire alarm, fire exit as well as ensuring that there was no intrusion by anyone apart from those who signed consent. I also ensured that research participants information or identities will not be divulged from those not involved in the focus group discussions or semi-structured interviews. However, given the nature of the research, location of fieldwork and nature of participants, risk of harm to participants or the researcher were extremely low.
Denscombe (2017:341) asserts that there is general agreement that people should not suffer because of their involvement with a piece of research. I therefore anticipated any risks or harm, physical or emotional that would likely befall prospective research participants.

I did not anticipate any possibility of significant physical harm if any to personal safety of the participants arising from the time, location of meetings and even retribution from people who felt threatened by participants’ involvement in the research or disclosure of particular information (Denscombe, 2017:342). Though the possibility seemed quite remote, I had a responsibility as the researcher to anticipate and assess such risks and avoid any physical harm from occurring.

I also explored any likelihood of psychological harm resulting to participants resulting from the research. I did this by looking out for any signs of distress before, during and after discussion. I also asked participants their feelings about the research study and to the contrary of any psychological harm, participants really cherished the opportunity to be part of the research and expressed the importance of the issues related. Denscombe (2017, p. 342) asserts that any investigation that is potentially going to lead to any trauma, stress or other psychological harm will be considered unethical and that researchers need to anticipate any likelihood of intrusion, sensitive issues and threats to beliefs of participants.

3.7.4. Deception

Deception occurs when a researcher represents one’s work as something other than what it is (Bryman, 2016). The rigorous processes involved from the research proposal, ethical approval, access request and consent ensured that chances of deception were none or negligible.
Focus group discussion and semi-structured interview methods were not only suitable but appropriate for the qualitative research study. My research proposal was not shared with neither Local Authorities nor participants and therefore I did not influence discussions or participants’ contributions.

Research participants were provided with my student details, University, and supervisors in the event of unethical conduct or deception.

3.7.5. Avoidance of bias

Bias is a deliberate attempt either to hide what one has found in a research study or to highlight something disproportionately to its true existent (Kumar, 2014). It is important to state that bias is different from subjectivity which is one of the criticisms of qualitative and social research. Subjectivity is a way of thinking that one develops due to such factors as one’s educational background, training, professional background, competence in research, overall intellectual capabilities and philosophical perspectives (Kumar, 2014).

I tried to plan and conduct my research study in as transparent a way as possible. There were checks and balances within the process such as approval for the research study and ethical approval. These processes ensured that my research topic was relevant and would add to the body of knowledge in research as well as utilisation of appropriate and suitable methods for data gathering. Supervision with my supervisors also ensured checks and balance as well as provision of necessary guidance. The use of NVivo 11 also ensured that bias was minimised in my data analysis. I also did not pick and choose participants in a biased way.

3.8. Reliability of the research study
Kumar (2014) asserts that the concept of research reliability in relation to a research instrument relates to its consistency and stability and its capacity to ensure predictability and accuracy. Blaxter et al (2010) state that the concept of reliability is concerned with whether a researcher has carried out a research in such a way that, if another researcher were to look into the same questions in the same setting, they would come up with essentially the same results (though not necessarily an identical interpretation. If the answer is yes, then one’s work might be judged reliable.

According to Guba and Lincoln (2011) dependability is another concept that is synonymous to reliability. Kumar (2014) argues that as qualitative research underscores the need for flexibility and freedom, it may be challenging to establish dependability or reliability unless one keeps an extensive and detailed record of the process for others to replicate to ascertain the level of dependability. This research study does not seek to replicate though the tools used, that is, focus group discussion and semi-structured interviews, are widely used in exploratory qualitative studies.

Kumar (2014) states in social sciences, it is impossible to have a research tool which is totally accurate, not only because a research instrument cannot be so, but also because it is impossible to control the factors affecting reliability. Some of the factors that affect total accuracy according to Kumar (2014) are the wording of the questions; the physical setting; the respondent’s mood; the interviewer’s mood; the nature of the interaction; and the retrogression effect of an instrument i.e. when an instrument is used twice with the same participants in measuring attitudes towards an issue. Therefore, replication is a challenge with qualitative studies and hence not the objective of the research.

3.9. Validity
Validity according to Blaxter et al (2010) has to do with whether one’s methods, approaches and techniques relate to, or measure, the issues you have been exploring. ‘Validity is defined as the degree to which the researcher has measured what he has set out to measure’ (Smith, 1991:133).

Qualitative design and methods used in the research study namely focus group discussion and semi-structured interviews are not only commonly used methods in social and qualitative research but suitable and appropriate for exploration of social workers’ attitudes and knowledge to poverty as well as their experiences in dealing with poverty within children and families’ social work practice. These methods enabled me to use questionnaire guides to address overall aim of the exploration, describing and analysing the relationship between social work and poverty in relation to social workers’ attitudes and knowledge of poverty as well as research objectives of exploration and examination of themes highlighted earlier. Kumar (2014) states that establishing validity through logic implies justification of each question in relation to the objectives of the study. Establishing a logical link between questions and objectives is both simple and difficult (Kumar, 2014). Kumar (2014) argues that it is simple in the sense that you may find it easy to see a link for yourself and difficult because your justification may lack the backing of experts and the statistical evidence to convince others.

Establishing a logical link between questions and objectives is easier when the questions relate to tangible matters whereas when a less tangible concept such as effectiveness, attitude or satisfaction, one needs to ask several questions in order to cover different aspects of the concept and demonstrate that the questions are actually covering it (Kumar, 2014). The focus group outline and the semi-structured questionnaire guide contained several questions and enabled probing in order to cover different themes of the research topic.
Kumar (2014) states that validity in such situations becomes more difficult to establish especially in qualitative research where one is mostly exploring feelings, experiences, perceptions, motivations, or stories.

Wisker (2008) states that validity is central to the whole issue of the cohesion in one's work between conceptual framework, questions and findings. If one's methods, approaches and techniques really fit with and measure the issues one has been researching, then the findings are likely to be valid.

3.10. Generalizability

The concept of generalizability relates to whether one’s findings are likely to have broader applicability beyond the focus of one’s study (Blaxter et al, 2010). The concept of generalizability or representativeness has relevance to small-scale research (Blaxter, 2010).

Bryman (2016) argues that it is often suggested that the scope of the findings of qualitative investigation is restricted. When qualitative interviews are conducted with a small number of individuals in a certain organization or locality, critics argue that it is impossible to know how the findings can be generalized to other settings. In the case of research based on interviews rather than participation, can we treat interviewees who have not been selected through a probability procedure or even quota sampling as representative (Bryman, 2016). ‘Similarly, the people who are interviewed in qualitative research are not meant to be representative of a population, and indeed, in some cases..., it may be more or less impossible to enumerate the population in any precise manner’ (Bryman, 399). As stated earlier this research study does not seek to generalize to the social work population beyond the research scope. The research findings can however be generalized to theory (Holstein and Gubrium as cited in Weinberg, 2002).
3.11. Research participants’ comments about the research: Strengths

This focus group method and semi-structured interviews produced rich data which is useful in contributing to the body of research in understanding of poverty and attitudes towards the poor and poverty.

Research participants expressed their appreciation to be part of the research not only due to its importance but stated that such opportunities were rare in their experiences due to a number of reasons including competing demands and ensuring that there are on top of their statutory obligations and a feeling of not being listened to. This resonates with the research finding relating to low status of social workers. One of the participants sent me to convey a work the so-called experts that social workers are the foot soldiers on the issues they grapple with and therefore need to be listened to.

Most participants stated that they do not reflect on poverty in supervision and do not consider the emerging issues in their practice. Participants expressed that they will because of their participation incorporate the themes discussed in their assessments and practice. Even managers acknowledged that they do not consider poverty in their oversight of assessments and expressed an intention to do because of the research study.

Participants stated that the debate has benefited them in their understanding through themes discussed and explored and interaction with other participants in focus group discussion. The participants are keen for me to share the findings of the research and encouraged me to carry on with raising awareness and raising the profile of poverty as it was indeed a real issue in their practice.
CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS OF PRACTITIONERS
UNDERSTANDING OF POVERTY

Chapters 4 and 5 analyse research findings according to major themes generated from the literature review with a view to addressing the research aim and objectives as well as themes that emerged from the findings. These findings will inform the conclusion and recommendations in Chapter 7.

4.1. The prevalence of poverty among users of social work services.

There was a general agreement amongst all but one participant of the focus groups and semi-structured interviews that poverty is a significant issue among most social work service users.

As interviewee 1 highlighted,

*I think there is a high correlation between families that come to social services…obviously they all present with different problems, but most of them do present with social problems, problems of truancy, or substance misuse, or domestic violence, yes, or single parenting or financial problems which are all quite, I think, linked to some sort of poverty. It’s not only financial poverty but poverty in terms of accessing resources or poverty in terms of parents wanting to achieve or make change.*

Focus Group C Participant 6 stated,

*I would say in a large proportion of our children, living in poverty is a significant factor, in terms of them being in the care system or having Local Authority involvement.*

The views of participants in this study echo findings in the literature by Morris et al (2018) that there is a strong association between involvements with children’s social work services and experiencing poverty.

Interviewee 2 asserted,

*I think if someone were to look and compare some data, obviously the data would suggest that more children from a background where they are experiencing poverty*
are more likely, well, not more likely, sorry, that’s the wrong word, but have involvement with social care.

Interviewee 1 echoed a sentiment of the significant part poverty plays in association with social work interventions.

*I think that it plays an important part in social work, because, well, the majority of services that we do have may be from what people would say are living in poverty.*

Interviewee 3 not only expressed an association between involvement with children’s social work interventions but expressed insight that there is an association and that poverty is likely to get worse for service users because of changes to the benefit system,

*There is a clear relationship between poverty and social work interventions, I guess really, it’s going to get worse, because the governments are making lots of changes to benefits that are going to put families in more difficult situations.*

Despite the consensus that there was prevalence of poverty amongst social work service users, some participants explained that there is no explicit recognition of poverty as a problem by practitioners.

Other participants revealed that there are various perceptions of poverty by different social work practitioners.

Interviewee 5 argued,

*I think most of my cases have involved elements of poverty, but I think the interesting thing is that we don’t really recognise it as explicit poverty, because our understanding of poverty is, I guess varied and so influenced by how it’s presented to us in the media. So you have, you know images of absolute, but in my cases I think it’s just you have families who are very socio-economically disadvantaged and in that respect marginalised.*

The above practitioner expresses that one of the reasons that social workers do not always recognise poverty is due to imageries portrayed by media and arguably by some influential personalities.
Interviewee 5 drew attention to a tension between media depictions of absolute poverty in developing countries and ascription of poverty to families in developed countries.

I think that kind of cases that we do work with in countries like, you know, UK and Australia, I think a lot of the families would not recognise their situation as poverty because, yes, we do a have specific picture of what poverty looks like. The way it is taught to us in schools, through television, through all those who sponsor a child campaigns is they’re really impoverished, starving people. So, I think there’s a lack of understanding and acknowledgement that a lot of what we’re working with are people who are affected by poverty.

The above participant argues that many services would not recognise themselves as poor due to the tension outlined above. This in turn makes it less likely that they will present their problems as poverty which in turn makes it likely to be recognised as poverty by social workers. Alternatively, it results in social workers being ambivalent to classify service users who reject being in poverty as poor. This accords with Morris et al (2018) who reveal social workers’ adoption of a number of techniques and frameworks for disengaging with poverty and justification of this approach by using notions of equitable and nonstigmatising practice. The findings by Morris et al (2018) of food bank provisions being put in mainstream supermarket carrier bags to protect family’s dignity affirms the point.

The research data reveal that some participants believe that most service users are poor, and that poverty is not explicitly acknowledged. The variation in practitioners’ understanding of poverty is a finding that relates to the research topic suggesting there is no shared understanding about poverty. However, despite their variation in understanding, respondents believed that poverty should be recognised as a significant issue.

Some participants expressed an understanding that poverty is not a simple and singular issue but rather associated to systemic issues that exposes service users to experiencing poverty.

Focus Group C Participant 1 thus highlighted,

Our service users are of a higher vulnerability to experience poverty, or thresholds of poverty, simply because poverty is a systemic issue and when you consider, you know, all of the things that we do within the system, poverty is a significant issue.
Other participants expressed a concern that due to its prevalence, poverty is taken as normal.

Focus Group C Participant 6 stated,

*It’s difficult isn’t it though? Most of our clients are poor and poverty has got worse over the years and is around all the time, so I don’t know if we see it…, the few clients that we have are middle class, but most of our clients are poor, so it becomes the norm. So, I don’t know if we position ourselves because that’s how it’s always been. Certainly, in all the years I’ve practised and things have only got worse, I think now.*

The above participant highlights a picture of poverty within social work practice that highlights that there is a danger that social workers become blind to the existence of poverty due to its persistent nature.

Some data revealed how poverty is reframed to neglect due to complexities surrounding poverty, definition and how it is addressed.

Interviewee 5 stated,

*I think every specific case has different types of poverty in it, but if we’re looking to define it with finance, for example, the case that would come through for that might be neglect. So addressing it would probably, say for example, if they were neglecting, saying they can’t afford to give the child food, then we’d help with vouchers, or getting grants for furniture….*

Practitioners have revealed that they consider that poverty is a fundamental issue for service users though not explicitly recognised as such. Research data has shown that poverty is associated with other social problems affecting service users. Other participants have stated that due to its long-standing and prevalent nature, poverty has become invisible, acceptable, and normalised. It has emerged that images portrayed by the media of people result in social workers not recognising poverty in other forms and that some service users do not also consider themselves as poor for the very same reason. Participants have expressed that in some cases, this results in social workers reframing poverty for example as neglect and this determines how it is addressed.
The above findings resonate with literature review findings by Morris et al (2018) and Gupta (2017) on the prevalence of poverty, its structural nature, and the interconnectedness of poverty with other issues and the location of poverty within social work practice.

4.2. The challenge of defining poverty.

There was agreement among most research participants that how poverty is defined or understood is a critical factor within social work practice. This resonates with literature review findings that highlight that the way poverty is defined, and theories used play a significant role in determining how poverty is addressed (Strier and Binyamin, 2010). It was clear from the data that poverty could be understood in different ways. Some participants expressed their perception of poverty in relative rather than absolute terms.

Interviewee 8 stated,

*The thing is that to define poverty, the problem starts with a definition, isn't it? That’s because there are different levels or types of poverty. So I suppose in this country, I find that it’s more of a relative poverty than absolute poverty.*

Several participants recognised that the definition of poverty largely determines how it is addressed. Participants recognised that defining poverty was not simple and straightforward. Interviewee 6 stated,

*I think how they tackle poverty is, well, in lots of different ways. It depends, again, how we’re defining poverty, because it’s kind of difficult to describe what poverty is.…*

The quote above resonates with Wellbourne’s (2012) argument of poverty being defined in different and problematic ways.

One participant expressed element of stigmatization arising from the way poverty is defined and therefore encourages consideration of using a different term that is non stigmatising. This echoes Morris et al (2018) findings of poverty being explained in cultural terms as well creation of distances between service users and social workers characterised by disgust and shame.
Interviewee 13 stated

*The word poverty may not be explicit, but kind of talking about areas that are linked to poverty will always be in them. I think that the word poverty may be emotive, or potentially provocative, so you might want to phrase it slightly differently.*

Some participants showed their understanding of poverty in income terms whereby a client is considered poor if earnings are below 60% of the national average. The dilemma is inconsistence surrounding this measure as it is not based on assessment of what households need to avoid being in poverty in relative poverty (Backwith, 2015) as noted by Focus Group A Participant 2,

*The definition of poverty is if you earn less than 60% of the national average. However as this improves the average will increase so will poverty increase? Is the lack of social housing impacting on the poverty level? Most clients we work with would be aspiring to have a rented social housing home, there is not ambition to own a home.*

It is worth noting that participant’s point of poverty increasing with the national average increase is flawed as an increase in average will not lead to an increase in poverty. The participant questions whether lack of social housing will increase poverty. The participant suggests that lack of social housing means that people who are poor will have to rent from the private sector where rents are higher and therefore those households will be worse off. This is exacerbated by a policy emphasis on income when relative poverty is measured.

Some participants believed that poverty is invisible due to focus of material belongings and concluding they are okay regardless of the differences in olden and contemporary times. Focus Group C Participant 3 argued,

*So there’s a hidden poverty that we have, perception of poverty. We might look at young people, or at families today, but look at what they have in the house and what amenities that they’ve got and think ‘On they’re doing alright’. It’s just the new stage of poverty, what it looks like, as opposed to derelict houses, etc., back in the 1970s, or 1960s, which is my experience.*

One explanation of the perception of hidden poverty is possibly underscored by the predominance and generalizability of two main definitions of poverty i.e. absolute and relative
by professionals and how this overshadows other forms of poverty as evidenced by the reference material possessions owned by families in the above quotation.

The research data has shown participants’ awareness of the importance of definition and understanding of poverty in influencing how it is addressed. It has emerged from the research data that understanding of poverty in England is in more relative terms. Other participants have shown an understanding of how emphasis of understanding poverty in income terms negates other crucial factors such as cost of living and could result in poverty being hidden. Participants have expressed that the way poverty is defined can result in stigmatisation and shame (Gupta & Blewett, 2008 and Morris et al, 2018). The data has revealed that the complexity of poverty leads to poverty being reframed as neglect.

4.3. Poverty and other social problems

Backwith (2015) has highlighted some evidence of poverty being associated with social problems that bring services users to the attention of Children’s Services. Participants recognised a link between poverty and a range of issues prevalent among social work service users including drugs/alcohol, neglect, mental health, housing issues and homelessness and a perception of poverty as intergenerational. This section will therefore examine practitioners’ understanding of the relationship between poverty and problems highlighted above among social work service users.

4.3.1. Poverty and drugs or alcohol misuse

Some participants showed an awareness of the link between poverty and drug misuse or dealing amongst service users. The research data below showed evidence that some social workers had awareness of poverty as a push factor to criminal activities such as drug dealing and other related problems.
Focus Group A Participant 4 stated,

This also leads to teenagers becoming runners for dealers to earn their own money. This also leads to violence, gang activity and in some cases a risk to life for these teenagers living in communities that are financially struggling.

However, one participant questioned whether social workers were educated and aware enough to recognise this impact or link, Focus Group A Participant 5 remarked,

Are social workers aware and educated enough to recognise poverty, budgeting, benefits entitlements, debt… It is very stressful to live on poverty line and causes a number of other issues for these families, it also makes them vulnerable to loan sharks, gang culture, drug dealers etc.

One participant revealed the seriousness of the link between and drug dealing amongst many service users who become entangled in debt to gangs and dealers. The participant states that the problems are enmeshed and exiting the trap is impossible.

Interviewee 3 thus stated,

Our families are caught in a trap of debt, drug dealers, gangs etc. No one sees a way out.

Other participants argued that service users misuse drugs and alcohol as a form of distraction from underlying problems. Participants showed an awareness that this sometimes leads to such service users being regarded as neglectful. This resonates with the pathological model examined earlier, which places blame on the victims.

Interviewee 1 stated

Well again, you know a parent might be using drugs, might have some drink just to, kind of nullify some of the pressures they’re under but we would call that neglect.

Some participants were not clear about the direction of the link between poverty and drug/alcohol misuse.
Interviewee 4 thus highlighted,

*I think it depends on what side of the scale is poverty on. Are the family already experiencing poverty, and poverty is the result of them needing intervention from social care or is there something that comes before? I don’t know let’s just say, for example debt that they have from an alcohol or substance misuse issue and this is actually what’s pushing them further into poverty….*

Some participants were critical of the lifestyles and behaviours of the service users making assumptions that the lifestyle choices or behaviours either contribute to them being poor or make the poverty worse.

Focus Group Participant 2 stated,

*Actually, what they do put first, you know, I mean, I think that experience is that a lot of these people smoke, drink, and have animals, and they all come before their children which doesn’t help.*

However, the fact that a web of social problems is recognised is important and resonates with circular a vicious cycle.

Interview 10 thus remarked,

*Then if you look at drugs and alcohol, are people in poverty due to money spent on drugs and alcohol or are drugs and alcohol a factor in people’s inability to work.*

The above participant raises questions relating to causality between drugs and alcohol misuse, poverty, and unemployment.

Some participants expressed their awareness of poverty as a cause of negative effects, resulting in a vicious cycle (Jutte et al, 2014). The participant below identifies the toxic trio and poverty as a factor fuelling it (Morris et al, 2018).
Participant 14 in an interview stated,

So the lack of or inability to access money to support themselves, it can add to issues, conflict between parents and stress...So I guess it can be a cycle. Obviously, we work with families where there are things like the toxic trio, domestic violence, mental health and substance misuse. If you're somebody that's also living in poverty, that can actually fuel that.

Some participants as illustrated by interviewee 5 displayed a recognition that poverty is associated with behavioural and emotional problems such as crime, and alcohol and drug misuse (Bradshaw, 2002).

Interviewee 5 stated,

I think with poverty there comes a lot of social issues. People who are in poverty are more likely to be involved in problematic to deal with the poverty, whether that's committing crime, so trying to make money through illegal means, or whether that's drinking or taking drugs as a form of escapism from poverty.

The above quote shows participant awareness of the impact of poverty as a driver to problematic or criminal behaviours as well as a way of coping with poverty.

Other participants urged social workers to be non-judgemental based on personal factors considering the finding that some behaviours are a form of escapism.

Interviewee 4 below illustrates,

I think as a social worker you do have to leave your personal views at the front door. People who have unresolved issues, and they may drink or they take substances, or they are unable to handle their finances for whatever reason.

This underscores the need for social workers to identify presenting behaviours and underlying behaviours within assessment and interventions before making a judgement.
4.3.2. Poverty and neglect

Several participants agreed that there is an association between poverty and neglect. While participants were clear about the link, some, as evidenced by Focus Group A Participant 4, recognised that failure to assess and classify poverty as a critical factor can lead to poverty being reframed as neglect.

Focus Group A Participant 3 asserted,

_I agree what we see in children’s services is the impact of living with poverty and the kind of struggle that you see and that how it impacts on the mind-set of the parent and how that carries through into what can be of a neglectful type of parenting. Parents are just struggling so much with making ends meet, struggling with debts. It is almost as if there is no space in their head to consider child development or stimulation of the child because from day to day it’s a worry of bills…that the parents think of and that escalates between parents as they have different views and the whole cycle of conflict in the family escalates…_.

Focus Group A Participant 4 stated,

_Yes, and there are also people’s perceptions of what they see. I’m thinking, you know, in the past, when police go in, because an incident has happened, they’ll look through they’ll see no toys, they’ll see no food in the fridge, and they will make a judgement ‘this is neglectful parenting’. Actually, it’s poverty that they’re seeing. The benefit cheque isn’t going to come until the end of the week and then the fridge will be full and they can’t afford toys. So we make judgements on parenting based on poverty…._

Participants above and below contend that professionals at large reframe poverty as poor parenting or neglectful parenting. This type of assessment is consistent with a pathological narrative.

Focus Group A Participant 5 thus stated,

_It gets lumped in on neglect. I also had a period of time where things were tough financially. I wonder about poverty being linked with neglect because it does not have to._

Other participants identified poverty as not only a critical factor but an underlying factor in its association with neglect and abuse.
Interviewee 4 argued

*If you assess the reasons for neglect you can kind of see that underlying that is poverty, is marginalisation, yes. So I think we look at it in different ways. So, we look at neglect and abuse primarily, and then from there on you can kind of see that one of the major stress is poverty. So yes I do think it’s a huge focus but not in explicit sense, not where it’s identified as poverty. Poverty masked as something else, perhaps.*

The participant above explains that practitioners perceive neglect in different ways but shows awareness of poverty being an underlying factor. The important point outlined by the participant is poverty being masked as something else negative and being marginalised arguably in its assessment.

Participants expressed that poverty is used as an issue against service users. This goes against central social work principles such as anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practices as well as need to be empathetic.

Interviewee 19 gave an example of how a lack of financial means to meet certain expectations outlined by professionals or agencies is used against service users,

*The mother was judged on her ability to get to hospital appointments in London for the child. They kind of used that as building a case against her for not being committed to the child yet when I suggested that they find her transport to London to the hospital, they said, ‘well, no, because we want her to prove that she’s committed’ I said, ‘well, having money isn’t proof that you’re committed to your child’.*

The practitioner is opposed to this punitive approach, which does not help relationship and trust building between social work practitioners and services. The quote also evidences the challenges faced by some practitioners in advocating against discriminatory treatment or prescriptions.

Some participants linked the issue of neglectful parenting to unemployment and mental health. Focus Group Participant 2 stated,

*In terms of neglect you find that neglect issues are occurring because the parents aren’t working, they don’t want to get out of bed and meet the needs of children or*
because they cannot meet the needs of the children, mental health then becomes a massive part in neglect issues.

The participant above raises an issue that points to some neglect resulting from parents’ own making and becoming entangled with mental health. The causality in this case is not clear.

One participant revealed some difficulties faced by parents whose children are living with disabilities including making it harder for the parents to access employment. The connection of the quote below to the one above, is that failure to recognise the impact of disability on parents whose children are living with disabilities with regard to seeking employment by government officials or social workers, could result in them being unfairly perceived as neglectful.

Focus group A Participant 5 stated,

When you have children with long-term disability you are unable to work and thus the parents have no work skills as they have been fully committed to the child. This makes it difficult for them to have employment.

This is interesting given that employment is considered as a major way out of poverty by the government especially by the current and previous Conservative Governments as evidenced by push for those on Employment Support Allowance or Job Seekers’ Allowance to seek work (Morris, 2011). This resonates with literature review findings of disability as an exacerbating factor to poverty (Backwith, 2015).

Some participants expressed an understanding that certain behaviours perceived as neglectful in some parents or families are a coping mechanism or a form of escapism.

Interviewee 1 thus argued,

Every family finds their own way of coping and sometimes parents who have experienced deprivation themselves as children, now they’re adults with their children, their way of coping. I suppose I try to remind myself that they are victims of their experiences to an extent. The difficulty comes when we’re talking about what is good enough parenting. As much as we can appreciate that, you know, a parent may be
depressed, they may have some shocking experiences of their own from childhood and the fact that they are spending a lot of their money on cigarettes means the children are going without. So that’s an issue, but you can’t ignore the fact that that there is kind of, a good reason why this is happening.

The participants quoted within this subsection have expressed different views regarding the relationship between poverty and neglect. It has emerged from some participants that poverty causes neglect. Research data has revealed that some behaviours that are perceived as neglectful parenting are a coping mechanism.

4.3.3. Mental health and poverty

Most of the research participants believed that poverty is associated with mental and emotional strain on poor parents. Focus Group Participant 4 expressed that parents afflicted by poverty are preoccupied with wearisome and stressful tasks involved with juggling several tasks including claiming benefits.

Poverty blocks everything else, spending much time looking for a way out, claiming benefits, attending various appointments- it is stressful and mundane to families.

Focus Group Participant 2 clearly believed that poverty can cause emotional or mental strain which could in turn increase the risk of domestic violence, a common trigger for social work interventions.

There is a factor of stress brought on by lack of financial security. Poverty can lead to stress and stress is a factor in domestic violence.

Some participants linked poverty and deprived conditions to depression and alcohol abuse. Interviewee 1 thus stated,

Living in poverty can be very depressing for some people, their environments are not always pleasant, this leads to alcohol abuse or depression etc. No one can make a judgement on people if they have not walked in their shoes.

The participant’s comment above resonates with the finding that characterises some behaviours such as alcohol abuse as either a coping mechanism or escapism. The above
quote also illustrates not only an association between poverty and mental health, but alcohol abuse. The participant’s remark about making judgements without putting oneself in the subjects’ shoes is relevant to the research topic and issue of attitudes. The second part of the above quotation relating to the issue of judgement highlights difficulties that might be faced by social if they have had no similar experience. It is reasonable to argue that this is debatable as it is subjective to the above client.

Some participants were not certain whether mental health was a cause or effect of poverty. Interviewee 5 remarked,

> What came first? You know, did the poverty come first causing the mental health or did the mental health come first and cause the poverty?

The lack of certainty as to the direction of causality creates a dilemma in terms of how to address mental health, root cause versus symptom and effectiveness.

Some participants argued that stress caused by financial disadvantage affects the quality of parenting. This resonates with literature review findings by Welbourne (2012)

Focus Group Participant 5 argued,

> So it’s not always just about limited income, it means that you are going to be under stress, you’re not going to be good parent.

The point above underscores the need to examine the impact of poverty especially as to how poverty or lack of money affects parenting.

One theme that emerged as evidenced by the quote below is that mental health is an issue that affects both the wealthy and the poor but addressed differently according to one’s class. Interviewee 4 thus stated,

> I think mental health is something that affects the whole society, but people who are wealthier are able to pay for their own therapist or pay for their own this and that. So,
because they have access to those resources, it goes unnoticed within the system. I think there a lot of problems within families that have money, but because on the face of it if their child’s going to school all the time, they’re relatively functioning, it’s a lot easier to hide the intricacies of maybe familial relationship problems.

The quote above highlights the impact of resource availability and how this exposes service users who are poor to scrutiny whilst enabling the wealthier to go unnoticed as well enabling their access to private mental health services or facilities. The participant also believes the invisibility of those who are rich masks their family relationship and other problems.

The above section highlights research participants’ understanding of the association between poverty and mental health. Most participants have expressed a belief that poverty and deprived conditions cause stress and depression. Some participants have argued that mental health in turn affects parenting and experiencing of other problems resulting in a cycle. One participant cautioned about judging service users without walking in their shoes. The research has shown an understanding of how mental health is addressed and managed differently between service users who are rich and those experiencing poverty and how access to financial resources and therapy makes a difference.

4.3.4. Poverty and housing and benefits

Most participants believed that poverty is associated with housing difficulties and welfare benefits.

Focus Group A Participant 2 below states that housing and financial constraints are presenting problems for families who get referred to Children’s Services.

Yes I would agree that poverty is a factor that leads to the types of abuse that we see. You know, the lack of money, coupled with poor housing is often an identifying factor when families first get referred to us. Cramped living conditions, yes. So, poverty is a root of the issues.
The participant identifies a relationship of poverty and housing problems in which poverty is a root cause.

Focus Group C Participant 4 at expressed the view that homelessness results in families having to relocate to somewhere, disruption of education and family breakdown. The participant believes welfare benefits changes, cost of housing and bedroom tax resulted in parents failing to look after and accommodating sixteen plus children at home.

*We can see cases where poverty has a direct impact on the direction of the case, and potential risks to the family. Say like losing their accommodation, the impact of a family having to move to a new place, leave schools, and set up home elsewhere. We know the benefit system has changed, the housing tax, bedroom tax, that was another thing which has impacted on people…Some parents feeling that they have to tell their child to leave home at an earlier age, so there was a history of sending your child out at sixteen saying you can’t look after them and the Local Authority picking them up and accommodating them, in order for them to get a flat.*

Interviewee 7 below asserts that homelessness has become a big issue prompting referrals to an Assessment Team.

*What I have noticed over the last year is that homelessness is becoming a massive issue, the amount of referrals we get because of homelessness has increased due to government’s policy where they have capped benefits, has left a lot of families having to fund a large part of their rent themselves and they are unable to do this… They then have rent arrears outstanding and are evicted….and ultimately the cost then comes back on social care.*

The participant above attributes increase in homelessness referrals to government policy. A running theme in this quote is the issue of welfare benefits caps rendering families unable to pay rent and resulting in eviction.

Participant 5 below expresses a view about self-perception. The participant states that people feel they are failing their children, partners, and society due to experiencing poverty. Poverty in the quote below is directly identified as a cause for homelessness and a difficult issue to exit from.

*Poverty means to people that they are failing their children, partner, society and it’s no wonder that you become homeless and don’t see yourself coming out....*
The reference to failing society suggests that the participant perceives oneself as a failure and not the social environment or wider factors resonating with the pathological theory.

Other participants whilst affirming that housing is a big issue linked to some issues mentioned earlier, such as inability to paying rent, hinted that there is not much that a social worker can do to meet service users’ housing needs. The participant states housing is the responsibility of a different agency which has different, procedures and thresholds for which a social worker has little or no control.

Interviewee 9 thus stated,

*Sometimes the demand is so high that they may not get the full support, I guess, that they want. So, in terms of, I guess, like housing, so housing is a big issue. A lot of families can’t afford to privately rent…That’s something that physically as a social worker, there’s not much you can do other than a process of speaking with the housing officer and reassuring them that ‘You are no the waiting list and you just have to be patient’. So that can be the limitation that some things are out of our hands and no matter how much we advocate….*

The participant highlighted referral to housing, appealing for patience by service users and reassurance as practical roles that a social worker can play in issues of homelessness or housing. In other words, one of the roles in this instance becomes that of helping service users to live with the crisis until the housing issue is addressed pragmatically.

This sub-section has evidenced participants’ understanding and awareness of the association between poverty, homelessness, housing, and welfare benefits. Most participants have revealed an understanding of poverty being a major cause in this association. The data has shown that participants feel homelessness is increasing and that this has resulted in service users being referred for social work interventions. This is ironic to the view expressed by participants that there is not much that social workers can do other than referring to housing and service users’ patience. This resonates with social work function of helping people to cope with their struggles. It has emerged that homelessness is causing family breakdown with
teenagers being forced to seek Local Authority accommodation and resulting in instability in children’s education. Some participants expressed that some participants were being evicted due to failing to pay rent resulting from welfare benefits changes and bedroom tax. The link of eviction to some government policies suggest impact of structural factors on homelessness and poverty.

**4.3.5. Poverty as intergenerational**

Most participants expressed a view that poverty is inter-generational, cyclical, and vicious. Focus Group B Participant 1 stated,

> There is a lot of poverty that is inter-generational. It's the cycle and we find that those parents, not just parents, but people in general who are suffering from poverty, quite often they've come from a situation where they've always struggled.

The above participant seems to narrate poverty in cultural terms.

Focus Group C Participant 3 below echoed an inter-generational view but highlighted structural, neo-liberal ideology and capitalist society as significant factors, Focus Group C Participant 3 argued,

> I think it's a cyclical generational issue, I think because we do live, you know in neo-liberal times and you know, capitalist society it's very hard to get out of the poverty. So I think once you are in poverty, or you're vulnerable to poverty, then it's very hard to progress out of that, and you do have all these factors that do stack up and are heightened stressors. They do kind of lead for you to have interaction with social services, if you are at high risk.

The participant suggests that the neo-liberal environment and capitalism make it difficult for families to find a way out of poverty and therefore an argument can be made that these superstructures make the generations get stuck in poverty.

Interviewee 5 highlights various impact of poverty affecting parents and their children,
It’s generational, it really is. If it impacts on the parents, it impacts on the children, it impacts on education, it impacts on their health, it impacts on holistic development, it impacts on everything.

Focus Group A Participant 6 apart from echoing wider impact, raises an issue relating to a lack of aspirations by parents impacting on children lacking aspirations,

Poverty and living on benefits do have a variety of impact on young people and their families, it is the foundation to further concerns later on in their lives. Parents not having aspirations have an impact on young people and also leads to them not having aspirations of their own in future.

Interviewee 4 below echoed other participants’ views but further pointed out some difficulties faced by families and professionals working with them in addressing intergenerational poverty.

The biggest impact is the lack of employment available. Children growing up in families were parents etc. do not work leads to these children then carrying on that pattern. Poverty becomes generational. It is difficult, in the limited time we have, to change the mind-set.

Interviewee 4 cites lack of employment and poverty in cultural terms. Some participants narrated poverty as cultural and the benefits system creating a culture of dependency.

Focus Group C Participant 1 in a Site C focus group argued,

For example, a person on job seekers’ allowance for two, five, ten, fifteen, twenty years, a person trying to find a job for twenty years, and then no consequences of that, and that’s generational. That is the grandparents, that is the parents, and the children are going to go into it. So, I think the government has maintained that mentality of something for nothing, like they don’t have to make an effort to live to enjoy. I don’t know a house, food, resources, nothing. So yes. ‘Too bad for the government, I’m sorry’...

Focus Group Participant 5 argued,

I think for a lot of people, benefits are a choice…, it’s a generation thing, you know, maybe it’s their parents, or their families, or their wider networks have made that choice.

Focus Group A Participant 1 noted that,
One generation passes on the ideology that you can live pretty much on benefits and get day by day, but kind of imbedding in children the aspiration of work and getting ahead and go to university, and doing well for themselves is a poverty of mentality.

Focus Group A Participant 3 remarked,

I think sometimes the importance perhaps has not been put on them having an education, and then they get to a situation where they actually can’t work”.

The quotes above link issues of education, employment, and benefits as connected issues within the intergenerational narrative.

Interviewee 3 asserted,

My belief of poverty at least in the developed world is that it's kind of, if you think about it systemically some people are born more vulnerable to poverty and to live marginalised and I think that really impacts life outcomes, education outcomes and ultimately all of those things feed into one another so it becomes cyclical. I do think that the way policy is designed you know, living in the age that we do where, like, neo-liberal political systems, kind of dominate and there is you know, the breakdown of the welfare state, it doesn't really provide opportunity for equity and I think you know, the people who are most vulnerable always get left behind…

The participant believes poverty is cyclical whereby one issue feeds into another. The participant highlights that some systemic issues such as government policies and the neo-liberal political systems exacerbate poverty characterised by some people being more vulnerable and inequity (Featherstone, Morris and White, 2014).

Focus Group B Participant 2, “Not all the time. No, not all the time, but quite often it’s a choice”.

Focus Group Participant 4 below however points out an element of inaccessibility of educational facilities as a significant factor linked to lack of other necessities as opposed to not accessing education as a choice.

So you have parents who have grown up not being able to access things such as education, which has impacted on their current situation and you do have children who do go without some of the basic needs....

Some participants as reflected by interviewee 10 explain criminal behaviour in cultural terms.
Interviewee 10 stated,

Oh yes that’s the cycle. That’s the continuous cycle. Some of these children they seem to be destined to be just like Mum and Dad. Criminal activities, you know, intergenerational, it’s all being part of the family.

This sub-section demonstrates participants’ cultural narratives of poverty linked to the cycle of deprivation. Participants have expressed an understanding of a vicious cycle of poverty’s association with other problems such as criminal behaviour, lack of employment and debts. The research data has shown cultural narrative of poverty being passed from generation to generation and therefore difficult to break from.

4.3.6. Poverty as a political problem

Some participants expressed that poverty is a political and man-made problem, Focus Group C Participant 4 argued,

No, I think those are political choices. We know that poverty is man-made, it’s created, but I don’t think we really appreciate just what an impact that policy has had on the way we’re living at the moment.

Focus Group Participant 4 identified government for the creation of poverty, “It’s the government that makes them poor”.

The participant suggests that the impact of poverty, politically created, has significant impact on people’s lives and less recognised by practitioners.

Focus Group A Participant 6 argued, “I don’t think poverty is ever named because that is a political statement”.

This resonates with literature review findings by Parrot (2014) and Featherstone et al (2014) who highlight that structural causes of poverty such as the neo-liberal ideology and economic
environment and existing social relations in society result in persistent inequalities in wealth and income. It also resonates with the radical movement argument that poverty is political and structural.

This sub-section has revealed practitioners’ understanding of poverty as a political and man-made. Some participants have expressed a view that capitalism characterised by neo-liberal political and economic ideology are significant factors that affect accessibility contrary to a view that characterises poverty as a culture or choice. Participants argued that capitalism and neo-liberal ideology do not promote equity and render some people vulnerable to poverty.

4.4. Social workers’ attitudes towards poverty

Morris & Shepherd (2000) assert that increased bias and classification in social work with children and families has led to the erosion of main social work skills and an increased chance for particular values and attitudes to determine qualification for services.

Most participants state that social workers judge people who are poor negatively. Focus Group Participant 2 stated,

*The fact that they’re in poverty, they are discriminated against to a certain extent by us because of the situation.*

Interviewee 20 stated,

*It’s like being poor you might be looked at or scrutinised or penalised quicker than someone who is more affluent….*

Interviewee 20 does not only echo the sentiments of Participant 2 but alludes to social work interventions being punitive to people who are poor.
The participants believe people experiencing poverty are discriminated and oppressed. Focus Group Participant 2 below believes that poverty impacts on lives of children and that some blame is apportioned to their parents and alludes to professionals being critical rather than being supportive (Ferguson et al, 2009).

Focus Group Participant 2 stated,

So, I think that sometimes families are in poverty and as a consequence the children are suffering and rather us taking a supportive view on paper, it reads as though we are more critical.

Anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive principles are main values of social work and their violation is concerning and testimony to Morris and Shepherd's (2000) assertion. Discrimination against people experiencing poverty goes against an integral social work value that requires social workers to tackle discrimination against service users. This is testimony to Sen's (1999) argument in relation to how people in poverty are regarded, treated, and dealt with.

Some participants debated the principle of having a non-judgemental attitude. There were some debates relating to its application in relation to poverty. Interviewee 5 argued,

Training insists a social worker does not need to be judgemental, so how can they label a family as living in poverty… without being judgemental.

Focus Group C Participant 2 indicated the need for social workers to be consistent in their approach regardless of context after suggesting that social workers find working with service users who are wealthy challenging contrary to what their training suggested,

So, a strong theme of our training and the skills that we need to develop is to be able to work with anyone of any class, or creed, or race and rich poor. We do find it challenging working with wealthy clients.

The importance of the point raised by interviewee 5, is that the participant feels that the act of identifying a person as poor is indicative of a judgement that works against their treatment.
This resonates with the literature review finding by Gupta & Blewett (2008) whose findings revealed ‘povertyism’ in which families spoke of being blamed for being in poverty and facing difficulties with a prevalent theme being it must be their own making as other people manage on state benefits. The two quotes above seem to suggest tension between what training suggests and what happens in practice in the application of the non-judgemental principle towards people who are poor and those who are wealthy.

Some participants believed that negative attitudes towards people who are poor extended to other agencies and professionals who refer poor families for social work interventions.

Focus Group C Participant 8 therefore stated,

> Now, there are other reasons why, I’m not saying that there isn’t abuse and neglect that doesn’t go in those families where abuse and neglect happen, and the way other agencies are more likely to refer poor families to us, and they are middle class wealthy ones who they are afraid to upset or they can’t believe it’s really happening.

A noteworthy point raised by the participant is that social workers and other agencies do not refer clients who are wealthy due to fear of upsetting which could imply due to valuing the poor less or a belief that people who are wealthy are more powerful and therefore less confident or comfortable about challenging them. It was stated that people experiencing poverty are therefore more likely to be referred as opposed to middle class and rich families. It can also be argued that there is an element of power wielded by not only the referring agencies but also the rich who have the power and means to complain about those agencies who could refer them.

Focus Group Participant 4 thus stated,

> Some social workers’ views echo those of other agencies such as the NHS, how they work with poor people. Some poor people are viewed as poor due to being lazy, lack of motivation, overweight people are also linked to poverty and being lazy.
The above quote exhibits an individualistic and subjective focus on service users who are poor as opposed to examination of underlying causes. The workers and other agencies blame individuals for their poverty.

One theme that emerged was that the views relating to service users’ blameworthiness vary according to workers.

Focus Group Participant 3 stated,

*What I have seen is the different views from different workers. I think there are views that people held, whether it’s professional or personal, about ‘have people created this themselves? Are people doing enough to get out of it?’ Some people have different levels of empathy for others. I do always see that there’s that notion of the deserving and the undeserving, who should help and where. That can change from the social worker’s outlook on a day-to-day.*

A point worth noting in the above quotation are concepts of deserving and undeserving with classed connotations and which the participant believes vary between workers and are inconsistent. This raises questions about factors that influence differences in assessments.

Views expressed by Participant 1 below not only characterises the judgemental nature of professionals’ attitudes and assumptions but prescriptions of lifestyles they believe the poor ought to adopt and that the poor should manage on the welfare benefits. This accords with individualist-reformist social work framework as the views suggest compliance to the status quo (Dominelli, 2002).

*…there is a notion of blame in assessment which goes back to the point of deserving and undeserving. There is an idea that people can manage on the benefits system and if they cannot manage, they are doing something wrong. Some of the assessments that I see are about what they are doing wrong, why they cannot manage and why the children are in poverty….*

Interviewee 10 below echoed sentiments echoed by participant 8 at the beginning of this theme and states how differently the rich are less referred as compared to people who are poor.
I think the wealthier clients are referred less, because of the other agencies out there don’t want to or believe it’s possible….

The rationale behind less referrals of the rich as outlined by the participant is due to the element of labelling and subjectivity whereby the rich are largely viewed positively.

Some participant expressed a view that context of poverty determines social workers’ perception for example during home visits amounting to different approaches.

Focus Group Participant 1 stated,

I just feel that poverty directs our position sometimes, or most times… So, when you do a home visit, and you’re visiting an affluent family, the approach is different. It’s you know different. What you choose to see is like, people say when you drink a red wine in a glass cup if it tastes differently. When you’re going to a family that is affluent, you see different things.

One participant believed that the threat and capacity of service users who are rich to get their lawyers involved to seek legal recourse against social workers and Children’s Services is a challenge in practice.

Interviewee 6 noted that,

What happens actually in practice sometimes is that if you’re working with a middle class family they kick up a fuss, they get their lawyers involved, they are telling you what the policy is and they are hard… so the middle class ones are the ones that give us problems, which make some social workers to actually bring down the gravel harder than they would with poor families.

The participant further elaborated that social workers exercise caution in relation to their actions and what is said.

Interviewee 6 further stated,

When a family are seen as affluent or educated, I see a different approach that we’d say, ‘Well make sure this is done this way.’ It’s not all the time, but I get a sense that they say ‘If a family is of a better social standing, we have to approach them of a better social standing because they may come back and complain this way and that way.’
Again, they have another voice. It’s like being poor you might be looked at or scrutinised or penalised quicker than someone who is more affluent.…..

Interviewee 6 suggests that the attitude to people who are rich is conciliatory as opposed to one towards those who are poor. Services users who are poor are the worst affected due to their impoverished context.

Some participants expressed the view that service users who are poor are criticised for luxurious lifestyle when they treat themselves.

Interviewee 2 stated,

Some social workers have shown very negative attitudes towards families suffering from poverty, such as criticising them for little luxuries they do treat themselves to.

The above quote is quite telling and disturbing in that the approach to the poor by professionals is condescending as illustrated by condemning families who are poor to lives of basic necessities.

Interviewee 5 made a remark that shows the significance of assumptions held by professionals and how these influence professionals’ attitude and practice in relation to foster carers and looked after children.

Interviewee 5 states,

…but I’ve never done a welfare check in a foster carer’s home, so I’ve always assumed there’s been enough food. So that’s quite telling isn’t it. Foster carer’s home’s always nice and plush and well decorated, so I’ve always made that assumption that the food’s there…..

The views of the participant imply that social workers only check families experiencing poverty and indicative of prejudice against the people who are poor.
Other participants encouraged practitioners to guard against letting their own goals or beliefs affect their practice.

Focus Group C Participant 7 states,

...remembering to show empathy, trying not to let your objectives or your personal beliefs sit into your work as a social worker....

An argument can be made that lack of scrutiny involved with foster carers as highlighted by interviewee 5 is in direct contrast to the attitudes and practice towards biological parents from whom the child was removed. This resonates with the point highlighted earlier about service users being discriminated against by social workers and other professionals for experiencing poverty.

Many participants described that poverty is taken as normal and background music within children and families’ social work practice. This suggests social workers’ feelings of acquiescence and resignation towards poverty. This finding resonates to Morris et al’ (2018) finding of poverty as wallpaper to social work practice.

Focus Group A Participant 1 stated, “I think we just take it for granted that people will be in poverty...”.

Focus Group A Participant 6 said,

It’s bad background music, isn’t it? It’s like Green sleeves when you phone the doctor, over and over and over again. It’s nagging.

Interviewee 1 stated,

I do think that it is something that you do just get used to, and you do just take it as a norm. Especially if you’ve been working years of practice.

Focus Group C Participant stated,
I think we now have a blind approach to poverty because it’s all we see and that’s a bad thing.

Focus Group C Participant 8 argued,

…We do need to remind ourselves of that. We live in this world where all of our clients are generally poor and then we stop seeing. We’re blind to it now, and we’re not seeing how it impacts on parenting…

The research data has revealed how social workers relate to service users who are poor, rich and poverty. Most participants expressed that social workers judge service users experiencing poverty negatively contrary to anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive principles. Other participants revealed that social workers are critical towards families experiencing poverty who they blame for experiencing poverty. This resonates with Gupta & Blewett’s (2008) finding about povertyism. It is significant the finding corroborates the same finding by Gupta & Blewett (2008) but from service users involved in their project.

This led to a debate that highlighted tension between social work education and application of anti-discriminatory principle with some participants arguing that it is not possible to identify a service user as poor without passing a judgement.

The research data has revealed that service users who are poor are treated differently to those who are rich. This also showed a tension as some practitioners argued that social work training teaches that people should be treated equally regardless of class. Some participants expressed there is an assumption that service users should cope on welfare benefits they receive. This suggests that social workers and policy makers expect service users who are poor to behave and live in ways that avoid indulgence in things that are perceived as luxurious. Research participants expressed that poverty is taken as background music to social work practice.

4.5. The relationship between practitioners’ attitudes and personal experiences
Some respondents stated a belief that practitioners’ personal experiences influence practitioners’ current perception of poverty.

Focus Group Participant 1 stated,

_I think personal circumstances is what makes everyone's view of what poverty is different. So, what I will see as poverty, I'm sure someone in the team probably wouldn't and I think that's the only thing that I would say is down to personal circumstances, really._

Some participants expressed a view that they and other social work practitioners have been benefits’ recipients and can therefore relate to experiences of families affected by poverty.

Focus Group A Participant 3 stated,

_There are social workers, managers who can relate to families in poverty. They have been on benefits themselves; their families have been their support networks. They understand the struggles._

This participant believes that such experience tends to make workers more empathetic to the challenges faced by people who are poor. Morris & Shepherd (2000) define empathy as the values and attitudes that enable a social worker to acknowledge, connect with and comprehend the experiences of others.

Focus Group B Participant 3 echoed the need for empathy

_It is important to have empathy to be able to understand the parents’ situation as well as the children._

One participant related their experience with homelessness and having a small baby as a single parent.

Focus Group C Participant 6 narrated,

_I think it’s different when you’ve got personal experiences to draw on, like yourself. I was made homeless and I had a small baby. I had to bring her up on my own, and like yourself, I would go days without eating anything to make sure that she had her needs provided for. I think there are times when I do look at people’s situations slightly different, because I think, “Well, I’ve been in that place myself._
The participants believe that their experiences make them look at service users’ circumstances somewhat differently. It is reasonable to assume that the participants suggest that their experiences might result in increased empathy.

Focus Group B Participant 5 below echoes the above point relating to insight from personal experiences.

I think I’ve learned; my personal experience was from poverty. So, I’m informed about what the issues and stressors are from my own history.

One participant expressed a suggestion that it is good for those who have experiences and stories of living with poverty at one stage or another in their journey to share with service users so that they know that social workers understand what they are going through.

Focus Group B Participant 2 stated,

Actually, it’s okay to tell them that you know how it is because you’ve been there. I think that’s a really important message to give to families, you know, because it’s very easy for us to say, ‘Oh I understand what you mean’, and they look at you ‘No you don’t’. But if you say to them, ‘Do you know, there was a point in my life when I was on benefits and I was really struggling.’ They look at you like a real person and they actually appreciate your honesty….

Some participants expressed a view that their personal experiences result in judgemental attitudes towards some service users who are afflicted by poverty. This is also coupled with assumptions or beliefs held by practitioners that service users are not utilising opportunities, being proactive and functioning at their potential. Two quotations below evidence the points above.

Focus Group B Participant 1 stated,

I have come from poverty and I left school with no qualifications. All through my twenties, I was in and out of benefits. I did access course. So, I am quite proud that I took the lead and went to University in my 30’s coming from a background that I came from. For me I find it is frustrating when people cannot see the difference that it makes to their life. Yes, because I’ll be quite honest, I do get cross with people and think, “well, if I can pull myself out of it, why can’t you. You know, you do get that.
Focus Group B Participant 5 stated,

I do get cross with people, and I can't deny that you know because I do think, 'You've got potential. Use your potential'. You know, when you're at rock bottom, you don't always see that you've got potential.

Focus Group A Participant 3 echoed the above though with a point of reflection about the significance of awareness of own values and bias,

Yes, it was tough, I suppose, because I fought for my professional breakthrough, I get cross with people. I do have to remind myself that they're my values and not my social work values.

The quotes above evidence a running theme emerging from practitioners’ narrative of their focus on individuals and families in poverty to find a pathway out of poverty failure of which is characterised as a pathology.

Some respondents believed that practitioners’ socio-economic standing and experiences can sometimes affect service users’ perception of their worker.

Interviewee 6 stated,

You know, I’m sort of, like, a white middle class female. I didn’t go without when I was growing up. I am quite bad with my money...So sometimes when you’re having these discussions about, ‘Oh you really need to budget your money.’ And ‘you really need to do this,’ I feel like a bit of a hypocrite to be honest, because I don’t do that, I mean, I don’t have children...Then I think families perhaps look at me because, I am, sort of, white, middle-class female. They may have this opinion that, actually, ‘She doesn’t understand. She doesn’t get’ I think people can see that, and that can create a bit of a barrier sometimes.

The participant believes that differences in backgrounds and experiences can create barriers in effective engagement with service users. Interviewee 6 sounded reflective and honesty about being prescriptive and hypocritical in her discussions with service users.
Focus Group A Participant 2 below was uncertain but suggested that the poor are to blame for a lack of inspiration. “Yes, I don’t know. I find that they don’t have motivation for change”.

The research data has revealed that practitioners’ personal experience influence their attitudes towards service users experiencing poverty. Some participants related to service users’ experience of poverty. The difference in emotions stirred by personal experiences is noteworthy for example empathy on the other hand and critical on the other hand. This led to another level of debate with some participants expressing the needs to share their own experiences with service users so as to inspire and motivate them whilst others impressed upon the need for social workers to be aware of such impact on their practice.

4.6. Conclusion

Chapter 4 has explored social workers’ understanding of poverty, practitioners’ attitudes towards service users experiencing poverty and practitioners understanding of the relationship between social work and poverty. The research data revealed that there is no shared understanding of poverty. Some practitioners affirmed that poverty is prevalent within service users and social work intervention. These finding is relevant in that it builds on the existing knowledge and research in social work poverty and significant in that they confirmed literature review findings that most service users are poor.

Despite the prevalence, research data revealed that poverty is not recognised due to how it is distinctively portrayed by media for example leading to practitioners and service users not recognising poverty in other forms. This suggests subjective element of relative poverty which makes its definition and understanding complex. The research data confirmed literature and existing research findings of shame and stigmatisation associated to poverty and social work interventions.
Participants revealed their understanding of poverty being associated with other problems dealt with by social workers. This echoes with the finding by Morris et al (2018) of the prevalence and interconnectedness of poverty to other problems identified in their research. Some practitioners referred to the toxic trio which according to Morris et al (2018) have influenced social work design and yet poverty that has had a long-standing relationship is taken as normal and background music. Most participants described poverty in individualistic and cultural terms, and this resonates with individualistic and pathological social work frameworks. These findings resonate with findings from mixed methods comparative study of frontline practitioners in England and Scotland by Morris et al (2018) in which practitioners described poverty as rooted, fundamental, and “generational”. Some participants indicated a view that referrals of homelessness have increased, and many participants linked it changes in welfare benefits and housing policy. These findings build on and corroborate previous research and add to the body of knowledge and research.

Other participants described poverty as political and man-made and this resonated with the socialist collective framework which is linked to the radical social work model. Participants recognised the dominance and powerful nature of capitalist and neo-liberal systems. This adds to the weight of the argument that poverty needs to be tackled at organisational and structural level by bodies such as BASW.

Participants have shown awareness that defining and understanding of poverty is not clear-cut as evidenced by variations in how it is understood by different practitioners and this resonates with the argument by Featherstone et al (2017) that definitions of poverty are debated. Some research participants expressed a view that poverty is reframed as neglect by practitioners. Featherstone et al (2017) assert some of the debates centre around whether to use absolute or relative poverty measures and whether to pay attention to material resources or to incorporate broader measures for acceptable living standards and social inclusion.
Most participants were clear of the association of poverty with other problems dealt with by social workers. However, some participants were not clear of the direction of causality in relation to the above issues and the above issues with some expressing a view that poverty causes other problems whilst others believe that poverty was a result of other issues. It has been argued by some that failure to recognise poverty as a significant factor could result in poverty being reframed as neglect, which resonates with the pathological narrative. The intergenerational finding echoes the finding by Featherstone, White and Morris (2014) that suggests that social work has absorbed and now uses wider social and political discourses about the failing poor and the toxicity of needs. Other participants whilst espousing the intergenerational attitude argued that capitalism and neo-liberal ideology and environment are significant factors that make addressing of poverty and exiting from it difficult. Other participants expressed a view that poverty is a political and man-made problem whose impact is less appreciated by practitioners.

In relation to practitioners’ attitudes towards poverty and people who are poor, most participants expressed a view that social workers, other professionals, and agencies judge the poor negatively. The data show that participants suggested that there are differential attitudes shown towards service users who are poor as compared to those who are rich thereby resulting in greater likelihood of the poor being referred for social work interventions. Some participants have argued that this is discriminatory, oppressive, and punitive. These finding echo the assertion by Morris & Shepherd (2000) that increased selectivity and classification in children and families’ social work has resulted in the extinction of core social work values and an increased opportunity for particular values and attitudes to determine qualification for services.

The research data has shown that many practitioners believe there is a relationship between practitioners’ attitudes towards service users and practitioners’ personal experiences. Whilst some practitioners expressed a view that their personal experiences of poverty helped
understanding of poverty and showing empathy others indicated that their experiences made them judgemental and critical.

The foregoing Chapter 4 findings will serve as a context to Chapter 5 which explores findings relating to ‘poverty practice’ and discussions about social work poverty practice.
CHAPTER 5: ‘POVERTY PRACTICE’ IN SOCIAL WORK

‘Poverty practice’ in this chapter refers to social work practice that aims to address issues associated with poverty. To a considerable degree, the extent to which participants considered they were able to deal with issues of poverty in their practice and the way they did so, reflected attitudes and understanding described in the previous chapter. Different conceptions of poverty understandably give rise to different forms of poverty practice. This chapter comprises of findings relating to barriers to poverty practice and those relating to poverty practice building from Chapter 4 findings.

5.1. Barriers to poverty practice

Given the view expressed by participants that poverty is not recognised or reframed, and therefore the unsurprising finding that participants perceive that there are considerable obstacles to effective practice, it is necessary to examine barriers to poverty practice below.

5.1.1. Government policies (neo-liberalism, poverty, welfare benefits, housing, homelessness)

Some participants identified policies as systematic factors that negatively affect certain groups of people making them more vulnerable to poverty.

Interviewee 9 refers to what they call ‘neo-liberal political systems'

Yes, I think the way I kind of see poverty, I kind of see it as systematic, ... My belief of poverty at least in the developed world is that it's kind of, if you think about it systematically, some people are born more vulnerable to poverty and to live marginalised and I think that really impacts life outcomes, education outcomes and ultimately all of those things feed into one another so it becomes quite cyclical. I do think that the way policy is designed, you know living in the age that we do where, like neo-liberal political systems, kind of, dominate and there's, you know the breakdown of welfare state, it doesn't really provide the opportunity for equity and I think you know the people who are most vulnerable always get left behind which, yes, I guess impacts their ability to progress.
If poverty is cyclical and systematic, it is reasonable to assume that it is not only hard for social work to address it but difficult for service users to use available structures to exit poverty.

Interviewee 1 highlights the lack of political prioritisation of social care which suggests less resources than it would receive if it were more prioritised,

*I am not really sure how policy makers make their judgement calls on it…I do not think that there is recognition of the issues, but I think that, particularly with the government that we’ve got at the moment, they don’t prioritise the budget being used on social care.*

There was consensus that the bedroom tax for example is negatively impacting on poor families. Participants also expressed that housing policies are contributing to homelessness.

Site C Focus Group Participant 3 asserted,

*We can see cases where poverty has a direct impact on the direction of the case, and potential risks to the family. Say like losing their accommodation, the impact on the family, having to move to a new place, leave schools, set up home somewhere else. We know the benefits system has changed, the housing tax, bedroom tax, that was another thing which has impacted on the people. One child moving out, and having a spare bedroom…Some parents feeling they have to tell their child to leave home at an earlier age, so there was a history of sending your child out, maybe at sixteen, saying you can’t look after them, and the Local Authority picking them up and accommodating them, in order for them to get a flat.*

Interviewee 1 highlighted having to share a bedroom with a parent. This is an impact of the bedroom tax resulting in the teenager sofa surfing.

*So, the child had gotten to the extent where she was, like, ‘I would prefer to sleep on the streets than to share a bed with my mum’. She had got this plan to go and live with her sister, who lives in London and her sister had a studio flat, so she’d be staying on her sofa, but she was very, kind of adamant that she didn’t want to live in that situation anymore.*

One of the impacts of poverty as highlighted by participants above is homelessness which in turn has wider impact. Social work interventions will likely involve supporting the family financially or otherwise given financial problems involved and probable loss of support networks. Resource constraints are likely to impact upon the capacity of social workers to help
effectively. Referral to charitable organisation could be one of the ways of addressing problems caused by homelessness. The participant also highlights an issue of family breakdown due to bedroom tax and housing policy. In terms of sixteen plus teenagers, Local Authority will have an obligation to accommodate and the barriers are likely to be resource constraints and shortage of housing which social workers have no control as evidenced by the quote below.

Lack of agency roles resulting in agencies not wanting to take responsibility in addressing social problems such as homelessness was expressed as a barrier by some participants. Interviewee 2 states,

It seems like there isn't clarity on some issues of the issues like homelessness. Like when a family becomes homeless, who has a duty to house the family? Who has got a duty to help them financially when they haven't got any money? We end up having a case whereby the family are being moved from one agency to another because each agency will be saying, 'that's not our remit, you need to go to children's services' Children's Services will say 'Go to the Council'….

Social workers end up being the professionals involved in such cases due to statutory obligations related to children and families but ineffective and powerless due to structural reasons.

The policy to tax families for an extra bedroom was identified as negatively affecting families and causing poverty as highlighted by Focus Group A Participant 1,

Massive role, bedroom tax, it is devastating to some families and within an instant, families who were doing okay and surviving are thrown into poverty. No doubt about it, risk and stress has been added to the family.

Social workers in this instance are likely to get involved in addressing risks and emotional problems highlighted by the participant.

A divergent view was expressed by Focus Group A Participant 2 who rationalised the bedroom tax policy with a view that suggests that politicians possibly perceive things differently from
practitioners. This could therefore lead to dysfunctional policies which affect social workers and service users negatively.

_I agree but when you have a family of three who are stuck in one room and you have someone that has a three-bedroom house on their own- to a politician that looks quite simple._

Focus Group A Participant 2 argued that government’s policy has also caused shortage of social housing

_Had they have not changed the policy in the 80s about buying your council house without building any more we will not be in this position today._

Participants expressed two basic reasons in relation to eviction of service users as evidenced by two quotes below. Focus Group C Participant 1 seems to suggest unaffordability of rent by service users leading to unintentional eviction whilst Focus Group A Participant 4 suggests service users getting evicted intentionally by withholding rent. Cost of housing, however, seems to be an issue associated to either reason.

Focus Group C Participant 1 stated,

_People aren’t affording the rent, you know and they’re struggling to pay rent and being evicted._

Focus Group A Participant 4 however offered an account that evidences some tenants making themselves intentionally homeless with a view to getting social housing.

_There are cases also where families living in private rental properties are withholding rent and getting evicted deliberately to make them eligible for Council housing._

An argument can be made in defence of the above families that the major reasons are the dysfunctional, and disjointed policies constituting structural barriers.
Participants identified welfare benefits policies as causing problems for service users and resulting in involvement with Children’s Services whose social workers seem powerless in addressing consequent problems.

Focus Group A Participant 1 states,

*Benefits cuts have led a lot of families from London moving into more rural areas therefore separating families from their extended family networks. It’s the lived experience and how this affects self-esteem.*

Focus Group B Participant 3 narrates,

*You’ve got so many changes to benefits and restrictions because of all the cutback being made by the government, you know and people are getting into debt that way. They are being penalised on their benefits in some areas and that’s going to have an impact on what they can provide for their children.*

Interviewee 8 made a remark about Universal Credit that epitomises welfare benefits changes.

*Universal credit is limited to two children, even if they have ten children, should this be allowed?*

The scenario painted by the participant is concerning and raising questions about morality or ethics. It is reasonable to argue that UC amounts to injustice.

Some participants illustrated tension between welfare benefits and employment benefits resulting in social workers swimming against the tide. This is interesting given government’s strategy to get people into employment and employment as a pathway out of poverty.

Participant 2 in an interview argued,

*Definitely there is the bigger picture of the government not encouraging parents to give up the benefits, the welfare benefits isn’t it? So, people are going out to work but if they earn more than a certain amount, then they are going to have to pay for everything, childcare, housing, transport, food. Whilst if they maintain the benefits, they even get discounts to go to the gym. So, what’s the motivation there for anyone to make changes? So, we are like swimming against the tide here....*

The participant assumes it is incentivizing for the service user to remain on benefits rather than take low paying jobs. The participant argues the earnings do not motivate the claimants
to opt out of benefits in favour work as they end up being worse off due to having to pay essential needs as highlighted as compared to remaining on benefits. The participant blames the government for this predicament due to incoherent welfare and employment policies that equally act as barrier to social workers encouraging service users to get a job or address poverty.

Interviewee 2 expresses problems resulting from incoherent policies and the implication for social workers,

... government has policy and they talk about wanting to have children out of poverty, and then there is another department that’s putting on all these cuts on benefits. Whilst it’s really important to encourage people to go out to work, you’re now placing families at greater risk and in greater difficulty.

Participants argued that employment does not guarantee an end to poverty, as there are people in employment affected by poverty.

Focus Group B Participant 2 argued,

.. actually, if you are relatively low paid you can also be penalised because you are not entitled to certain things. Therefore, certainly people in work can experience poverty as well really, can’t they.

Interviewee 4 asserted,

You have 49% children within the borough living in poverty. The more interesting research around poverty was that, even though there are much more people in employment right now, because that’s what the Conservatives are bragging about, it is about how many of them, people that are in work, are below poverty rate. They don’t want to be on benefits, but equally they’re are not making enough in order to survive.

Contrary to the argument by some participants in a previous section that benefits are a choice, the above participant argues that people are placed in a dilemma when having to choose either receiving benefits or being gainfully employed.

Some participants described that policy makers are disconnected from vulnerable groups in society.
Focus Group C Participant 1 argued,

*I think that the issue is that, you know, and in so many Western developed countries is that social policy is being made by people who are so disconnected from you know, the vulnerable parts of society….*

Interviewee 3 therefore urged policy makers to be attuned to their constituents,

*I think it would be really good if policy makers actually were in touch with the persons, they're making policy for.*

Some participants expressed a view that the gap between people who are poor and those who are rich is widening.

Focus Group A Participant 3 blamed government for the widening gap and for service cuts.

*I think the gap between poor and wealthy, whatever you want to call it, is becoming greater, and I think the current government has had a large impact on that, and there have been a lot of services shut, where you know people would have gone for support. Now they don’t have that support and that can lead to more stress. So, it all kind of affects the other….*

The Troubled Families Programme was criticised by all participants who described the programme as ill conceived, ineffective, imposed, and prescriptive.

Interviewee 3 had this to say,

*The version of the troubled families’ scheme did not really work; the troubled families do hold a very high poverty level. Anger and aggression is a symptom of poverty, especially in the teens in the families we care for.*

The above participant insinuates that some behaviours dealt with by social workers such as anger and aggression within services could be caused by poverty. It is reasonable to suggest that whilst there is need to deal with presenting problems, addressing underlying issue is critical.

Focus Group C Participant 5 hinted,
So, their way of addressing it was that troubled family’s scheme, which was absolutely slated.

Focus Group A Participant 2 argued,

They didn’t accept that poverty might have had anything to do with it. These were just troublesome people. They could be just turned around like that….

The participant argues that the architects of the programme or the government marginalise the impact of poverty.

Some participants argued that the programme undermined social work profession. Focus Group C Participant 6 remarked,

That programme, they basically came in, and well. I felt they undermined the profession of social work, by coming and telling, almost like telling the Local Authorities what they needed to do, and what they were going to do, to make some miraculous difference. So, it was really interesting that the outcome of the research proved nothing. They had no successes from the outcome of that….

The participant raises points about the government’s attitude towards Local Authorities and Social Workers as well as the ineffectiveness of the programme.

The research data in this sub-section has revealed that government policies related to neoliberalism, poverty, welfare benefits and housing constitute a barrier to poverty practice. The research data revealed that most of the participants believe that housing, welfare benefits, employment and poverty policies are dysfunctional and disjointed and therefore a barrier to effective poverty practice. Some participants expressed that policies could result in poverty or exacerbated it. The data revealed that employment is not a guaranteed pathway out of poverty as there are people in employment suffering poverty (Shildrick, 2019). Some participants argued that policy makers are not connected to constituents experiencing and likely to be referred for social work interventions.
Other participants expressed a divergent view that government welfare policies fostered a dependency syndrome amongst participants by making benefits attractive than employment wages. This resonates with the pathological and cultural conceptions of poverty.

The Troubled family programme reviewed as a case study of government policy to address poverty and associated problems in the literature has been described as ill conceived, ineffective, imposed, and prescriptive and has therefore not been described unsuccessful. This programme assumes that the so-called ‘Troubled Families’ are responsible for their problems and should therefore be turned around as well as social work. This resonates with literature findings by Featherstone et al (2014) for example, which assert that policy changes for vulnerable families reveal a trend of categorization of political narratives that attribute responsibilities and failures to specific categories are discernible. It also resonates with Backwith’s (2015) assertion that the ‘Troubled Families’ argument is not intended to win public sympathy for the families concerned and one may argue especially due to referring to the families as ‘troubled’ which has stigmatising connotations.

5.1.2. The impact of managerialism

It is important to re-visit the definition of managerialism as examined in the literature as outlined by Tsui and Cheung (2004). The ethos of managerialism is a belief that top-down set of practices and better management of services will resolve economic and social problems. It is important to state that this resonates with the neo-liberal socio-economic ideology.

It emerged from some participants that social workers are directed in terms of what to do and how to do social work tasks. It was argued that this results in practitioners being preoccupied with administrative tasks to meet managerial prescriptions and performance targets at the expense of effective advocacy and support.
Interviewee 1 explained how managerialism pans out in practice,

Social workers are made think, ‘Right you must do this. You must do that. Why hasn’t this been done?’ you know ‘That parents must do this’, and actually, no social worker out there really wants to be that authoritative person. They want to sit next to that parents and go, ‘Right, come on, let’s do this, let’s get this better. Let’s make this work’ Sometimes you can get bogged down with all these tasks and hoops that then need to jump through. This results in social workers being overburdened with work.

Interviewee 9 narrated,

I think it’s really difficult because I would like to think that I have done in the past but then, you can sometimes get criticised by management that you’re over sympathising with clients, in which case you can miss or at least it’s viewed that you miss other things because you are being too nice, for the lack of a better word.

This affirms Lymbery’s (2001) argument in the literature review that the upsurge of managerialism seems to be demoralising and stressing social workers by undermining their professional and challenging their values.

The participant above argues that this practice results in work overload associated with tasks that distract workers from direct work such as advocacy and provision of support.

Some practitioners revealed that social work practice is resource-led as management does resource allocation and that it is difficult to get financial requests approved.

Interviewee 18 stated,

Even to get management to approve that and to facilitate, is so difficult. It’s like how are we to address everything else when you can’t even provide the easiest, most simple solution, which is just giving this kid money, the money that he needs and that he’s owed. So yes, I think it can be very frustrating.

Participants revealed that services are critically affected, and resources are critically low and therefore bureaucratically controlled.
Interviewee 3 argued,

*The services and finances available for social workers to use are at a breaking point. If I want a service for a family, I feel in an access to resources form. I then have to go to a resources panel who 8 times of 10 will refuse and that has a major negative impact on children and families. We have become much more reliant on the community voluntary service but there are some times where we need professional help but it costs money and that is not always available’.*

Participant 3 further argued that this results in workers feeling helpless.

*There is helplessness that we feel in resolving their situations because community resources are going down, grants are going down or their thresholds are so high that no one can reach them. Add on top of that it will take hours to do referrals when we don’t have hours due to lack of staff and staff turnover. There is a feeling of helplessness in the sense of you leaving them thinking that you cannot do anything else- you don’t have anything else in your power to support them.*

Some participants highlighted the dominance of compliance to rules and regulations in social work. Participant 21 in an interview argued,

*…we comply and that’s how we live, really. So, it’s pretty much similar to how the families do it.*

The comparison and irony of the above quote are fascinating.

Morris & Shepherd (2000) argue that many layers of decision-making result in the development of multiple and complex procedures and practice guidance to inform and manage social work. Morris & Shepherd (2000) further argue that in an effort to attain consistency and manage the control of resources, the interpersonal skills needed for effective practice become marginalized.

The research data revealed that social workers detest paperwork and believe it is not an effective use of their time.

Interviewee 13 argued,

*It looks as if these forms are seen as a protective factor on its own, and for me one of the reasons why social workers haven’t got the time to be social workers, which is why workers in the society aren’t making a difference.*
Focus Group C Participant 2 argued,

*Social workers require time to help, being a social worker is not a paperwork job, it is the mental and practical help that counts need the time available to focus on these families in need.*

Other participants highlighted that there was much focus and attention on meeting the needs and requirements for Ofsted Inspections. The participants revealed that such a focus puts a lot of pressure, generates anxiety and work for practitioners.

Participant 13 in an interview argued,

*Because you've got to justify now that Ofsted is coming. I am fed up with that, I think they need to come tomorrow, because each time it takes them, they've more things to do, there's paranoia, there's madness.*

Participant 16 in an interview argued,

*I think the organisational cultures play a role in all social work. Ofsted have influenced the way authorities work….*

It was also argued by some that Ofsted ratings are subjective and do not take into consideration the impact of inadequate resources within some under-resourced Boroughs of Local Authorities. Bywaters et al., (2017) assert that the National Audit Office report emphasized that broad inconsistencies between Local Authorities in Ofsted ratings, referral, and repeat child protection plan rates were evidence that “children in different parts of the country do not get the same access to help or protection” (p.7).

Interviewee 9 argued,

*We have systemic practice and the reflective practice as well, thinking over your cases and being analytical, but other local authorities don't have that luxury. They're overstretched in terms of their cases, their allocations, they don't really have time, it's a lot of firefighting and lack of resources. I often think of the discrepancies between how Ofsted scores are done. It's very nice to say that one local authority scores 'outstanding' when they've got all the resources etc. and then another local authority that's really working hard to try and raise the standards can't do that. So, for me, the Ofsted scores are another thing as well. What are we actually looking for?*
This resonates with Bywaters et al (2018)'s finding that both high deprivation and low per child expenditure have a significant relationship to poor Ofsted judgements.

The resource theme emerged across all the three sites and participants cited resource availability as a critical factor that made a difference to social work interventions in their local authorities. It emerged that this differed according to boroughs or Local Authorities.

Interviewee 1 stated,

*It depends on different boroughs, I’d say, with the resources because the assessment is tailored to what is out there in the community.*

The participant elaborated,

*Now we have outreach workers, but it depends on the local authority you’re with, it depends on the resources again”. I’ve worked in boroughs where you’ve 40 on your caseloads, and you’re just trying to visit. So, even after doing the actual work with the clients, because of the computer, you just have to keep putting it in. Then that’s a barrier as well.*

Most of the participants acknowledged that poverty is marginalized by management and by the government and this explains the dearth of poverty practice.

Interviewee 8 argued,

*I think as much as it’s organisational responsibility, which I think is not being talked about enough, and it’s not being expressed enough in assessments, just today I looked at research base for this local authority as I am quite new to the organisation and what books, what kind of articles, what things are there to be shared, I actually haven’t seen an article that jumped out to me in saying poverty, whatever impact on families…. *

Some participants argued that social work is reactive and firefighting rather than being proactive. Interviewee 3 revealed,

*You are literally working to the bone… All you end up doing all day long is putting up fires and reacting to stuff…You start the day with this long to-do list things…and then by the end of the day, you’ve done nothing on it, because all you have done is run around and put out fires. That is the most frustrating thing, and I think every social worker across the country would complain about it, it’s never changed in ten years that*
I’ve done ...I think the system as a whole, I hate to say it, but I don’t think it works. I think it needs to be revamped.

The worker calls for a countrywide change. Interviewee 13 stated,

*Having such a high caseload, I tend to be reactive rather than being proactive because I don’t have the time to spend lots of time with families just being with them getting what the real difficulties are, suggesting areas that might really support them. I know that is this is the case and you know in a way that is poor practise, but I don’t have the time, space or means to do it anything about which is very frustrating.*

The above participant bemoans lack of time to support families and how this frustrates social workers.

This sub-section highlights the negative impact of managerialism on social workers, professionalism, and social work practice and how this amounts to a barrier to effective social work practice and poverty practice as social work is run as a business. Participants have expressed a belief that managerialism is impacting on allocation and management of resources. Participants have described resources as critically inadequate and therefore impacting on service delivery and effectiveness.

Participants have expressed that social work practice is characterised by administrative tasks that deter social workers from undertaking social work functions and implementing interventions that would make a significant difference to children and families they work with.

It was revealed that Ofsted significantly influences organisational policies and service delivery. Some participants argued that Ofsted presence generates undue pressure, anxiety, and a lot of work which practitioners described as frustrating. Other participants argued that Ofsted ratings are subjective and do not consider the significance of resource availability and impact on service delivery. This resonates with findings by Bywaters et al (2017).

5.1.3. Not equipped by social work education to address poverty (worlds of social work education and practice are quite different)
Gupta & Blewett (2008) assert that despite poverty and social exclusion being prevalent in families subject to child protection proceedings and a main feature associated with children becoming looked after, poverty has experienced little discussion on many social work training courses outside the borders of the social policy lectures. This section explores practitioners’ narratives in relation to the association of social work education and poverty.

Some participants highlighted that there is a gap between social work training and social work practice in terms of equipping social workers to understand and address poverty.

Focus Group B Participant 6 stated,

> From a personal point of view, I don't think any part of going to college to do the social work degree actually prepares you for what happens when you hit the ground running. I think that you come out and you're completely de-skilled, you're nervous, you're scared. You wonder why the hell you have done this and not worked in Sainsbury's.

Interviewee 13 argued,

> You know, like I say with our social work degrees, you know, a lot of the things which are really...Its so different when you actually, faced with all this, with austerity, with the budgeted cuts, and you have to be working. You know, it's a big difference when you actually, come out and practice.

The above quote echoes the finding by Morris et al., (2018) in which they found the respondents of their mixed method study to be either overwhelmed by poverty or simply unable to transform social and material circumstances.

Focus Group C Participant 2 felt that practitioners learn how to address poverty on the job,

> ... that is how it made me feel when I finished university and I think you have to build up your own bank of knowledge and skills as you go on.

Focus Group B Participant 4 argued that whilst some of the education is helpful, it does not equip them to deal with poverty as the reality on the ground is different,
Yes, the foundation, which was really helpful. You cannot really do without that. However, it doesn't prepare you for the real world and when you come into social work because it's so much involved.

Focus Group B Participant 5 in agreement narrated a graphic practice scenario,

Yes, you know, it helps you to put your theory into practice and to understand things like that but, you know, when you're faced with somebody that's threatening to smash your face in unless you give them a tenner to get a bag of weed, you know, I'm not quite sure that I'd be standing there thinking 'hmm, now which theory do I apply', you just wouldn't, would you?

Focus Group B Participant 3 stated,

I'm grateful that I have to take Social Work and Poverty at university, okay, but it still didn't prepare me, like, for the reality, but lived experience worked.

Focus Group B Participant 2 found it fascinating that poverty was marginalised in their social work training as compared to another degree and educational setting where poverty was significant.

Well, I've just finished my master's and we didn't even touch on in Master’s, and I had done the social work degree before. We touched on it slightly then. Funny enough, before I was a social worker I worked in school, and I did a degree in early childhood education and we had a huge part of that that was to do with poverty, funny enough.

Focus Group B Participant 3 reflected and wondered,

Going back to the university thing...because I did two degrees one in Sociology. We had to do poverty. Why not in Social Work?

Many participants revealed that experience and skills to deal with poverty were acquired from practice rather than University education.

Focus Group C Participant 1 revealed,

My learning has come from the job, rather than Uni teaching. You learn, sort of facts and figures, but you don't have that experience until you're doing it. Also working in different areas, you have different experiences. Like, different boroughs, different counties.

Focus Group C Participant 6 shared from personal and stated,
...In terms of education, I don’t think that, at that time, because you know, as I say, I qualified a long time ago. I don’t think it equipped me enough to understand what I didn’t already know, really, I think what I’ve learned on the job, working directly with families and children is what’s informed my practice really. In terms of being creative to, kind of, work with the families and work out solutions and get advice etc.

Focus Group A Participant 3 underscored the need for poverty training,

*poverty should be a priority to us and maybe training and focus does need to be refocused…Do we need to access better training and take more accountability of this subject?*

Beddoe and Keddell (2016) have proposed that social workers’ education must move the students on from indignation to informed indignation, turning furious reactions to poor family conditions into activism for change.

The above sub-section reveals that social work education and training does not equip social workers to address problems associated with poverty on the ground. The research data reveal that most participants believe the reality of poverty on the ground is different to what they learn in social work training. Some participants expressed that poverty is marginalised in social work training as compared to other courses they have studied, and this was found to be ironic given the prevalence of poverty within service users and significant impact on social work interventions. Other participants stated that they acquire knowledge and skills related to understanding and addressing poverty on the job. These findings resonate with literature review findings on marginalisation of poverty in social work education and practice.

*5.1.4. The impact of resource constraints (caseloads, thresholds and lack of early intervention or prevention).*

Morris et al., (2018) assert that there is lack of processes, systems, or resources to support social workers in understanding and addressing the consequences of poverty. This sub-section will explore research data in respect of practitioners’ views on the above.
Most research participants expressed the view that resource constraints are a major barrier in what they consider as effective social work services. Some practitioners thought that austerity and budget cuts have worsened the predicament.

Interviewee 1 narrates how reduction in expenditure impact on family functioning and welfare and social work processes and systems,

> We are living in a period of austerity as well and I do think that kind of tipping balance between a family managing and not managing, financially can alter the tipping balance of them actually being able to manage as a family, which is why you often see increases in caseloads and child protection figures and so on when we have these times of austerity.

Interviewee 13 illustrates changes in social work and funding,

> I suppose social work has changed, you know it’s forever changing…, so when I think back to when I was actually working in frontline child protection, our funding wasn’t bad…We could help families financially.

Interviewee 6 suggests that social work lacks resources to address impact of poverty,

> There’s lack of resources to even support with poverty in the first place. So, the interventions you know, so I will give an example. Like when we worked in disabilities, you’re not even allowed to mention transport now, because they’ve cut the funding for it.

Some participants expressed a view that reduction in resources has resulted in higher staff turnover in frontline teams. Participant 3 believes these are structural changes that directly lead to staff turnover or retention. It is reasonable to assume that this has significant impact on statutory responsibilities as evidenced by the first quote relating to high case load and child protection numbers.

Interviewee 3 argued,

> I think the difficulty in the high turnover of social workers, especially in the front-line teams, you are looking at family safeguarding, assessment and intervention, even MASH teams have been destabilised because of the cuts or changes, structural changes to the local authority have huge implications around people staying or leaving.
Despite the hype by government and local authorities on the importance of early help and prevention (Bywaters et al, 2017), it emerged that thresholds of intervention and prevention are high.

Interviewee 2 argued,

So early help thresholds are relatively high as well, so they’re dealing with cases that are just on the cusp of going into social work and they’re quite time consuming. You look at things like domestic violence and so on, so the bottom end of the thresholds where you would like to get involved where the family has got quite minor issues isn’t always possible. We need to look at universal services, schools, health visitors, GPs, to try and provide help as well and they do.

The participant suggests that early help and intervention instead of supporting families to avoid drift end up dealing with higher level cases which should be dealt by social work teams.

It is perhaps not surprising therefore that high thresholds are likely to result into a reactive and punitive approach.

Interviewee 5 and 4 narrate the impact of drift and how resources are channelled to cases in child protection or legal arena,

Well I think when we do become involved, personally, I think it’s too late. I think there needs to be more focus on early intervention, because I think by the time that we’re involved we’re really blaming the situation. It’s quite punitive by the time, you know, we do become involved and that’s because of lack of resources really….

Interviewee 4 explains,

I suppose, it’s commonly known that children who are either looked or subject to a child protection are the ones that get all the resources provided, because of the level of concern they’re the top levels of priority. Children in need who aren’t subject to a plan, and aren’t looked, they’re living at home with their parents, those are the ones traditionally that tend to get a rougher deal because they don’t have the focus now.

Interviewee 4 described,

I suppose a limit of the Section 17 budget is a barrier. There’s only so much money to go round and only so long that we can pay for things…I think sometimes we are asked to do too much within that…I don’t want to get to a point where social work is just looked after and child protection. I still do think we should have those high-end prevention cases to prevent them becoming looked after or subject to a plan, but I think sometimes we are asked to do too much.
The above quotes show that practitioners believe that social work practice is resource driven and risk averse. Bywaters et al., (2017)’s examination showed that as a result of cuts, by 2015-2015, Local Authorities were spending 41% of the total children’s services budget on Looked After Children and this demonstrated the severe squeeze on prevention and family support especially in deprived areas.

Some practitioners expressed a view that social work is not valued and that social workers need more resources so that they practise effectively.

Interviewee 4 during stated,

> I guess governments do not really value social work…I think social workers could be doing a lot of work on the ground if were provided with more resources to do so and funding was more appropriately distributed.

Some participants expressed a view that thresholds vary according few factors evidenced by quotes below.

Interviewee 13 narrate that threshold inconsistence is influenced by volume of referrals,

> Threshold quite a lot of time will depend on how much is coming through, certainly for the team, thresholds can go up if you are overwhelmed with what is coming through as it has a knock-on effect…. It is pretty inconsistent as one area might have a higher threshold than another area. If that area is particularly a busy area, their threshold will be higher than another area.

Interviewee 20 states that thresholds are higher when the volume of referrals is high,

> Well these thresholds, sometimes they are high, if they are too many cases which are coming, sometimes the threshold, it will be a matter of priority. So, the higher the volume of cases coming in, the higher the need for prioritisation of addressing those cases.

It is reasonable to assume that this correlation has a knock-on effect on caseloads and support to families as narrated by Interviewee 4.
Interviewee 4 stated,

…So the thresholds for local authority very much is whether the child needs to be safeguarded from harm, as a primary threshold, and then, if it doesn’t meet that threshold, you’re looking at support, but I think it’s increasingly difficult to provide the support in light of cuts.

The participant above believes that child protection or safeguarding is prioritised over children in need. Whilst it is necessary to prioritise safeguarding as it is a statutory responsibility, it would be naïve to disregard influence of other factors such as lack of resources and impact on systems and processes (Morris et al, 2018).

Some participants linked thresholds to systemic factors such as organisational culture and resources.

Interviewee 2 narrates,

I think the organisational culture plays a role in all social work… The theory was that the threshold mark was based on the number of social workers and if there was availability and if no, they were closed, they most all were referred again within three months?

Some participants revealed that thresholds and resources vary according to areas and Local Authorities in accord with findings by Bywaters et al (2017).

Interviewee 13 narrates,

Threshold quite a lot of time will depend on how much is coming through, certainly for the team, thresholds can go up if you are overwhelmed with what is coming through as it has a knock-on effect…. It is pretty inconsistent as one area might have a higher threshold than another area. If that area is particularly a busy area, their threshold will be higher than another area.

Interviewee 4 narrated the impact of resources to their Borough in comparison to other Boroughs,

I think it varies massively from borough to borough, …I think in… (Site C) thresholds are somewhat lower for social work interventions, because there is early intervention team, who work with families, kind of outside of statutory services. Therefore, people
who would probably usually get missed in other boroughs, don’t get missed so much in this borough. However, for statutory services, and for things to be responded more quickly, the higher the concerns are, the more that would be put into a family. Which is logical in some sense, however we know that prevention is better than cure. Some services are not available… for people without them being at crisis point. That is a failure of the system, I would say.

Some participants argued that high threshold lead to late intervention. The quotes below suggests a tension across services,

Interviewee 3 revealed,

You see, the children that we get, they would have been damaged, when I go back to their assessments and when I read what has been done, if it were according to me, I would have brought those children in to care sooner, rather than the time they actually come to us. I do feel that no, we don’t really get involved at the right time. I feel that thresholds are way too high. You only realise that when the children come to us. You try to put in all the support, you know, but sometimes it’s just a little bit too late.

Interviewee 6 stated,

I think the issue we find in Children Looked After is, because the thresholds have gone up, the children that remain in the birth family for longer…What we are finding…is that when they do come across to our team, they are more damaged…They’re more complex, they have greater needs, because they’ve been in an environment that’s not been healthy for a longer period of time.

The above quote shows that there is tension between early intervention and late intervention with thresholds playing a significant role. Featherstone, Gupta & Morris (2017) in their article on psycho-social approaches to social suffering assert that deprivation was the largest contributory factor in children’s chances of being looked after and the most powerful factor in variations between Local Authorities. The issue of resources is critical and creates a dilemma in terms of what needs to be prioritised between early intervention and a reactive approach. It is frequently argued that early intervention is more effective and maybe even be more resource neutral overtime. However, given that levels of resources, it is hardly surprising that higher
levels of need are prioritised. I would therefore argue that there is need to inject enough resources and prioritise a social work approach that focuses on poverty.

Other participants argued that early intervention by taking children into care at a young age could result in good opportunities and outcomes for children.

Focus Group B Participant 4 narrated,

…So, we are able at a young age to provide them a good care, and to stay out of poverty. So, we gave them that positive outlook on life, and they’ve broke that chain of poverty.

In terms of evidence base, it is complicated, as there seem to be no evidence to suggest that taking children away early from their families early generates better outcomes. In any event, children service’s statutory framework is predicated on the assumption that children are better off in their family environment unless there are at risk of harm. This is supported by the no order principle of the Children Act.

Interviewee 17 argues that the number of children should be constant if thresholds are objective which they ought to be.

More often a lot of the young people coming through within their teenage years have already become involved in criminal activities or we have massive issues around lack of school attendance which clearly has very negative impact on the family and their future. Threshold is an interesting factor, because it should not make a difference with the number of children coming into care….

Whilst one can understand the above participant’s argument, it is reasonable to argue that a rise in maltreatment could result in rise of Looked After Children as evidenced by Interviewee 11.

Interviewee 11 argues that the influx of children into care is due to lack of support.

I have seen high influx of teenagers coming into the care system because the families have completely broken down due to behaviour and other issues within the family. I would see the direct correlation between the minimum amount of support been given to the family from the very beginning rather than the threshold being a bit lower. So,
what I have is a social worker working more with teenagers who are more distrusting of professionals, I am working with parents and families who are distrusting of professionals....

The above participant suggests that there is a big rise for teenagers in the care system. This resonates with the finding of teenagers being asked to leave their family home due to hostile government policies. The participant states that there is mistrust of professionals by parents and families. This paints a difficult picture for social work interventions.

Interviewee 9 below argued when social problems are left to drift without support, they escalate resulting in costly interventions.

I'm thinking in the case of maybe a family with disabilities now. There's a threshold, sometimes they just don't meet the threshold, but that doesn't mean they don't need our intervention, so I think sometimes, thresholds make it difficult for people to access the service. As a result, things escalate to a point where, if we were able to meet a family's need at a specific point, then maybe their case might not have escalated to what it is, so sometimes we shoot ourselves in the foot. The threshold makes it hard for us to kind of give the help, but actually when we could have nipped something in the bud and deal with it, it kind of escalates, and then it makes it more expensive for the local authority and then perhaps the children then end up in care, and then it's almost like a cycle of negativity....

The participants above and below underscore the importance of early intervention and prevention. Bywaters et al., (2017) state that the major strategy used by Local Authorities to manage demand was to emphasize early and integrating services, with the reality not matching the rhetoric. The participant above argues that imbalance of thresholds is related to the structure of a service and resources and resources could be related to wider structures.

Interviewee 5 explains a good news story and links to the argument about need for enough resources to allow expansion of services to children who would otherwise be excluded by high thresholds,

Traditionally children in need were lower down on your list of priorities, they weren't being abused or neglected, and they weren't looked after, so they didn't always get services that they should... In addition the project that we're doing, which we will try and push children in need higher up and make sure they get multi-agency input-type
focus plans, we’ve also got an early help service, which we didn’t have in the day...So I think at last we’re in that position now where children in need and those that need preventative services have actually got somewhere to go where they can receive help and support in a more effective way.

Some study participants felt that there are no early help and preventative services. Participant 9 in an interview argued,

*There’s no almost no preventative work, and if the preventative work were being done we could be working at a much lower level, and then the situations that we’d be working with wouldn’t be as serious, and then you wouldn’t be getting a fourteen year olds scavenging for food in their placements.*

Some participants felt that there is no early intervention and argued that this is detrimental leading to unhealthy behaviours by families in poverty.

Interviewee 7 stated,

*Yes, I mean, I suppose, we don’t have universal services and early intervention, isn’t it? I suppose a family is actually identified at an early stage with not many problems, they can be supported by early help.*

Focus Group B Participant argued,

*Intervention which is delayed is quite detrimental to the emotional and behavioural wellbeing of children… We have parents actually resorting to drugs as there is more drug reliance within families who are poor and children are neglected. It brings up the question; do they do that as a way of coping with their stresses?*

This sub-section has revealed that participants believe that lack of resources compounded by austerity and service cuts impact on social work practice, thresholds, early intervention, and prevention. The participants revealed that thresholds are a significant issue, subjective, inconsistent, and high. Participants believe that the volume of referrals at one given time influence threshold levels. Participants revealed that there is a tension between early intervention and late intervention that results in punitive interventions and families being
blamed for their problems. Other participants argued that there is no early intervention and prevention. All participants revealed that early intervention and prevention services are a necessity and important to supporting needy families and children proactively and effectively. This resonates with some literature review findings about the importance of early help by Morris (2012). Participants argued that late intervention and lack of support at an early stage is not only detrimental but results in costly intervention and breakdown of families epitomised by children being taken into care.

5.1.5. Shame, sense of stigma, hopelessness and fear associated with social work interventions.

This section explores practitioners’ narratives and experiences about services users’ shames, sense of stigma and hopelessness and fear associated with social work interventions. Low-income family members have reported experiences of stigmatising and differential social work practice that intensify shame and suffering of poverty (Gupta, Blumhardt & ATD Fourth World, 2017). Some chapter 4 findings have evidenced practitioners’ belief that service users who are poor are treated differently to those who are rich.

Some participants revealed that social work interventions are characterised by stigmatisation of service users due to poverty being perceived negatively and being attributed to parents’ deficiencies and their parental obligations.

Interviewee 3 argued,

*I think also there’s a lot stigma around the people that we do work with because I know in Australia there’s a name for them and they say there are dole bludgers, so that they don’t work, so that they can just get paid benefits. So I think it’s really stigmatised relationship, that they’re people who are lazy to, you know, make better for themselves, and I think that does impact the way a lot of the families we work with see themselves. There is just a lot of shame being involved with social services and I think, you know*
our role could be quite a positive one, but it’s not structured in that way. I think it’s because there is such an emphasis on economics and economic prosperity.

The participant suggests that social work role is viewed negatively due to stigmatisation of service users which in turn affects relationship between social workers and services and arguably with other stakeholders.

Other participants argued that poverty is therefore hidden and somewhat a difficult subject to broach with service users for several reasons that include pride, fear of being punished, blamed, and stigmatised due to experiencing poverty.

Focus Group C Participant 4 poses a question,

*Do parents feel confident enough to come forward at an earlier stage to say they’re in trouble with their finances, and how that impacts on their families?*

The participant above suggests that the service user might lack the confidence to seek social work help which then becomes a barrier.

Focus Group C Participant 5 narrated,

*People don’t actually talk about poverty as such though, do they? It’s like a dirty word, isn’t it? It’s like, ‘I’m not going to admit that that’s what I am suffering from. I’m a bit hard up.*

Interviewees 10, 11 and 4 below provide interesting insights as to why parents hide their poverty and find it difficult to discuss about it,

*People hide their difficulties. Once the situation is escalated to Children’s Services being involved, people tend to hide their difficulties because they’re doing everything they can to retain their children in their care., because that’s their biggest fear, that, ‘You’re here to take my children away’, and there’s an element, then, of being dishonest for fear….*

Interviewee 11 stated,

*People hide their problems because they’re doing everything, they can retain their children in their care, because that’s their biggest fear, … and so there’s an element,*
then of being dishonest for fear. Not many people are just really honest and, ‘Yes, life’s a struggle, it’s really hard. We haven’t got enough to go round.

Interviewee 4 stated,

Also, you’ve got to think of families from ethnic minorities as well, how they struggle with poverty, how they deal with poverty. Again, they will put up a front in terms of how they’re managing. Often, they’re living together with large families, so they’re overcrowded in their property. They’re working various shifts in terms of keeping up with payments, and from that there could potentially be a level of neglect towards their children….

Blame, Asian, Minority Ethnicity (BAME) factor highlighted in the above quote has the potential for disadvantage and stigmatisation resulting in lack of trust of professionals and lack of hope in social work interventions and outcomes.

Focus Group Participant 2 echoed the above,

You’d never say it to someone ‘Gosh you’re in poverty. My sister has been subject to benefits sanctions and things like that but I’d never say to her, ‘that means you’re in poverty’….

Focus Group A Participant 1 stated; “It almost sounds like a real insult, doesn’t it”?

Other participants suggested that stigmatisation results from stereotypical views about the poor.

Focus Group C Participant 6 in a focus group discussion at site C argued,

So I think it’s a really stigmatised relationship, that they’re people who are too lazy to, you know make better of themselves, and I think that does impact the way a lot of the families we work with see themselves. There’s just, I guess, a lot of shame of being involved with social services……

Some participants felt that stigmatisation leads to poor or lack of engagement with support services that could expose parents who are poor and their children to negative judgement.
Focus Group C Participant stated,

That is stigma, isn’t it? You know, I can think of quite a few families that I have worked with over the years that would say that they would rather go without than let Mrs So-and-So up the road sees them going into the food bank.

Interviewee 5 narrated,

That’s where the poor will shelter themselves and not ask for the help because they think you’re going to judge. It’s like the homeless.

Some participants described that the poor feel helpless and demotivated to change their situation, as poverty is seen as a cycle difficult to break. This resonates with the intergenerational view,

Interviewee 9 explained that

Poverty is a cycle and the risk goes along with that. Part of the problem is trying to encourage parents to change the situation and make things better for them. Quite a lot of time that is met with resistance and there is a lot of hopelessness attached with the thought of nothing I do is going to make it better.

The above sub-section revealed practitioners’ views about sense of shame and stigmatisation associated with experiencing of poverty and involvement with social work interventions (Morris et al, 2018) and Gupta et al, 2017). Some practitioners have indicated that there is stigma attached to poverty and therefore service users might not want to admit experiencing poverty. This will inhibit self-referral or discussion about poverty. The data also show that practitioners believe that some service would worry that social workers will judge them critically, leading inhibition of self-referral and discussion of poverty. Due to the stigma involved with experiencing poverty some service could reframe their problems differently. It can therefore be argued that some social work interventions could reinforce stigma.

5.1.6. Uncertainty as to how to address poverty- neglectful parenting or response to stress? Narrowness of assessments and punitive approach.
Featherstone et al., (2017) argue that the issue of shame as explored above speaks centrally to a contemporary aspect of debates about poverty viz what are its causes? Are these rooted in the choices made by individuals? What roles do circumstances and or constraints play? These are indeed pertinent questions explored within the thesis and findings. Preceding themes and their findings such as poverty definitional tensions, poverty marginalisation in social work practice and government policies as well as negative attitudes towards the poor and barriers such as lack of resources present a challenge as to how poverty is and should be addressed in practice. This section will explore practitioners’ narratives in relation to this dilemma and challenge.

Research participants felt that there are challenges and uncertainty in dealing with poverty and neglect.

Focus Group C Participant 2 argued that the poor are penalised for poverty, which is reframed as neglectful parenting,

...because then we penalise them, if they are in poverty is that a part of their problem to care for their children. If it’s not in their means to change anything, is highlighting the fact that they’re in poverty in the assessment, when the assessment should be looking at their role as a parent and the parental capacity.

This also goes against the ethical care model of social work.

Focus Group C Participant 3 argued

Very challenging, and in a paradoxical way, we actually punish them, I think, more, in my experience, that we would a working-class family, because maybe they’re bit matching up to what our perception of them should be.

Focus Group B Participant 1 spoke about how the poor are stereotyped and seen as abusive,

It also colours our mind set, as well, because I think you know, after years and years of working with clients of a particular socio-economic group, we tend to see, sort of more abuse, more neglect there. We know that we’re not reaching, you know, the middle-class clients, for the reasons that you’ve both given, but I think we look at everything through this narrow focus.
Some participants argued that wealthy parents are treated different in some social work interventions.

Focus Group C Participant 2 narrated that,

*So, when you do a home visit, and you’re visiting an affluent family, the approach is different…you see different things…So poverty in my view has a very clear influence on assessments and various….*

Other participants argued that social workers’ attitudes and approach in relation to poverty do influence social work practice,

Focus Group C Participant 4 argued,

*I think our attitude and our approach to issues of poverty are interplaying with our role over assessing what is good enough and all the time. So I think it’s the dichotomy between assessing a family and intervening to help them, and that’s a very fine line where ultimately you do have to make a judgement, but also you have a responsibility to help them, to fix their problem….*

Some participants argued that support is critical in addressing root causes of social problems dealt with in social work interventions. This resonates with above finding of narrowness of assessments.

Focus Group A Participant 3 argued,

*What we’re really doing is taking children out of poverty and putting them with wealthy parents. Why don’t we just put money into the family because poverty causes stress? There is no doubt about that. Overcrowding, not being able to afford you know, food or clothes or whatever, creates stress in a parent….*

This resonates with findings in relation to findings in relation to disjuncture of thresholds, lack of support and Looked After Children.

Some participants argued that lack of family support led to their failure in their parenting.

Focus Group A Participant 3 stated,
Some families who have had their children removed do believe if they were financially more secure, they could be better parents, they could fight the local authority for their children, they could provide a better life. There are parents who do believe, wholeheartedly, that poverty led to the breakdown on their family.

Other participants argued that financial resources enabled those who are rich to get away with the very same problems experienced by the poor.

Interviewee 5 stated,

*I think that all of the social issues that happen for people experiencing poverty do happen to people who are wealthier, however, the rate at which it happens is probably less. It’s more well-hidden, and it’s something that wealthy families are able to manage independently….*

The sub-theme above has uncertainty involved with addressing poverty affecting parents and carers. Some participants revealed that service users who are poor are punished rather than being supported. This resonates with literature review finding that social workers seem to be disgusted by the service users who are poor rather than poverty. The quote by Focus Group A Participant 3 sums up the uncertainty involved in addressing poverty.

5.2. ‘Poverty practice’- How social workers address poverty.

An argument can be made linked to the findings in Chapter 4 that practitioners’ understandings that focus on individual failings are likely to lead to individually focused interventions or responses. Conversely, given the individualistic nature of much of social work practice, where poverty is seen as structural, it becomes difficult for social work practitioners to play an effective or meaningful role.

This section explores a range of responses and actions of practitioners to address poverty when they do or must address poverty in practice as well as tools employed.
5.2.1. Resources and charitable organisations

The issue of resources is important in social work practice given the prevalence of poverty amongst most service users and the association of poverty with most social problems addressed by social workers. Given the scarcity of resources, research data revealed that charitable organisations play a significant role in meeting some service users' physical and practical needs where possible.

It emerged from all the participants that social workers generally signpost service users to other agencies for issues associated with poverty.

Interviewee 13 stated,  

*In terms of resources, I would say we could tackle immediate problems. So, if the family, for example don’t have bedding, a bed, some food etc., we can meet these needs immediately you know, by making charity applications or by getting a grant.*

Interviewee 12 stated, “I know we do a lot of sign posting to other agencies”.

Interviewee 15 gave specific examples,  

*We supported them in terms of getting weekly food bank vouchers...We also made an application to a charity organisation called the 'Xxxx and they provided them with a cot and a fridge freezer...*

Some participants described that children with disabilities and their parents are significantly affected by poverty and charities play a significant role.

Interviewee 20 highlighted an example of practice involving disability and poverty.

*One of the things, I spoke about was a child with disabilities and that lots of families in poverty not being able to put food on the table etc. mainly due to the fact that parents couldn't work as they have to look after their disabled child. I have experienced families finding it difficult to buy specialist equipment because it doesn't come under the remit of funding for local authorities or national health ...We have never used the word*
poverty. I don’t think because it is almost known to families with children with disabilities will struggle with finances and with those families we look at local services that are available to families through grants, charities that we will help them to access.

The need for specialist equipment for children with disabilities cannot be overemphasized for them to live a normal and quality life. It is concerning therefore that social workers and families as suggested by the quote must go to charitable organisations to seek for support.

The above participant also highlights the impact of disability on parents caring for children with disabilities and how disability compounds poverty.

The participant below gives a divergent view that suggests but families are supported.

Interviewee 21 thus stated,

I have cases where the impact of disability on the family such as that one or parents have no choice and they have to be full time carers because of the needs of the child…In that regard, yes, finances are real issues but in all our cases our families are supported to access the necessary benefits…If these parents are not looking after their children those children will be local authorities’ responsibility so it beneficial to make sure that they are supported in every way including housing.

An argument can be made from the above quote that social workers do ensure that families are supported to accessing benefits as it is in the Local Authorities’ best interests to do so lest those children come into Local Authorities’ care. It is reasonable to argue that an assumption or expectation that the parents are expected to cope with benefits received seems to exist. This leads to parents or carers being perceived as neglectful when they seek support from social work interventions.

Almost all the participants revealed that in their experience, poverty and material needs are mostly addressed by referring to charitable organisations and voluntary organisations. Knowledge of available services and charitable organisations is therefore significant for practitioners in social work practice especially in the current climate of austerity, budget cuts and service cuts.
Some quotes below evidence the above.

Interviewee 2 stated,

*Our job is just to make sure the parents get all the necessary support they require and if need be, sometimes we signpost them to other agencies that can help them, like food banks, charity organisations that can give them property, Children’s Centres where they get nappies, baby food and things like that….*

Focus Group A Participant 8 highlighted the significance of signposting so as support parents and children,

*Working with poverty and trying to support a family who are in poverty becomes low on the social worker’s priority. It might be an impacting factor in some of their cases or in some of their caseloads. However, there are not going to be concentrating on a family who are in poverty when they’ve got child cases and Looked after Children’s cases that are a priority and dominating their work. I mean in …, there are some good resources, particularly dealing with families who are actually homeless and, you know that’s a terrible position to be in. I think there needs to be more about knowledge of resources, social work is knowing about these resources and being able to refer them. Like, for example, the Red Cross. They do a lot of work in E, T and S (Districts within the County) working with families who are extremely poor, you know, and in such a bad place where they’re not even housed.*

The research data showed most participants described that one of the necessary skills is signposting and addressing some of the issues afflicting service users was knowledge of local services and resources.

Interviewee 15 stated

*You have to have a really good knowledge of other agencies that are around to be able to refer to other agencies.*

Interviewee 19 remarked, “*So I think that the skills we need are the resource base*."

Interviewee 8 stated,

*In terms of knowledge base, it’s important to have an understanding of the benefits system…*
Interviewee 11 stated, “Job centres and citizen advice bureau. That’s where we can signpost them...”.

Whilst the role of referring service users to other agencies is acknowledged, it is therefore necessary to question or explore the extent to which service users’ needs are met given that the problem of resource constraints does not spare charity organisations.

Interviewee 14 below affirms the above argument.

*The amount of hand-outs given to families that are not managing has also been reduced. Giving this financial support made the families feel that someone actually cares enough to come and give them assistance, this is now a practice that is not done...Charities and food banks are also stretched recently and have not got the ability to assist everyone who requires it...*

The participant states that financial support is appreciated by families in need.

This sub-section has shown that in terms of providing material resources, social workers often refer to charitable organisations or advice agencies for benefits advice. It has also emerged that cuts in resources affect children services as well as other agencies. The research data has shown that lack of resources affects social work responses and echoes the argument made in the conclusion of the previous section. Social workers’ main role therefore is signposting to charity organisations.

It also emerged that lack of resources does not spare children with disabilities in relation to provision of specialist equipment which results in social workers and families having to resort to charitable organisations. There was a divergent view expressed by one participant who believed that the needs of children with disabilities are met. This makes sense if one considers that failure to do so could result in Local Authority accommodating the children at a higher expense than supporting the children at home.
5.2.2. Tools/theories used to inform poverty practice

This section explores the theoretical tools used in addressing poverty and any justification given for their use. Some consideration will also be given where necessary to how this reflects on different conceptions of poverty explored in Chapter 4.

5.2.2.1. Strengths-based approaches

Interviewee 8 described awareness of a strength-based approach and how this informs poverty practice. This resonates with the finding of Gupta & Blewett (2008) whereby families endorsed strength-based and relationship-based approaches to poverty.

A strength-based approach is an approach that can be used in addressing poverty through trying to motivate parents and families to looking into ways in which they can improve their situations.

This approach aims to promote service users acting independently and making effective choices. The participants suggest that parents or families somehow lack motivation and are not utilising their strengths hence the need to motivate. This resonates with the pathological theory and overlooks structural factors.

5.2.2.2. Motivational interviewing

Some participants shared that motivational interviewing has been adopted by their respective local authorities to help service users change their situations.

Focus Group Participant 2 stated,

We knew how to have those conversations using motivational interviewing techniques etc., regarding how to change a situation.

Motivational Interviewing is a cognitive behavioural technique intended to help service users to identify and change behaviours by establishing supportive and non-judgemental
surroundings (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). Motivational interviewing is a prescriptive client-focused counselling technique for obtaining behaviour change by assisting service users to explore and deal with uncertainty. This technique resonates with a therapeutic approach to social work practice. The technique underscores empathy as one of the basic principles.

Focus Group A Participant 3 below narrates how practice should help service users achieve their goals, “we need to help in the accomplishment of the person’s dreams, goals, aspirations etc.”

The practitioner does not outline how social work practice should help service users attain their dreams goals of aspirations. However, practice wisdom suggests that practitioners are urged to formulate or help service users formulate specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time bound objectives to achieve their goals.

Interviewee 9 spoke about resilience, “I suppose it depends on how resilient you are on how it impacts you in the long term”.

The worker went on to give examples of Sir Alan Sugar and the founder of JD as people who succeeded to accomplish personal dreams and aspirations from poor environments.

The above tools or theories are individualistic. It is reasonable to argue that there is not much done by practitioners in practice as the expectation is for individuals to change and make their situation better or in other words cope with their difficulties. Featherstone et al 2017) assert that in a neo-liberal system or environment, the government’s role to provide welfare or protection from the market is renounced and/or seen as a retardation on free enterprise and as instrumental to individuals becoming dependent and unwilling with work. This gives prominence to the individualistic social work frameworks examined within the literature review.
### 5.2.2.3. ‘Every child matters agenda’

Every Child Matters Initiative was launched in 2003 in England and Wales in relation to children and children’s services. The aim of the initiative was to ensure that every child is afforded an opportunity to work towards the goals mentioned within it namely to be: Safe, Healthy, Enjoy/Achieve, Economic, Positive contribution.

Some participants identified the ‘Every Child Matters Agenda’ as an initiative relevant to addressing poverty affecting children.

Focus Group C Participant 5 stated,

> You remember ‘Every Child Matters’, the focus on education and health, to try and bring them out of that poverty.

Interviewee 15 echoed the above.

The Practitioner outlined that what they have learnt helps in their understanding of poverty and ensures that attempts are made to address it.

> So, I suppose everything I was taught and have learnt on the job as a social worker enables me to understand poverty and ensure that the plan that we develop for the family is tackling it to some extent. We had Every Child Matters outcomes, education, and health, they can all be linked back to poverty.

In their last sentence, the participant refers to the initiative in the past tense as the Coalition in 2010 and consequent Conservative Governments moved away from the initiative. The fact that the practitioners are still using it suggests that there is no clear and effective initiative to replace it. This together with the dropping of the pledge to end poverty raises questions about the governments’ commitment to address child poverty which affects most service users.
5.2.2.4. Ecosystems perspective

The ecosystems perspective uses concepts from systems and ecological models discussed in the literature review. The quotations below explore participants’ understanding and employment of the models in practice and how this relates poverty where mentioned.

Interviewee 3 explained that the systemic model is relevant for the whole situation.

*We work with a range of theories. We work very much on a systemic basis. We look at the whole situation not just poverty.*

The participant suggests that practitioners look at family dynamics and wider environment and not poverty. This correlates with findings from some participants about poverty not being focused upon in assessments or visits but parental deficiencies without addressing structural reasons causing parents’ failures.

Interviewee 12 explained that the systems theory resembles the triangle used in assessment “*we use the assessment triangle. It’s quite similar to the systems theory…*”.

This resonates with literature review findings of Wilson, Ruch, Lymbery & Cooper (2008) who assert that the ecological model underpins the Framework for Assessment and helpful in engaging families in thinking about their strengths. The three domains of the triangle are used to identify Child’s developmental needs, carers’ parents’ capacities to meet children’s needs and the influence of family and environmental factors on children and their carers (Wilson, et al 2008). Poverty falls within the environmental factors’ domain, but practitioners have indicated that there is little focus on it.
Interviewee 13 narrated the relevance of the systems and ecological models in working with families but no specific reference to how it addresses poverty,

When we work with these families, you really need to have the systems theory as well as the ecological.

Interviewee 4 below explained that whilst practitioners are supposed to deal with helplessness, there are some systemic factors that hinder effectiveness of their training and capacity in practice.

I think we are equipped to deal with vulnerabilities, because that’s essentially what we were trained to do, but then I do think that there are systematic barriers, so a lot of the things we could be doing, we can’t do because there are systemic barriers, we can’t do because there’s not the funding for it, or not the resources…Yes, I think we do work within quite a rigid system.

This is a diverse point as it contrasts with the main conception of apportionment of blame to service users’ pathology or deficiencies.

Relationship-based practice and poverty is one theme that emerged from some participants. This resonates with Gupta & Blewett’s (2008) finding about the importance of relationship-based approach.

Interviewee 1 stated,

One of things that I have found that underpin social work practice is about relationships, working with families, there is an expectation that if a social worker sees a family as poor, that provisions be provided because it would be seen as a way out of a way they came to the attention of the local authority.

Interviewee 10 stated,

I think that’s the professional side, is how to talk to them without them feeling degraded, or you know, ‘We’re no good, ‘or ‘It’s going to be used against me because I’m poor…It’s a while to build up that trusting relationship.

The participant identifies professional relationship as significant in terms of making service users feeling valued, not judged and that the poverty or problems will not be used to build a
case against them. The worker asserts that it takes time to build trusting relationship and I believe this is a significant point relevant to the research question.

The participant above suggests there is a professional way of interacting and relating to service users and that this needs time.

**5.2.2.5. Anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice and poverty**

Some participants narrated the location of anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive principles in their practice.

Focus Group Participant 2 stated,

> In terms of knowledge and skills, for me, when I was training, and I know now, we still are, talked about anti-discriminatory practice and empowering our clients. That’s really important because we hold such a strong position of power…We can take people’s children away from them.

Anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive concepts have roots in radical social work. The practitioner in the quote highlights how statutory powers empower social workers in removing children from their parents. This echoes the finding by Gupta & Blewett (2008) whereby family members highlighted the need for social workers and other professionals to be cognisant of the use of their power and how their actions can either affirm or disconfirm feelings of powerlessness and oppression.

Focus Group Participant 2 describes a dogmatic application of anti-discriminatory practice,

> Everybody training to be a social worker has to focus on anti-discriminatory practice, what we tend to do is that we polarise it on race, don’t we rather than considering poverty.

This resonates with weaknesses of radical social work discussed in the literature review.
Focus Group A Participant 4 narrated,

*I am a Practice Educator, poverty is listed in anti-discriminatory practice, economic well-being and I do talk to my students about poverty and they understand the effects of discrimination and poverty.*

The above participant describes awareness of the link of anti-discriminatory to poverty and how the participant uses their role talk about poverty. The question is how and to what extent this translates to poverty practice.

In contrast to the above participant, it emerged from some participants' accounts that social work practitioners use poverty against the poor,

Focus Group B Participant 5 argued,

*To a certain extent it does go against them. The fact that they're in poverty, they are discriminated against to a certain extent by us because of their situation.*

The above participant suggests that social workers punish and discriminate against service users. This goes against the ethical model of caring for service users.

This sub-section has explored some social work responses and related theoretical concepts and how they relate to addressing poverty or social work practice.

Most of the responses and theories mentioned focus on individuals and families in accordance with pathological or deficit models. Some of the practice theories and designs such as motivational interviewing that underpin social work in some Local Authorities involved resonate with social work change programmes described by Morris et al., (2017) as a growing feature of social work in the UK. The research data does not show significant social work
responses towards addressing poverty though some participants made some abstract references to poverty.

The ecosystems perspective is one approach that participants spoke about in abstract terms without specific reference to poverty.

One participant attested to the fact that social workers focus on the effects of poverty that lead to service users involvement with social work interventions and that there are systematic barriers such as lack of resources, time and capacity to build trusting and effective relationship with service users that hinder effective responses in practice.

In relation to anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive, it emerged that practitioners are aware of the principles. However, it emerged that in practice poverty is used against the poor in contrast to the centrality of the principles to social work.

5.2.3. Pragmatic approach and experience-based knowledge

One of the findings of Chapter 4 in terms of practitioners’ understanding of poverty is that social workers addressed poverty pragmatically and knowledge gained from experience. This sub section explores how this translates to poverty practice.

Some participants revealed that they addressed poverty using a pragmatic approach as opposed to theoretical knowledge. This means that the practitioners address poverty practically using experience and skills mostly learnt from practice.

Interviewee 18 narrated,
Knowledge base, I suppose, I think with poverty, it's just practical, isn't it? With regards to social care and when you're working with families in poverty, it's knowing where to direct them….

This view echoes the finding on practitioners signposting to other agencies. The participant above identifies knowledge of available resources where service users are referred for support with material support.

Interviewee 20 was explicit that they do not apply theory in addressing poverty,

*I don’t use any theory… I think social work is more about common sense and life experiences, so if you’re an older person, you’ve got heaps of life experiences to bring to it, and if you are a young social worker, you’ve got more enthusiasm, and you have got other advantages.*

This participant’s view resonates with the findings in Chapter 4 about the influence of practitioners’ life experiences on their understanding of poverty and attitudes towards services users affected by poverty.

Focus Participant C 4 described a limitation of theoretical knowledge in real situations and argued,

*I don’t think I’ve looked at poverty in isolation…certainly when you’re on the ground, you can’t really understand it theoretically, because if you try, you have to look at it in isolation, but it doesn’t make sense in isolation, the way we see it in real life.*

Interviewee 6 described how they addressed the issue of housing which was found to be associated to poverty in Chapter 4,

*I addressed in terms of housing, in following up what kind of provisions were there, but it is a bit of a dead end. When housing. Just kind of, said she wasn’t a priority because they did have somewhere to sleep…*

The above quote highlights how difficult structural and systematic factors impede on social work responses in relation to housing.

The above findings affirm the marginalisation of poverty not only in social work practice but also in social work education and echoes assertion by Gupta & Blewett (2008) that despite
poverty and social exclusion being common in families subject to child protection and care proceedings, poverty has been given limited discussion on many social work training courses. This is reflected by social workers resorting to experience-based knowledge. Gupta & Blewett (2008) argue that social work should be based on a powerful research-informed knowledge base.

5.2.4. Advocacy and radical social work

Jordan (2004) argues that social work finds itself in an equivocal spot concerning the question of the relationship between the individual, the family, and the state. This suggests that social work plays an intermediary role between the individual, state and the family which is not straightforward and characterised by tensions and ambiguity. This is illustrated by Beckett & Horner’s (2016, p. 70) postulation that social workers are engaged daily in trying to influence the decision of ‘unjust and unresponsive systems’ on behalf of their service users. Given the importance of advocacy in social work, this sub-section examines how practitioners’ views of advocacy pans out in practice.

Most participants revealed that advocacy is an important social work function.

Interviewee 1 stated,

*I think, you know that the most important skills that social workers do have is advocacy, and sometimes it does not go very far and that’s because of systems and bureaucracy, but I think advocacy is the most important skill and I think bearing in mind that, you know, a lot of poverty is not a result of, you know, not working and not being motivated to get yourself out of that situation. I think that changes your approach to things.*

The participant above argues although advocacy is critical, it is however not undertaken effectively due systems, rules, and regulations in reverberation the finding and argument by Morris et a., (2018). The participant believes that poverty does not result from service users’ deficiencies or pathology. This is contrary to the earlier view espoused by the intergenerational theory. The participant that this is significant in changing one’s approach.
It emerged that there is paucity of advocacy in social work practice. Interview 12 gave a passionate narration about radical social work and advocacy,

"As a young radical social worker, I was on the marches and I was petitioning parliament. As an exhausted, penniless social worker those proactive bits for me have stopped. The way that social workers are trained now is very different than I was trained and the social workers before were trained. We were more viewed as the advocates (voice) for children, families, adults, and elderly. We were voices that put across what needed to be change within society. Social workers today are trained as gate keepers and the focus is on self-determination but that was as well as other support and not only determination and I believe that is where things have changed. Some people work extremely hard work 3-4 jobs and they are still on the breadline-it is not easy as that, but we do have some student social workers having lack of specialist knowledge...."

The participant raises some interesting points one of which is how contemporary social work practice is different to the time the time they trained. The practitioner refers to how advocacy was fundamentally located within training and within practice. The practitioner believes that contemporary student social workers lack specialist knowledge on poverty in accordance with the finding on earlier section.

One significant point highlighted by the above participant is how radical social work discussed in the literature review influenced advocacy. The practitioner narrates difficulties encountered by workers and service users in relation to poverty.

Interviewee 2 stated,

"Don’t get me wrong, obviously we do still advocate for people, and provide support, etc., etc., but there’s a lot of stuff that happens behind the scenes which is to do with form filling...."

Empowerment was identified as a necessity in tackling poverty.

Interviewee 7 asserted, “I think to tackle poverty, it’s a lot about empowering the service users".
The above quote echoes with the social work global definition. Empowerment is also an important concept in radical social work though there is controversy surrounding the concept of empowerment as argued by Trevithick (2010) within the literature review section.

It emerged that social work had changed. The quotes below evidence the changed in relation to advocacy and financial support.

Interviewee 3 stated,

*I do think that social work has moved on a lot and has changed from what people once thought it was... obviously ...and provide support etc., but there is a lot of stuff that happens behind the scenes which is to do with form filling.....*

Interviewee 19 argued,

*I want to do so much more but I simply don't have the time to advocate, and when you do raise it with management it's a flat-out no. You know that you've, you know, it's horrible, but we do have competing priorities and unfortunately it's the nature of an under resourced job that you don't have the capacity to do as much as advocating as you should, as you want to, and yet ultimately that limits best practice. I think it's hard when the intention is there...when you know the children that you work with and the families that you work with, you can see how things could be better but lack of resources really impacts.....*

Interviewee 1 stated,

*When I started ten years ago, there used to be a frontline desk, where you'd just give people money. Now, you know, it would be very difficult for anybody to do that. They might come and say, 'On I've got no nappies today,' and then even all that's disappeared now.*

The participants above highlight that the way advocacy is undertaken has changed due to other demands such as form filling that compete for social workers' time.

This sub-section has examined participants’ understanding of advocacy and radical social work and how this translates to social work practice. One participant revealed that advocacy and radical social work practice are different in contemporaneous practice as compared to
when radical social work gained prominence. It has emerged that advocacy is marginalised, and that social work has changed from the era of radical social work.

5.2.5. Gatekeepers, not advocates

Beckett & Horner (2016) assert that Social workers are often involved both in gathering information used to determine allocation of resources and in the decision-making process itself. This section explores practitioners’ narratives that suggest that social workers play more of gatekeeping role than advocacy.

It emerged from some participants that social workers undertake more of a gatekeeping role rather than advocating. This highlights a tension in what practitioners are taught as students and the reality in practice.

Interviewee 10 narrated,

Theoretically, obviously from university we are told that we are advocates of empowerment, social justice. Social workers are there to support people, but the reality of things is, we are the gatekeepers and...we are the ones who actually sometimes go against the principles that we stand for.

Some practitioners expressed their difficulties and ineffectiveness in challenging structural limitations.

Interviewee 8 argued,

It’s not easy to challenge the structure, you’re sometimes put in a very difficult position...Yes you are torn apart between the two. It’s conflict of interest in some ways, especially if you’re challenging the Local Authority you work for.

The participant above highlights a dilemma associated with conflict of interest between advocating and gatekeeping. This also resonates with Lymberry's (2001) argument that it is difficult for social worker to individually challenge structural barriers.
Some participants revealed that high thresholds play a gatekeeping function rather than facilitating provision of services. Participants felt in such instances, thresholds go against social ethos and values,

Interviewee 8 thus stated,

*I think they play a big role. I think they, kind of act as the gatekeepers. So, sort of, if they don’t meet threshold it’s almost like you can’t support at all, sometimes and if they do support at all, sometimes and if they do yes you can kind of do different things depending on….?’*

The participant further argued,

*Well I think yes, it really limits social work intervention and the scope that we do end up having as social workers isn’t always holistic, and it isn’t always you know, anti-oppressive. I think a lot of the ways that these thresholds are designed kind of go against the fundamentals of social work to some extent.*

This resonates with the argument by Morris & Shepherd (2000) that the social work profession fails too many children and families and urge the social work profession to recognise this.

Most participants expressed that thresholds for social work service provision are higher and tighter.

Interviewee 24 stated,

*The thresholds, I think are quite high. We’ve seen the threshold go up higher, I think as services become tighter.*

This resonates with the earlier finding of lack of resources being a barrier to effective service provision. Morris & Shepherd (2000) argue that the rationing process must unavoidably signify that organizational structures aim to remove those with either insufficient need or inappropriate need.
Participants described that thresholds are set by managers and handed down to practitioners without their involvement.

Interviewee 14 stated,

…It is management who can set the threshold. Because some of these will be you know printed. Sometimes handed down to us. So, it’s a top down approach.

Interviewee 23 stated,

That threshold, that decisions are made for us before we even get involved, isn’t it? You know the managers are making the decisions.

Interviewee 12 argued,

Yes, it’s not really that you are really involved. You can give your case to say, ‘I really think these children should be…’. The people who make the decisions, the thresholds. I don’t know whoever sets the thresholds, it’s not the social worker.

Interviewee 8 makes a point that echoes with managerialism,

Because what your threshold might be, your managers might have a different threshold view on your threshold. If you’re able to negotiate and bring it to one that’s fine. If your threshold is there and somebody else’s threshold is somewhere else then you’re very much in a difficult position, because you are seeking somebody’s support and approval but they’re not actually seeing why this is necessary, because their threshold is at a different level.

The participant reveals the difficulty involved in differential thresholds and the disempowerment of social workers.

One participant revealed that social worker are themselves victims of oppression, but they do not advocate enough for themselves. It is therefore reasonable to argue that this renders social workers incapable of advocating effectively for the poor.

Interviewee 8 vividly remarked,

We do not even advocate for ourselves; you know. We keep complaining to managers about caseloads. They keep hearing it, and about staff turnover and all those things. We just take it…So we don’t advocate for ourselves enough.”
This participant highlights some of the structural problems such as caseloads and staff turnover that commonly affect social work practice. This resonates with Morris et al., (2018)’s findings that their study data revealed how different system pressures, such as caseloads, timescales, and budget cuts eroded social workers’ endeavours to address the roots of family problems.

Interviewee 3 argued,

I think there is this understanding that social workers have a voice and they can talk about things… but I don’t think quite know where that forum is exactly, and I think that part of social work might be dying out a little bit, because people don’t really have the time….

The above participant view resonates with the view expressed on radical social work Focus Group Participant 8 further asserted,

We’re being oppressed and we are meant to support people who are being oppressed by the system. So that’s interesting because if we don’t make change for ourselves, how can we do for the service users really?

It emerged that social work role in this instance, advocacy, is not appreciated. This resonates with the finding in the literature review that saw social workers encouraging deviant behaviour. Some participants attributed this to negative publicity by media. It was argued that there is no leadership in terms of handling the media issue.

Interviewee 5 argued,

I think the whole role of social work is not appreciated or understood by the media. Even the other day when we were talking about pay scales and things like that happening, they always mention fire brigade and nurses and teachers but they never, ever refer to social work, how it’s presented in the media as well. There is no one really taking the lead in terms of social work, how it’s presented in the media. Social workers do a degree, might need to take some ownership of the profession, class themselves as professionals…. 
The marginalisation about social workers when there is discussion about key workers and importance of their roles in relation to Covid 19 by the media and politicians is a case in point. Focus Group A Participant stated,

Think we have been beaten down. We are not viewed very highly in society and our power is very low.

Some participants therefore argued that social workers need a strong union. Interviewee 9 bemoaned,

Social workers don’t really advocate about anything much, do they? We don’t have a particularly strong union, we’re not like teachers or doctors sadly…I think we need our own union as a profession and not lumped in with all the other public sector workers.

The above quote links with the argument I made earlier in the literature review about the need and effectiveness for an Association such as BASW taking a lead and advocating social work involvement in tackling poverty and inequality given its impact on service users and social workers (Lymbery, 2001). Lymbery (2001), however, notes that this will require BASW to transform itself into a relevant body not only to social workers but to different stakeholders and social workers would need to join BASW in order to make it relevant and powerful.

This sub-section has revealed that many participants clearly believe that social workers play a gate-keeping role as opposed to advocacy and provision of support due to several reasons.

Some of the factors highlighted include structural limitations, low status, and de-professionalization of social work, competing demands vis-à-vis lack of time as well as the consequences of over sympathising with service users in poverty. Some participants expressed a view that social work roles such as advocacy and provision of material support to not seem to be appreciated as compared to other professionals’ roles and plight. Other professionals argued that higher and imposed thresholds result in social workers being gatekeepers rather than advocates.
5.2.6. Family support /Support networks

Featherstone et al., (2014) assert that family support became a key element of the service response underpinned by the Children Act 1989 to ensure that children were protected and being able to remain within their families wherever possible. This suggests that family support should be a cornerstone of social work rather than being marginalised. This sub-section explores practitioners’ narratives in respect of the above.

Some participants highlighted the importance of family support and support networks in ameliorating the impact of poverty such as debts, involvement of children in gang activities.

Interviewee 1 gave an example,

Yesterday, you know, the biggest issue that is sticking in my head, a mum said to me…She hasn’t got a lot of family support, but she has had to borrow money. She is like, she is trying to pay it back and wherever she goes she has to pay extortionate rates of interest. She said to me something like ‘Why can’t I just go somewhere and get money and pay back the same amount’…. 

The participant attests to a lack of family support and how this makes some service users vulnerable to high interest loans.

Interviewee 4 argued,

…so obviously if there were issues way too early about gang culture and obviously children involved in gangs, because there is the financial aspect…but obviously if you’ve got a good support system at home and a good network of not even just family but friends, then that could maybe deter from what you ever want in a gang or ever joined a gang because obviously there is a preventative factor that has stopped you from doing so….

The above quotation underscores the importance of family support and elaborates on some of the consequences of lack of support networks. A point made by the participant that echoes the argument made by Featherstone et al., (2013) above worth mention is support networks being a preventative factor.
The participant highlights the importance of family support and support networks to families.

Interviewee 8 stated,

*The main barrier is that there’s not enough money. A big part of social work ethos is to help families to get to a place where they are able to survive without the support of social services… and I think people who survive well are people who have support structures.*

It emerged that single parents are vulnerable to poverty due to lack of family support. This affirms the need for support for single parents.

Interviewee 7 stated,

*What I’ve noticed a lot is that single parents will suffer a lot harder than others. I can understand that people have different relationships with state but when it comes to fathers who are absent not pulling their weight it does get on my nerves a little bit…obviously because there are more than one or two or three children …A parent might not be in a position to say ‘this is your responsibility’. If they go to child support agencies, a lot of money is wasted within admin …but the children go without. That is quite a hard one.*

An important point raised above pertains to a structural barrier relating administrative costs involved in dealing with agencies meant to support single parents such as Child Support Agency at the expense of children.

It emerged that lack of family support or support networks affect the ability of parents to sustain employment and how this relates to other social problems.

Interviewee 2 highlighted,

*What is also shown…, is that parents who do obtain employment often leave soon afterwards as they have not had support maintaining that job due to childcare issues, they are not used to working and often find it very overwhelming. Poverty leads to a lot of separate issues such as isolation, loneliness, and low self-worth. One particular problem in this county is the number of people moving into the area from other local authorities. They move into the area with no support networks and this leads to isolation and loneliness in itself.*
An argument can be made that current childcare support provisions by the government is insufficient and ineffective. This attests to the argument by Featherstone et al., (2013) that in many countries prevention and family support are in policies but subordinate to the main role of child protection.

In this sub-section, participants have expressed the importance of family support and effective support networks. It has emerged that lack of family support and effective networks exposes families and children to the impact of poverty and impacts on their ability to sustain employment. This suggests a need for a social work practice underpinned by effective and strong family support interventions so as to enable families to care for children within family environments.

5.2.7. Poverty only addressed when there are other psycho-social problems

Morris et al., (2018) found that poverty was not identified or described as a risk factor for children in their mixed method research and that where families' socio-economic conditions were recognised after prompting, there was an inclination to frame the discussion in the realm of toxic trio or risks.

This section examines participants' views and experiences of poverty being addressed only in association with other psycho-social problems.

Most participants agreed that poverty is not explicitly assessed and regarded as a risk factor in social work assessments and practice.

Focus Group C Participant 8 thus stated,

*I think that it's not overtly stated about the poverty within the assessments, like highlighting that poverty is one of the direct factors that's impacting on the family. It would always come under as neglect or emotional abuse or whatever.*
It is reasonable to argue that reframing of neglect enables social workers to access resources associated with priority accorded to child protection and care proceedings due to scrutiny and consequences of organisational neglect.

Focus Group A Participant 6 highlighted problems which assessments focus on as opposed to poverty. This attests to the marginalisation of poverty and its impact in practice,

*The risk assessments social workers carry out are more focused on drugs, alcohol, and neglect rather than living in poverty and what the implications of that are.*

Focus Group B Participant 2 was quite explicit,

*There is nowhere that we actually identify whether we feel the family is living with poverty and it they are then how is it affecting the children? There isn’t that…….*

Some participants highlight that social work interventions are prompted by crisis and this links with the narrative of toxic trio. This resonates with findings by Morris et al (2018)

Focus Group C Participant 4 stated,

*Also, we come to families in a time of crisis and change, and lots of things going on for them. So obviously our perception of the problem might be increased because an issue has just happened and the family has not had time to settle or work it out, that sort of thing. So, the time we come in as well has an influence on the assessment. It’s a time crisis.*

Interviewee 5 echoed the above,

*I was just thinking back and it’s like, maybe. I suppose you are doing sort of initial assessment, and you’re kind of looking at the incident, you’re looking at what happened. How did it happen? What’s the risk of intermediate harm? What’s the risk in the future? Where is the child…?*
Participants generally agreed that poverty is not addressed as a standalone issue as compared to issues highly prioritised in statutory practice such as child protection and care proceedings.

Interviewee 13 highlighted,

*Working with poverty and trying to support families who are in poverty becomes low on the social worker’s priority list...they’re not going to be concentrating on a family who are in poverty when they’ve got child protection cases and looked after children’s cases that are prioritising their work and dominating their work.*

Interviewee 2 linked marginalisation of poverty in social work practice to resources.

*There are absolutely no thresholds surrounding poverty and it is felt that this is because having such a threshold could cost the local authority money.*

*As social workers, we just don’t focus on one issue… Poverty, yes may be part of the problem, but however don’t pinpoint on poverty.*

Interviewee 11 stated,

*I must admit, it’s not something that I’ve seen in terms of naming what the actual issue is and wording it as a contributing factor towards whatever the concerns are regarding the child.*

The research data in this sub sections shows that most participants believe that neither poverty nor its impact are an explicit focus of assessments and interventions but are dealt with in association with other issues. Some participants revealed that other issues or processes prioritised within thresholds such as child protection take priority which come with the advantage of access to resources as compared child in need case. This accords with risk averse practice where inactions or omission by social workers and Local Authorities attract scrutiny by legal representatives of service users in Public Law Outline or legal proceedings.
5.2.8. Corporate parenting (relationship between children’s and adult services, post 18 provision compared unfavourably with provision for the looked after children)

Featherstone, Gupta, and Morris (2017) reveal that most parents do not abuse their children and that the differences between local areas are mostly due to practice differences. It is reasonable to argue that this relates to provision of support to families to keep children within their families as opposed to removing children from their families whereby Local Authorities assume corporate parenting. This is relevant given earlier findings in relation to thresholds, lack of resources and imbalance between early intervention and prevention against late intervention. The quotes below reveal participants’ views about the corporate parenting of Looked After Children and those who have had care experience.

Many participants revealed that Looked after Children are well provided for in terms of financial resources whilst in care and neglected upon reaching adulthood or leaving care. This resonates with the higher percentage expenditure on Looked After Children (Bywaters et al., (2017).

Interviewee 1 asserted,

…I think they are given quite a lot as looked after children, which is right, but the money, you know, the only monetary resource when they’re eighteen is either benefits or for them to be earning their own.

Focus Group B Participant 3 asserted,

It lulls them into a false sense of security, doesn’t it? When they go out into the big wide world, and you have told them time and time again, ‘You won’t be having your phone paid for, you’ll have X amount of pounds to spend.

Focus Group B Participant 4 elaborates,

Yes and you’re taking away quite a lot of opportunities for them, so if they return home before they’re sixteen, they’re not going to get housing if they return home, they’re not
Participant 4 highlights a predicament faced by care leavers in terms losing significant benefits entitlements if they rehabilitate to their families. This predicament underscores the need for effective support to families and the need to keep children within their families.

Other participants therefore argued that social work interventions and government policies are a deterrent to rehabilitating looked after children to their families.

Interviewee 2 suggested,

\begin{quote}
So, the care plan shouldn't just be the care plan for the child, it should be a care plan for the family. So, what plan have we got to make sure that Mum doesn't get evicted?... We are causing them to lose their home, in some cases.
\end{quote}

The participant above argued that parents whose children are taken away are not supported and yet looked after children are supposed to maintain some form of relationship whilst in care and more so when they leave care.

Interviewee 3 argued,

\begin{quote}
Okay, but again, parents have this image that they think we're are going to judge them because they don't have money to take their kids here and there. They feel guilty. So, that means sometimes it will impact on them having contact.
\end{quote}

Some participants therefore argued that Local Authorities who have Duty of Care to Looked After Children are bad corporate parents.

Focus Group A Participant 6 argued,

\begin{quote}
We see ourselves as corporate parents but actually we are really bad corporate parents, we consistently leave them high and dry.
\end{quote}
One theme that emerged from the study is that poverty is a factor for children at both ends of the continuum of their journey before care and after care.

Focus Group A Participant 6 echoed and further stated,

We see that at the other end of the scale as well, don’t we, when they come into care, but also when they’re leaving care as well, they’re expected to manage on quite limited budgets. However, much preparation you try and do, the shock of it is quite significant.

The participant raises a point that resonates with earlier findings i.e. poverty is prevalent to service users and compounded by lack of support, early intervention, and prevention services.

Focus Group B Participant 2 stated, “I think a lot of our care leavers struggle”

The above sub-section has shown that participants are well provided for whilst in care in terms of financial support but plunged into poverty upon leaving care. The participants have expressed a dilemma in the rehabilitation of Looked After Children to their parents. This is compounded by lack of support to parents whose children have been removed into care. It can be argued that this exposes the care leavers to lack of support they desperately need after leaving care.

5.2.9. Conclusion – is social work a force for change or a sticking plaster for the status quo?

This chapter has explored barriers to poverty practice, social work knowledge base and tools used in addressing poverty, social work responses and practice in relation to addressing poverty. It is therefore prudent to conclude with participants’ narratives of social work in relation to poverty practice.
Participants expressed views that social work poverty practice is ineffective, reactive, and marginal, as social work does not address root causes to most problems dealt with by social workers in practice.

Focus Group C Participant 5 gave a vivid and an analogy that likened some social work interventions to a sticking plaster and stated,

*More of putting a plaster on top of it by putting interventions but because we do not get to the root of the problem and we cannot improve a situation…, the plaster is put on and then we wait for the next time it comes in and another plaster is put in and cycle goes on.*

Focus Group C Participant 6 argued that,

*Yes, if they don’t meet the criteria right now, you are probably certain that in six months, one year’s time the situation is going to be even more difficult, then we will try to intervene, but then we just do patchwork, really. We try to patch up whatever immediate difficulties the family has, instead of thinking of, I don’t know, giving the family the tools to make changes for themselves. Like I said that needs time and we don’t have time.*

The above participant argues that not addressing problems earlier only results to escalation of problems and this characterises a patchwork approach. This resonates with literature review findings by Davies (2011) about the need to pay attention to poverty so as to avoid a reactive approach, late intervention and repeat referrals. This calls for the need to match the rhetoric on early help and intervention with injection of adequate resources (Bywaters et al, 2017). The participant highlights that there is lack of time to address problems.

Interviewee 12 illustrates how reactive social work generates repeat referrals,

*So that cycle of poverty continues, and again, those cases come back to the local authority at a later date, because we have a history of cases which keep on coming back around.*

One interesting theme that came up and connected to government policies is that social work practice at least maintains the status quo and at worst in some instances pushes families into poverty. This resonates with findings in relation to thresholds, dominance of the pathological
and stereotypical views towards the poor. The finding about the impact of austerity and the far-reaching impact on the poor underscores the need for review of government policies that impact on service users.

Focus Group C Participant 2 stated,

*I think social work was developed to maintain the poor…So I just feel like you can use powers developed to maintain the poor.*

This resonates with findings of social work being punitive and discriminatory. Focus Group C Participant 3 highlights social work maintenance function,

*…So, the generational, so the fact that when there was crisis, I think social services are often seen as the resource to go to, and then we ask the questions about, ‘Have you been to Plan B? Have you tried this? Have you that?’ so helping them to manage the crisis.*

Focus Group C Participant 4 contended,

*I also wonder if we are placing people in poverty. Example, financially the families are okay and not in debt but when we remove the children, they lose everything including their money (child tax credits) so then you are placing the parent in poverty.*

Social work practice narrated by the above participant goes against the IFSW and BASW ethos in relation to poverty.

Focus Group C Participant 5 responded,

*I never really thought of it in that way, we focus on the impact of the child and consider the child now being safe once they have been removed but very little work is done on the parent once we remove the children, especially when they are adopted.*

There was consensus amongst participants that social work does not address poverty. Focus Group C Participant 1 stated,

*I think kind of… signpost people, and just to give people knowledge of, you know, how they can support themselves or even simple things like budgeting. Then I do not think there are enough resources to support poverty or deal with it… its more of a government issue.*
Focus Group A Participant 3 asserted that social workers do not have capacity to make a sustainable difference due to structural barriers,

*Where poverty is there, maybe things are highlighted differently and it can lead you to being there longer because we are not able to change this. Sadly, there is a bigger thing in the system. We, as social workers, don’t have the ability or power to change that individually.*

This echoes the findings by Morris et al., (2018) of poverty being too big a problem for social workers.

It emerged that social work interventions in terms of addressing are short term and this resonates with the argument of social work being an instrument of maintenance of the status quo.

Focus Group C Participant 5 argued,

*…but our intervention is not that long term. It is immediate to medium term. We work with a family for six months to a year… and we leave it there. We put some measures in place so the family can kind of maintain that little change and be okay for the next six months and we reassess later on, but we don’t take a very long term to support children for life.*

One participant believed that social workers do understand the impact of poverty on the poor but argued that lack of resource militates against sustainable and effective practice.

Participant 2 in an interview therefore argued,

*There is quite a good understanding of what poverty is and how poverty affects people. However, I think that the fact that we do not have enough resources to make a sustainable change for families, therefore makes it difficult for really being able to see positive changes flourish. I think when concerns for families are so high, most significant steps are taken, in terms of Child protection, a child will be removed because the issue of poverty can’t be addressed.*

Interviewee 5 argued that poverty is marginalised in social work practice,

*Social work practice has, kind of, distanced itself from poverty. It’s kind of, not there to pick up the pieces, if that makes sense.*
Participants generally agreed that social work is not equipped and has no capacity to address poverty.

Interviewee 5 stated,

*I don't think that we are equipped to deal with poverty. Not in how big it is and the variety of it, no. You only get back in, well, a little tiny bit of sight….*

The above findings evidence that social work does not promote change but rather an agent of social control and maintenance of service users’ status quo. Featherstone, Gupta & Morris (2017) argue that the similarity of such measures with the dedication to austerity and attendant cuts to a span of welfare benefits and family support services, affect mainly on families and individuals living into poverty and push others into poverty.

This resonates more with individualistic social work definitions of individualism- reformism and the reflective-therapeutic which locates blame in service users as highlighted in the literature as opposed to the IFSW new global definition of social work adopted in Melbourne, Australia in 2014 in which social work should ‘promote social change and development …’.

Participants have expressed that social work practice is reactive and lacks capacity to tackle poverty and argued that this results in drift and repeat referrals. The findings reinforce literature and research findings that poverty is marginalised.

### 5.2.10 Conclusion

The research data have revealed that there are more barriers to poverty than social work interventions to address poverty. The research data have shown that barriers range from political, structural to organisational. Managerialism has been identified by research participants in accordance with literature review findings as disempowering social workers and
frustrating social work practice. This suggests that social work is run as a business in a neo-liberal environment in which poverty is pathologized and blamed on parents who are poor and their families. This resonates with literature review findings on social work frameworks.

Research data have revealed that service users’ feelings of shame, shame, hopelessness, and fear also constitute barriers to poverty practice. This resonates with literature review finding that social workers are disgusted by the poor rather poverty. It has emerged that this militates against core social work values such as anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice. Research findings have revealed that poverty is marginalised within social work education and practice. Research data have revealed that social work education does not equip social workers with knowledge and skills to address poverty. This is evidenced by paucity of knowledge and skills within practitioners’ narrative in relation to poverty practice. In fact, participants expressed that their knowledge and skills have been learnt in practice rather than in social work education and training. It is noteworthy that social workers’ main function in addressing poverty is reduced to form filling and referring service users to charitable organisations. This gives weight to the argument of the significant impact of political and structural factors in creation of poverty as opposed to the dominant pathological model that views poor service users as architects of their own poverty.

Participants have revealed that social workers play more of a gatekeeping role than facilitation of family support. This is linked to lack of resources and its impact on thresholds. Social work has therefore been described as reactive, punitive, acquiescent and an instrument of social control and maintenance of status.

These findings suggest the need to evaluate location of poverty within social work theory, social work values, social work education and social work practice. Given the power held by government and powerlessness of social workers in advocate for radical changes in social work education and practice, it is critical that social work academics, researchers, social work
practitioners, BASW, policy makers and service users be involved in evaluation of poverty within social work thresholds, education and practice.
CHAPTER 6: IMPLICATIONS OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

This chapter sets will consider the relevance, usefulness and meaning of the research findings presented and discussed in the foregoing chapters, why they matter and what might be done with them. This involves looking at the concepts of significance or meaning of the research, generalizability, reliability, and validity as highlighted in the methodology chapter.

6.1. Significance

The research study raised some awareness and consciousness of poverty within social work practice amongst the participants who included managers, Independent Reviewing Officers, and frontline practitioners. It was significant for the research to address some research questions and themes on social work and poverty given the fact that most of the service users of social work interventions experience poverty and yet addressing poverty is not one of social work’s main remit. The research therefore set out to contribute towards the body of knowledge in relation to social work and poverty. This involved looking at existing knowledge and research surrounding social workers’ understanding of poverty and attitudes towards poverty with a view to examining how my research findings compared to existing findings within social work and poverty.

It was also intriguing and enlightening to learn from focus group discussions which provided a forum for practitioners to discuss and debate not only social work and poverty but other social work-related issues such as thresholds, theoretical understandings, social work education and training. Participants openly and explicitly expressed some gratitude for the opportunity provided by the study to think, reflect and discuss about social work, poverty, and other related issues. Some participants revealed that they had not, before their participation in this study, thought very much about poverty in their respective teams and practice.
Other participants expressed how intrigued they were by the research topic and themes such that they promised to consider poverty within social work practice within discussion with their colleagues and clients, within supervision sessions, in their assessments and within social work interventions. The participants expressed that the research topic and the themes were significant and relevant given the location of poverty within service users and social work practice.

The research study enhanced and emboldened my passion about social work and poverty and the contributions from participants indeed enhanced my practice wisdom, knowledge and understanding about the research subject and related issues. I believe that the research has contributed to the body of knowledge in social work and poverty. Most of the major findings resonate with findings of major researchers and academics in this area such as Anna Gupta, Kate Morris, Brid Featherstone, Sue White, Julie Walsh, and Paul Mason.

6.2. Reliability

The narrative literature review method used in the literature is reliable as it helped me identify sources and material relevant to the research topic and themes. The narrative review helped me to examine the evidence and draw conclusions in the area social work and poverty. The research study methods of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were instrumental towards exploration of social workers’ understanding of poverty and attitudes towards people experiencing poverty and addressing the research question, goal, and objectives. Findings generated through these tools can enlighten other social workers, managers, government, and policy makes sense of social work poverty in terms of understanding of poverty, attitudes towards people experiencing poverty and poverty as well as social work poverty practice. The tools are reliable as they facilitated generation of interesting and useful data in relation to the research topic and social work and poverty which resonate with related to existing knowledge and research studies. As mentioned in section 3.8
of the methodology, I cannot state with certainty that the focus group discussion and semi-structured interview guide were wholly accurate in relation to the generality of social workers given that it involved three sites. It is therefore not possible to state that the research findings can be replicated in further studies as it impossible to control some of the factors such as the physical settings, people’s different views and different experiences, the discussion points, participants ‘mood and the nature of the interactions.

6.3. Validity

Validity as highlighted in Section 3.8 of the methodology relates to the fact whether the research methods used namely semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions captured the issues that the research set out to explore.

The methods, approaches and techniques were suitable and appropriate for the exploration of participants’ attitudes and knowledge to poverty as well as their experiences in dealing with poverty within children and families’ social work practice.

The semi-structured and focus group questionnaire guides were to a reasonable extent able address the aim and objectives of the research as well as validate some themes generated by the literature review findings. The methods used enabled me probe and I was in that way able to cover different themes of the research topic. I can therefore state that the findings of the research study are valid.

The research confirmed some of the literature review findings about poverty definition being contested and practitioners understanding and addressing poverty differently. It was confirmed that despite its complexity, definition and understanding of poverty are critical in determining how poverty is assessed, the extent to which poverty is addressed and the nature of interventions. The research findings confirmed some literature review findings that different
commentators or in this case participants had different understandings and experiences of causes and effects of poverty and that this was due to a variety of factors including personal experiences of social workers. It was confirmed that poverty is a major issue in the generality of cases handled by participants. The research confirmed that poverty is marginalised within social work assessments and practice.

6.4. Generalizability

The research in question is small-scale in nature. Therefore, it is difficult to claim that the findings can be generalized to other settings. Apart from the small-scale nature, generalizability is also difficult given that the participants were conveniently selected rather than purposively. The research findings cannot therefore be generalized to the social work population beyond the scope of the research. However, the research findings can be generalized to some related theories of social work and poverty.

6.5. The extent to which the study met its aim and objectives

The research set out to address the question: Exploration of practitioners’ understanding of poverty and attitudes towards people who are poor and poverty.

The research study was able to achieve the aim of the study in terms of exploration, description, and analysis of the relationship between social work and poverty and the way poverty is understood and addressed within children and families’ social work practice.

The research findings contribute to social work practice and the body of knowledge through themes and findings discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. The findings generally relate to the relationship between children and families’ social work interventions and poverty. Specific findings relate to how poverty is understood, how poverty is located within social work and association with other problems, how poverty is addressed, social workers’ understandings of
the nature of association between poverty and other social work problems including neglect, social work professionals’ role in poverty discourse at policy level. Other areas covered by the research findings relate to how social work practitioners understanding of the above themes impact on social work practice and poverty, social workers’ experiences of addressing poverty and alternative ways of addressing poverty.

The research found out that social workers’ and their managers’ understanding, and attitudes influenced the way poverty was perceived, assessed, prioritised, and dealt with. Most participants expressed that social workers’ attitudes towards people who are poor, and poverty are negative. It emerged that most of practitioners’ attitudes were judgemental. It was interesting that though the participants were aware of the principle being non-judgemental, some participants stated that it was not practically possible to be non-judgemental and confirmed theoretical argument that social work is not value-free. There was consensus that knowledge of poverty is critical, and that social work education and training do not prepare social workers to address poverty practically. The research study revealed that government policies and political and the neoliberal socio-economic ideology and environment impact negatively against service users and people who are poor.
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1. Conclusion

This chapter outlines the main conclusions of the research study in line with the objectives of the study as well as literature review themes. The subsequent section will outline recommendations derived from the findings.

7.1.1 Practitioners understanding of poverty

Research data have revealed that practitioners acknowledged the importance of a shared understanding of poverty within social work practice and its significance in how poverty is addressed. This is evidenced by the fact that social workers understanding of poverty vary according to a variety of factors. These factors range from social work education and training to personal experiences of poverty and social work experience in addressing poverty. All participants agreed that poverty is prevalent within service users and social work practice. Research participants acknowledged that poverty is associated to social problems dealt with in social work practice. This resonates with and build on the literature review findings by Morris et al (2018) about the relationship between social work and poverty. Poverty has been described as background music and not recognised as risk factor within understanding and practice.

Marginalisation of poverty in social work education and practice is arguably linked to social work in England being regulated and how this determines statutory social work functions in which poverty is marginalised. It emerged that poverty is perceived in cultural and pathological terms. The data revealed that poverty is reframed as neglectful parenting within social work practice.
7.1.2 Social Workers attitudes towards people who are poor and poverty

The findings on social workers attitudes towards the poor are significant to the research topic. It emerged that attitudes influence how social workers relate to service users and how poverty is addressed. Research data revealed that social workers attitudes are negative and critical to service users experiencing poverty.

Some participants expressed a view that social workers and other professionals hold stereotypical views about people who are poor such as perceiving them as benefit dependent and lazy due to factors such as practitioners’ personal experiences and pathological conception of people experiencing poverty.

Participants confirmed the literature review finding of class bias (Backwith, 2015), that people who are poor are subject to more surveillance and are more likely to be referred for social work interventions as a result of stereotypical association between poverty and some form of abuse. It emerged that this goes against social work core social work values such as anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive principles. Participants expressed that social work practice is punitive and discriminates against service users experiencing poverty as evidence by differential treatment accorded to service users who are poor and those who are rich.

7.1.3 Influence of practitioners’ personal experiences on attitudes towards the poor and poverty

The research data have shown most participants believe that practitioners’ personal experiences influence their understanding of poverty and attitudes towards people who are poor and poverty. Some participants stated that their experiences make them empathise with people who are poor whilst others revealed that they are critical of people who are poor for not optimising existing opportunities and working hard to address their problems.
Other participants suggested that it is important to share their own experiences with people who are poor experiencing the same problems they went through in order to encourage and reassure them that they can turn things around and exit their impoverished circumstances. This contributes to the body of knowledge in relation to social work and poverty and underscores the need for social workers to reflect on the influence of their personal experiences to their understanding of poverty and practice. This also evidences the emotional impact of dealing with poverty which I believe require governmental and organisational attention and action.

7.1.4 Barriers to poverty practice

Almost all research participants expressed that government policies can negatively impact on service users experiencing poverty and on social work interventions. Other participants stated that government policies are underpinned by capitalist and neoliberal ideology and directly influence political decisions, perpetuate poverty, and affect welfare, housing, and homelessness.

Some participants argued that poverty is political. Some participants highlighted that there is no clear policy government policy on poverty as evidenced by the abandonment of the New Labour pledge to end child poverty by 2020.

It was argued that welfare benefits changes such as several benefits being converted into Universal Credit leaves families worse off and exposes them to poverty. Some participants identified that Universal Credit impacts negatively on households with more than two children. Other participants argued that employment wages are not attractive enough for benefits recipients especially single parents or women to opt for or sustain employment due to lack of support such as childcare support or allowances.
All participants expressed that shortage of resources coupled with funding and service cuts are a barrier to effective social work practice and attempts to address poverty. This resonates with findings by Bywaters (2017). Some participants stated that this is evidenced by high caseloads, high thresholds and paucity of early intervention or prevention. Participants stated that they have to write reports and make presentations to access to resource panels in order to access resources and services for their interventions and that in most cases it is a struggle to get their requests approved and this is frustrating and disempowering. This is a positive contribution to the body of knowledge as it evidences the disempowering and frustrating effect of managerialism.

Some participants highlighted that it is difficult to challenge government and their employers due to a conflict of interest, powerlessness, and the impact of managerialism. Other participants revealed that the focus for managers is meeting performance targets, deadlines and Ofsted inspections in which poverty is marginalised. Some participants expressed that Ofsted inspections generate pressure, anxiety, and stress amongst practitioners.

Participants expressed that lack of advocacy is compounded by low status of social work and not being appreciated by government as compared to other professionals such as NHS Workers. This is a contribution towards body of knowledge in relation to social work and poverty as it augments to calls for poverty to be assessed as risk and tackled as such without blaming people who are poor.

Most participants expressed that thresholds for social work interventions are higher and not consistent. Participants expressed that poverty alone does not meet thresholds for social work interventions unless used on building a case against service users experiencing poverty. Participants expressed that thresholds are resource led and therefore exclude most service users in need. Research participants expressed that thresholds play a gatekeeping role, are
imposed upon practitioners and that they go against core social work principles such as empathy and care. This is a contribution towards knowledge about social work and poverty as it indicates the need to magnify the location of poverty within thresholds and appropriately address it within social work practice.

Most participants reiterated literature review findings that social workers have no time and capacity to advocate despite the significance of the advocacy role. Participants argued that there is a gap between what is taught in training and the reality in practice in terms of advocacy. Other participants argued that social workers are too disempowered, disregarded, marginalised, oppressed, and overloaded to advocate effectively.

Some participants argued that poverty can be viewed as a provocative term which makes service users uncomfortable to disclose and discuss their financial struggles due to stigmatisation surrounding poverty. Other participants noted that social work interventions are characterised by service users’ shame, stigmatisation, hopelessness, and fear.

Other participants argued that poverty and financial problems are hidden from social workers. It was explained that this is done for understandable reasons such as fear of losing children and feeling of shame. This is a positive contribution to the body of knowledge as it evidences oppression of service users and the impact of structural factors.

Participants affirmed that poverty is marginalised within social work practice and only addressed when there are other psycho-social problems.

**7.1.5 Poverty practice**

There was consensus amongst all participants that social workers mainly signpost and refer service users experiencing poverty to charitable organisations and food banks for material
support and financial support such as grants. Participants expressed that knowledge of available resources is therefore significant in their practice and that their role translates to filling in request and referral forms for their clients. This accords with the literature review assertion by Krumer-Nevo et al (2009) that social workers do not consider supplying material assistance as real or professional practice.

Most participants stated that in practice, poverty is generally addressed through Section 17 disbursements (Child in Need) of the 1989 Children Act which are practically means tested and severely limited due to lack of resources and managerialism. Most participants revealed that S17 of child in need funding has been cut or significantly reduced.

Some participants identified tools and theoretical frameworks underpinning poverty practice such as strengths based and relationship-based practice, motivational interviewing, Every Child Matters Agenda, Ecosystems, anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice. Other participants argued that they do not use theories, but a pragmatic approach based upon their knowledge of existing resources and their experience. The research did not evidence a strong theoretical base for poverty practice.

Some participants acknowledged that advocacy is an important skill within social work practice albeit ineffective as it is constrained by tensions in what is taught within social work training and the social work environment characterised by high caseloads, lack of time for direct work and marginalisation of poverty.

Most participants described social work interventions as crisis driven and reactive. One participant described this as ‘patch work’ practice characterised by the same problem re-appearing in future and addressed through authoritative and punitive interventions such as child protection or children being removed from their families. This underscores the need for
early intervention and effective family support interventions that focus on addressing the root
causes of social problems which are largely associated with poverty.

Some participants felt that social work is generally used to maintain the status quo as they are
the professionals who interface with people who are poor, most of whom are service users
either referred to them or who approach social work for support. This accords with the
neoliberal socio-political ideology.

Some participants highlighted that where consideration of and reference to poverty is made in
assessments and intervention, it is on a short-term basis. Participants expressed that
assessment of poverty does not consider long term impact of poverty as evidenced by reactive
and short-term interventions.

In relation to Looked After Children and Care Leavers, participants expressed that Local
Authorities and social workers were not good corporate parents as Looked After Children are
generally well catered for financially whilst in foster care but plunged into poverty when they
leave care as they lose most of the benefits associated with the care system and have to either
depend on income or benefits. There have been some changes though in legislation or
policies, which have extended the rights of some benefits to care leavers up to the age of 24
from 18 in terms of staying put arrangements which entitling care leavers to be supported by
their previous foster carers with housing until at the age of 24. Care Leavers are also supported
with training and employment opportunities if duly assessed by their respective Care Leaving
Teams. The continuation of support is dependent on assessment which has been evidenced
to be flawed as there are no appropriate tools to assess poverty. This accords with findings

Other participants expressed that children and families social work does not have the capacity
and is not equipped to address poverty. This is due to several factors such as ineffective social
work education and training, lack of resources, managerialism, political and socio-economic ideology, and environment. This accords with findings by Morris et al (2018) in which poverty was seen as too big a problem to be tackled by social work and therefore contributes to a body of knowledge.

A few participants highlighted awareness of some approaches associated with the radical social work such as anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practice as well as empowerment as effective probable approaches of addressing poverty. However, participants noted that this is difficult in practice due to changes in social work practice and the nature of social work practice and environment.

Most participants expressed that social workers are gatekeepers and that this goes against core social work values and principles. This accords with findings relating thresholds by Morris et al (2018) which evidence that poverty was not cited as one of the reasons of social work involvement. My research found out that thresholds are imposed on social work practice, high and resource led.

7.1.6. Reflection of the findings in relation to the research question

This section will briefly refer to the research topic with a view to summarising findings and implications of the findings in relation to social work education, policy, and practice. I will also highlight where my research endorses other research and where it adds to existing knowledge.

The research main objective was exploration of practitioners understanding of poverty and attitudes towards people who are poor and poverty within social work practice. The research findings evidence that social work understanding of poverty is not shared, contested, and varied and therefore endorses literature review findings that there is no agreed definition. The research has found that this is due to several reasons such as social work education in which
poverty is marginalised and influenced by the neoliberal socio-economic ideology which holds people who are poor responsible for their poverty and problems. This is evidenced by the dominance of the individualised and pathological narratives and overlooking of structural factors. The findings evidenced that the policy context accords with the neoliberal socio-economic ideology and context as evidenced by the finding that government policies either perpetuate poverty or worsen the situation for people experiencing it. The findings evidence that social work is therefore an instrument for maintenance of the status quo in which poverty is taken as a normal background to social work despite evidence of the devastating impact of poverty.

The research endorses some of the main findings by key academic researchers in the area of social work and poverty such as Kate Morris, Anna Gupta, Paul Bywaters, Will Mason and others in relation to prevalence of poverty amongst social work service users, stigmatisation and shame surrounding social work practice interventions and poverty, negative attitudes towards poverty, dominance of individualised and pathological understanding of poverty and within practice, marginalisation of poverty within education and the impact of structural factors and attitudes towards the poor.

My research contributes towards understanding of poverty due to practitioners’ personal experiences, social work education not equipping social workers with effective knowledge and tools to address poverty, social workers not being actively involved in poverty discourse, social workers’ attitudes being negative and judgemental and poverty being marginalised in assessment and practice.

The implication of my findings is that poverty will remain marginalised in education and practice unless location of poverty in theory, social work values, social work practice and social workers attitudes is radically transformed.
7.2. Recommendations

This section will suggest recommendations based on findings from the literature review and research study themes such as practitioners’ understanding of poverty, social work education and training and barriers to poverty practice.

7.2.1. Poverty awareness and poverty practice social work education and training

Given the finding that poverty is marginalised within social work training and lack of a strong theoretical base underpinning poverty understanding, I recommend that poverty should be included as a main module in social work training to impart an enhanced radical understanding of poverty and effective means of addressing it. The social work and poverty module should consider ways of addressing tensions identified between training and practice in relation to anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice as well as advocacy. I recommend that the delivery of this module should mirror the model of the Royal Holloway, University of London project by Gupta and Blewett (2008) discussed in the literature review with a view to incorporating service users and charitable organisations given their significance poverty and how its addressed. Local Authorities should consider rolling out a post-graduate training programme in social work and poverty given the prevalence of poverty amongst service users and how poverty should be addressed. This should also incorporate service users and other stakeholders such as policy makers and charitable organisations.

Universities and academics should consider radical strategies to review the current competence-based model of social work education and practice with a view to promoting poverty as an academic and political issue that promote systems and practices that address stigmatisation and suffering caused by poverty.
7.2.2. Awareness raising and poverty discourse at the policy level

Given the finding of lack of effective advocacy and social workers not actively involved in poverty discourses to highlight the prevalence of poverty, how it impacts on people experiencing poverty and social work interventions as well as disjuncture between government policies and their impact on addressing poverty or its perpetuation, I recommend that social workers should be involved in promotion of policies or legislation that enhances understanding of poverty and effective ways of working with people experiencing poverty including addressing structural barriers and factors.

7.2.3. Adequate resourcing of early Intervention and prevention

Given the findings of tension between early intervention and prevention, funding cuts negatively impacting on early intervention, prevention and family support, government should be lobbied so that early intervention and prevention is adequately funded and be considered as a way of addressing poverty by social workers and not be a lip service. This should also consider making the tackling of poverty, a social work remit such as safeguarding as poverty is a risk factor and therefore should be a child protection matter. This should be coupled with reviewing of the negative social work environment characterised by managerialism, high caseloads, lack of resources, fear, blame, low morale, frustration, burnout, and mistrust. Local Authorities should be directed to measure poverty within statutory interventions such as child protection and care proceedings so that poverty data is captured.

7.2.4. National evaluation of the impact of government policies and programmes on the poor and social work interventions

In view of the findings that some government policies negatively impact service users especially people who are poor, that they perpetuate poverty, and are impacting on social work practice, it is recommended that a national evaluation be commissioned to evaluate their impact. Such policies include austerity, funding cuts, welfare reforms (such as Universal
Credit), benefits cuts and housing policies. Government should encourage and commission research into policies affecting people who experience poverty. Service users involved with social work interventions and experiencing poverty would be critical in identification of such policies.
Bibliography


Appendix 1: Student information sheet:

How social work professionals' attitudes towards and knowledge of poverty affect the approach of children and families social work practice in England: An analysis of the location of poverty within service users, social work interventions and practice

My name is Milton Nyamtowo and I am researching how attitudes towards and knowledge of poverty affect the approach of social work professionals in relation to social work practice with children and families in England as part of my Professional Doctorate programme in Leadership of Children and Young People’s Service at the University of Bedfordshire, UK. I am therefore writing to ask for your help in this research as a participant.

I have chosen to focus on this question partly as a result of my own professional experience but also in the light of evidence that poverty is not taken as a prime social work function due to lack of clarity on its role and ethos. Yet there is a longstanding history of association between the majority of social work clients and poverty. My aim for this research is to contribute to the body of knowledge and research as well as enhance social work practice in relation to poverty.

Your participation in the research would involve a semi-structured interview and participation in a focus group discussion which will be anonymous, to gather information in relation to the above research topic. The identity and findings will be anonymised so as to prevent harm and to ensure confidentiality of research participants both in semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. However, there will be a limit to confidentiality in the event of safeguarding issues and dangerous practice. You will have the option to opt out of the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions if at any point you feel you do not want to continue up until submission of the research dissertation. This research intends to contribute towards filling
in the gap in research in the area of attitudes, knowledge and social work approaches in addressing poverty within children and families.

Can you please kindly give in your consent in writing by filling in the attached consent form?

I thank you in advance for your support.

If you have any questions about the research, please contact me at mnyamtowo@yahoo.com or my supervisor, Professor Michael Preston-Shoot, at michael.preston-shoot@beds.ac.uk

Thank you for your time

Yours sincerely

Milton Nyamtowo
Appendix 2: Focus group questionnaire guide

Focus Group Questionnaire Guide:

Introduction:

Thanks for consent and your willingness to be part of this focus group discussion. We appreciate your willingness to participate:

Introductions:

Moderator- Milton Nyamtowo

Assistant moderator:

Participants: What you do in your own practice

Purpose of the focus group discussion:

The reason we are having this focus group discussion is to discuss our professional experiences as social work practitioners in relation to perception and addressing of poverty.

We need your input and want you to share your honest and open thoughts with us.

Ground rules:

Talking:

- We would like everyone to participate.
- I might ask for your participation if I haven't heard from you for a while.

There are no right or wrong answers

- Every person's experiences and opinions are important.
- Speak up whether you agree or disagree.
- We want to hear a wide range of views and opinions.

Confidentiality:

- We want you to feel comfortable sharing when sensitive issues come up.
Recording:
- We are tape recording the discussion as we want to capture everything you have to say.
- We do not identify anyone by name in our report - you will remain anonymous.

Icebreaker:
Discussion stimulus

Question outline:
1. Can you please tell me your understanding and experiences of poverty in your social work practice?
2. What specific knowledge, skills and experience can you share from your work/involvement with the most deprived and disadvantaged children and families?
3. How would you describe your attitude towards poverty and the disadvantaged clients?
4. Please tell me your views or conception of poverty as a risk factor in social work interventions and children and families social work? - Please elaborate.
5. What’s your view or understanding of thresholds in children and families’ social work practice? - How does poverty feature in this relationship?
6. What role do you think the government policy plays in the definition of poverty and social work practice in relation to poverty?
7. To what extent is poverty considered in assessments and social work interventions?
8. Can you think of how your social work education, personal circumstances or professional development has equipped you/influences you in dealing or addressing poverty?
9. Is there anything else you would like to say about social work practice and poverty relationship?
Appendix 3: Semi-structured questionnaire guide

Social work practice/ poverty research

Semi-structured question guideline:

Introducing questions:

Building rapport and demographic information;

Role: -

Personal/Professional background: -

1. Can you please describe a case in your practice that involves poverty and how this was addressed or not addressed?

2. Please tell me about some social work practice skills and knowledge base in relation to how poverty is addressed or tackled?

3. What’s your view or understanding of thresholds in children and families social work practice? What role or influence do they play in influence social work intervention or lack of it?
4. What is your understanding and experience of the nature of relationship between children and families’ social work and poverty?

5. Could you please say something more about that relationship?

6. How equipped do you feel social workers are in dealing with poverty?

7. How and to what extent is poverty considered in assessments and social work interventions?

8. What are the barriers in social work interventions in relation to poverty? - Is there anything that could be done differently to make a difference