

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: Royal Holloway, University of London		
Unit of Assessment: 20 Social Work and Social Policy		
Title of case study: Improving child protection policies and practices by incorporating poverty and parental perspectives		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2013-2019		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Anna Gupta	Professor of Social Work	1999 - date
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2015-2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
<p>1. Summary of the impact Professor Gupta's research highlighted the effects of involvement with child protection services on parents and other family members, and in changing attitudes, policies and practices in relation to poverty awareness and family inclusion in the child protection system. Her research centres attention on the social harms and damaging contexts of many families' lives, especially as a result of 'austerity' policies. This research influenced public and professional debate; facilitated social work practitioners to be more poverty-aware and family inclusive; and has enhanced the capabilities of the parents engaged in policy and practice development. In turn, this has directly led to increased parental participation and co-production in child protection policy development at local and national level, notably with changes in policies in Camden Children's Services.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research The wider context in which Gupta's research was undertaken is one of a child protection and family court system in England that is in crisis. The number of children taken into care has been increasing each year since 2008, from around 60,000 children to over 78,000 in March 2019. The number of child protection investigations and children on child protection plans have also been rising at a time when austerity policies resulted in severe cuts to family support services and increased hardship for many families.</p> <p>All three research projects, the <i>ATD Fourth World</i> project, the <i>Adoption Enquiry</i> and <i>Camden Conversations</i>, highlighted similar experiences of families involved in the child protection system. Families felt powerless and shamed by a child protection system that was seen as highly risk averse. Fear of an unsympathetic and punitive response inhibited families from asking for help, while in parallel community and family support services diminished as a result of austerity policies. The social context of families lives and in particular the struggles they faced dealing with poverty, housing problems and limited family support services was often not being recognised by practitioners. The research projects furthermore highlighted the importance of breaking down barriers between professionals and families, and of using participatory research methods as a means of opening up new and innovative responses to protecting children and supporting families. The <i>ATD Fourth World</i> project particularly identified the affective impact of poverty and inequality and highlighted 'othering' processes by professionals and the wider public. The continuing importance of birth family links following adoption was highlighted by a range of participants in the <i>Adoption Enquiry</i>, yet support for birth families and direct contact post-adoption was identified as being severely deficient. These findings have led to the development of a Social Model for Child Protection (reference 6). This was developed with Professors Featherstone, Morris and White, and is published in the book <i>Protecting Children: A Social Model</i>. Work is being undertaken to establish a website and develop tools for practitioners and policy makers. Gupta's work has been particularly relevant to the poverty-aware practice and family inclusion/ co-production elements of the Social Model.</p>		

The first research project was undertaken on and with families living in poverty who have experienced child protection interventions (references 1 and 2). It was a participatory project with the anti-poverty organisation ATD Fourth World that brought together families, professionals and academics to explore the relationship between poverty and social work interventions with children and families. It was an innovative project as poverty was largely absent from child protection discourses at the time. Whilst service user involvement in social work education and practice development was established in relation to much of adult social care and young people in care, parents involved in child protection were largely viewed as 'undeserving' and excluded. The findings of the project highlighted the affective, as well as material, impacts of poverty on families' lives, and how social workers can compound, but also mitigate such impacts. As well as joint publications and conference presentations, a training programme for social work students to be delivered by family members was developed from this project (2014 to 2016).

The second research project is the *Adoption Enquiry* undertaken with co-investigator Professor Brid Featherstone (references 3 and 4). The project explored the role of the social worker in adoption with a focus on ethics and human rights, and was funded by BASW. The Enquiry involved questionnaires, interviews, focus groups and multi-stakeholder seminars with birth family members, adopted people, adoptive parents and professionals, including social workers and legal professionals. Recommendations made include the use of adoption being located and discussed in the context of wider social policies relating to poverty and inequality; that the current model of adoption be reviewed with consideration given to a more open approach in relation to birth family contact; and that there needed to be on-going dialogue between the different stakeholders living in/with adoption and professionals working with them. (2016 to 2018).

The third project *Camden Conversations* came about as a result of Gupta's previous participatory work with parents (reference 5). In this project, commissioned by the London Borough of Camden's Local Safeguarding Children Board (CSCB), parents with experience of child protection services were trained and supported as peer researchers to interview other parents, social workers and managers about how to make the child protection system more humane and effective. A report was produced and recommendations made to the CSCB, including the establishment of advocacy service. The project found that parents and professionals held similar views of what an effective child protection system should look like, and there is much scope for breaking down barriers and working together to develop more humane processes (2018 to 2019). A follow-up evaluation of the changes as a result of Camden Conversations, including the advocacy service, is being completed through funding from Research England.

3. References to the research

- 1) **Gupta, A.**, Blumhardt, H. and ATD Fourth World (2016) 'Giving Poverty a Voice: Families' experiences of social work practice in a risk-averse system', *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 5 (1), pp. 163-172. Available from HEI on Request.
- 2) **Gupta, A.**, Blumhardt, H. & ATD Fourth World (2018) 'Poverty, exclusion and child protection practice: the contribution of 'the politics of recognition&respect'', *European Journal of Social Work*, 21(2), pp. 247-259.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2017.1287669>.
- 3) Featherstone, B. & **Gupta, A.** (2020) 'Social Workers' Reflections on Ethics in Relation to Adoption in the UK: Everywhere but Nowhere?', *British Journal of Social Work*, 50(3), pp.833-849. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcz033>.
- 4) **Gupta, A.** & Featherstone, B. (2020) 'On hope, loss, anger, and the spaces in between: Reflections on living with/in adoption and the role of the social worker', *Child and Family Social Work*, 25(1), pp.165 – 172. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12674>.
- 5) Camden LSCB (2019) *Camden Conversations: Our Family-Led Child Protection Enquiry*, https://www.camdenchildrensocialwork.info/site_search?utf8=%E2%9C%93&search_site%5Bterm%5D=camden+conversations&commit=Find
- 6) Featherstone, B., **Gupta, A.**, Morris, K. and White, S. (2018) *Protecting Children: A social model*, Bristol: Policy Press – ISBN 978-1447332756. Available from HEI on Request.

References 1- 4 are published in respected journals with rigorous peer-reviewed processes. References 3-4 are based on a BASW funded (GBP60,000) competitive study. Reference 5 developed as result of Gupta's participatory work with families (References 1 and 2) and has received Research England funding (GBP5,000) for a follow-up study. Reference 6 is published by a respected publisher, Policy Press that also has a rigorous peer review process.

4. Details of the impact

Gupta's research transformed policies, practices and attitudes in relation to poverty awareness and family inclusion in the child protection system. She is recognised nationally and internationally as a strong advocate for more humane and social justice-based approaches to child protection work. The main beneficiaries of the research are national and local policy makers, managers, social work practitioners and other child welfare professionals. Parents and other family members who participated in the projects are also key beneficiaries, as are children and families who receive child protection services.

1. Transformed Policies: Enhancing service delivery with and for families within local authorities and family courts

(i) London borough of Camden - The *Camden Conversations* project was commissioned by the local authority's Safeguarding Children's Board (CSCB). The recommendations about the format of the child protection conference and process have been fully adopted; including the recognition of the power imbalances and difficulties for parents to effectively participate. A service manager at Camden identified in his testimonial that an example of changes to practice is that: *'the relationship between the independent chair of the child protection meetings and the family is being improved; the chair now keeps in contact with the family between meetings so the family has the opportunity to give feedback and build a trusting relationship so they can speak openly and honestly'* (E1). Parents have led monthly 'learning exchange' workshops sharing with practitioners their experiences of subjects such as domestic violence and growing up in care. There was strong recommendation for advocacy in the *Camden Conversations* report and this recommendation is being implemented with 'independent professional' advocacy from family group conference facilitators offered to families attending child protection conferences. In terms of reach, in the year ending 31st March 2019, 1,394 children had been referred to Camden Children's Services and 321 children were subject to child protection plans on the 31st March 2019, with over 700 child protection conferences occurring during the year.

The service manager in his testimonial also explained that not only have the recommendations made an impact, but the process of the research has made a difference: *'the research process itself, bringing together parents and social workers in dialogue, has had an impact on breaking down 'us' and 'them' barriers that can so often impede effective relationship-building'* (E1). The CSCB Annual Report 2018 to 2019 highlights the recommendations of *Camden Conversations* and states that: *Camden are forging an approach which puts service user experience and voice at the forefront of the system* (E3). In the video made to support the implementation of *Camden Conversations*, one of the parent researchers explains the impact on her as a beneficiary: *'I learnt so much being involved in the Enquiry, it made me realise that we have a voice that will be heard'* (E3). In an article written for *Community Care* magazine (E3), 'Annie', another parent involved in the Enquiry, explained that: *'what really shone through was the shift in power dynamic, and the effect this process was having on both practitioner and parent. If you've previously been "done to", being listened to and worked with can be life changing. Feeling part of a solution was uplifting, for all'*. She confirms this in her testimonial (E2).

(ii) Informing family-inclusive policies in other local authorities and organisations – The process and findings of *Camden Conversations* have been shared widely, with a number of local authorities, including Brighton and Southwark Children's Services, changing practices to be more family inclusive (E1). In their report *From Tiny Acorns: Communities Shaping the Future of Children's Services*, the New Local Government Network (NLGN), an independent think tank that seeks to transform public services, identifies *Camden Conversations* as *'taking advantage of the wealth of knowledge and experience of real families going through court proceedings to influence service delivery and reform'* (E3). The Department for Education Children's Social Care Innovation Programme newsletter in January 2020 also commends the project and notes that the final report has *'already led to real change'* (E3). In addition, a training session with 'Annie' was attended and very well received by over 30 professionals from across England

involved in child safeguarding, with the feedback from one participant being: *'I am excited to go back and bang the drum for co-production'* (E2).

(iii) International and National Parent Advocacy Networks - Gupta's research with parents has led to her involvement in the development of an International Parent Advocacy Network (IPAN) and the Parents, Families and Allies Network (PFAN) in England. PFAN is a network of parents, academics and practitioners seeking to create a more socially just child protection system. In October 2020 Gupta and other PFAN members conducted a consultation on behalf of the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory with parents who had experienced remote hearings in the family courts during the pandemic. In response to the report on remote hearings quoted in the Guardian newspaper, Lord Justice McFarlane stated that: *'However there are clearly circumstances where more support is required to enable parents and young people to take part in remote hearings effectively. It is worrying that some parents report that they have not fully understood, or felt a part of, the remote court process...I am very alert to the concerns raised in this report, and I will be working with the judiciary and the professions to develop solutions'*. He has since issued guidance that unless 'truly urgent' a telephone connection should not be used for parental participation in remote hearings (E10).

2. Transformed Practices: Enhancing the development of poverty-aware practice and training for social workers

(i) Anti-poverty practice guidance - Gupta's research with ATD Fourth World has made a significant contribution to the development of poverty-aware social work in the UK. The work underpins ATD Fourth World's significant contribution to the *Anti-Poverty Practice Framework for Social Workers in Northern Ireland* produced by the Office of Social Services in the Department of Health; and the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) *Anti-Poverty Practice Guide for Social Workers*, as explained in the testimonial from the National Co-ordination Team of ATD Fourth World in the UK (E4, E5). BASW is the main professional association for social workers in the UK. As of April 2020, the BASW Anti-Poverty guide had 1,748 views.

(ii) ATD Social Worker training programme - The ATD Fourth World project led to the development of a training programme for social workers delivered by family members. ATD Fourth World families have been involved in training students on social work programmes at Royal Holloway University of London and other universities (Universities of Sheffield and Birmingham). The training has been received by at least 200 students across these universities. In addition, they have presented with at conferences, including *Making Research Count* conferences at Kings College London, with hundreds of social workers and other professionals having heard the ATD Fourth World families present since the research was undertaken. One of the social work students explained the impact of the training: *"It helps to have real people talking about their experiences. What struck me was how much social work can empower people if done right in terms of service user involvement, respecting service users, actually finding out how service users feel and talking and listening to them"* (More feedback from the training is provided in E6). The beneficiaries have also been the families involved in the research and subsequent dissemination activities. As outlined in the testimonial from ATD Fourth World National Co-ordination Team: *'Involvement in these projects has led to parent activist growing confidence to speak out about the everyday reality of living in poverty in various forums, including to the UN Rapporteur on Human Rights and Extreme Poverty'* (E4).

(iii) Influencing change via Research in Practice podcast – Gupta was commissioned to produce a podcast on the Social Model and together with colleagues developed Social Model practice tools for a government funded national programme for over 1,000 practice supervisors in local authorities across the country. The materials are available (open access) on the *Research in Practice* website. Gupta's colleague, Prof, Featherstone, made a similar podcast on the Social Model for BASW Talk. As of October 2020 the two podcasts have had almost 2,500 downloads (E5).

3. Changing the professional narratives and informing public conversations:

(i) Changing professional understanding about poverty and austerity policies – The findings from the *Adoption Enquiry* has influenced the work of BASW, in particular the anti-poverty campaign as explained in the podcast and testimonial by the CEO of BASW (E7, E8). In

the podcast on the *Adoption Enquiry: One year on*, the CEO of BASW states that the ‘*home truths of the report*’ about the impact of poverty and austerity policies on families and the child protection system has also impacted on the narratives of organisations such as Ofsted, the Children’s Commissioner and the Family Rights Group (FRG) (E8). The findings of the *Adoption Enquiry* report were cited in *FRG Care Crisis Review*. Gupta was asked to serve on the Academic Advisory Group of the *Care Crisis Review*. The President of the Association of Directors of Children’s Services (ADCS) said at the time of the *Adoption Enquiry* report’s release that: ‘*This report raises some important questions worthy of further debate, not least in relation to the cumulative impact of wider government policies, exacerbated by financial austerity, on our most vulnerable children and families*’ (E8). The ADCS has continued to campaign against austerity and highlighted issues in relation to poverty and children.

(ii) **Informing public conversations about poverty and austerity policies** - Gupta’s work led her to be asked to be the academic advisor for the National Theatre production – *Faith, Hope and Charity*. The writer/director Alexander Zeldin approached Gupta because of her research on parents’ experiences of the child protection system and the impact of poverty on families’ lives. The play ran from the 9th September to 12th October 2019, with over 5,000 tickets sold and received uniformly positive reviews in the press. It garnered two nominations to the Evening Standard Awards, and has been invited to perform in the USA, Australia, France and around Europe. The director in his testimonial states that: *the collaboration between us certainly deepened my thoughts and allowed the play to have a rigour and a grounding in the fact and also the intellectual framework around austerity that your work so powerfully articulates* (E9)

(iii) **Changing professional narratives and informing public conversations about adoption:**

In a keynote address to professionals working in the family courts that is available on the Ministry of Justice website, the current President of the Family Division of the High Court, Lord Justice McFarlane described the *Adoption Enquiry* report as a ‘*significant piece of work*’ to achieve greater openness and involvement of birth families in adoption. He quotes paragraphs from the report and concludes that: *The BASW Enquiry, coupled with the range of anecdotal evidence that led me to say what I did last year, strongly suggests that a higher level of ongoing contact, or a level of direct contact that develops slowly during childhood once the dust from the adoption order being made has settled, may well be better for these young people in the longer term* (E8). The report has also been quoted in a Court of Appeal judgement on considerations for post-adoption contact (E8).

The *Adoption Enquiry* was reported in the mainstream media, including in the Guardian newspaper, Family Law Week, and a BBC TV report that highlighted the impact of austerity policies. There were also articles in the professional press (Community Care, PSW & CYP Now). A podcast interview with Gupta on a popular adoption website The Adoption and Fostering Podcasts and a BASW podcast on the *Adoption Enquiry – One Year On* have been downloaded over 1,200 times. The report itself has been downloaded more than 7,000 times (E8).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

E1. Testimonial from Service Manager in Camden re-impact of *Camden Conversations*

E2. Testimonial from ‘Annie’ – parent involved in *Camden Conversations*, parent advocacy and National Theatre production

E3. Document with links to additional evidence on Camden Conversations – CSCB report, Youtube video, Community Care article, NGLN report and DfE newsletter

E4. Testimonial from National Co-ordination Team at ATD Fourth World

E5. Document with links to additional evidence on poverty- aware practice and the Social Model for Child Protection – NI anti-poverty framework, BASW guide, RIP podcast and BASWTalk podcast

E6. Feedback on the ATD Fourth World – Social Worker Training module

E7. Testimonial from the CEO of BASW regarding the *Adoption Enquiry*

E8. Document with links to additional evidence on the *Adoption Enquiry* – BASW podcast, FRG review, ADCS response, McFarlane lecture, Court of Appeal judgement and Adoption & Fostering podcast

E9. Testimonial from writer/director of National Theatre production – *Faith, Hope and Charity*

E10. Document with links to PFAN and NFJO consultation on remote hearings and Lord Justice McFarlane’s responses