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Exploring the meaning of protection from abuse:

Problem construction in Scottish adult support and protection practice and policy

A PhD thesis by publication

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02 August 2013

ABSTRACT

This PhD project by publication begins to explore how Scottish adult support and protection (ASP) policy and practice carves out its role and remit. It examines the ways that concepts like “abuse”, “vulnerability” and “protection” have been constructed, both by individual practitioners and at a policy level. The submission comprises five papers published in peer-reviewed journals and this contextualising document, which knits together the work and draws out overall conclusions and implications. The papers themselves report on a literature review, a further analysis of case study research into ASP practice and a critical policy comparison. The case study research was conducted immediately prior to legislative changes in Scotland with respect to ASP, and the policy comparison was conducted subsequently to these changes. Overall, the findings highlight the ways that a social constructionist approach can usefully deepen our understandings of ASP. That is, they show how understanding concepts like “protection”, “vulnerability” and “abuse” to be actively constructed in unique and complex contexts can promote criticality in policy-making, practice and research.

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1 INTRODUCTION

This contextualising narrative draws together and critiques the five papers submitted for this PhD by publication. The narrative sets the papers in their policy, historical and theoretical context and shows how they interrelate to constitute a coherent programme of inquiry. It draws out the implications for policy, practice and future research of this programme of inquiry as a whole.

The broad topic of the PhD study is “adult support and protection” (ASP), which broadly relates, in turn, to keeping certain adults safe and well. Throughout this narrative I use the accepted Scottish term of ASP, a term made standard by the implementation of the Adult Support and Protection (Scotland) Act 2007 (the ASPSA). However, I conceptualise ASP not as a piece of policy or legislation but as a body of ideas and practices. These helped to shape the Scottish legislation, but they also evolve in more complex and incremental ways than legislation does (Braye and Preston-Shoot, 2006; McLaughlin, 2008; Webb, 2006; Williams, 2004). ASP, in short, pre-dates the ASPSA, though we have not always given it the same name. ASP also has counterparts and close relatives in other UK countries and internationally (ADSS, 2005; Council of Europe, 2003; National Assembly for Wales, 2000; Teaster, 2003), and it draws upon and is influenced by knowledge, ways of thinking and policy trends not confined to Scotland nor to adult social services. Hence the inclusion of a substantial re-analysis of pre-ASPSA data as part of this submission, and the argument that the findings have implications for contemporary Scotland and elsewhere.

The PhD project draws on a range of sociological and social work theories. These theories are loosely unified by their compatibility with certain forms of constructionist thought, particularly contextual constructionism (Best, 2003) and affirmative constructionism (Parton and O'Byrne, 2000). On the one hand, these approaches share a premise that policy-makers and practitioners in *any* field construct problems and the appropriate response(s) to those problems in ways that are socially and historically contingent. On the other hand, they share full compatibility with a commitment to challenging ethically objectionable circumstances, for instance those commonly termed “abuse” or “harm” (Department of Health, 2000; Scottish Government, 2008), and to evaluating the impact of policies and practices that set out to do so (Bacchi, 1999; Best, 2003; Edwards et al., 1995; Hacking, 1999). Indeed, rejection of the notion that a single, correct interpretation of events and circumstances exists and will dictate how to proceed arguably places *greater* ethical demands upon policy-makers and practitioners, because it urges reflexive examination of the ways they use their power (D'Cruz, 2004; Parton and O'Byrne, 2000; Taylor and White, 2000). This perspective is developed in more detail in the papers and in the narrative below.

The ASP literature is currently thin on analysis from constructionist perspectives as described above, notwithstanding some exceptions, often relating more specifically to the abuse of older people (Brammer and Biggs, 1998; Harbison, 1999; Leroux and Petrunik, 1990; Penhale and Kingston, 1995). UK empirical research to date has certainly focused more heavily on progress against policies to address “abuse” or “harm” than on ways the problem(s) and its solutions are currently being constructed by policy-makers, practitioners and others (Galpin, 2012), or the intricate relationships between these different sources of construction. Constructionist analysis is virtually absent from the recent Scottish literature on the subject, in particular, despite the increased prominence and distinctiveness of Scottish ASP in policy and practice terms since the implementation of the ASPSA in 2008. Beginning to address this gap is one way in which the PhD project sets out to make an original contribution to knowledge. However, the themes and approach of the work, as noted, are also relevant and transferable to other legislative contexts.

The PhD project focuses specifically on how Scottish ASP has carved and is carving out its remit: that is, the construction of “the problem” in the field of ASP (Bacchi, 1999). The project is guided by the following research questions:

- What kinds of circumstances count as ASP concerns?
- *How* do these kinds of circumstances come to count as ASP concerns? Specifically:
    - How are the problem(s) to which ASP responds constructed in policy? How does this compare with related policy constructions (particularly of domestic abuse and of child protection issues)?

- How do professionals allocate particular sets of circumstances to the category of ASP in practice?

Accordingly, the submitted papers examine both *what* counts, or counted, as an ASP concern for policy and/or practice purposes at particular times and in particular places and policy contexts, and also the *processes* by which ASP concerns are, or were, constructed. In its later chapters, this document discusses the implications of these different types of findings for ASP in contemporary Scotland and elsewhere. It also places inquiries and findings of this type into the context of broader ASP theory and research, including the research into useful interventions.

A few points about the approach and presentation of this contextualising narrative are important to mention here. First, the narrative is structured around a first person account of the development of my thinking over the period of writing the five papers. As discussed further in section 2.2, this approach is in line with an understanding of knowledge as contingent and contextualised, and with the resulting call for researchers to situate themselves reflexively within their work (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2009; Finlay, 2002; Mauthner and Doucet, 2003). Moreover, the format has proved especially well-suited to a PhD project by publication, because papers published some time ago cannot be revised with hindsight, and the ongoing development of thinking is therefore already strongly evident within this submission.

A second set of significant overarching points relates to language and choice of terminology. Shifts in the language deemed acceptable to describe people, behaviours and types of intervention are one key way in which constructionist thought has long since entered into adult social work and care. In the more critically analytical of debates over language there is an acknowledgement that language is political: it does not merely mirror reality, but also has some power to shape our thinking and hence to shape our social world (Burr, 2003; Gregory and Holloway, 2005). Whilst I have not set out solely, or even principally, to study people's choice of terminology, it is important to note that this understanding of language does underpin my work. This means that I have chosen my terms carefully throughout. I adopt the terminology in common use within the field of social work where I find this to be useful and politically acceptable: for instance, I refer to "older people" and "people with mental health problems", and I do not use labels that are now generally considered to be derogatory, even when writing of historical periods during which these labels were the norm. Where terminology is currently contested, I have made some inevitably political choices. For instance, I never use the term "adult" to refer exclusively to people between the ages of 16 and 65, because I do not consider it helpful to imply that adulthood ends at 65. I refer to "disabled people" rather than to "people with disabilities" (or "people with physical disabilities", or "people with learning disabilities") because these constructions blur the distinction between an impairment and a disability that I find helpful and politically powerful (Oliver and Barnes, 1998, p.18). Within the social model of disability, a disability is a social barrier (UPIAS, 1976), and "people with social barriers" does not make grammatical sense (Hollomotz, 2011, p.17). Related to this, I refer to "people with learning difficulties" because groups of people in the UK who are intellectually/learning disabled have often indicated a preference for this terminology to refer to their impairments (BILD, 2011; Hollomotz, 2011; People First, 2013).

A final, related point is that inverted commas are not used in this narrative, nor in the published papers, merely to emphasise that a concept is constructed. This would be incongruous with my premise that all concepts are constructed, and that all language evidences and contributes to processes of construction. Instead, my inverted commas are used to aid clarity where, for instance, I am discussing “abuse” or “harm” as *concepts*, as opposed to discussing particular empirical circumstances that I or others have labelled as harmful or abusive. The concept in inverted commas is the current focus of deconstruction and discussion. However, there is no necessary implication that this concept is objectionable or wrong, and no implication at all that it relates to circumstances that are not “real” in a material sense (Burr, 2003). My later discussion of types and meanings of constructionism in the context of this project develops some of these ideas further.

The remainder of this document is set out as follows. Chapter Two presents the papers, woven together with sections of narrative that place them in their policy, historical and theoretical context, as well as in the context of my developing thinking over the course of the PhD. The concluding section of this chapter summarises my findings in relation to the research questions. Chapter Three is a methodological critique of the papers and of the PhD project as a whole. Chapter Four provides an overview of the project’s conclusions and their implications for policy, practice and future research.

The abstract of each published paper appears in a box in the text, at the point that the paper is recommended to be read. Of course, the papers might alternatively be read at any point, as each is stand-alone. The full text of the papers is supplied in Appendix One.

2 THE PAPERS IN CONTEXT

Before introducing the first of the submitted papers, this chapter provides some context for the PhD project as a whole by outlining the development of ASP concerns and corresponding policies in the UK, and especially in Scotland. The aim of this section is to introduce some historical and theoretical roots of contemporary Scottish ASP, with a particular focus on the nature of the problem(s) that ASP and its forerunners set out to address. This is an outline of some important themes and not a comprehensive history of ASP, which could, in any case, be told in many ways. Having sketched this initial background, I then outline the beginnings of my own intellectual struggles with the construction of ASP in policy and practice, as a way to introduce the first submitted paper.

2.1 The development of ASP research and policy

One part of the context for the emergence of ASP is the changing nature of social work services to adults over recent decades. Though by no means the only important contextualising factor, these changes are of particular importance given that many adults affected by ASP are or become users of social work services, and that social work has currently and traditionally assumed a lead role in ASP (ADSS, 2005; Scottish Government, 2008). The changes have included a shift in the provision of many services from institutional settings to private homes, the introduction of the role of care manager and the purchaser/provider split, a growing emphasis on regulation and inspection of services, and increasing moves to work with and formalise the roles of family carers (Carers (Recognition of Services) Act 1995; Community Care and Health (Scotland) Act 2002; National Health Service and Community Care Act 1990; Regulation of Care (Scotland) Act 2001). Such changes have themselves been underpinned by various and multi-faceted theoretical understandings and political imperatives, to contestable degrees and often in uneasy alliance with one another (Means et al., 2008). These include an emphasis on independent living as an ideal for adults with care/support needs, the rise of new social movements and pressure to uphold the civil rights of disabled people in particular, cost-cutting measures and a belief that market forces drive up standards, changing ideas about accountability and partnership working as opposed to the professional as "expert", and particular ideologies about the role of the family and broader community in providing support or care (Harris, 2002; Lymbery, 1998; Means et al., 2008; Rummery and Fine, 2012).

Services have also been influenced by a growing emphasis on risk, the prediction and minimisation of risk and, latterly, the taking of positive risks as key considerations in the organisation and provision of care and support (Alaszewski et al., 1998; Kemshall et al., 1997; Titterton, 2006; Webb, 2006). Ideas about risk took hold more fully and at an earlier stage in children's than in adults' welfare and protection services (Kemshall et al., 1997; Parton, 1996; Stalker, 2003) but the influence has been felt in both and there are traceable similarities that are discussed further in Paper 4 below. In concert and over an overlapping time-frame, provisions for adults to organise their own services, and for services to be "personalised" have placed further emphasis on personal choice as the driver of quality and the individual as the locus for the design and delivery of care/support (Community Care (Direct Payments) Act 1996; Scottish Government, 2009). These developments have been argued to promote dignity, autonomy and human rights on the one hand, and to abdicate communal responsibilities, ignore vulnerability and interdependency and cleave increasingly closely to unhelpful neo-liberal agendas, on the other (Ferguson, 2007; Fyson and Kitson, 2007; Lymbery, 2012; Roulstone and Morgan, 2009).

Concurrently with these changes, a number of concerns that would now fall within the remit of ASP began to emerge more fully into the public consciousness, and in practice, research and policy. These concerns emerged in different ways, and limited connections were initially drawn between them. Their emergence interacted in a number of ways with the above, more global shifts in services, moreover: sometimes galvanising these changes, for instance, and sometimes acting as a check on them (Fyson and Kitson, 2007; Stewart, 2012).

One of these concerns relates to “elder abuse” and “elder protection”. The abuse of older people was identified as an issue in the UK in medical journals in the 1970s (Baker, 1975; Burston, 1975), though a programme of research was slow to develop thereafter, as was a national policy response (Biggs, 1996; Penhale, 1999b). The UK government issued its first guidelines for responding to elder abuse in 1993 (HMSO, 1993), prompted in large part by the campaigning of concerned professional groups and voluntary organisations working on behalf of older people (Manthorpe, 1999). This slowness of policy response has been attributed to a number of factors, including the cultural devaluation of older people relative, for instance, to children (Penhale, 1993; Phillipson and Biggs, 1995; Rowlings, 1999), and the challenge that acknowledgement of the problem, in the way it was then perceived, posed to conservative ideals of the family and of privatised care (Biggs, 1996).

Early UK thinking about elder abuse was influenced by North American traditions of “family violence” research (e.g. Kingston and Penhale, 1995), and also arguably by an ageist emphasis on dependency upon the family in older age (Biggs, 1996). Hence the problem was originally largely characterised as one of physical violence by family carers at home (Eastman, 1984; HMSO, 1993). Constructions of the problem have widened considerably since, however, for instance to include financial, sexual and psychological abuse and neglect, abuse perpetrated by non-family carers and non-carers (Eastman, 1994; McCreadie, 1996; O'Keeffe et al., 2007), and abuse that might better be conceptualised as a type of partner abuse and/or gender-based violence (Aitken and Griffin, 1996; Hightower et al., 2006; Penhale, 2003; Seaver, 1996). Appropriate policy and practice responses, risk factors and extent are prominent concerns of the UK and international elder abuse literature. Alongside these concerns sit ongoing debates about useful and less useful definitions of the problem itself: for instance, how broad a range of harms ought to count as “elder abuse” (Brammer and Biggs, 1998); the extent to which age does or doesn’t make the problem a distinctive one (Dixon et al., 2010; Slater, 1999); distinctive features of the relationships in which abuse might occur (Dixon et al., 2010); and the extent to which constructions of abuse in policy and research fit the concerns and experiences of older people themselves (Bowes et al., 2008; Croft and Beresford, 1999; Dixon et al., 2010).

A second body of UK research, policy and practice that now numbers amongst the components of contemporary ASP grew out of a concern that adults with learning difficulties were being sexually abused (Brown and Craft, 1989; Brown et al., 1995). The conceptual terrain for this emerging policy and practice concern was different from that of elder abuse, particularly in the early stages of awareness of each issue, with less of a link drawn between abuse and the breakdown of care-giving relationships, and more of a focus on questions of capacity and consent, power and exploitation in conceptualisations of abuse. Early UK research into this phenomenon aimed to settle on a working definition of the problem (Brown and Turk, 1992), to map out its extent and to investigate professional and agency responses (Beail and Warden, 1995; Brown et al., 1995). At the same time, guidelines and codes of practice were being developed and/or adopted by many services at local level, again influenced by the campaigning of concerned professionals, voluntary organisations and others working with and/or caring for adults with learning difficulties (ARC/NAPSAC, 1996).

Just as “elder abuse” was thought of as “family violence”, and hence sometimes grouped with other forms of “family violence” (Gelles, 1997; Kingston and Penhale, 1995; Wiehe, 1998), so the sexual abuse of adults with learning difficulties was sometimes grouped with the sexual abuse of children with or without learning difficulties, on the understanding that these were aspects of the same or related phenomena (Brown and Turk, 1994; Tharinger et al., 1990). There was also some research and theorising in the UK and internationally that grouped the abuse of adults and children with learning difficulties with the abuse of adults and children with other types of impairment (Brown, 2002; Sobsey, 1994; Westcott, 1994). Mirroring the expansion of elder abuse from physical to other forms of violence and mistreatment, research and thinking on abuse and (learning) disability also increasingly set sexual abuse alongside other categories of abuse (Harris and Craft, 1994; Sobsey, 1994). UK national policy picked up on this trend, as outlined below, though not on the trend of problematising the adult/child divide.

A third major precedent of ASP was the escalating concern amongst the public, policy and research communities about the experiences of adults living in institutions (Clough, 1996; Martin, 1984; Stanley et al., 1999). With respect to the former long-stay hospitals for people with learning difficulties and mental health problems, a series of government reports from the 1960s onwards revealed appalling standards of living and widespread mistreatment of various kinds (Cambridge, 1999; Penhale, 1999a). At the same time, Goffman’s (1961) famous study in the USA supported the conceptualisation of “abuse” as rooted in the nature of institutional regimes themselves. This contributed to the closure of the UK long-stay hospitals (Cambridge, 1999; Penhale, 1999a). Nevertheless, the history of residential provision since the 1960s has been one of evolution rather than eradication (Penhale, 1999a), with older people and people with mental health problems and/or learning difficulties and challenging behaviour notably common users of these services (Bowers et al., 2009; Rees and Manthorpe, 2010). Concern to raise care quality and/or to eradicate abuse within residential settings accordingly continued (Cambridge, 1999; Department of Health and Comic Relief, 2012; Social Services Inspectorate, 1989; Wagner, 1988; Wardhaugh and Wilding, 1993; White et al., 2003). Conversely, the passage of the NHS and Community Care Act in 1990 raised fresh concerns that "the community" would prove a hostile place for adults who might previously have lived in more "protective" environments (Means and Smith, 1994).

By the mid-1990s across the UK, then, there was a developing sense amongst many professionals, policy-makers and others that heightened risks of mistreatment of numerous kinds, and potentially restricted ability to protect oneself against these risks, were associated with adults who tend to use community care services, both within these services and in other settings. Existing frameworks for the assessing and meeting of need and the promotion of independence and choice were increasingly interrogated for their adequacy to address this specific problem, as thus perceived, and there were pressures to develop a more comprehensive and unified policy response (Stewart, 2012). The Scottish Law Commission recommended new legislation in 1997 and produced a draft "Vulnerable Adults Bill" including a proposed duty to inquire into allegations of abuse and proposed powers to intervene where abuse was established (Scottish Law Commission, 1997). These proposals were not progressed, however, for a number of subsequent years.

In England, a government guidance document was issued in 2000 requiring local authorities to develop multi-agency policies and procedures "to protect vulnerable adults from abuse" (Department of Health, 2000). This document defined a "vulnerable adult" as a person over 18:

> who is or may be in need to community care services by reason of mental or other disability, age or illness; and who is or may be unable to take care of him or herself, or unable to protect him or herself against significant harm or exploitation (Department of Health, 2000, p.8-9).

It defined "abuse" as "a violation of an individual's human and civil rights by any other person or persons" (Department of Health, 2000, p.9). A number of categories helped to narrow this definition down, however, specifically:

- physical abuse;
- sexual abuse;
- psychological abuse;
- financial or material abuse;
- neglect and acts of omission; and
- discriminatory abuse (Department of Health, 2000, p.9)

A similar document was also issued in Wales (National Assembly for Wales, 2000). These guidance documents required arrangements to be made at local level to support inter-agency working where abuse was alleged or suspected, through a structure of reporting, investigation and case conferencing similar to child protection procedures (Filinson et al., 2008). Adult Protection Committees, or Safeguarding Boards, were also recommended to be formed, to take a multi-agency, strategic overview of these developments (Mathew et al., 2002). There was some scope for local authorities to interpret the guidance in different ways according to local needs. In line with the emphasis of the guidance itself, however, all interpretations focused on policies and procedures for responding to concerns and allegations of abuse, as opposed to pre-emptive and longer-term preventative work (Mathew et al., 2002; Slater, 2001).

Though no comparable national guidance was issued in Scotland in 2000, Scottish ASP policies and procedures were also being developed at local authority level at this time, often drawing on guidance issued south of the border (Hogg et al., 2009a). Moreover, following devolution in 1999, Scotland had begun to develop a distinctive legislative framework affecting how mistreatment of adults is thought about and responded to. The first of a triad of directly relevant laws (Keenan, 2010; Mackay, 2011b) is the Adults with Incapacity (Scotland) Act 2000. This sets out provisions for welfare and financial decisions to be made on behalf of adults who lack capacity to make these decisions themselves, and for welfare and finances to be safeguarded in these circumstances (Keenan, 2010; Patrick and Smith, 2009), whilst acknowledging that individuals may lack capacity in some matters but not in others, and must be allowed to participate and have their views considered. The second of the triad is the Mental Health (Care and Treatment) (Scotland) Act 2003, which modernised mental health law in Scotland including the provisions for compulsory detention and treatment and individuals’ rights in relation to these. This Act also incorporates duties and powers to address mistreatment affecting adults with “mental disorder”, which covers mental health problems, learning difficulties and personality disorders (Keenan, 2010; Patrick and Smith, 2009). The third of the triad is the Adult Support and Protection (Scotland) Act 2007 (the ASPSA), which was modelled on the “Vulnerable Adults Bill” proposed by the Scottish Law Commission in 1997, and most directly builds on the UK legacy of seeking to “protect vulnerable adults”. This third Act was prompted in part by a high profile case of abuse of a learning disabled woman in the Scottish Borders, in which professional practice and leadership were poor and opportunities were missed to prevent or curtail extreme and prolonged mistreatment (Mental Welfare Commission and Social Work Services Inspectorate, 2004). More generally, the ASPSA was intended to put ASP on a firmer legislative footing and to plug perceived gaps left by the pre-existing legislation in terms of the people who might require protection and support, and of the measures available to respond effectively (Patrick and Smith, 2009; Scottish Government, 2011; Stewart, 2012).

The ASPSA established new duties and powers to inquire and intervene where an “adult at risk” is suspected to be subject to “harm”. It places duties on certain agencies to co-operate and requires the establishment of multi-agency Adult Protection Committees in each local authority area (ASPSA s.5; s.42-47). The detail of these provisions, so far as they are relevant to this project and its policy and practice implications, are set out in the published papers introduced below, particularly Paper 5. This narrative now shifts to a more personal tone, however. Specifically, the comments that follow situate the beginnings of my own inquiry in the above context, by way of a preface to Paper 1.

2.2 The development of the PhD project

Having introduced ASP in policy and legislative terms, the remainder of this chapter describes the development of my PhD project, and the research I was previously involved in out of which it grew. The published papers that form the core of this submission are presented and discussed here, woven together by a narrative that charts my intellectual journey as I wrote and reflected on them. I have settled on this approach to the task of contextualisation because it facilitates an accounting of my work that feels more authentic to me than other approaches I have tried. The platform it sets up from which to evaluate the work and its implications feels more authentic too. Specifically, and in line with epistemological positions that challenge an understanding of knowledge as external from the knower and extricable from values (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2009; D'Cruz and Jones, 2004; Finlay, 2002; Mauthner and Doucet, 2003; Witkin, 2012), I have found that editing out the personal, the contingent and the emotional impoverishes my account in significant ways. For instance, constructionist analyses of ethically sensitive issues have been subject to charges of trivialising real pain and suffering and/or irrelevance to efforts to address pain and suffering (Bacchi, 1999; D'Cruz, 2004; Edwards et al., 1995); I have found that consideration of my own emotional and ethical engagement with the subject matter has helped me to consider and counter this type of reading. As a further example, my acknowledgement that the papers I have written evidence evolving understandings and have departed from my original plan has in my view facilitated a fuller and more candid critique of their interconnections. This critique begins in the following section and is continued in Chapter Three.

Some particular comments are warranted about the introduction of theoretical discussion by means of a personal account. Social constructionist ideas and their relation to ASP are introduced and discussed in this part of this chapter; however, rather than setting out a theoretical perspective upfront, with the implication that this was clear to me and chosen at the start, I use the following sections to describe how my thinking has developed, and how the usefulness of constructionist ideas to making sense of ASP has emerged over the course of the project as one of its conclusions. I am aware that some aspects of what I describe, for instance my expanded understanding of different sociological approaches to the construction of meaning, represent new insights *for me* rather than new insights for the academic community. Again, however, starting from who and where I am has seemed to me to be the clearest and most candid way to communicate the project's notable insights into ASP. I am also aware that I draw on several vast bodies of theoretical thought within a relatively short narrative. I attempt to hold these bodies of thought in tension and to move between them, finding much of great value but no perfect fit for my project, and in so doing I am open to charges of incommensurability and/or of sacrificing depth for breadth. This approach has an academic pedigree too in the postmodern concept of "bricolage", however (Kincheloe, 2001), as well as an affinity with strands of thought within my own discipline of social work that have moved on from aspirations to "totalizing theories" (Hall, 2012, p.38), and are prepared instead to view the world through a "fractured lens" (D'Cruz, 2004, p.14; Payne, 2005). The detail and the adequacy of this as an epistemology for contemporary social work and related disciplines is a debate that continues elsewhere (Parton and O'Byrne, 2000; Shaw, 2009; Taylor and White, 2000; Webb, 2001). It has certainly felt reflective of the evolution of my thinking over the course of this project, however, in ways that I expand upon below.

2.2.1 The Scottish ASP study

In 2006 and 2007, I was working as a Research Assistant on a case study exploration of interagency ASP practice in four Scottish local authority areas, more details of which are set out in the published papers and in Appendix Three. I was supportive of the commitment of the Scottish Government, the statutory services and others to the "protection of vulnerable adults", as we called this field of policy and practice then, being as disturbed as others around me by the treatment inflicted on many people in the most vulnerable of situations (Stevens et al., 2010). I knew about this mistreatment both through well-publicised atrocities (e.g. Flynn, 2007; Mental Welfare Commission and Social Work Services Inspectorate, 2004) and through day-to-day experience as a student social worker, as a support worker for disabled adults of several years' experience, as a researcher, but first and foremost as a member of a society in which many people are devalued and oppressed.

At the same time, I felt that what should count as “abuse” and “vulnerability” in the context of ASP was not self-evident nor was it clear-cut. This perspective was supported by the uncertainties, the range of views and the shades of grey that were beginning to emerge from practitioners’ accounts in our research (Hogg et al., 2009a). This was not about adopting a morally relativist stance, in terms of how people ought to be treated. Rather, it was about a developing awareness that judgements have been made by policy-makers and practitioners at the point of professional action or inaction, about the *kinds* of problem that a given circumstance might represent, and hence the *kinds* of responses that are required and justified and by whom.

Whilst practitioners’ accounts contained many shades of grey, then, ASP policies and procedures at the time and in the locations of our research did not appear to reflect the same level of complexity and uncertainty. I wondered about their theoretical underpinnings. In particular, I wondered how the construction of abuse and protection in ASP policy at that time had drawn from and integrated with the theories of related fields, in particular theories of domestic abuse and theories of child protection. Other members of the research team also had interests in child protection and in issues of abuse and protection across the lifespan. Together we reviewed the literature to explore where connections had been drawn.

Paper 1:

Johnson, F., Hogg, J. & Daniel, B. (2010) ‘**Abuse and protection issues across the lifespan: Reviewing the literature’**, *Social Policy & Society,* 9(2), 291-304.

Abstract:

The literature is reviewed: (a) comparing models of abuse and protection applied at each stage of the lifespan; and (b) exploring abuse and protection issues with respect to individuals over time. A paucity of comparative and lifespan work in the field of abuse and protection is reported. Within the available literature, different types of knowledge are drawn upon and contrasted definitions of ‘abuse’ and ‘protection’ employed. Accordingly, the most significant findings of the review are in the dissonances and the gaps surrounding the substantive findings. Examples are presented to demonstrate this, while new directions for discussion and research are proposed.

This paper marked the beginning of my interest in the different ways that abuse and protection can be understood. Nevertheless, looking back on the paper now, I recognise a lack of clarity about our ontological and epistemological position. That is, we explore the connections that have been drawn between the different “types” of abuse, and we argue for more such connections to be forged, but we do not really specify our rationale for this, notwithstanding that there are several possibilities, not all of which are entirely compatible with each other. For instance, we might have been concerned to establish whether “domestic abuse”, “adult abuse” and “child abuse” are actually similar or different and in what ways. Additionally or alternatively, we might have been concerned to compare how these phenomena have been *constructed*, with any one of a range of more complex perspectives on how further study might contribute to their potential *re*-construction in the contemporary UK policy and research context. These were questions with which I had yet to fully engage, though further discussion and exchange of ideas (see for e.g. Bowes and Daniel, 2010) and a wider range of reading has helped me to do so subsequently to this. In particular, the sociological literature about social problems was beginning to influence my thinking at this time, and I introduce this body of theory in the following section.

2.2.2 Initial theoretical influences on the PhD project

There is often said to be a divide between two basic perspectives on the study of social problems: a realist perspective and a constructionist perspective (Clarke, 2001; Spector and Kitsuse, 1977). A realist perspective begins with an assumption of a problem's existence and looks for causes and solutions. This would correspond with the first of my suggestions above. A constructionist perspective looks at how a social condition came to be defined as a problem, who considers it to be a problem, for whom and in what ways. This would correspond broadly with the second of my two suggestions. However, there are in fact many versions of constructionism, many versions of realism, and more overlaps between them than might at first seem likely, certainly when "straw figures" are excluded (Davies, 1998; Potter, 1998). In particular, and as I have indicated above, constructionism in the social sciences is not about questioning "reality" in the sense of truth or materiality, but about questioning whether “reality” *essentially* only lends itself to one interpretation (Burr, 2003). Furthermore, whilst a “strict constructionist” approach claims no legitimacy to comment on underlying social conditions, nor does it aspire to promote any given construction over any other (Best, 2003), “contextual” and “affirmative” versions of constructionism (Best, 2003; Parton and O'Byrne, 2000) are both more common (Best, 2003; Holstein and Gubrium, 2003) and of considerably greater relevance to this PhD project. Contextual constructionism admits both the processes of problem construction and the social conditions to which these constructions relate within the sphere of its legitimate, though tentative, study. It does not consider ethical and political detachment desirable or possible for the researcher (Best, 1989a, 2003). Affirmative constructionism sees the absence and/or inaccessibility of an essential and unmediated “truth” against which to measure any given construction as an opportunity for creative re-interpretation and re-negotiation, in the service of valued ethical and political ends, rather than as an argument that “anything goes” (Parton and O'Byrne, 2000; Rossiter, 2000).

Constructionist accounts exist of many well-studied social problems (Best, 1989b; Clarke, 2001; Hacking, 1999). For instance, Parton (1979) charts the way that the assumedly pre-existing social condition of physical violence against children and young people came to be defined as “child abuse” in the UK, and then how “child abuse” came to be constructed as a different *kind* of problem at different points in time: for example the shift from a medico-social to a socio-legal framing. He notes the influence of factors such as key historical events, the status and actions of individuals and interest groups such as politicians and paediatricians, and the receptiveness of the media to specific types of story at specific times. Again, it is not that any given interpretation necessarily departed from the “facts” about harm to young people. It is rather that these facts might support more than one interpretation, with contingent factors determining which took precedence and when. Studying accounts like these, I wondered whether the influence of different contingent factors on the construction of “child abuse”, “domestic abuse” and “adult abuse” could account for the divergence between understandings of these problems, at a policy and legislative level and in research, which we had identified in Paper 1.

Alongside their intersection with the primarily US-based social problems literature, social constructionist ideas have also intersected with themes in European social theory including Foucauldian and related post-structuralist concepts of discourse (Miller, 2003; Parton, 2012; Parton and O'Byrne, 2000). In a post-structuralist sense, discourses are bodies of ideas and practices that grow up in particular societies and that are accorded the status of “truth” within those societies. They develop in ways that are discontinuous and disparate rather than unitary and progressive over time, and they are intricately connected with power. That is, a given society’s “truths” shape the ways that its members think and act; they dictate the ways of being and of understanding that will be given credence and those that will be discounted (Burr, 2003; Foucault, 1980; McHoul and Grace, 1993). Although a post-structuralist perspective rejects the idea of an underpinning “truth” against which discourses can be measured, Bacchi (1999) has argued that particular discourses can still be evaluated against their effects, for instance on individual behaviour and on social policies and practices.

Engagement with this range of constructionist ideas at the outset of the PhD project helped me to appreciate how understandings of “domestic abuse”, “child abuse” and “adult abuse” might have developed in UK policy, practice and research contexts in ways that have some internal consistency but are not entirely consistent with one another. In particular, these ideas freed me from the need to account for this lack of fit on the basis that one or more of these understandings is necessarily empirically flawed. Instead, an appreciation that no way of understanding and responding to the social world is merely a direct reflection of our empirical knowledge; that all ways of understanding are also mediated by available ways of thinking and of talking in a particular culture, at a particular time and in a particular sphere of expertise, has helped me to recognise that our culturally dominant constructions of social problems have a history and they have a politics (Burr, 2003; Keddell, 2011). Moreover, the concept of discourse emphasises that, not only are our understandings of social problems constructed, but so too are the ideas and practices with which we as a society respond to the problems we identify: that is, “protection” is as important to deconstruct as “abuse” (Parton, 2006, 2012).

I would bring these understandings more greatly to the fore if I were to write Paper 1 again. In particular, I would make clearer that the future research and discussions shown to be required by the literature review might be grouped into two conceptually distinguishable though intricately connected camps, namely:

1. More empirical research into abuse and protection from lifespan and comparative perspectives;
2. More comparison and contrast of the politics of constructions of abuse and protection in respect of different groups i.e. the power dynamics playing out in different ways of understanding and responding to these issues.

This distinction flows from a clearer standpoint, now, that an adequate critique of our constructions of “abuse” and “protection” at the macro-level of policy and legislation cannot proceed on the basis of assumedly “neutral” knowledge alone, but must also take account of the political and ethical sources of particular constructions, and their political and ethical effects (Bacchi, 1999; D'Cruz and Jones, 2004; Edwards et al., 1995).

My exploration of this expanded range of ideas corresponded with the beginning of my further analyses of the ASP study dataset. This work was to form the core of my PhD project, and was additional to and separate from my previous work on the ASP project itself (see Appendix Three). The further analyses grew out of two key observations, the first of which I have begun to describe above. Namely:

a)practitioners’ interpretations of key concepts in ASP varied quite significantly and did not always fit well with policy interpretations; and b)when we spoke about this to policy-makers and practitioners, there appeared to be a common assumption that this variation reflected badly on practitioners: i.e. that practitioners' understanding and compliance with policy was the issue here. However, this assumption did not seem to me to do justice to the complexity of the circumstances and responses that practitioners had recounted to us.

Therefore, my further analyses set out to examine the ambiguities, the uncertainties and the variations that we had noted in more detail, and to try to make some further sense of where they might have come from. I had a sense that the constructionist ideas with which I had begun to engage, and particularly their intersections with post-structuralist thought, would help to guide this further analytical work.

The three papers that follow chart the development of this exploration. The papers are presented together without further interlinking narrative because they flow so closely on from each other. Indeed, I originally planned to cover this material in a single paper, and it took me some time to pick the strands apart sufficiently to present them separately. Nevertheless, whilst the ideas were conceived together, these papers were written sequentially and over a considerable period of time. Because of this they go some way to chart my progress from an appreciation of the insights of the theories outlined above, to an appreciation also of their limitations in relation to these data, and of their relationship and tensions with other varieties of constructionist ideas. I say more about this in the continuation of this narrative below.

Paper 2:

Johnson, F. (2012) '**Problems with the term and concept of "abuse": Critical reflections on the Scottish Adult Support and Protection study'**, *British Journal of Social Work,* 42(5), 833-850.

Abstract:

This paper critically reflects on the Scottish Adult Support and Protection study (the ASP study), a research project conducted at a time when "adult protection" was understood in Scottish policies to be the professional response to "abuse". During the course of analysing the ASP study data, it became apparent that practitioners themselves did not necessarily construct "abuse" and "adult protection" concerns as coterminous categories. Some examples are recounted to illustrate the potentially more partial, less linear relationship between these categories in practice than in policy constructions. The paper concludes with suggestions for further research into professionals' constructions of "adult protection" concerns. It explains why such research would have continuing, if not greater, relevance in the context of recent Scottish policy moves to re-conceptualise adult protection as a response not to "abuse" but to "harm".

Paper 3:

Johnson, F. (2012) ‘**What is an “adult protection” issue? Victims, perpetrators and the professional construction of adult protection issues’**, *Critical Social Policy,* 32(2), 203-222.

Abstract:

Drawing on data from a Scottish research study, this paper explores the relationship of professionals’ perceptions about specific perpetrators and victims to their constructions of “adult protection” issues in practice. It finds that professionals’ perceptions of victim distress did not consistently coincide with the construction of adult protection issues, whilst the connection to any assessment of victims’ heightened vulnerability in specific cases was not clear. With respect to perpetrators, implicit practice rules were evidenced which differed from explicit policy criteria. In particular, there were different rules for relatives, staff and service user perpetrators, whilst harms attributed to institutions were de-emphasised. Explanations of the findings are advanced based on the complex power relations underpinning practice but unacknowledged in policies. More research is recommended to deepen this analysis in a changing policy context, to foreground service user perspectives, and to contextualise harms potentially resolvable through adult support and protection/safeguarding routes with respect to harms better addressed in other ways.

Paper 4:

Sherwood-Johnson, F. (2013) ‘**A different kind of practice? Meanings attached by practitioners to the idea of “adult protection”’**, *Journal of Social Work* published online ahead of print. DOI10.1177/1468017313479857

Abstract:

Summary: *This paper began with an observation made during re-analysis of the dataset from a study of Scottish adult support and protection practice. Namely, different practitioners could mean different things when they said they had been doing “adult protection” work. For this paper, therefore, practitioners’ conceptualisations of adult protection work were hypothesised inductively from the dataset, and refined into categories through a process of constant comparison, open and axial coding. The dataset comprised material from case files and practitioner interviews relating to 23 “adults at risk”.*

Findings: *When practitioners said they had been doing “adult protection” work, they could mean that: a)they perceived themselves to have been responding to abuse, harm or high risk; and/or b)they were adopting a certain formal, even coercive tone of work; and/or c)they had formally flagged the work as adult protection, including through the use of procedures. Practitioners drew on and combined these meanings in different ways. They also varied in the extent to which they saw adult protection as a distinctive type of practice and/or as different from what had gone before.*

Applications: *Support and protection work involves nuanced judgements about the nature and intentions of policy, about how these relate to particular situations and about how best to translate them into practice. Time and support is required for this complex work. Further research is needed to deepen understandings of the practice context, particularly with respect to risk. Policy-makers should engage with such research as they continue to develop adult protection/safeguarding policies.*

2.2.3 Refinement of theoretical perspective

I now offer some further comments about the development of my ideas over the course of the above three papers, as well as over the course of my subsequent reflections on them. I conceptualise my thought processes over this period as having involved a struggle between two broad approaches to making sense of my findings. Both approaches are present across all three of these papers; the primary development has been my recognition of these in an increasingly explicit way, enabling me to evaluate their relative merits in relation to this project. In the discussion below, I first summarise the type of thinking that I fell back on from time to time, but that I now consider to be less productive. I explain why I now consider this to be so. I then briefly outline some further connections that I drew with theory from the disciplines of social policy, sociology and social work respectively, as I continued to explore supplementary and/or alternative avenues of thought. The bodies of theory that I reference here have distinct roots and trajectories, though they have also intersected in a range of ways before. They combined for me to inform the second, more productive line of thinking that I summarise at the conclusion of this subsection.

As previously noted, I had approached my re-analyses of the ASP study dataset with an interest in the insights of the social problems literature, and of Foucauldian and related post-structuralist ideas. These ideas had enabled me to conceptualise ASP as a way of thinking and of practising that is culturally and historically contingent, that places limits on the ways that stakeholders think and act, and that needs to be evaluated in terms of its utility as well as its grounding in empirical “truth” (Bacchi, 1999; Rossiter, 2000). These ideas had helped me to problematise “abuse”, “harm” and “ASP” and to ask questions about the sources of these concepts. They had been useful to my thinking about the ways that policies develop and the ways that they relate to one another.

However, the essential findings of my re-analyses were that policy-level ways of describing ASP, its nature and requirements, bore a perplexing lack of resemblance to practice. Moreover, this lack of resemblance seemed to stem from a necessarily closer engagement with the complexities of presenting situations and of the context in which the work was taking place by practitioners than policy-makers. Because the literature on which I had been drawing was primarily concerned with the content of large-scale frameworks for understanding, and less focused on how these are reproduced, challenged and changed in the practices and interactions of individuals, I struggled to locate the conceptual tools to make sense of these findings from within this literature (D'Cruz, 2004).

What ensued for a while was something of a theoretical impasse. In order to move forward from this point, it was tempting to fall back on some less sophisticated modes of making sense. In particular, and as I have noted above, one thing that prompted my study was a rejection of the prevalent assumption that, if there are mismatches between policy and practice, practice must be at fault. A tempting conclusion to adopt instead, then, was that *policy* must be at fault, in the sense of having failed to understand the nature of the problem and its context. I stand by my arguments that further research into the detail of the practice context can inform more *useful* policy understandings. However, the straightforward conclusion that practice complexities are evidence of policy shortcomings is problematic, in ways I am now able to articulate more clearly.

At the root of the problem with this line of thinking, as I would understand it now, is a flawed conceptualisation of the nature of policy, as well as of the relationships between policy and practice. Indeed, it is in the nature of policy to offer schematised models of the social world, for the purpose of agreeing some shared actions, just as it is in the nature of practice to deal with individual circumstances that are necessarily more nuanced than policy categories. Whilst we can challenge policies on the basis of offering schematisations that are not helpful, therefore (Bacchi, 1999), it makes little sense to challenge them for offering schematisations *per se*. Furthermore, it is problematic from a constructionist perspective merely to characterise practice understandings as “correct” and policy understandings as “incorrect” (Best, 1989a). This conclusion disregards the premise that *every* way of understanding and describing is something more than a reflection of an empirical “reality”: that is, the role of discourse in its broadest sense in acting on and shaping the social world. It also overlooks the idea of multiple, competing versions of the social world, and the idea that power relations are always playing out in the version(s) that gain dominance and are acted upon. Just as policy versions of ASP shape the social world in certain ways at the expense of potential other versions, then, so too do practitioners’ versions of any given circumstance with which they are involved. This means that the challenge is not merely to determine whose version is "correct", but more importantly to speculate on how we can best work with these inevitably complex processes of continual meaning-making.

As I have noted above, a range of additional theoretical material helped me to move back towards these more productive ways of thinking. Each of these further bodies of theory functioned as a "lens" (D'Cruz, 2004), rendering some part of my findings and their implications clearer. The lenses contrast in some ways, and they overlap in some ways, generating ideas about power, knowledge and meaning, for instance, that connect with each other and that also connect back to the thinking outlined in Section 2.2.2 above. I introduce these bodies of theory below, and I elaborate on their connections at the conclusion of this subsection.

The first body of literature that helped to re-orientate me to the complexities impinging on my project comes from social policy. There is a long tradition within social policy theory and research of moving beyond understandings of policy formulation as top-down, instrumental responses to objectively established need. Instead, policy formulation has been characterised as an incremental process of conflict and compromise, which takes place at a number of levels of decision-making, each affected by unique contextual factors (Bacchi, 1999; Becker and Bryman, 2004; D'Cruz, 2004). The issue of the different levels of policy-making is particularly significant because it helps to dissolve the dichotomy between “policy” and “practice” that has characterised this narrative to this point. Instead, analyses that adopt a “bottom-up” model of policy implementation emphasise the ways that policies are effectively made by their front-line interpreters or “street-level bureaucrats” (Ellis, 2011; Lipsky, 1980; Prior and Barnes, 2011). A key concept in this body of literature is the *discretion* that practitioners are able to exercise in implementing policy, for instance because they and/or their agencies disagree with policy intentions and/or because of the pressure to maintain manageable workloads and protect resources. At the risk of oversimplification, then, these perspectives are especially useful in explaining how known policy intentions can be more or less knowingly subverted (Barnes and Prior, 2009). There are clear resonances here with some of my findings: for instance, the policy intention to draw a range of harms into an assumedly benign, formalised system for considering interventions and supports, versus the wish of some practitioners to divert some situations from these formalised systems.

There are themes in my findings, however, that extend beyond knowingly-exercised discretion. These themes might perhaps be better characterised as divergences in the meanings attached to certain concepts: for instance, what it means to “abuse”; what it means to “protect” and what it means to be “vulnerable”. Where the assumption is that such concepts do or should have shared meanings across different contexts and at different levels of decision-making, these struggles over meaning might not always be consciously waged nor recognised. For instance, when practitioners in the ASP study commented on what they understood “adult protection” to be all about, they did not tend to present this as a subject of particular contention. However, looking across the dataset, it is evident that different practitioners did mean different things when they drew on this concept.

Ideas from interpretative sociology have helped me to think through what might be happening in this kind of example. In contrast to a focus on large-scale discourses understood to constrain the meaning-making of individuals and social groups, interpretative sociology has a focus on interactions between individuals and the variations and complexities of meaning-making on this scale. Two key variants of interpretative sociology are symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology. Symbolic interactionism is grounded on the understanding that our social behaviour is not a direct response to stimuli in the social world, but is instead a response to the meanings we attach to those stimuli. Shared meanings, or symbols, facilitate social interactions, and are often encapsulated in the language that we use (Blumer, 1962). Ethnomethodology sees everyday practices of meaning-making as actually constituting social phenomena (de Montigny, 2009). For instance, for one branch of the sociology of social problems that draws on ethnomethodology, the object of study is not the category of problem as it appears in culturally dominant discourses, but how individual sets of circumstances are allocated to that category in practice (Holstein and Miller, 2003). Such processes of allocation are not viewed as mechanistic acts, but instead as “accomplishments”, always informed by local, contextualised practicalities and ways of making meaning, and each one forming part of the dynamic web of interactions that constitute problem categories, reproduce or alter them. In this respect, interpretative sociology is not to be understood as dichotomous with the "macro-level" constructionism to which I have previously referred, because it is a way of connecting large- and small-scale processes of construction, rather than of privileging the latter (Martin and Dennis, 2010; Stevens et al., 2013). Interpretative sociological approaches are also particularly helpful for my project, because they transcend a focus solely on policy and its implementers, reminding us of a broader range of contributors to meaning-making interactions, including adults at risk, carers, relatives and perpetrators of harm in any given circumstance. This is a point which is noted to some degree in Paper 3 and revisited in Chapter Four below.

Connected with ideas about meaning construction in ground-level interactions, on the one hand, and with ideas about the inter-relationship of policy and practice, on the other, are some bodies of literature about knowledge for practice within the discipline of social work. Specifically, it has long been argued that a "modernist" conception of knowledge is inadequate for social work (Fook, 2000): that is, an understanding of social work as the application of universalising knowledge about "effective" interventions, preferably derived from positivistic research, to identified instances of uncontested "problems" (Parton, 2003; Shaw, 2009; Webb, 2001). On the contrary, the need to intervene in unique situations, in which the full circumstances are frequently unknown, and the definitions of "problems" and "effective" interventions may be irresolvably contested, has led to an expanded conceptualisation of the types of knowledge that social workers need (Glasby and Beresford, 2006; Taylor and White, 2006). Literature within this tradition has focused in particular on the capacity to reflect in and on practice, in order to build, test and adapt ground-level theories that acknowledge the specifics of context and the place and impact of the practitioner themselves in any intervention (Schon, 1983; Thompson and Thompson, 2008). A reflexive understanding of knowledge as contextualised and contested, and a reflexive ability to evaluate knowledge use from this perspective, has also been proposed as essential to good practice (Fook, 2000; Sheppard et al., 2000; Taylor and White, 2000). Such proposals have great resonance with the theories from social policy and sociology about the nature of social interactions, in general, and of policy formulation and implementation processes, in particular, that I have outlined above. They also resonate with some of the implications of my findings for practice, as opposed to policy, that I have begun to draw out, particularly in Paper 4.

One further body of ideas that has helped me to develop these strands of my thinking, and which has roots and resonances in all of the disciplines drawn upon above, concerns an ethic of care perspective on human services and human relationships. An ethics of care is a way of conceptualising ethics that challenges some of the fundamental premises of many contemporary Western social welfare policies (Kittay, 1999; Tronto, 1998), not least in the UK (Barnes, 2011; Webb, 2006). Specifically, an ethics of care contends that ethics are worked out in the detail of human relationships, as opposed to being reducible to a set of abstract principles that can be applied to everyone (Banks, 2012; M. Barnes, 2012). Human beings are understood to be necessarily dependent on care, notwithstanding that this dependency varies in level and type from individual to individual and across the life course, and society is understood to comprise a collection of relationships rather than a collection of autonomous individuals (Kittay, 1999; Tronto, 1998). An ethics of care perspective can support an analysis of the human services at a number of levels, including the critique of policy (Sevenhuijsen, 1998), a point to which I return in Paper 5 below. In terms of its insights into direct practice, however, an ethics of care resonates with the bodies of theory outlined above because of its location of the detailed work of knowing and doing the right or “care full” thing (M. Barnes, 2012) *necessarily* in ground-level practice judgements, as opposed to in policy directives, “facts” derived from empirical research or abstract principles alone (Tronto, 1998). Indeed, Parton (2003) explicitly links ethics of care thinking with social constructionist thinking, characterising both as promising informants of contemporary social work practice, because of their shared emphases on the relationality of knowledge, plurality and negotiated meanings rather than on notions of an absolute “truth”.

In summary, then, a rich body of research and theory extends constructionist principles from the study of culturally dominant meanings to the study of micro-interactions, showing how meaning is constructed at this level and how its construction is connected with power. The ideas I have drawn from the social policy implementation literature can be envisioned as nested within the broader ideas I have drawn from interpretative sociology, which mirror but also extend their themes. In particular, these theories from interpretative sociology extend the arena of power struggles from consciously disputed goals to explicit and implicit struggles over meaning, and they extend the role of participant in these struggles beyond those formally charged with formulating and/or implementing policy. Completing the "bricolage" (Kincheloe, 2001), the insights I have drawn from theories about knowledge for social work and ethics of care thinking can be envisioned as translations of the above ideas about power, meaning and the contingency and relationality of knowledge into ideas about how social workers and others involved in care/support should practice, including the knowledge and skills they need. Specifically, these theories propose that social work and care is as much a practical-moral activity as a technical-rational one (Braye and Preston-Shoot, 2006; Broadhurst et al., 2010; Parton, 2000), and that practitioners need the ability to recognise and work with competing perspectives and meanings (Taylor and White, 2000), as well as with inevitable uncertainties (Parton, 1998; Taylor and White, 2006), as much as they need more technical forms of knowledge.

In combination, these insights help make sense of the disjunctures shown by my findings to exist between practitioners, and between practice and written policy conceptualisations of ASP issues. That these disjunctures necessarily evidence misunderstandings and/or misjudgements, *either* of policy-makers or of practitioners, is suggested by these insights to be a limited and limiting conclusion to draw. Of greater promise is to conclude that meaning-making is inherent in ASP practice, as in other areas of practice, and to consider the implications of this for supporting policy development and implementation at every level. I critique these conclusions and the routes by which I have reached them in Chapter Three of this narrative. I consider their implications for policy and practice further in Chapter Four. Before I do this, however, I first introduce the final paper of this submission, which picks up on and develops some of my earlier ideas, and in doing so adds another layer to my thinking as described above.

2.2.4 Reconsidering policy and the critique of policy

When I originally planned my PhD, all of the papers I envisaged except the literature review were to be based on the ASP study data. I also began with a more diffuse focus, having included a range of further analyses into the ways that investigations and interventions played out, following a single paper specifically about problem definition. What I have written does not match that plan. In part this is because my one paper about problem definition became three, as noted above. In part it is because, once these papers were written, a new legislative context had been in place in Scotland for more than three years. I had thought about this legislation deeply, I had delivered training about it, I had been involved in a range of further inquiry about it (Altrum Risk Research Team, 2011; Brookes et al., 2012; Daniel et al., 2013; Mackay et al., 2011; MARS, 2011, 2012; Sherwood-Johnson et al., 2013) and I had discussed it with practitioners, academics, service users and others many times. I had thoughts and worries about the direction of legislative and policy developments, moreover, that seemed to me to connect with the concerns I had been drawing out and developing in Papers 2-4, more clearly than the previously planned further analyses now seemed to connect. This is what I wanted to write about now.

The fifth paper presented here, then, is a policy critique. It is not based on the ASP study data, nor on the policy context that existed at that time, but on the current policy context, following implementation of the ASPSA in 2008 (see section 2.1). It is not based on practitioners’ interpretations of contemporary policy, moreover, about which I consider more research now needs to be done, but on the framework for understanding laid down by policy itself. This paper represents a shift in my subject matter and approach relative to the foregoing papers, then, and it opens up a range of directions for future inquiry that are elaborated in Chapter Four. I comment on some of the continuities with the work presented above, however, when I take up this narrative again below.

Paper 5:

Sherwood-Johnson, F. (2012) '**Constructions of "vulnerability" in comparative perspective: Scottish protection policies and the trouble with "adults at risk"**',
Disability and Society, published online ahead of print.
DOI:10.1080/09687599.2012.732541

Abstract:

This paper places Scottish Adult Support and Protection (ASP) policy in the context of debates about the nature of 'vulnerability' and its usefulness as a defining concept in law and social policy. It examines the construction of 'adults at risk' in ASP policy, using a comparison with the construction of children in Scottish child protection policy, on the one hand, and women in Scottish domestic abuse policy, on the other, to illuminate the nature of the vulnerability that ASP considers itself to be addressing. It then problematises this construction, drawing both on the social model of disability and on an ethic of care. It concludes that current ASP policy remains underpinned by unhelpful assumptions about disabled people, older people and people with mental or physical health problems. A more inclusive understanding of vulnerability would be more empowering to these people and others, in policies concerned with mistreatment and abuse.

In respect of continuities with the previous papers, an initial point to note is the degree of symmetry between this paper and Paper 1. Specifically, both these papers focus on "macro-level" meanings such as those set down in national policies, legislation and some research projects, though Paper 5 is more explicit than Paper 1 about its restriction to this level of meaning-making, evidencing the progression in my thinking about the interrelationship between policy and practice as described in earlier sections of this narrative. Paper 5 also picks up on an implication that flowed from Paper 1, or more specifically from my subsequent reflections on Paper 1, as noted in section 2.2.2. That is, Paper 5 builds on the need I had previously identified, for the construction of ASP issues to be compared and contrasted with the construction of abuse and protection issues in respect of different groups, from a perspective that acknowledges the theoretical and political aspects of such constructions and their variations.

As I have indicated above, however, Paper 5 also *felt* connected to Papers 2-4. I have spent considerable time reflecting on the nature of this connection; certainly, I had not worked out a way to articulate it when I was writing Paper 5 itself. I would now trace it back to the conceptual foundations of this PhD project: specifically, my concern that ASP policy both before and after the ASPSA appeared to be proceeding on the assumption that we broadly know what “the problem” is (see also Bowes and Daniel, 2010), and my sense that greater caution is perhaps required in this. My exploration of meaning-making in practice in Papers 2-4 was one angle from which to interrogate this policy-level assumption. My comparison of problem construction in contemporary ASP policy with problem construction in related policies was another. Neither line of inquiry has concluded that ASP policies were/are “wrong” in some absolute, empirical sense; though Paper 5 is more critical of policy than the other papers. Rather, one conclusion of both lines of inquiry is that understandings of “the problem” are not solely based on neutral, de-contextualised information about situations or sets of situations, and there needs to be a critical awareness of this, and of potential alternative constructions and their likely impacts, in policy-making and in practice.

Furthermore, the focus on the concept of “vulnerability” in Paper 5 is not the only perspective from which current ASP policy might be explored and critiqued. Rather, it was chosen based on concerns I had been considering in my writing and thinking for some time. For instance, in Paper 3, the ways that practitioners were defining “vulnerability”, and the relationships of this to their identification of ASP concerns, was one of the issues I set out to explore. In that paper, I concluded that further data would be required to address these questions about practice more conclusively, though the seeming absence of mechanisms to discuss, record and justify judgements about “vulnerability” prior to the implementation of the ASPSA did lend some weight to fears about uncritical interpretations of this concept (Brown, 2011; Disability Agenda Scotland, 2006; Enable Scotland, 2006; Fawcett, 2009). Whilst further research into practice interpretations of “vulnerability”, inability to safeguard oneself (ASPSA, s.3(1)(a)), “harm” and “risk” continues to be needed in the contemporary Scottish legislative context (Mackay et al., 2011; Stewart, 2012), this work would benefit from engagement with the cautious approach to *policy*-level constructions of such concepts shown to be required by Paper 5. Furthermore, the links drawn between “disability, mental disorder, illness or physical or mental infirmity” (ASPSA, s.3(1)(c)) and “vulnerability” are common enough to other UK policy contexts (Department of

Health, 2000; National Assembly for Wales, 2000; Northern Ireland Social Services Board, 2006) for the debates in Paper 5 to also have some purchase there.

There are also additional connections to be drawn and more closely examined between the discussion in Paper 5 and broader discussions about developments in welfare services and their underpinning rationales. In particular, the interaction of ideas about vulnerability and protection with ideas about human rights and citizenship is a burgeoning area of research and debate (Beckett, 2006; BGOP/AEA, 2004; Fyson and Kitson, 2010; Hough, 2012; Mackay, 2011a; Stewart, 2012; Stewart and Atkinson, 2012), and some of this territory interrelates and/or exists in tension with the ethics of care theorising that I have begun to draw upon, both in relation to ASP practice and in relation to policy (Barnes, 2007; V. Barnes, 2012; Boyle, 2008; Brannelly, 2007; Sevenhuijsen, 1998). I could not explore these ideas to the extent that each merited within the confines of Paper 5, and the connections left uncovered, or glanced over only briefly, is the primary limitation of this paper in my view. These broader connections continue to inform my thinking and my plans for further research, however, as set out in Chapter Four.

2.3 Summary of project development and findings

In this final section of this chapter, I tie together and summarise the above narrative, setting out in brief terms what I have done over the course of the PhD project, and how my thinking has developed over this period. I also summarise my findings, as presented in the papers, in the context of the PhD project research questions, which are re-stated below. This summary functions as a foundation for the critique and further discussion developed in the later chapters of this narrative.

My argument throughout this PhD project has been that the remit of ASP; that is, what is understood to count as an ASP concern; can benefit from examination from constructionist perspectives. As the work has proceeded I have developed a more nuanced understanding of the range of perspectives that I have called "constructionist". In particular, I have drawn upon perspectives that focus on large-scale policy and dominant cultural discourses, that stress the political, historical and social contingency of meaning-making on this scale, and that emphasise how these frameworks place restrictions on the meaning-making of individuals and on which/whose meanings are accepted as legitimate in any given historical, social and cultural context. I have also drawn on perspectives that emphasise the complex ways that individuals make meaning, notwithstanding these partially constraining frameworks, and the ways that this ground-level meaning-making shapes the experience of policies in practice.

I have conducted specific inquiries into problem construction in Scottish ASP, and I have drawn meaning from and connections between the different aspects of these inquiries with reference to a range of theoretical literature as discussed above. The core of the work has been a re-analysis of data from a study of professionals' accounts and written records of ASP practice prior to the implementation of the ASPSA. Following on from this, I have conducted a comparative policy critique that examines how the ASPSA itself constructs “the problem”, with a particular focus on its demarcation, via ideas about “vulnerability”, of the people whom the problem affects.

The research questions for the PhD project were:

- What kinds of circumstances count as ASP concerns?
- *How* do these kinds of circumstances come to count as ASP concerns? Specifically:
    - How are the problem(s) to which ASP responds constructed in policy? How does this compare with related policy constructions (particularly of domestic abuse and of child protection issues)?
    - How do professionals allocate particular sets of circumstances to the category of ASP in practice?

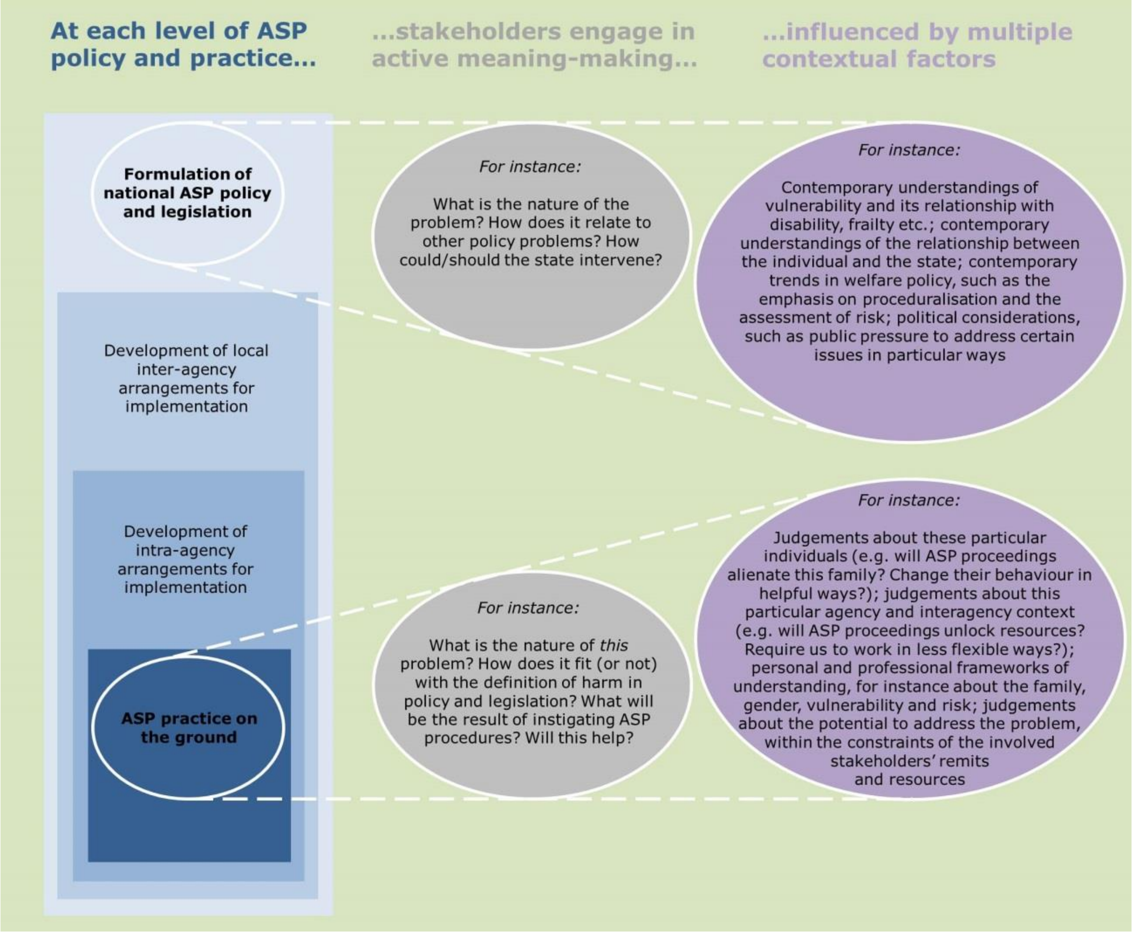
However, rather than an enumeration of the kinds of circumstances that did and did not count for practitioners as ASP concerns, the most significant findings of the reanalyses of the ASP study data highlight the *processes* by which circumstances came to be counted as ASP concerns. Indeed, a decision to categorise a particular set of circumstances as an ASP concern did not appear to be based purely on a judgement about the nature of the presenting circumstances, and in particular the correspondence of these circumstances with definitions of “abuse”. Instead, a decision to categorise a set of circumstances as an ASP concern appeared also to be influenced by the results such a categorisation was expected to achieve. For instance, would it raise the priority of the situation in the eyes of people who could help to resolve it? Would it unlock resources? Would it alienate the service user and/or the family carer(s)? Would it necessitate the adoption of a different kind of practice, for instance one that was more procedure-bound, formalised or even heavy-handed than other ways of practising? Variations between practitioners in the ways that they constructed ASP issues were proposed by my analyses to be linked to the contextual specificity of these fine-grained judgements: for instance, the likely reaction of *this* family; the approach to ASP in *this* local authority, agency and team. These variations were also proposed to be linked to each practitioner's understanding of the nature of ASP itself. Whilst the roots of these different understandings are a subject for further research, it is notable that many were linked to practitioners' different perceptions of broader trends within society and/or within their profession: for instance, ASP as a reflection, or not, of increased bureaucracy or proceduralisation; ASP as a different approach to risk.

As well as the variations in problem constructions between practitioners and sets of circumstances, which were not accounted for by the written policies then in place, there were also broad commonalities across the practitioners and sets of circumstances studied, which were also not accounted for by policies. In particular, harmful circumstances that were attributed to the actions or omissions of institutions were less likely than harmful circumstances attributed to individuals to be constructed as ASP concerns. Furthermore, of those concerns attributed to individuals, construction as an ASP concern was particularly likely where the individual was a member of care or support staff. These broad commonalities could again be linked to practitioners' strategic judgements: that is, situations that they felt they had the power to address were constructed as ASP issues more readily than situations that were beyond their immediate control.

Whilst these analyses show that the identification of "the problem" on a micro-level scale was more than a matter of establishing an empirical fact, my review of the comparative and lifespan literature, and my comparative critique of contemporary ASP policy, demonstrate the additional need for caution and considered critique of policy-level constructions of "the problem". My particular focus has been on constructions of "vulnerability", though other aspects of problem construction in ASP policy discourses could form the focus of future work. My comparison has identified an assumed division between "autonomy" and "vulnerability" underpinning ASP policy and its positioning relative to other contemporary Scottish policies concerned with protection and abuse. I have suggested that policy approaches based on the idea of this division might be less helpful than alternatives based on a conceptualisation of vulnerability and inter-dependence drawn from an ethic of care.

In conclusion, I have argued that circumstances do not come to count as ASP concerns purely because of their essential characteristics, and the fit of these characteristics with definitions (e.g. of "abuse"/"harm" to "vulnerable adults"/"adults at risk") that are straightforward to apply in practice and are beyond contestation on political grounds. Rather, coming to count as an ASP concern is a process of meaning-making at a number of nested levels. A simplified view of the interconnections between some of these levels is presented diagrammatically in Figure 1 below. In the following chapter I consider the strengths and limitations of the evidence on which I have based these arguments, and the strengths and limitations of the methodology of the PhD project as a whole.

Figure 1: Summary of project findings



For instance:

What is the nature of the problem? How does it relate to other policy problems? How could/should the state intervene?

For instance:

Contemporary understandings of vulnerability and its relationship with disability, frailty etc.; contemporary understandings of the relationship between the individual and the state; contemporary trends in welfare policy, such as the emphasis on proceduralisation and the assessment of risk; political considerations, such as public pressure to address certain issues in particular ways

For instance:

What is the nature of *this* problem? How does it fit (or not) with the definition of harm in policy and legislation? What will be the result of instigating ASP procedures? Will this help?

For instance:

Judgements about these particular individuals (e.g. will ASP proceedings alienate this family? Change their behaviour in helpful ways?); judgements about this particular agency and interagency context (e.g. will ASP proceedings unlock resources? Require us to work in less flexible ways?); personal and professional frameworks of understanding, for instance about the family, gender, vulnerability and risk; judgements about the potential to address the problem, within the constraints of the involved stakeholders' remits and resources

3 METHODOLOGICAL CRITIQUE

The purpose of this chapter is to critically discuss the methodology and consider the strengths and limitations of the PhD project. There are a number of levels at which to situate these critical discussions and, indeed, a number of ways in which I have already begun to develop them. Each of the papers contains some aspect of self-critique, as do many sections of the narrative above. For instance, I have described the way that Paper 1 represented a pivotal point in the thinking that inspired this project, whilst also evidencing limitations in my clarity of conceptualisation of certain key issues in sections 2.2.1 and 2.2.2. I have critically discussed my approach to this contextualising document itself in section 2.2. I will not repeat myself here, but will focus instead on those levels of critique that still require some comment and some consolidation. I consider these to fall into three groups:

a) A methodological critique of my re-analyses of the ASP study data i.e. a critique of the underpinnings of Papers 2-4. This covers a number of issues raised by debates about secondary analysis and its distinction from primary analysis, including some ethical issues.

b) A critique of the coherence of the project and the gaps in its evidence-base, given the shifts in my level of focus, mode of inquiry and the legislative and policy context over the course of the work. My discussion of the relationship between the re-analyses reported in Papers 2-4 and the conceptual analysis that began in Paper 1 and was developed in Paper 5 is consolidated here.

c) A critique of the place of theory in the PhD project.

A number of implications for further research flow directly from the above discussions, and these are noted as they arise. The implications for further research are also drawn together more fully in Chapter Four.

3.1 Critique of the ASP study re-analyses

In this section I address some practical, epistemological and ethical issues arising from my further work with the ASP study dataset for the purposes of the PhD project. The methodological literature about secondary data analysis in qualitative research also addresses these issues and I develop my discussion with reference to this literature. However, I note my ambivalence about the status of the PhD project as a secondary analysis at various points in this discussion, and I draw my reflections on this specific issue together in section 3.1.4.

3.1.1 Secondary analysis and the PhD project

Heaton (1998, para 2) defines secondary analysis as “the use of existing data, collected for the purposes of a prior study, in order to pursue a research interest which is distinct from that of the original work”. The analysis might involve a new question or a new perspective on the original question (Hinds et al., 1997). Many discussions of secondary analysis in qualitative research refer exclusively to analyses conducted by people other than the original researchers (e.g. Fielding and Fielding, 2000; Gillies and

Edwards, 2005). However, several writers have discussed secondary analysis with reference to their own data, usually revisited after a substantial period of time (e.g. Grinyer, 2009; Mauthner et al., 1998; Silva, 2007).

My efforts to situate my own planned reanalyses of the ASP study dataset relative to the debates raised in this literature led me early on in the PhD project to consider whether my proposals constituted secondary research. I could articulate a number of arguments why they did *not*, and I think that these arguments still apply today. Specifically, it is debatable whether the research interests I have pursued are, in Heaton's (1998, para 2) words, "distinct from that of the original work". Certainly, the research interests we addressed in our report to the Scottish Government (Hogg et al., 2009a, 2009b) were distinct from those of the PhD project. However, the ASP study as a whole was exploratory and engaged with more issues than could be represented in a single report for any one audience. Our broad aim to examine adult protection practice encompassed the specific focus of the PhD project just as easily as the specific focus of the Scottish Government report, and either analysis might actually have been completed first. Moreover, my ideas and strategies for further analysis began to develop in parallel with the completion of the ASP study, so no period of intervening time clearly marked the "primary analysis" off from the "secondary analysis".

Nevertheless, arguments could also be made that the PhD project *did* constitute a secondary analysis. Some of the challenges raised in the literature specifically in relation to secondary analysis certainly appeared to me to be of key relevance for consideration in relation to this project. I will expand upon these under two headings below. The first relates to epistemological issues, including some practical issues with a bearing on epistemological issues, and the second relates to ethics.

3.1.2 Epistemological issues in secondary analysis

A number of challenges for secondary analysis identified within the literature are argued to be ameliorated where the secondary analyst is a member of the “primary” research team. For instance, a primary researcher will know details of the ways in which the data were generated, including the reasons for any missing data, whether or not these have been explicitly documented (Hammersley, 1997; Hinds et al., 1997; Thorne, 1994). Based on the premise that qualitative data are reflexively produced by researchers and participants in collaboration, it has also been argued that primary researchers have a relationship with and understanding of the data that third parties cannot recreate (Gillies and Edwards, 2005; Mauthner et al., 1998). To treat data instead as discrete entities, which can be imported to and analysed in another context, has been called “naively realist” (Mauthner et al., 1998, p.743).

Notwithstanding the above, practical and epistemological difficulties have also been associated with secondary analysis by primary researchers. For instance, Mauthner et al. (1998) describe their respective attempts to perform secondary analyses of their own data, all of which they felt were unsatisfactory, because they had moved on in terms of their personal circumstances and theoretical perspectives from the periods during which these data were generated. The issue of a different theoretical and/or epistemological perspective confounding secondary analysis is one that merits some particular discussion in relation to my PhD study. This is because the evolving theoretical framework that I have described in this document, and from which I have tried to view the ASP study data, was not a part of the genesis of the ASP project itself. Nor was it an explicit part of my own thinking as I contributed to the generation of these data.

To consider the implications of this, I should like first briefly to revisit the ASP study, its aims and the perspective that it took. As discussed above, in the papers and in Appendix Three below, the ASP study used documentary analysis and interviews with professionals to examine contemporary ASP practice: that is, what was being done in response to the abuse of adults, and how professionals accounted for its being done this way. We read case files first and then conducted individual interviews with each professional involved in that case. We were interested in differences of view, for instance about the best ways to approach the case, and conflicts of information, for instance about the dates or decisions of meetings and case conferences, because of the insights these gave us into inter-agency collaboration and communication in particular. However, a major function of the interviews was to triangulate information about what had “really happened”, and to clarify errors in our emerging chronologies due to misremembered details, miscommunications and problems with case file recording. The chronologies we put together, then, aimed to describe the cases using the same kinds of units of meaning that guidelines and procedures might use: for instance, when an investigation was initiated (or the rationale for its not being initiated); who was involved and what was decided in an initial referral discussion; what the elements of the protection plan were and when and how it would be reviewed (Department of Health, 2000; Scottish Government, 2008).

However, this is not to imply that we did not engage critically with the limitations of this information about “what really happened”. For instance, to admit the possibility of establishing that a “vulnerable adults case conference” was held on a particular date which concluded that abuse had occurred, was never equivalent to assuming that objective criteria of “vulnerability” and “abuse”, consistent across time and place, existed and corresponded unequivocally to the “facts” of this case. Because of our criticality in this respect, I consider that the difference in perspective between the ASP study and the PhD study is better conceptualised as a difference of emphasis than an absolute epistemological and/or ontological incompatibility. Indeed, the suggestion that the units of meaning used by guidelines and procedures might not be the only lens through which to make sense of ASP practice emerged *from* the richness of our data, as I have recounted above and in Papers 2-4, rather than being imposed upon it retrospectively. Clearly, then, an epistemological perspective such as that taken by the ASP study does not obscure the generation of data that speaks to an epistemological perspective such as that adopted by the PhD study.

An appreciation of the way that the second perspective grew out of the ASP study data, moreover, and an understanding that pointing this out constitutes part of the aim of the papers, is vital to a consideration of the limitations of this work. This is particularly the case for Paper 2, which demonstrates that the concept of “abuse” was not linked in consistent ways to practitioners’ decisions about the need for an ASP response. The paper does not attempt to comment on the full range of meanings that practitioners attached to the concept of “abuse”, however, or the full range of connections that they drew between the concept of “abuse” and the concept of “ASP”, because a study designed in a different way would be required to explore this. Similarly, the data facilitate a fuller examination of some of the questions posed by Paper 3 than others, with particular inconclusiveness remaining about the adults’ own perspectives, the nature of practitioners’ judgements about “vulnerability”, and the relationship of these judgements to the identification of ASP concerns. Likewise, Paper 4 demonstrates that practitioners did not all mean the same thing when they talked about “ASP”, and it sets out what some of the meanings that they drew on were. However, it cannot argue that this was a comprehensive range of meanings, nor pronounce on the frequency with which each meaning arose, because the data are only indicative in respect of this research interest: that is, no attempt was made to seek out such meanings directly or comprehensively during the generation of these data.

Viewed in these terms, a significant part of the work of Papers 2-4 can be characterised as the raising of new questions, their preliminary exploration, and the systematic documentation of the ways that these data show them to be important questions. They are questions that probably arose more clearly, moreover, because they were allowed to arise obliquely: asking practitioners about the fit of ASP policy with practice meanings, directly and in the abstract, would likely have garnered less rich information. Nevertheless, I do note below some features of the ASP study that limit the usefulness of the data it generated to my subsequent inquiries: or how, as Blaxter (2007, para 4.2) puts it, “making things visible means making other things invisible”.

First, the ASP study spent significant amounts of time and resources in establishing details of interventions and exchanges that would be less central to a study purely of the ways that practitioners were conceptualising their work and its underpinning rationales. For pragmatic reasons, then, the kinds of data of present interest to me were limited by our concurrent interest in many other types of data. A good example of this is the fact, noted above and in Paper 4 itself, that not all interviewees spoke about the meanings they attached to the concept of ASP, nor were they prompted to do so in this study. A study designed specifically to explore practitioners’ meanings would find a way to access this information in a more systematic way. Second, the study accessed retrospective accounts as opposed to negotiations of meaning in real-time, and it did not capture how a range of stakeholders, including service users in particular, contributed to the detail of these negotiations. What we accessed were selected people’s accounts of the outcomes of such negotiations, which tells us something about meaning-making in ASP, but leaves a further range of nuances unexplored. Third, the dataset comprises detailed notes and verbatim extracts compiled on a laptop by a member of the research team during each interview, with supplementary comments added by myself, as the interviewer, as soon as possible afterwards, rather than full transcripts of entire interviews. This was felt to be sufficient for our purposes in the ASP study, and to be more acceptable to our interviewees than audio recording this material (BSA, 2002). However, clearly a more fine-grained analysis of meaning-making would be supported by a more precise recording of interviewees' narratives. Chapter Four builds on these limitations to propose new directions for future research. In the following section I turn to debates about secondary analysis with a specifically ethical dimension.

3.1.3 Ethical issues in secondary analysis

The ASP study worked with large amounts of sensitive material, and information about the arrangements for access and informed consent is given in the papers, as well as in the full report of the ASP study (Hogg et al., 2009a). We undertook to store the data securely on a password-protected computer system and/or in locked filing cabinets, to keep personal information confidential unless our level of concern about an individual or professional practice required us to report this, and to disseminate the findings in an anonymised way (BSA, 2002). These undertakings in relation to confidentiality and anonymity continued to apply to the PhD project.

In addition, I thought carefully about informed consent in relation to the PhD project as a distinct piece of work. This is because specific ethical issues arise in situations where the respondents to a primary study did not explicitly consent to their data's secondary use (Bishop, 2007). However, I found it difficult to say definitively whether the PhD study should count as a primary or a secondary analysis in relation to these important issues; the debate felt similar to my deliberations about epistemological perspectives, as set out above. Specifically, I felt that the broad aims and interests we outlined in requesting our original permissions from gatekeepers, and direct consents from participants, already encompassed the aims of the PhD project. However, I was keen not to foreclose this debate in ways that worked to my advantage, and it was the subject of a number of discussions with my supervisors, one of whom was the Principal Investigator on the ASP project, and with the Chair of the Ethics Committee at the University of Stirling.

The resulting consensus that further permissions and consents were not required was related to a number of pragmatic considerations as much as it was based on an absolute distinction between primary and secondary research. First, as there was no prolonged time gap to separate the first and second analyses, we felt that our key contacts at the senior level of each agency, our professional respondents and the adults at risk themselves might well struggle to understand the necessity for any further approach for permission or consent. Moreover, whilst attention to securing proper informed consent is clearly a significant ethical requirement, potentially confusing and/or irritating respondents has ethical implications too (Grinyer, 2009).

Some of the ethical permissions for the ASP study, particularly from NHS Caldicott Guardians, took many months to be obtained, presumably because of pressure and prioritisation of other work. Another approach to these gatekeepers, placing further demands on their time and attention for what might be perceived as permission to disseminate the existing work, could well have alienated them and encouraged *withdrawal* of permission (Wiles et al., 2005, no page number, cited in Grinyer, 2009, p.2). This would have had implications for the adults at risk we studied and our professional interviewees, whose substantial gifts of time and information were given on the understanding that they would be used to maximal good effect. Moreover, further approaches to the adults at risk themselves would not actually have been possible at all, because of the commitment of time that would be required from those social work staff who made the initial approaches, and because of the very likely confusion surrounding the differences between the two requests. Grinyer (2009) notes that in situations such as these, there are no definitive guidelines about when further work might proceed or when further consents are in fact required. Nor could guidelines be laid down which were sensitive and flexible enough to replace situational ethical judgements, “located in the context of the research and the wishes of our participants” (Grinyer, 2009, p.4). I consider the decision to proceed with the analysis of the PhD project to be one such judgement, informed by the intention to make best use of data that could usefully inform future policy and practice.

3.1.4 Continuities between “primary” and “secondary” analysis

A theme running throughout this chapter to this point has been my ambivalence about the classification of my further work with the ASP study data as “primary” or “secondary” research. Interestingly, this discussion mirrors a broader debate in the social science research methods literature, about how different “primary” and “secondary” qualitative analysis really is or should be thought to be. For instance, rather than attempting to re-create the original researcher’s relationship with the data at the time of its generation, thus ignoring issues of reflexivity (Mauthner et al., 1998), Moore (2007) argues that good “data re-use” exploits the potential for a new, dual focus both on the dataset and on its process of production. The researcher, whether or not involved in the original data generation, engages afresh and reflexively with the dataset, rendering its “re-use” a primary study of new, re-contextualised data (Bishop, 2007; Moore, 2007). From this perspective it has also been argued that *all* good qualitative studies should be engaging with the issues that some have claimed to render only “secondary” analysis problematic. For instance, all data analysts work with finite datasets. Most would like more information than is available and/or than they are able to follow up; all must proceed with caution, knowing that their data are potentially incomplete (Bishop, 2007; Fielding, 2000). Similarly, all data analysts encounter material reflexively produced by others (Fielding, 2000). A basic example pertinent to the ASP study would be the recounting by a professional, for the purposes of a research interview, of their earlier interaction with an adult at risk. Nor can most, if any, qualitative researchers give full information to participants about the course the inquiry is likely to take at the time they first agree to take part (Grinyer, 2009). Bishop

(2007) also argues that all qualitative researchers produce their analyses from artefacts most if not all of the time, working as they do with transcripts or their own notes at the point of analysis, rather than with actual interviews or, in the case of the ASP study, with the professionals’ actual written documentation.

I have found these commentaries helpful because of the intuitive sense they have made to me as I have deliberated on the above issues in relation to the PhD study. Specifically, and to summarise, whilst there have been ethical issues to negotiate, and real limitations to the work I have done and the dataset I have drawn upon to do it, these sit somewhere on a continuum with the ethical issues and limitations of any study, whether the work is thought of as “secondary” or not. This is not to argue that engagement with these issues and these limitations should be anything other than detailed and critical. However, it is to argue that the designation of the work either as “primary” or “secondary” is not of key significance in these considerations, being less a matter of fact than a matter of perception or degree.

3.2 Coherence of the project and transferability of learning

In section 3.1 above, I have critically discussed Papers 2-4, and specifically the further analysis of the ASP study data on which these papers are based. In this section I critique the PhD project as a whole. This involves some further comment on Papers 2-4 as a subset of the submission; however, the aim of these comments is to evaluate the fit of Papers 2-4 with Papers 1 and 5. A further aim of this section is to evaluate the transferability of the findings of the PhD project. This is because the papers have adopted a range of foci and modes of inquiry, and they were written over a period during which Scottish ASP policy and legislation changed. Accordingly, whilst there are ways in which the project can be argued to be a coherent one, with ongoing implications for policy and practice, there are also some counter-arguments in respect of each aspect of this claim. Though the extent to which the papers constitute a coherent body of work, and the extent to which the project's findings are transferable to the contemporary Scottish and broader UK contexts are different issues, I consider them together here because they are connected by their relationship to debates about the nature of knowledge, in ways that I expand upon below.

The primary point to be emphasised, then, in this part of this chapter, is that the links that I perceive between the papers, and the ongoing implications for policy and practice as I present them here, only really emerge in the context of the epistemological approach that has developed out of this project and that has been described in this contextualising narrative. I am referring here to my adoption of a body of ideas that I have loosely grouped under the label of "constructionism". To re-state and to summarise, I have accepted understandings of "knowledge" as negotiated in the context of particular power dynamics, as mediated by contingently available ways of thinking and of talking, and as more or less useful in particular contexts rather than as "true" or "false" in any absolute, over-arching sense (Burr, 2003; D'Cruz, 2000; Keddell, 2011; Parton, 2012). As I have explained in section 2.2.3, these ways of thinking contrast with "modernist" understandings of knowledge as derived from generalisable research about social phenomena, and hence able to be applied by "objective" professionals across a range of contexts (Fook, 2000; Hall, 2012).

Had I instead adopted this modernist model of knowledge for practice, the variations between practitioners' ways of identifying ASP issues that I report in Papers 2-4, and in particular the influence that I evidence of factors other than the correspondence of presenting situations with policy definitions of "abuse", might have been grounds to conclude that practice was flawed and in need of further, standardising guidance (Banks, 2007). From my alternative perspective, by contrast, I was able to interpret the strategic and contextually specific negotiation of meanings I had evidenced to be the way that all practice *must* proceed. I was then able to explore how specific meaning-making processes were working, from a position that cared about their *effects* (Bacchi, 1999), but did not set out to measure given meanings against one "correct" definition of "abuse" or "harm" or "ASP".

Furthermore, had I read the findings of Papers 2-4 as evidence of the need for further standardising guidance, I might also have concluded that these findings are of limited relevance now. This is because further guidance has indeed been issued in Scotland since the ASP study, as part of an extensive programme of development associated with the implementation of the ASPSA (Scottish Care, 2009; Scottish Government, 2008).The data on which these papers draw have nothing specific to say about practitioners' use of this more recent guidance. However, a reading of the findings as a reflection on the nature of practice itself, and the difficulties attendant on any assumption that policy categories like “abuse” or “harm” can be translated into practice in objective and standardised ways, is as relevant in the contemporary Scottish legislative context as it was in the previous one, and it is also relevant in other similar policy contexts, for instance in England and Wales. This is notwithstanding the need for focused research in specific contexts, to elaborate the detail of interpretation processes of particular policies.

From a perspective that sees Papers 2-4 to be about flawed but historical practice, moreover, the links with Papers 1 and 5 also become quite tenuous. Specifically, only Paper 5 might be characterised as actually still “in date”, quite apart from the fact that one group of papers critiques practice and the other policy. However, whilst I would not dispute that these papers critique different things, a constructionist perspective leads me to frame their primary subjects in a slightly different way. Namely, I would characterise Papers 2-4 as critiques of the assumption that standardised meanings can be imposed on practice in a top-down way. I would characterise Paper 5 as a critique of the assumption that current ASP policy flows solely from our empirical knowledge about an objectively identified and definable problem. There are linking threads here, in terms of what we really “know” about the problem to which ASP responds and, indeed, what we ought to assume about the types of knowledge that ASP practitioners need. These are the threads that I have tried to draw out in this narrative, and I expand on their implications for policy and practice in Chapter Four below.

Notwithstanding the above, it is important to acknowledge that although the five papers are connected, these connections are not tightly bounded nor are they exclusive. That is, my thinking might have taken a different route, bringing in different types of inquiry equally as connected as those presented here. Paper 5, in particular, is not the only logical progression from the work that went before it. Similarly, as has been described above, Paper 1 marked the beginning of a theoretical exploration, and this exploration, when linked with my particular interests in the ASP study, led me to a specific focus on problem construction in ASP policy and practice. However, Paper 1 itself circles around a number of issues that extend beyond the question of problem construction, and it might equally have launched a different journey. This is arguably a strength of the body of work submitted: that is, it contains multiple ideas and bases for inquiry that will merit further exploration over time.

3.3 Use of theory

The final issue to be addressed in this chapter is the use of theory over the course of the PhD project. Given its central role in guiding the project and lending it coherence, I include here some consolidating reflections on my rationale for adopting a constructionist perspective. I also reflect further on my eclectic use of theory under the broadly "constructionist" umbrella.

Taking the second issue first, it is important to acknowledge both the strengths and the dangers of eclectic use of theory. The dangers include superficiality in relation to the depth and detail of any given theory, and the combination of elements that are not compatible because the underpinning philosophies of the respective sources are at odds (Payne, 2005). Furthermore, a theoretical framework could be argued to be a pre-requisite for making sense of the social world; it might then be argued to follow that sense-making is academically suspect if it is claimed to have taken place outside of such a framework, in the process of deciding on a framework, or by means of crossing and combining frameworks.

As I have indicated previously, however, an account of the PhD project which implied that it flowed from a pre-selected, tightly defined theory would be a retrospective rationalisation. It would overlook important nuances, as well as important tensions, gaps and areas to return to for further exploration. However, nor I do not claim to have weighed up, selected and combined elements of theory from a neutral, atheoretical position. Rather, I acknowledge that all the sense-making I have done in relation to the data has been theory-infused, either explicitly or implicitly. The journey of the PhD project has been to identify my ways of theorising and to articulate, evaluate and develop these, in iterative dialogue with previously articulated and debated bodies of social theory. Because this has been a reflexive exercise, as opposed to an unthinking “mix and match” approach, the issue of compatibility has been a topic of consideration throughout (Payne, 2005). The nature of this exercise means that it will continue as a work in progress, however, in future academic work.

Second, I have argued throughout this contextualising narrative and throughout the papers submitted that constructionist approaches can make a valuable contribution to the study of ASP. At least as an explicitly articulated argument, this is better thought of as an outcome than as a premise of the PhD project, notwithstanding my comments about implicit theory above. Of course, there exists “no transcendent position from which to adjudicate” (Iversen et al., 2005, p.694) between constructionist approaches and competing ontological and/or epistemological orientations. However, one aim of Chapter 2 was to illustrate how constructionist insights have proved helpful and convincing to me in making sense of the PhD project findings. In particular, moving away from the idea that categories like “abuse”, “ASP” and “vulnerability” can have generalisably “correct” meanings seemed to me to fit the ASP study data better than alternative perspectives, and to account for more of their complexity. A sense of fairness, and possibly my professional loyalties, probably also played a part in drawing me towards this way of thinking because, as I have noted, an assumption that “abuse” is defined and definable is part of a common route of logic that places blame on professionals, particularly social workers, when practice is not as standardised as is thought to be desirable and/or when service users come to harm (Parton, 1996, 1998). The sense that we had from our interviewees in the ASP study was not of professionals with access to clear rules and categories that they did not or could not observe, however, but of professionals using their judgement in murky territory (Mackay et al., 2011; Schon, 1983).

The other reason I have found constructionist ways of thinking about ASP plausible concerns their resonance with ways of thinking in related fields. For instance, I have mentioned constructionist accounts of policy specifically about “elder abuse” at other times and in other places above, and several examples have long impressed me with their sense and their critical insights (e.g. Biggs, 1996; Leroux and Petrunik, 1990). In relation to practice-level meaning-making, research into child protection has long since challenged models of decision-making based on the technical-rational application of “formal” or “propositional” knowledge alone (Broadhurst et al., 2010; Helm, 2011; Horwath, 2007; Keddell, 2011; O'Connor and Leonard, 2013; Platt and Turney, 2013). Indeed, some close studies of practice using ethnographic and other methods have specifically questioned the adequacy of a model of “child protection” imagined to be based on a common definition of “abuse” (Buckley, 2003; D'Cruz, 2004; Parton et al., 1997). Moreover, cautions have been raised in children’s services about an over-emphasis in policy on practitioners’ roles in identifying “protection” cases and separating them from other kinds of cases, particularly as definitions of “abuse” or “risk” grow wider and resources more constrained, and in climates where practitioners fear blame should harm be missed or not foreseen. Deleterious effects of such systems have been argued to include risk aversion, increasingly unwieldy recording systems, suspicion of professionals by families and the channelling of increasing proportions of those resources available from support into investigation (Featherstone et al., 2013; Jack, 1997; Parton, 1998). No easy assumptions can be made about parallels between child protection or child safeguarding and ASP. However, it seems sensible to explore the potential similarities, and the possible cautions of which to take heed. One suggestion of this project is that constructionist perspectives might help to facilitate such explorations.

3.4 Summary of methodological critique

This chapter has considered the strengths and limitations of the PhD project with three primary foci. First, it has considered practical, epistemological and ethical issues in secondary analysis, with reference to Papers 2-4. Second, it has considered the coherence of the PhD project as a whole, and the transferability of its findings. Third, it has considered the place of theory in the PhD project.

The chapter has noted that a primary aim of Papers 2-4 was to highlight new questions raised by the ASP study data, and to systematically document the grounds for considering these to be useful questions. The data are limited, to a certain degree, in their capacity to offer answers to the questions raised. Nevertheless, these limitations sit on a continuum with the limitations of all research studies, whether these be thought of as “primary” or as “secondary”. The chapter has further noted that a constructionist approach to “knowledge” is the thread that connects the five papers and that gives the findings some level of transferability across historical and legislative contexts. However, the papers are a loosely bounded unit. They might have taken a different trajectory, and they might now be developed in a range of further ways. Finally, the chapter has revisited eclecticism in the use of theory, emphasising the reflexivity with which this has been practised here. On a broader level, the chapter has accounted for the adoption of constructionism as an over-arching framework on the basis of its helpfulness and its plausibility in the context of the PhD project. The following chapter explores some implications of adopting this perspective.

4 DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This chapter discusses the implications of the PhD project findings for policy, practice and future research. It refers to the primary implications proposed by each paper, but it also consolidates these, informed by the reflections and the connections that this contextualising narrative has helped to draw out. The first section of the chapter summarises some reservations about current conceptualisations of “the problem” to which ASP responds, as articulated in policy frameworks, particularly Scottish ones. It also suggests some ways to expand on these conceptualisations. The following two sections note some cautions about an over-emphasis on this line of enquiry, however. These sections propose some alternative foci for research, policy and practice developments. The fourth section considers how best to support ASP practitioners in light of the project’s insights into practice processes.

4.1 Understanding “the problem”

This project has focused on the nature of the problem that ASP policies and practices see themselves to be addressing. The project’s insights into this topic have been explored in the papers and summarised in section 2.3 above. I present three over-arching arguments about conceptualisations of “the problem” in ASP policy frameworks here, which consolidate these findings and place them in the context of contemporary literature.

First, the project has indicated that we do not yet have a conceptualisation of "the problem" in policy that is rooted in a coherent body of theory, debate and research. As Paper 1 has evidenced, we have pockets of research and theorising about specific aspects of the problem and related problems, but no coherently argued and evidenced narrative of how these things relate. This is further borne out in the most recent UK literature with relevance to ASP that focuses on the nature of the problem itself, as opposed to the systems in place to address it. Specifically, this literature is without exception about particular aspects of the problem: it is about financial abuse and dementia, for instance (Manthorpe and Samsi, 2013), or emotional abuse and learning disability (Robinson and Chenoweth, 2012), or quality of staff practice in care homes (Tadd et al., no date), or self-neglecting adults in community settings (May-Chahal and Antrobus, 2012). It does not address how these things are similar to each other but different from things that fall outside the scope of ASP.

Second, the project has indicated that we do not yet have a conceptualisation of "the problem" in policy that fully acknowledges the power dynamics involved in its construction. The unanalysed gaps between differently politically oriented policies underlined in Paper 5 is evidence of this. So too is the lack of representative debate about the nature of the problem, at the point of designing systems to address it. Certainly, there has been some promising work on service user and carer involvement in ASP, including a number of recent examples in Scotland (Altrum Risk Research Team, 2011; Cameron and Place, 2011; Cross and Mackay, 2013; Scottish Government, 2009a). However, this work has tended to focus on ASP responses and better ways to implement these, rather than on the nature of the problem itself.

Third, the project has indicated that we do not yet know if we have a conceptualisation of “the problem” in policy that fits with practitioners’ understandings of what ASP policies, procedures and/or practices are *for*. Papers 2-4 evidence that we did not have such a conceptualisation, at least, in the pre-ASPSA Scottish context. Meanwhile, ongoing debates amongst practitioners and others about inclusion and exclusion criteria for ASP and their justifications suggest this topic to be ripe for further exploration. For instance, there has been considerable debate about the position of adults who misuse substances and about self-harm and self-neglect within the ASPSA criteria (MARS, 2011; Stewart, 2012).

Given this situation, one implication of the PhD project is the need for further discussion and debate about the nature of “the problem” that ASP systems set out to address. To be perfectly clear, this is not to suggest that there *is* no problem. Nor is it to suggest that contemporary ASP systems do not help in some circumstances conceptualised to exemplify the problem: indeed, there is some evidence to the contrary, not least from research and evaluation work in post-ASPSA Scotland (Ekosgen, 2013; Mackay et al., 2011; Miller, 2011). It is rather to propose some further exploration of the *kind* of problem we conceptualise these systems to address, and in particular where the boundaries around this problem lie. This is on the assumption that there will be real implications of this for societal and service responses to phenomena placed inside these boundaries, and those placed outside them.

There are dissenting voices about current problem constructions within the existing literature, and these exemplify some voices with which such debates need more fully to engage. For instance, in addition to the arguments set out in Paper 5, Roulstone et al. (2011) argue that constructions of mistreatment associated with “vulnerability” in safeguarding systems and constructions of violence that constitute “hate crime” in the criminal justice system are shown to be problematic when viewed in comparative perspective. Galpin (2012) discusses potential links between abuse of older people and consumerist models of health and social care, raising a point echoed in Papers 3 and 5 about the conceptualisation of “the problem” as separate and separable from the fundamental ways in which we organise and conceptualise services (see also Mandelstam, 2009). Mowlam et al. (2007) reflect on their reservations that the UK Study of Abuse and Neglect of Older People identified phenomena that were entirely meaningfully related to each other, and entirely meaningfully distinctive from other, excluded phenomena. These reservations stemmed in part from the bemusement expressed by some of the older people interviewed in the study’s qualitative phase, over the rationale for these inclusions and exclusions.

Further debate is required, therefore, and careful attention needs to be given to the voices represented in that debate. Further research is also required, particularly research that accesses the perspectives of those who have experienced abuse/harm and those who might potentially fall within the remit of ASP policies. Views from those who have experienced abuse/harm about its nature, what caused or contributed to it and the kinds of help they needed might improve our understandings, if ethical and equitable ways can be found to discuss and share this information, perhaps through collaborative methodologies. I address these issues further in the following section. There is some UK research that has already contributed successfully to this body of knowledge (Copperman and McNamara, 1999; EHRC, 2011; McCarthy, 1999; Mowlam et al., 2007; Pritchard, 2001a, 2001b), but the range of phenomena that might fall under ASP policies is not equally represented, and the commonalities and differences across this range could be investigated further.

It would additionally be useful to gauge the views of actually and potentially affected adults, about the kinds of things that ASP policies and/or legislation ought to cover, particularly in countries where new legislation and/or policy is being proposed, or when these frameworks are due for review. This is a complex topic to approach as well, however, because knowledge of the potential consequences of any inclusion or exclusion is required to offer such a view, and perspectives on these consequences are themselves based on a number of contingencies. It might perhaps be an issue that those who have experienced ASP processes and/or others close to them would feel able to comment on retrospectively. Alternatively, it might be approached by research that takes a broader perspective on the expectations that individuals have of state and professional roles in relation to their safety and well-being. This connects with the discussion below, about the ways and the reasons that we might look beyond “the problem” in order to develop ASP.

4.2 Looking beyond “the problem”

Notwithstanding the points set out above, then, there are a number of cautions to be raised in relation to the proposal to study “the problem” in increasingly greater depth, at least as a primary strategy to develop ASP policy and practice. First, research in this vein necessarily makes judgements about the population(s) to be studied and the type(s) of experiences that are deemed to be relevant within those populations. Whilst accessing the detail of particular experiences, therefore, inclusion and exclusion criteria of the phenomenon or phenomena to which those experiences relate are already presupposed to some degree (Mowlam et al., 2007). Second, seeking out people’s accounts of abuse or harm runs the risk of privileging experiences as “victims” over people’s other identities, experiences and insights (Brookes et al., 2012). This is similar to the point made by Fawcett (2012), that the focus of welfare services on perceived dependencies and vulnerabilities can be oppressive in itself. Not only does a focus on “the problem” pre-define the terms of the research, then, but it might be experienced as directly disempowering by particular participants and/or in the uses to which the findings are put.

Given these political considerations, assuming that “harm” and “abuse” are social constructions whose boundaries cannot ever be definitively fixed (Dixon et al., 2009), and given that the ever-widening reach of policy definitions presumably stems from an intention to minimise negative experiences and support more positive ones, it makes sense to maximise attention in research, policy and practice to the factors that *keep people safe*. “Safe” is intended here to be open to broad interpretation, including ways of working and organising services that support dignity, rights and self-fulfilment. Indeed, what “safe” means and how “safe” people wish to be merits careful discussion in service-provision settings (Cook and Miller, 2012) and would certainly merit more research (Faulkner, 2012). Such a shift in focus connects with ideas about person-centred services and an emphasis on outcomes (Cook and Miller, 2012), and it also resonates with thinking about resilience and salutogenesis (Daniel, 2006; Taylor, 2004), which is most greatly developed in relation to children’s services but has applicability elsewhere (Christie, 2012; Mowlam et al., 2007; Robinson and Chenoweth, 2012; Sherwood-Johnson et al., 2013; Windle, 2012). It is a shift already made by the UK programme of research into elder abuse in residential settings, for instance, which has focused as much on dignity, respect and excellence in caregiving as it has on the nature of abuse and neglect (PANICOA, 2010).

Focusing attention on “safety” or more holistic well-being has a number of potential benefits. It avoids an over-emphasis on “vulnerability”, which can become an individualising and deficit-focused discourse in the experience of service users, as noted above. It raises questions about the preventative work needed to run in parallel with those ASP interventions targeted at situations that have already become problematic (Faulkner and Sweeney, 2011; Slater, 2001). It may give more tangible guidance and feel less deficit-focused to practitioners as well (Ferguson, 2003), particularly front-line social care practitioners, a point that I expand upon in section 4.4 below. Additionally, a broad focus on what services should be trying to achieve may help to access fresh perspectives on some debates that are currently live ones for adult social services, and that I have touched on to various degrees in the narrative above. In particular, adopting such a focus may facilitate discussions with service users and others about the ways that the goals of ASP should articulate with the goals of personalisation or self-directed support (Fyson and Kitson, 2007; Hunter et al., 2012; Manthorpe et al., 2011), and the ways that an ethic of care should or should not inform policies and practices (Banks, 2007; Barnes, 2011; McDermott, 2011), without requiring detailed knowledge of the language of these policies and theories amongst research participants.

There is already a broad range of research and theory that focuses on good support, quality in services, well-being and inclusion (e.g. Beresford et al., 2005; Gridley et al., 2012; Hoban et al., 2011; Katz et al., 2011; Ward et al., 2012), itself unevenly distributed between service user "groups" and containing its own range of complexities and tensions (Barnes et al., 2013). Strengthening the bridges with research and theory about ASP, as I am proposing here, could mutually enrich these bodies of thought. Some of the literature about elder abuse provides a useful lead in this, particularly in relation to institutional settings, as I have noted above (PANICOA, 2010). However, there is considerable scope for these connections to be broadened and further explored across a range of settings.

4.3 Understanding ASP

One further caution to be raised in relation to a focus on “the problem” in research and in policy as a way to develop ASP is this. Papers 2-4 evidenced not only that practice definitions of “the problem” were contested, but that the centrality to ASP practice of defining and identifying a distinctive type of “problem” was itself contested. That is, my findings have demonstrated that practice was not meeting the policy expectation that identification or suspicion of an objective phenomenon (i.e. “abuse” at that time; “harm” now) would function as a precursor to instigating ASP procedures and/or practices. Linked to this was the finding that ASP policies and procedures themselves were not necessarily understood to be neutral frameworks within which to address a given problem. Rather, different practitioners offered different explicit or implicit accounts of the *kind of project* ASP was thought to be, how it was similar or different from other ways of practising, and how it compared with practices that had gone before. These understandings were a part of practitioners’ reasoning processes as they constituted particular circumstances as ASP concerns, and other circumstances as falling outside ASP.

Once meanings are understood to be embedded in and to arise out of practice in this way, closer studies are called for of the kind(s) of project that ASP has evolved into, or is evolving into on the ground. An ethnographic approach may be particularly useful to examine this. Rather than rationalisations after the event, ethnography would allow exploration of the ways that ASP cases are constructed in specific practice contexts and through specific interactions, and with what effects. For instance, it might be possible to observe professional meetings in which referrals are discussed or allocated and/or to observe ASP case conferences and reviews, mirroring aspects of Buckley's (2003) study of child protection practice in Ireland, and D'Cruz's (2004) study of child protection practice in Australia. Researchers might also negotiate permission to accompany workers on home visits, as in McDermott's (2011) study of Australian health and social care responses to elder self-neglect. Studies of ASP of this type could explore the meanings and uses of concepts like "harm", "abuse", "vulnerability" and "ASP" more fully, how the interpretations of these concepts vary between different stakeholders, for instance between particular practitioners, service users and carers, and how these differences are negotiated to constitute ASP cases in practice. It could be particularly informative to compare the findings of a study like this with findings of similar studies into the construction of domestic abuse and/or child protection issues, or to run comparative studies in parallel.

In the contemporary Scottish context, it would also be useful to study how wide the effects have been of the increasing attention to ASP across health and social services in recent years. If ASP is conceptualised by practitioners to be linked with a different *kind* of practice and/or a different practice context, for instance a different approach to risk, the effects might well be felt beyond formal ASP systems. There is little research about this, though there has been parallel discussion of the impacts of a "child protection orientation" (Spratt, 2001) across broader children's welfare services, as noted above (Featherstone et al., 2013; Jack, 1997; Parton, 1998). However, in one study in England, some managers and support workers in adult residential settings spoke of their fears and anxieties in connection with ASP, and of ASP as a "threat" that encouraged more risk aversive practice (Rees and Manthorpe, 2010). This was in the context of services and support workers who had directly experienced false allegations, and it was also in the context of considerable value placed by many respondents on the rationale for ASP systems, notwithstanding these unwanted side effects. However, these indications from related policy contexts underline the importance of gauging broad perceptions of ASP across the health and social care sector in Scotland. The amelioration of similar side effects might then be discussed, should they be indicated. The views of support workers, care assistants, home helps, advocacy workers and longer-term users of services, for instance, might be canvassed in relation to these issues.

4.4 Supporting practice

The above discussion has highlighted that there is considerable further work to be done to investigate the kind of project that ASP has evolved into, or is evolving into, in a wide range of contexts in contemporary Scotland. One thing the findings have suggested that ASP is *not*, however, is a framework for addressing a problem that can be objectively defined and identified in a rationalistic way. A number of considerations about the best ways to support practice and to develop future policy flow directly from this premise.

It follows, first, that recommendations and efforts to refine definitions or thresholds, to render decisions about what “counts” as ASP more standardised (e.g. Collins, 2010; Taylor and Dodd, 2003), may work *against* rather than *with* the grain of practice. To support front-line ASP professionals, it may be more helpful for training and policy guidance to acknowledge the impossibility of fixing definitions, and instead to address and encourage critical reflection on the broad aspirations, underpinning values and strategic uses of ASP structures and ways of thinking to secure particular outcomes for service users and with service users. Policies, guidance and training need to acknowledge the practical-moral as well as the technical-rational aspects of support and protection work, these findings would suggest, in common with other findings from child care and protection (Horwath, 2007; O'Connor and Leonard, 2013; Platt and Turney, 2013). Given the inherent complexities and uncertainties of this work, a key priority of national and local level resource allocation should be to ensure that practitioners have sufficient time and skilled support to reflect on these complexities and negotiate ways through them.

A related debate concerns the utility of training and guidance for practitioners less centrally involved in statutory ASP work, for instance care assistants, nursing assistants, support workers and their managers, which is currently heavily focused on identifying “harm” as an objective phenomenon, and referring such instances on (Scottish Care, 2009). Based on my findings, I would propose that there is further research to be done to gauge whether this feels like helpful guidance, and its actual effects, given the sheer breadth of “harm” and its inevitably blurred boundaries with the issues many service users face and many social care workers encounter on a daily basis (c.f. Brown and Keating, 1998; Copperman and McNamara, 1999; Galpin and Parker, 2007; Rees and Manthorpe, 2010). This point is similar to Jenkins et al’s (2008) proposal for further debate within the field of learning disability nursing on the workability of a “zero tolerance of abuse” policy, meaning a policy that all abuse must be reported so that it can be stopped, on the basis that identifying “abuse” is such a complex process of interpretation. “Harm” is broader still, and thus arguably more complex. Clearly, it is of vital importance to communicate a strong message across the health and social care sector that some types of circumstance require swift mobilisation of a multi-agency response; some secrets cannot be kept and some types of situation cannot be kept “in-house”. This is not in dispute. However, there is perhaps also greater scope to acknowledge and work with the grain of the interpretation that will inevitably go on, in identifying which situations these are. This point also relates to the broader research and reflection on the factors that keep people safe and well as proposed in section 4.2 above. This work is likely to be of most relevance to those who provide direct support and care: connections need to be drawn between their day-to-day practices and the broad aspirations of ASP.

Related to the above points about front-line ASP practitioners, on the one hand, and the wider health and social care workforce, on the other, is the importance of agencies and multi-agency partnerships looking beyond the training of staff about definitions of “harm” to other systemic factors that will influence the interpretation and the uses of

ASP systems. The findings of the PhD project suggest that the anticipated effects of treating a circumstance as an ASP concern influence practitioners' judgements. Other research and theorising supports this, suggesting that the perceived flexibility of ASP systems once instigated makes a difference (Brown and Stein, 1998), as does the perceived level of involvement and control that existing workers will then have (Brown and Stein, 1998), as does the perceived efficiency of ensuing systems and the level of faith that something positive will change as a result of instigating them (Rees and Manthorpe, 2010). Systemic analyses like these in specific inter-agency contexts could inform targeted interventions to ensure that ASP systems and their relationships with other systems and agencies are working as intended and/or in helpful ways. Indeed, the recent Scottish Government (2013) guidance on the involvement of GPs in ASP has adopted this approach, in its focus on promoting confidence in ASP systems and building trust amongst collaborative partners alongside its emphasis on certain legal duties.

4.5 Summary and conclusions

When academics, trainers, campaigners and others explain the need for ASP policies and/or legislation, they often describe examples of abuse of adults in which the extremity of the harm, the callousness of its infliction, the disempowerment of the victim and the ethical rightness of some intervention on behalf of society are each very difficult to dispute (Baumann, 1989; Stewart, 2012, p.xiii). Certainly, I would not wish to dispute these things in these types of circumstance, nor has it been the aim of this project to do so. Instead, the project grew from an interest in the contingencies on the route between two points. For the purposes of this metaphor, the starting point can be understood to be just this type of example, and the more or less unanimous recognition of some ethically abhorrent circumstances that it represents. The finishing point is the way that contemporary ASP systems define and place boundaries around the problem they set out to address. In Scotland this problem is currently referred to as “harm” to an “adult at risk”.

The PhD project set out to explore the kinds of circumstances that come to count as ASP concerns, and the processes by which they come to count as ASP concerns. As the project has developed, the nature of these processes has emerged as the more significant insight, and one that I have argued has some transferability between national and legislative contexts. Specifically, the project has emphasised the value of constructionist ways of understanding what comes to count as an ASP concern. This has led to arguments for representative debate to inform and potentially refine definitions in policy, and for time and support to facilitate the inevitably complex meaning-making processes involved in the construction of ASP concerns in practice. Alongside these proposals, I have highlighted the politics of an over-emphasis on “the problem” in research, policy and practice. I have proposed that the inextricability of discussions about “harm” and/or “abuse” from discussions about what constitutes well-being and good care/support is grounds to keep a substantial level of focus on the latter, in the interests of delivering and developing services that help people keep safe and well.

The issue of problem construction has not received great attention in the ASP literature to date, though there are some exceptions, which often relate more specifically to elder abuse and protection. The value of examining how “the problem” is constructed lies in the fact that this affects how particular sets of circumstances are responded to, and how the characteristics and the needs of particular groups of people are understood and approached on a societal scale. Nevertheless, the workings and the effects of particular practice approaches and interventions in particular types of problematic situation has not been a focus of this project. The programme of further inquiry proposed above will sit in the context of many other valuable types of inquiry, then, and will seek to enter dialogue with and to complement these.

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