

## Qualitative Social Work

**'It was sort of like a globe of abuse'. A psychosocial exploration of child protection social work with emotional abuse.**

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Keywords:	Child protection, Psychosocial, Critical realism, Emotional abuse, Professional practice
Abstract:	<p>This article draws on research findings from an ESRC funded PhD psychosocial exploration of child protection social work with emotional abuse. In the context of child protection social work, this harm occurs within the relationship between a parent and their child. Emotional abuse is a complex concept, comprising of many cumulative elements, which may include restricting a child's psychological autonomy. Although not so clearly observed as other forms of parental harm, it causes the most significant impairment. Making the less tangible aspects of working with this form of child abuse more visible was a key goal of the research, along with improving professional understandings of how to work with it more effectively. The focus of this article is the methodological framework for this small qualitative study. The framework is a critical realist view of social work practice, with a psychosocial research approach. Psychosocial methods incorporate researcher and research participants use of self to explore the often deeply subjective, and undocumented process, of identifying the presence or risk of emotional abuse. This article draws on one social worker's narrative of encountering emotional abuse to exemplify some of the professional and personal challenges the work presents. The research sought to elicit responses that enabled social workers to share their unconscious thought processes to get under the surface of everyday decision-making. Sharing their 'workings out'. With the aim of illuminating the complexity of work with emotional abuse, this research provides a methodological template for research that supports more effective interventions with emotional abuse.</p>

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## Article for: 'Qualitative Social Work' Journal (Sage)

'It was sort of like a globe of abuse'. A psychosocial exploration of child protection social work with emotional abuse.

### **Abstract**

*This article draws on research findings from an ESRC funded PhD psychosocial exploration of child protection social work with emotional abuse. Intrafamilial harm occurs predominantly within the relationship between a parent and their child in the context of this research. Emotional abuse is a complex concept, comprising of many cumulative elements, which may include restricting a child's psychological autonomy. Emotional abuse is not so clearly observed as other forms of parental harm, but it causes the most significant impairment. The dual overarching goals of this research was to make the less tangible aspects of work with this form of child abuse more visible, and to improve professional understandings of how to work with it more effectively. The focus of this article is to exemplify how the critical realist methodological framework, and psychosocial research approach were developed to underpin the data collection and analysis processes. Psychosocial methods incorporate researcher and research participant's use of self to explore the often deeply subjective, and undocumented process of identifying the presence of emotionally abusive behaviour. The research sought to elicit responses that enabled social workers to share their unconscious thought processes to get under the surface of everyday decision-making. Sharing their 'workings out'. This article draws on one social worker's narrative of encountering emotional abuse to illuminate some of the professional and personal challenges the work can present. This research provides a methodological template for further research into supporting social workers in effective interventions into intrafamilial emotional abuse.*

### **Introduction**

There is very little research that looks at the undocumented aspects of social work decision-making processes, and even less about how emotional abuse is defined, assessed and evidenced. Insights into the role that social workers' cultural, personal and subjective selves play in their assessment and intervention of emotional abuse are required.

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5 The current literature suggests that cumulatively, work with emotional abuse carries a  
6 broad array of additional challenges, the most prevalent of which concerns the  
7 unacknowledged emotional labour experienced by child protection professionals.  
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11 This paper takes an in-depth look at one social worker's daily work with emotional  
12 abuse, and how they managed themselves in this task. A narrative approach  
13 exemplifies why social worker 'subjectivity' should not be repressed or deemed  
14 unprofessional. The use of the term 'subjectivity' is derived here from the  
15 psychoanalytic tradition and refers to an individual's emotional and personal  
16 characteristics, such as their social and cultural background. Social workers are  
17 subjective beings with agency. They bring aspects of themselves to the job and may  
18 therefore 'react to things in ways that feel beyond words' (Rose 2012: 153). The  
19 stance of this research is that a social worker must acknowledge their own  
20 expectations about what, for example, denotes a warm and loving relationship; and  
21 possibly reconsider their assumptions (Pecnik and Bezensek-Lalic 2011). Aspects of  
22 the self should be used reflexively and assertively alongside more pragmatic 'checks  
23 and balances' in work with emotional abuse.  
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32 There is risk attached to taking this perspective. Acknowledging one's subjectivity  
33 brings focus to personal foibles. As an often publicly criticised profession, this stance  
34 opens up social workers to further scrutiny, potentially galvanising the existing  
35 'cultural trope' of blaming social workers for failing to protect children (Shoesmith  
36 2016). However, when faultfinding is put to one side, defenses can be lowered, and a  
37 greater degree of honesty may emerge in explanations for professional decision-  
38 making processes. Exploring the 'intersectional identities' (Wetherell 2008: 78) of  
39 social workers is integral to improving professional practice with emotional abuse;  
40 how, for example, their personal motivations for doing the work impact upon the  
41 assessment process. Greater clarity about the difficulties of practice with abuse may  
42 develop through increased self-awareness.  
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50 A psychosocial approach has been key to this research. It requires a researcher to  
51 use their own emotional and physical reactions to assist in understanding the  
52 interview material, thereby providing 'points of entry into data analysis' (Hollway and  
53 Jefferson 2013: 166). This often involves starting with a feeling to inform subsequent  
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4 thinking about the complexities of work with emotional abuse. Having used my own  
5 experiences of the work as a starting point, I have been able to embrace my sense of  
6 similarity and difference to the participants, rather than making unrealistic claims to  
7 scientific objectivity. My subjective role as a social work researcher has aided the  
8 understanding that researching the assessment of abuse can, at times, be a messy  
9 process (Thomson and Gunter 2011). I have shared the participants' experiences,  
10 and my interpretations of them. A psychosocial research approach requires a level of  
11 self-awareness that facilitates the recognition of complex emotions and identities.  
12 This commitment to transparency may be seen as strength of the design.  
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### 18 **Emotional Abuse: A contested notion**

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20 Previous research has revealed that social workers struggle with recognising, naming  
21 and intervening in cases of emotional abuse (Iwaniec et al. 2007). A possible reason  
22 for this is that the impact of emotional abuse on children is experienced and played  
23 out predominantly within the psychosocial rather than the physical domain. Work with  
24 emotional abuse importantly encompasses the social worker's use of their self in the  
25 job. This is particularly challenging to demonstrate in work with emotional abuse, as it  
26 is an additional aspect of work that is not always easy to make visible.  
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32 Understandings about what constitutes emotional abuse, or even whether it exists,  
33 vary according to historical, cultural and geographic context (Iwaniec 2007; Glaser  
34 2012). Child abuse, and specifically the concept of emotional abuse, has a recent  
35 history (Munro 2008). Social workers have specific statutory duties requiring them to  
36 protect children from significant harm through abuse and neglect. It is the practical  
37 and emotional difficulties of carrying out social work in a real world, not a theoretical  
38 one, that is of interest to this research. From a realist perspective the existence of  
39 human suffering is not just a 'value-judgment' (Robson 2002).  
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45 This research is cognisant with English law, which indicates that children may be  
46 defined as experiencing one or more of four categories of abuse. These categories  
47 are designated under the Children Act 1989 (CA89) to be physical abuse, sexual  
48 abuse, emotional abuse and neglect. Allegations of physical abuse may be  
49 substantiated by injuries caused non-accidentally and/or with discrepant  
50 explanations; disclosures of sexual abuse may be supported by forensic evidence  
51 gained through medical examination; neglect may be demonstrated by  
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4 developmental delays, poor hygiene and an unkempt appearance (Glaser 2002;  
5 Iwaniec 2003; Sheehan 2006). In cases of emotional abuse not all of what a child is  
6 feeling and experiencing will be apparent to others. Identifying emotional abuse and  
7 assessing levels of harm is often harder to do than with other forms of abuse, as the  
8 signs are less transparent or tangible (Smith Slep et al. 2011). With the effects being  
9 less observable, they are more challenging to attribute directly to emotionally abusive  
10 behaviours by parents and caregivers (Glaser & Prior 1997).  
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### 17 **Methodology: A stratified approach**

18 The ontological premise of the research is located in the real world of the institution  
19 of social work which regards child abuse as actual and real. It has critical realist  
20 underpinnings derived from the work of Bhaskar (1979) who proposed that reality has  
21 depth, and that knowledge about reality is infinite. Bhaskar (1978) suggests a  
22 theoretical model to represent the 'stratified' world with its multi-levels of causation,  
23 which offers a way of conceptualising the reality social workers inhabit. It has three  
24 layers of interest: the actual, the real and the empirical. Bhaskar does not explore  
25 what these are in his work, although others such as Hood (2012) and Elder-Vass  
26 (2004) have sought to investigate what each layer of the model could represent in a  
27 broader societal context.  
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35 This research draws on these derived ideas of Hood and Elder-Vass to demonstrate  
36 how the three layers might be applied to the social work profession. The actual  
37 represents the institutional aspect of social work; the policies and laws, such as  
38 CA89, social workers use to guide their practice. The real represents the individual  
39 reflective practitioner who has their own social ideas about relationships and how  
40 they engage with the institutional aspects. The domain of the empirical involves the  
41 exploration of these practitioners' deeper thought processes; this is the psychological  
42 level at which the social worker experiences their practice. The layers are not static  
43 descriptions, and can be reinterpreted according to context. This interpretation of  
44 Bhaskar's stratified model can be linked to the more contemporary critical realist  
45 ideas of Archer (2007) who views the individual as a 'reflexive agent'. Archer regards  
46 the social worker as not merely a representative of the state but a complex and  
47 multifaceted being who mediates between their own thought processes and the  
48 external world (Archer 2007).  
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5 Social workers are not simply rational beings but have conscious and unconscious  
6 capacities to express themselves in a variety of ways. Archer addresses the domain  
7 of social workers' empirical processes more directly. She proposes that social  
8 workers use internal 'analytical narratives' to navigate the difficult terrain in their  
9 stratified world between their deeper thoughts, aspects of their own social ideas  
10 about relationships, and the laws and policies that guide them. It is their internal  
11 voice that directs them how to reconcile 'problems of structure and agency'. In a  
12 psychosocial context, it is social workers' use of self in a reflexive way that allows  
13 them to make sense of what is happening around them and directs them how to act  
14 in a particular situation.  
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### 20 21 *Operationalising Critical Realism through Psychosocial methods*

22 The 'anchor' of critical realism ontologically and epistemologically situates the  
23 research study in the real world of social work practice. Psychosocial methods  
24 facilitate in-depth explorations into the domain of the empirical layer of social work  
25 with emotional abuse. The challenges child protection social workers experience in  
26 their everyday work may be understood through a psychosocial exploration of  
27 practitioners' deeper thought processes.  
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33 The term 'psychosocial' embraces a range of disciplines (Hollway and Jefferson  
34 2013). There are a number of divisions within the psychosocial tradition, but it is most  
35 useful to view psychosocial studies as 'an emergent perspective' (Clarke and  
36 Hoggett 2009:2) that responds to our growing appreciation of the complexity of the  
37 individual. It has been described as more of 'an attitude, a position towards the  
38 subject of study rather than methodology' (Clarke 2008:113). It offers a collection of  
39 approaches from the three disciplines of sociology, social work and psychology. The  
40 work of Hollway and Jefferson (2013) has been particularly influential on this  
41 research project. Hollway and Jefferson differentiate their psychosocial approach to  
42 others, particularly those used in medical and health studies, in that theirs pays due  
43 attention to the challenge of 'individual-social dualism' (Hollway and Jefferson 2013:  
44 xiii) rather than by-passing the problems this can create. They clarify their use of the  
45 term psychosocial as 'Conceptualising human subjects as, simultaneously, the  
46 products of their own unique psychic worlds *and* a shared social world' (Gadd and  
47 Jefferson 2007: 4 cited in Hollway and Jefferson 2012: xiii).  
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5 Psychosocial approaches draw on psychoanalytic theory and practice, which  
6 originate from the work of Freud (Trevithick 2012). Psychoanalytic theory places  
7 'relationship at the heart of what it is to be human' (Gomez 1997:1). From a Freudian  
8 psychoanalytic perspective, we are all anxious, and we defend against our anxieties  
9 in various ways. For example, it is a common response for families under pressure of  
10 child protection investigations to engage in defensive mechanisms such as 'splitting'.  
11 Splitting is a process that originates in childhood, and is a defensive mechanism  
12 carried into later life. It 'oscillates between external and internal manifestations'  
13 (Tennison 2002: 1). 'Splitting' when it is 'done' to others occurs when, for example, a  
14 parent praises or condemns different professionals who are working with them.  
15 Professionals may internalise these feelings of being valued or devalued and carry a  
16 polarised sense of being good or bad at their job. They may act out on this,  
17 responding by liking or disliking the service-user. This embodiment of binary thought  
18 processes may be played out in relationships between the worker and other team  
19 members, producing yet more splits if they remain unacknowledged and reconciled.  
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29 Psychosocial methods are often used to understand the unique qualities of  
30 individuals or the 'personal identifications' (Clarke and Hoggett 2009: 7) that underlie  
31 the commitment of people who work in welfare to their jobs. In its eclectic  
32 composition of influences, a psychosocial approach lends itself to researching the  
33 equally diverse and complex nature of social work practice with emotional abuse. It  
34 thereby enhances the flexibility of the existing critical realist framework, providing the  
35 research approach with a 'methodological bricolage' (Kincheloe 2001) that matches  
36 the complexity of the subject matter.  
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#### 42 *Researcher Subjectivity*

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44 There is an emphasis in this work on the researcher and participant as 'co-producers  
45 of meaning' (Clarke 2009: 8), with a focus on aspects such as the unconscious  
46 dynamic that arises. This approach has influenced the shape the research has taken.  
47 In using such a methodology, a researcher may, during and after the interview,  
48 reflect on their own affective responses, such as unexpected discomfort, or wonder  
49 about parts of the participant's narrative that seem incoherent or incomplete. In the  
50 case of interviewing social workers about complex cases, considering such  
51 subjective reflections as potential counter-transference may be particularly useful in  
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4 recognising issues such as the unspoken fears a social worker may be experiencing  
5 whilst working with children who are suffering emotional abuse. In this work I explore  
6 and learn from all of the participants, with the aim of focusing on their individual  
7 experiences and feelings about work with emotional abuse.  
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### 10 11 **Research sample**

12 The qualitative data in this research were gathered from a sample of child protection  
13 social workers from two local authorities in the South East of England. Two focus  
14 groups were conducted, designed to generate broad themes to be further explored in  
15 individual interviews. Eight social workers were interviewed individually twice, with  
16 their follow-up interview held approximately two months after the first to give the  
17 interviewee an opportunity to reflect on the subject matter. The semi-structured  
18 interview schedule included exploration of how factors such as previous practice  
19 experiences, educational training and cultural background contributed to participants'  
20 decision-making processes during assessment and intervention with cases of  
21 emotional abuse. A 'second level' of data analysis was incorporated into the  
22 interpretive process. Two groups of social work students and practitioners formed  
23 panels to offer their interpretations of excerpts from interview transcripts. This article  
24 offers a detailed analysis of a research participant's interview, and the way in which  
25 an excerpt of it was discussed by a panel. The goal of this, rather than looking at two  
26 or three interviews, or across the data set was demonstrate an in-depth look at  
27 individual subjectivity.  
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### 40 **Research Method**

41 The psychosocial approach for data collection processes places an emphasis on  
42 open questions, thereby promoting narrative responses from participants. In  
43 constructing a framework for analysing some of the interviews the suggested stages  
44 of Doucet and Mauthner's (2008) 'listening guide' were followed during analysis of  
45 the interview recordings and transcripts. This is a listening method with a flexible  
46 structure consisting of four main readings of a text, which may be adapted according  
47 to 'the nature of the topic under investigation' (Doucet and Mauthner 2008: 405).  
48 During a first 'listening to', themes were identified, evocative descriptions of cases  
49 were pulled out, plot was 'listened' for, and initial responses were recorded. I also  
50 listened out for my own reactions to what I was hearing and how that impacted on the  
51 prompts I made during the interviews. I heard myself checking out the 'meaning-  
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4 frame' (Hollway and Jefferson 2013) of the social workers I interviewed to clarify if we  
5 had similar understandings about their responses to the situation we were  
6 discussing. This was so that as far as possible, I did not misinterpret their intended  
7 meaning. During a second level of analysis, I focused on the 'active I' in people's  
8 stories: trying to explore their subjective influence on their decision-making. A third  
9 listening, 'reading for relationships' (Mauthner and Doucet 2008), revealed the nature  
10 of connection and rapport the social workers, I thought, had with the service-users,  
11 and also the nature of the relationship between myself and the participant.  
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17 A fourth stage of listening placed people in their cultural context to understand how  
18 individual social workers negotiate aspects of their own identities within their broader  
19 work environment. Listening to the interviews in this way, multiple times, allows for  
20 the participant to be viewed from different perspectives, offering a deeper and more  
21 complete view of them. The structure this offered an analytic framework with which to  
22 analysis various element of an interview, without isolating them from the wider  
23 narrative. It also allowed me the opportunity to reflect upon my own intersecting  
24 identities as a researcher and social worker, in addition to the subjective elements of  
25 my own analytic interpretations.  
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32 My own experience as a child protection social worker led to me to possibly identify  
33 too readily with the struggles of the participants, possibly drawing conclusions about  
34 data gathered from interviews that overlooked other potential explanations. This may  
35 be referred to as 'wild analysis' (Hollway and Jefferson 2013). Sharing data with  
36 groups of panels of people unrelated to the research process is a psychosocial  
37 approach that enables researchers to draw back from the data and reflect on their  
38 subjective contribution to the analysis process. Therefore, data analysis panels  
39 contributed an additional source of data to the research.  
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#### 46 **Exploring subjectivity in practice: 'Li'**

47 It is not always easy for social workers to put into words what is troubling about a  
48 family relationship and why emotional abuse is a concern, particularly under the  
49 pressures of limited time and resources. During an interview Li, an experienced child  
50 protection social worker, explored how she uses her empirical experiences to decide  
51 that a case was emotionally abusive. She progressed beyond her personal  
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4 interpretations about what provoked her concerns to build evidence, which a court  
5 was able to accept as significantly harmful.  
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8 I asked Li to talk about a case where emotional abuse was clearly present. As many  
9 participants who volunteered to participate in the research, she answered by relating  
10 a story which was seemed to be conversely, quite opaque at the outset in its  
11 collection of emotionally abusive factors. It was a narrative about a mother and her  
12 relationship with her 12 year old daughter:  
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17 *...it was very much like a Siamese relationship and I've never seen*  
18 *something like this before. So, you know, sort of sleeping in the same*  
19 *bunk bed, her completely isolated from everything that was outside. You*  
20 *know, she didn't attend school, she didn't attend nursery, she didn't*  
21 *attend any form of activities of a child her age. She was quite... She was*  
22 *very cute but in a way...in a very strange way because she liked insects*  
23 *and reptiles, and for a girl to enjoy watching reptiles and like insects, it's*  
24 *kind of unusual. Quirky I could say, but not necessarily it was on the*  
25 *verge of quirkiness, and you know, weirdness and stuff like that. So it*  
26 *was quite tricky. Third generation where she lived. So she was the third*  
27 *generation living with mum and grandmother in the same house, all*  
28 *seem to be, you know, sort of like a...I can't even describe...like a globe*  
29 *of abuse so it was everything happening inside the house.*  
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### 38 A first 'listening'

39 During my initial 'listening to' the first interview transcript with Li, I focused on her  
40 evocative narrative. I wondered about the culture of social workers; how stories about  
41 a family situation may be constructed to demonstrate their concerns, for the benefit of  
42 the listener. Visual representations of the family in Li's narrative are of particular  
43 interest. Metaphors can fill in the gaps in situations where concerns seem intangible,  
44 and evoke strong emotional responses. Li started her narrative about the family with  
45 the figurative use of term 'siamese twins', which would not have the same impact had  
46 the phrase 'conjoined twins' been used. To me it suggested an unnatural spectacle  
47 that might be found in a Victorian freak show. The weaving together of such dramatic  
48 'presentational and discursive symbols' (Hollway and Froggett 2012: 14) were  
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4 perhaps intended to evoke fear and disgust, and to emphasise the situation was  
5 clearly wrong and unnatural.  
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8 There are aspects of the parent's care in the first part of Li's narrative that are more  
9 consensually and objectively worrying, such as a child who is isolated from contact  
10 with other children or the outside world. Li moved on to talk about the child in a more  
11 abstract way, drawing on some gendered assumptions about what girls should be  
12 like, when she described the child's liking of 'insects and reptiles'. I thought back to  
13 the traditional 1800s nursery rhyme that conveys popular stereotypes about children,  
14 where girls are made of 'sugar and spice and everything nice' whilst little boys are  
15 made of 'frogs and snails and puppy dog tails'. This folklore suggests that boys  
16 embody insects and reptiles, whilst girls embody other 'nice' and sweet things,  
17 reinforcing the idea that children who do not subscribe to their gendered preferences  
18 are unnatural. I felt conflicted about this story as Li spoke; on the one hand I do not  
19 think a girl who likes insects and reptiles is strange, but on the other hand I thought  
20 there could easily be another situation where I might fleetingly make a judgment  
21 based on some assumptions that are embedded in my own cultural experiences and  
22 childhood, and perhaps, if I had held the same opinion as Li on a girl's preferences,  
23 this it would be concerning to me too. 'In making everyday judgments, people take  
24 mental shortcuts' (Munro 1999: 797). Li's story was imbued with her own notions of  
25 'normality'.  
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36 Descriptions of stereotypical gendered behaviours assisted Li in beginning to unpick  
37 what she saw as a skewed and sinister scene. Non-judgmental spaces to 'work  
38 through' thoughts can help avoid the suppression of 'wrong' or 'inappropriate' beliefs  
39 which can lead to more serious misjudgments or oversights. The problem with this,  
40 however, is that although the child's liking of insects and reptiles was not itself  
41 worrying, when woven into the story it becomes part of a bigger picture. I wondered  
42 where in the 'real' world of social work practice would Li define the boundaries  
43 between judging the parent-child relationship as emotionally abusive rather than just  
44 an extremely close one that was unfamiliar and strange to her? In making a  
45 connection between Li's 'inner' world of emotional reactions to a child and the 'outer'  
46 realities (Winnicott 1962) of her social worker role, the difficult boundary between  
47 subjective judgments about relationships and the realities of labeling a case as  
48 objectively concerning must be continually acknowledged.  
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5 The last section of the quote is perhaps the most concerning in terms of mapping  
6 child protection concerns through chronological methods; the 'globe of abuse'  
7 seemed to refer to the intra-familial history of abuse. The description of the nature of  
8 the relationship between the mother and daughter was rich and memorable. An  
9 abusive family system maintained by three generations of the family living under the  
10 same roof. Li subsequently described the daughter as the 'third generation of subtle  
11 emotional abuse'. The description of the 'globe of abuse' had the instant and  
12 powerful consequence of inducing a strong emotional effect in me. I was alarmed by  
13 the suffocating dynamics within the family home. Even though the precise meaning of  
14 the situation remained vague and unclear (Rose 2012), I felt sufficiently disturbed to  
15 trust that Li's concerns for the child were not without basis, particularly alongside the  
16 rest of the more factual worries that she subsequently raised.  
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#### 24 *Trusted relationships between colleagues*

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26 Li's narrative is typical of how a story might be related to friends, colleagues, or in  
27 informal situations. This was an informal telling of an assessment for emotional  
28 abuse. For many social workers, the telling of such a story, may be a mechanism to  
29 be used in a safe space with trusted 'similar and familiars' (Archer 2007: 270);  
30 between colleagues with comparable experiences, who may be able to listen,  
31 support and guide each other to make sense of something they find troubling.  
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33 Li used established symbols from a 'societal collective unconscious' (Hollway and  
34 Froggett 2012) to build a fuller picture of the dark, oppressive nature of the home and  
35 the relationships she encountered within it. The way someone tells a story may  
36 'reveal what is important to the interviewee' (Hollway and Jefferson 2013: 1), and Li's  
37 narrative is an example of how social workers' personal and subjective responses to  
38 families can 'muddy the waters', and detract from building an evidential case about  
39 the presence of emotional abuse. Judgments are formed through interpersonal  
40 interactions that are 'encoded in a complex web of political, cultural, social, and  
41 family relationships.' Therefore 'what we see is mediated by what we expect to see'  
42 (Nicholls 2009: 171). Li had gendered expectations of girls, and her subjective  
43 feelings had to be sorted from the more 'concrete' evidence in order to arrive at a  
44 case that could be taken to a court of law. Later in the interview Li said much more  
45 about the other evidence she gathered in respect of the family to construct a basis  
46 upon which she was able to remove the child from her mother's care, which stemmed  
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4 from her descriptions. These included poor school attendance, fabricated illness and  
5 social isolation.  
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### 7 8 *Cultural difference*

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10 During our second interview I reflected with Li upon our first interview. I felt grateful  
11 for her transparency, and I did not want Li to lose trust in me by interrogating her  
12 about her descriptions of the family, but I wanted to know more about the mother and  
13 daughter 'Siamese Twins'. What she had shared had disturbed her, even though it  
14 would not be included in a court report. I asked her to explain what makes a  
15 particular situation strange, or strikes us as unsettling.  
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20 Li said that the family came from another European country where close-knit family  
21 life is normal and against this background the mother's behaviour was not so  
22 unusual. She felt that cultural circumstances played an important role. Behaviours  
23 like the family's level of physical closeness that might seem excessive to us, were not  
24 so unusual in their country of origin. In part, it seemed that Li took a step back and  
25 qualified her initial observations by deconstructing what she'd already said. Perhaps  
26 by referring to the more 'real' world of accountability and fact, she separated her  
27 subjective thoughts from the evidence available. She offered more concrete  
28 evidential information about chronologies of harmful behaviour in the family unit.  
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35 I asked Li more about her own origins, and experiences of growing up in one country,  
36 practising social work there, and then moving to work in the UK. Li grew up and first  
37 practised social work in another country, where there was an expectation that people  
38 cared for another's children without real financial gain. She had found it to be a huge  
39 contrast when she relocated to England and encountered a care system where  
40 children were not accepted by foster carers in the same way as their own children.  
41 There were many conditions and financial transactions attached to their  
42 accommodation.  
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48 Li said her experiences of growing up in a different culture gave her the advantage of  
49 insight into the cultural misunderstanding that arise between immigrant families to  
50 England and social services. She was able to change what she called her 'hat' when  
51 she needed to express clearly to parents what to do when she identified their  
52 behaviours as harmful. She used her own experiences to explain to families why  
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4 social workers become involved in their lives and where the thresholds of acceptable  
5 behaviour lie:  
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8 *Okay, fine, you are from a different culture; do your own culture and*  
9 *support your child with your own culture, but you can't send a child to*  
10 *school with head lice; you can't just not engage, you know, or allow your*  
11 *child to access some form of education...I do my own stuff for example*  
12 *for Christmas I cook mixed Christmas. I cook turkey and I cook*  
13 *something else, or I bake, you know, mince pies and I bake my own*  
14 *traditional food, but I still send my children...*  
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### 20 *Habitus and the 'active I'*

21 Following the second interview, the listening guide was used flexibly to focus on the  
22 'active I' of Li's story. This puts the narrator at the centre of the story to 'speak about  
23 who they believe they are' (Doucet and Mauthner 2008: 406). Through the lens of  
24 this interpretation Li described her similarity to the family of being a migrant, but  
25 unlike them she had adjusted to her new environment. The mother in the 'Siamese  
26 Twin' case was using her sense of cultural difference as an excuse for neglectful and  
27 harmful parenting which, as a migrant herself, Li felt empowered to challenge.  
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33 Returning to Doucet and Mauthner's first level of analysis, I made space for exploring  
34 my own emotional responses to Li's narrative. Something remained unsaid about the  
35 way in which Li views the world, what she views as strange and how this influenced  
36 her thinking about the case. Although I was concerned she felt unable to immediately  
37 and simply answer the question, it can also be difficult to question one's values and  
38 ideals about what a healthy home-life constitutes. Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus'  
39 (1984) is useful in exploring why Li may have been unable to answer why the  
40 household struck her as strange. Habitus is a complex result of embodying social  
41 structures, such as ethnicity, welfare systems and educational experiences that we  
42 carry with us. Although the internalised notion of habitus should not be static, and  
43 constantly evolving with no 'deliberate pursuit of coherence' or 'conscious  
44 concentration' (Bourdieu 1984: 170) it is nonetheless the embodied history of our  
45 past experiences. To shift one's values about what constitutes 'normal' behaviour is  
46 not necessarily an easy and instantaneous task. If habitus is the embodiment of  
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4 structure, emotional responses may be seen as a structural output of a person's  
5 individual habitus.  
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8 Child protection social work is a complex and emotive subject. Social work practice is  
9 under high levels of 'critical media and political scrutiny' (Stanley 2013: 68). Social  
10 workers are under pressure to make the 'right' decisions. The expectation on social  
11 workers to cast aside their emotional responses and cultural reference points and  
12 instead seek out hard 'objective' evidence of abuse can be overwhelming. There is a  
13 particular pressure on social workers to find hard evidence, which corroborates the  
14 presence of risk. The process of seeking out such information is also arguably a  
15 means of endorsing one's own cultural assumptions and expectations and of  
16 avoiding a direct challenge to one's own habitus. This does not mean that the child  
17 was not at risk, but Li may have met my questions about the scary story with a fear of  
18 accountability, and an understandable reticence at dismissing her deeply held views  
19 that were, to her, intuitive sources of knowledge.  
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27 She focused instead on replacing her account of the relationship with factual  
28 information that could be used to evidence abuse in a more functional, but less  
29 nuanced way. I applied Doucet and Mauthner's fourth stage of analysis: placing  
30 people in cultural context to help me understand how individual social workers  
31 negotiate aspects of their own identities within the wider expectations of English child  
32 protection social work culture. For example, how they reconcile the law and policy  
33 definition of emotional abuse with what they believe in a more instinctive way to be a  
34 caring relationship; what love ought to look like. I noticed that Li referred to everyday  
35 'normal' activities such as a baking at Christmas to model how it is possible to  
36 integrate one's own cultural difference into a broader English societal context. There  
37 is significant pressure on social workers to conform to the beliefs produced by a  
38 specific welfare system they work within. Li's activities as a social worker; how she  
39 uses her powers in her everyday work, depend on how successfully she is able to  
40 reconcile aspects of her subjectivity to meet the very specific cultural construction,  
41 and habitus, of English child protection social work.  
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### 51 **Panel analysis**

52 A central aspect of the psychosocial research design is consideration of my and the  
53 research participant's intersubjectivity as a means of gaining insights how  
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4 assessment of emotional abuse occurs. During data analysis the issue of 'wild  
5 analysis' is a clear concern. This involves the researcher drawing conclusions about  
6 interactions without any real basis for them. Instances of psychological elements,  
7 such as transference, may be perceived in every utterance, but these speculations  
8 about the participants are not tested for reality (Hollway and Jefferson 2013;  
9 Hoggett et al. 2010). I often reflected on how readily I was able to relate to some  
10 social workers more than others during the research process. Interested in enriching  
11 the research with other perspectives I subsequently introduced a 'second level' of  
12 data collection during the analysis phase in the form of panel analysis. This is a  
13 technique, which originates from Wengraf's (2011) 'Biographic Narrative Interpretive  
14 Method' (Hollway and Jefferson 2000).

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21 A research analysis groups was held, made up of four MA social work students. The  
22 analysis panel of students were given Li's description of the family home's globe of  
23 abuse, as detailed earlier in this article. The function of the panel was to 'kickstart'  
24 the interpretive process (Wengraf 2011), providing some checks and balances  
25 against the 'inherent epistemic risk' of wild analysis (Hollway and Jefferson 2013).  
26 The introduction of external members to the research process brought diverse  
27 viewpoints, allowing me to step back and examine my own relationship to the  
28 research.

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35 The group members were asked to consider what was going on in the excerpts, what  
36 their reactions to the data were, and if it deepened their understandings of work with  
37 emotional abuse. The group were immediate concerns from the group that Li's  
38 descriptions were not of abuse and could clearly be explained by cultural difference.  
39 The group suggested the level of personal opinion and emotion displayed by Li was  
40 not a legitimate means of assessment, and that it should be curtailed:

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45 *Becca: There's not enough fact – perhaps use of emotional language is the*  
46 *only way to get it across, but obviously you have to have fact to back it up.*  
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50 The group was self-moderating and they were keen to pose each possible side of the  
51 argument, acknowledging when they were perhaps 'playing devil's advocate', before  
52 offering potentially provocative statements. The group had very little information to go  
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4 on, but from the information they had they felt that Li was being too descriptive, too  
5 caught up in their 'value judgments' and one group member commented:  
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8 *Wesley: It strikes me that you almost know more about Li than you know*  
9 *about the child.*  
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12 The group seemed to echo the reflective, self-correcting stance of Li, exhibiting  
13 restraint and modification when they felt that they'd got carried away with their  
14 critique of Li's practice. One said 'perhaps we're being unfair' when they reflected on  
15 their own comments, acknowledging that their responses were based on very little  
16 information. The panel analysis group revealed to me the alarm that can be felt in  
17 reaction to the exposed emotions of a social worker. This led me to consider what  
18 happens to the individual and the profession when thoughts and feelings are  
19 considered wrong, and when they are suppressed or filtered. If there is 'a degree of  
20 deception between what the individual really feels and what they are supposed to  
21 feel' (Theodosius 2006: 896), where do unsaid and unsayable emotions (Hollway and  
22 Froggett 2012) like anger, fear, shame and guilt reside?  
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### 32 **Filling in the gaps**

33 I thought back to the social workers in previous child protection enquiries. This  
34 experience of facilitating a panel allowed me space to think about the wider social  
35 work context, and recalled social workers in previous child protection enquiries.  
36 Victoria Climbié was an 8 year old girl who as tortured and murdered by her  
37 guardians in 2000. Lisa Arthurworrey was Victoria Climbié's social worker. A newly  
38 qualified social worker, she was charged with missing multiple opportunities to  
39 protect Victoria. Although she was 'badly let down' (Laming 2003: 109) by her  
40 managers, at the time she was dismissed for her failings. It is exposing for social  
41 workers to be held up for public scrutiny for decision they have to make, particularly  
42 when they do not necessarily have all of the information they need to make the best  
43 decision for the child concerned. This is anxiety provoking for those involved. In  
44 cases where more worrying information subsequently comes to light, social workers  
45 are vulnerable to public criticism.  
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4 The inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié suggested that oversights were made  
5 regarding her abuse because assumptions were made about her cultural  
6 background. Victoria stood to attention for her carers, which social worker  
7 Arthurworrey did not see as concerning because obedience is an 'important feature  
8 of the Afro-Caribbean family script' (Laming 2003: 345). Victoria's subservient  
9 behaviour alone would not be a scenario that would meet the thresholds for a child  
10 protection intervention, but it was an aspect of a broader and more concerning  
11 picture, which offered an insight into the relationship Victoria had with her carers.  
12 Arthurworrey explained this away through her interpretation of cultural norms.  
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18 This serves as a reminder that work with children and families from different cultures  
19 can happen 'through a veil' of ambiguity (Riessman and Quinney 2005: 400). Even  
20 when people speak the 'same' language, where there is uncertainty with regards to a  
21 family situation, it is sometimes easier to make convenient assumptions that reject  
22 disturbing ambiguities and allow the social worker to move onto the safer territory of  
23 concrete facts. A year on from carrying out this interview I wondered about how this  
24 evocative narrative gave rise to an excursion that 'infiltrated' my unconscious (Rose  
25 2012). How it quickly became difficult to see the facts from the social worker's  
26 subjective observations, and in what ways these everyday interactions between  
27 professionals influence outcomes for service users. I wondered too about my power  
28 as a researcher, who was in the position to select this story from many others to re-  
29 tell, and in turn, influence opinions about emotional abuse and how it is identified.  
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38 I was grateful to Li for being candid about her feelings as, although most social  
39 workers feel strong emotional responses at some point, these are often hidden, as  
40 there is often a significant anxiety of being exposed as unprofessional. To present  
41 oneself as un-objective and emotional brings the risk 'of being caught out in the eyes  
42 of another person, seen more clearly by someone else than we can see ourselves'  
43 (Cooper 2012: 3). Through the process of moving from being a social work  
44 practitioner to experiencing social work practice as researcher I was left with the  
45 feeling of holding onto the profession's 'dirty secrets' (Morriss 2016). I felt that in  
46 order for these occupational experiences to be fully appreciated and understood, my  
47 new insights could not be 'unknown' but only retold amidst my own discomfort.  
48 However, in my analysis and telling of these secrets, I felt I had betrayed Li's trust  
49 and made her an easy target for criticism.  
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### Shame in sharing?

The purpose of this research has been to articulate the more subjective processes involved in child protection social work with emotional abuse, and to demonstrate how social workers' emotions, experiences and perceptions intersect with the more conventional and directive systems of statutory child protection work. How the social worker who took part in this research negotiated their role has been explored in depth. What it is like for social workers to draw upon their subjectivity during complex assessments and decision-making has been unpacked, with the role of emotions work positioned prominently in social work practices.

I found the process of panel analysis both un-nerving but also reassuring. To share troubling data during the process of analysis, in much the same way as a social worker may be supported by their team when they are working with a complex case and may be experiencing a variety of psychodynamic processes. When the purpose is to look under the surface of what is going on, it has been suggested that 'it requires two minds to think a person's most disturbing thoughts' (Ogden 2009 cited in Hollway & Froggett, 2012: 281). I wondered if someone less submerged in the data would make different observations to mine.

In considering the responses of the social worker and the social work students, it is possible to explore the nature of their 'intersectional identities' (Wetherell 2008: 78) within the context of the assessment of this family. Li is a social worker, an agent of the state, under scrutiny to do the 'right' thing, and in this situation she simultaneously felt responsible for the children. She experienced protective and authoritative feelings, blurring the boundaries and recreating them through her empathy and reflective practice.

Subjective responses to challenging situations may impact on child protection work with emotional abuse. Bringing these responses to the surface for scrutiny can lead to defenses becoming raised by interviewees, researchers and panel members alike. Emotions such as anger, fear, shame and guilt have been identified as significant in everyday decision-making processes. Systemic pressures around accountability can lead to moral outrage and 'institutional shaming' (Gibson 2016) of social workers. Hiding subjective responses, particularly those that invite disapproval, may be a

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4 common and natural response. Creating space in the system where 'honesty about  
5 our feelings and courage to speak up about this' (Gibson 2016: 127) must be  
6 prioritised. This research suggests that emotional responses to the work should be  
7 reflected upon and critically considered in safe spaces so work may be carried out  
8 more effectively.  
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## 11 12 13 14 **Conclusion**

15 This research adopts a reflective approach that looks 'under the surface' for depth  
16 explanations about sociological data. It does this whilst remaining clearly positioned  
17 in context of statutory child protection social worker where clear indicators of harmful  
18 behaviour are required in order for legal interventions to occur. With the assistance of  
19 psychosocial methodology, the empirical domain of a social worker's agency is  
20 explored. This research illuminates some of the ways in which their subjectivity plays  
21 a significant, often informal, role in work with emotional abuse. Participants'  
22 responses are examined to consider what may be subjective or unconscious in their  
23 narratives, and what might be hidden or denied. Through exemplifying specific  
24 practice experiences, an in-depth account of everyday encounters of work with  
25 emotional abuse has emerged.  
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33 The research suggests that there are significant risks involved in sharing what may  
34 seem on the surface to be unprofessional practice. However, this is necessary and  
35 should be carried out in safe contained spaces so that challenging work with  
36 emotional abuse may be carried out to greater effect. The research importantly also  
37 considers the value of researcher use of self during the research process. This  
38 transparency in the research approach, allows for a deeper exploration of the  
39 nuances of practice with emotional abuse. This methodological stance ensures that  
40 individual social workers emerge in the research as three-dimensional human beings  
41 with vulnerabilities and strengths.  
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