

Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	8
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS.....	10
ABSTRACT	11
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	12
1.1 Background & Rationale	12
1.2 Aim of the Study	15
1.3 Research Questions.....	17
1.4 Theoretical & Epistemological Positioning	18
1.5 Methodological Overview	21
1.6 Significance of the Study	23
1.7 Structure of the Thesis.....	25
CHAPTER 2: CONTEXTUALISING RACIALISED CHILD PROTECTION IN ENGLAND.....	27
2.1 Introduction	27
2.2 Historical Development of Child Protection in England	29
2.3 Legislative & Policy Framework	32
2.4 Welfare Reform, Austerity, & the Reshaping of Safeguarding	36
2.5 Immigration Governance, NRPF, & Child Protection.....	39
2.6 Inspection, Accountability, & Risk Cultures.....	42
2.7 Racial Categorisation, Professional Language, & the Governance of Difference	45
2.8 Racial Disproportionality as a System-Level Feature	49
2.9 Chapter Summary	52
CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW	53
3.1 Introduction	53
3.2 Poverty, Deprivation and Child Protection Intervention	56
3.3 Austerity, Welfare Retrenchment and the Shift from Support to Surveillance.....	59
3.4 Race, Ethnicity and Disproportionality in Child Protection.....	62
3.5 Black African Families and Child Welfare Intervention.....	65

3.6 Migration, Immigration Status and No Recourse to Public Funds.....	70
3.7 Professional Language, Risk Assessment and the Construction of Family Difference	73
3.8 Institutional Racism, Cultural Misrecognition and Critical Race Theory	77
3.9 Gaps in the Literature and Contribution of the Present Study	80
3.10 Chapter Summary	83

CHAPTER 4: THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK..... 84

4.1 Introduction	84
4.2 Critical Race Theory: Origins, Core Principles and Relevance to the Study.....	89
4.2.1 Operationalising Critical Race Theory in this Study.....	93
4.3 Race, Racialisation, Institutional Racism and Intersectionality.....	95
4.4 Counter-Storytelling and the Value of Lived Experience	100
4.5 CRT in Social Work and Child Protection.....	103
4.5.1 Cultural Misrecognition, Deficit Thinking and the Governance of Difference...	103
4.6 Conceptualising Child Protection as a Racialised System of Governance.....	106
4.7 Chapter Summary	109

CHAPTER 5: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY 111

5.1 Introduction to the Methodological Approach	111
5.2 Research Design.....	114
5.3 Epistemological and Methodological Alignment	118
5.4 Research Setting and Context.....	122
5.5 Participant Groups and Rationale	125
5.5.1 Participant Characteristics	129
5.5.2 Parent Participant Characteristics	129
Table 1. Parent Participant Demographics	130
5.5.3 Social Worker Participant Characteristics	133
Table 2: Demographic characteristics of the social worker participant group.	135
5.6 Sampling Strategy and Participant Selection.....	136
Table 3: Sample flow and attrition across participant groups.....	140
5.6.1 Pseudonyms, Confidentiality and Timing of Data Collection	141

5.7 Recruitment and Access	142
5.8 Pilot Study	147
Table 4. Pilot Participant Demographic and Professional Profile	149
5.9 Data Generation Methods	151
5.10 COVID-19 Considerations	155
5.11 Data Analysis	156
5.12 Reflexivity and Positionality	161
5.13 Ethical Considerations	168
5.14 Trustworthiness and Rigour	172
5.15 Limitations of the Methodology	177

CHAPTER 6: EMPIRICAL FINDINGS: SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN PARENTS' EXPERIENCES OF UK CHILD PROTECTION ... 181

6.1 Introduction and Analytical Orientation.....	181
6.1.1 Analytical and Thematic Structure of the Chapter.....	183
Table 5. Coding Grid: Parent Findings Themes	185
Table 6. Coding Grid: Social Worker Findings Themes	187
Figure 1: Sequential Architecture of Racialised Governance in Child Protection in England.....	190
Figure 2: Layered Architecture of Safeguarding Governance (Model B)	191
Figure 3: Recursive Governance Cycle of Safeguarding (Model C).....	193
6.2 Main Theme 1: Pathways into Child Protection and Institutional Visibility	197
6.2.1 Visibility, Referral and Institutional Entry	198
6.2.2 Structural Conditions, Poverty, Immigration and State-Produced Risk	201
6.2.3 Institutional Context as Experienced by Parents	205
6.3 Main Theme 2: Surveillance, Professional Judgement and the Construction of Risk	207
6.3.1 Surveillance, Monitoring and the Experience of Being Watched	208
6.3.2 Professional Judgement, Risk Construction and Credibility	213
6.4 Main Theme 3: Living Through Safeguarding Intervention	219
6.4.1 Fear, Compliance, Adaptation and Survival Strategies	220
6.4.2 Emotional and Psychological Impact of Safeguarding	225
6.5 Main Theme 4: Agency, Resistance and Counter-Narrative	230

6.6 Main Theme 5: Reimagining Safeguarding Through Lived Experience	235
6.6.1 Supportive Encounters and Relational Practice	241
6.7 Chapter Summary and Transition	245
CHAPTER 7: SOCIAL WORK FINDINGS.....	246
7.1 Introduction	246
7.2 Main Theme 1: Professional Language, Categorisation and the Construction of Difference	247
7.2.1 Professional Language, Race and the Politics of “BME”	248
7.2.2 Cultural Interpretation and Parenting Norms.....	251
7.3 Main Theme 2: Risk, Accountability and Professional Judgement.....	254
7.3.1 Risk Culture and Fear of Blame	255
7.3.2 Engagement, Compliance and Professional Judgement	258
7.4 Main Theme 3: Structural Constraints in Safeguarding Practice	261
7.4.1 Structural Constraints and Limits of Support	261
7.5 Main Theme 4: Reframing Practice Through Culturally Responsive Reform.....	265
7.5.1 Practitioner Reflections on Reform and Culturally Responsive Practice.....	265
7.6 Chapter Summary	269
CHAPTER 8: DISCUSSION / ANALYSIS.....	272
8.1 Introduction	272
8.2 Pathways into Child Protection as Racialised Visibility.....	279
8.3 Surveillance, Assessment and the Production of Fear.....	282
8.4 Parenting, Discipline and Eurocentric Normativity	287
8.5 Credibility, Power and Epistemic Injustice	296
8.6 Mental Health, Immigration and Structural Harm.....	302
8.7 Survival Strategies: Compliance, Silence and Performance	311
8.8 Comparative Insights: England, Canada, the United States and Sweden.....	319
8.9 Implications for Anti-Racist Social Work Practice	328
8.10 Chapter Summary	335
CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION AND CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE	340
9.0 Introduction	340
9.1 Restating the Central Argument.....	341

9.2 Contribution to Knowledge.....	345
9.3 Implications for Policy and Practice.....	351
9.4 Limitations of the Study	356
9.5 Directions for Future Research	361
9.6 Final Conclusion	366
9.7 Conflict of Interest Statement.....	370
REFERENCES.....	371
APPENDICES	422
Appendix 1: Ethics Approval Letter	422
Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet — Parent Participants	424
Table 5. List of support resources for participants	427
Appendix 2.1 – BME parents- Sociodemographic Questionnaire Version 1.	431
Appendix 3: Consent Form — Parent Participants	434
Appendix 4: Participant Information Sheet —Social Worker Participants	438
Table 1. List of support resources for participants	441
Appendix 4.1: Social workers -Sociodemographic Questionnaire.....	447
Appendix 5: Consent Form — Social Worker Participants	449
Appendix 6: Parents Recruitment Poster / Advertisement	452
Appendix 6-1: Recruitment Poster / Advertisement.....	453
Appendix 7: Recruitment Messages / Email or WhatsApp Invitation	453
Appendix 8: Parent Interview Schedule	455
Appendix 9: Social Worker Interview Schedule.....	457
Appendix 10: Observational Guide during the interviews	458
Appendix 11: COVID-19 and Risk Assessment	459
Appendix 12- Responding to participant distress during online/face-to-face interviews	473
Appendix 13: Debriefing statement	478
Appendix 14- Email of appreciation and debriefing information	480
Appendix 15: Thematic Matrix for Parent Participants (PB01–PB19)	481
Appendix 16: Thematic Matrix for Social Worker Participants (PSW01–PSW05)	507
Appendix 17: Reflexive Fieldwork Notes from Semi-Structured Parent Interviews	543

Systemic Inequalities in UK Child Protection: A Critical Race Theory Analysis of
Challenges for Sub-Saharan African BME Families

ALICE W MAINA

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Social Work

Department/School of Health and Social Care

University of Essex

Date of submission for examination: July 2026

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I begin with deep gratitude to God, whose guidance, grace, and blessings have sustained me throughout my PhD journey. His presence has been a constant source of strength, comfort, and hope, helping me to persevere through both the challenges and the achievements of this work. I regard the completion of this thesis as a testament to the resilience and faith that have carried me through.

Reflecting on the early stages of this journey, I am deeply thankful to my dear friends who offered invaluable guidance and encouragement as I navigated the PhD application process, developed my initial proposal, and chose the right university and supervisors. I offer special thanks to Dr Jawhl, Dr Judy Mwangi, and Dr Sarah Elmammeri for their unwavering support and mentorship. Your encouragement has meant a great deal to me.

I also wish to honour the memory of my dear friend Yusuf Mustapha, who's passing shortly after his graduation was a deeply painful loss. We shared much of this academic journey together, and I remain profoundly grateful for his friendship, encouragement, and companionship. He will always be remembered with deep respect, affection, and gratitude.

I express my heartfelt thanks to my former supervisors, Stephen Jordan and Professor Winifred Eboh, for their valuable encouragement during the application process, and to my current supervisor, Professor Vasilios Ioakimidis, whose expertise, guidance, and unwavering support have contributed greatly to my academic development. I also sincerely appreciate my supervisory chair, Professor Christopher Green, for his insightful feedback and steadfast commitment to academic excellence. Your collective support has been fundamental to this work.

To my beloved children, Brian Ngure and Lewis Ngure, your love, patience, and unwavering belief in me have been the foundation of my perseverance. Your sacrifices, understanding, and encouragement have given me the strength to continue even in the most difficult moments. This achievement is as much yours as it is mine.

I extend my sincere appreciation to the faculty and staff of the School of Health and Social Care at the University of Essex for providing a stimulating and supportive academic environment.

I am also deeply grateful to all the first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents and social workers who participated in this research. Your willingness to share your experiences, reflections, and insights has been invaluable to this study. I am honoured by your trust and openness.

To everyone who has contributed to this journey, mentors, friends, colleagues, participants, and loved ones, I am truly grateful. Your support, encouragement, and generosity have not only shaped this PhD but have also left a lasting mark on my academic and personal growth. Thank you for being part of this important journey.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BAME	Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic
BME	Black and Minority Ethnic
BASW	British Association of Social Workers.
CRT	Critical Race Theory
CRM	Critical Race Methodology
CPS	Child Protection System
DfE	Department for Education
DoH	Department of Health
HM	His Majesty's
ILACS	Inspecting Local Authority Children's Services.
NRPF	No Recourse to Public Funds.
ONS	Office for National Statistics
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
USA	United States of America

ABSTRACT

Racial disproportionality in child protection in England is well documented, but research has focused more on statistical overrepresentation than on institutional processes through which racialised inequality is produced, interpreted and sustained. Less attention has been paid to how safeguarding is experienced and negotiated by first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents, particularly in relation to poverty, housing insecurity, immigration precarity, professional judgement and unequal credibility.

Objective

This thesis examines how first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents experience and navigates child protection involvement in England, and how racialised inequality is reproduced through routine safeguarding practices, professional interpretation, and wider systems of welfare, migration and institutional governance.

Methods

Drawing on Critical Race Theory and Critical Race Methodology, the study conducted qualitative, semi-structured interviews with 19 first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents involved in child protection in England and 5 statutory social workers. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Essex Ethics Sub-Committee 2 prior to data collection, and informed consent, confidentiality, and data protection were guaranteed. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

Results

Findings show that safeguarding was often experienced as a cumulative process of institutional visibility, surveillance, professional judgement and unequal credibility, rather than as isolated interventions. Pathways into child protection were shaped by

referral events, poverty, housing insecurity, welfare exclusion, mental distress and immigration precarity. These conditions increased institutional visibility while limiting support. Parents described family life as judged against dominant norms of parenting, behaviour and cooperation, while structural hardship could be recast as parental inadequacy or risk. Fear, compliance, silence, emotional restraint, and strategic self-presentation emerged as forms of constrained agency within a system experienced as powerful, uncertain, and potentially punitive.

Conclusions

The thesis argues that racialised inequality is reproduced through routine practices structured by surveillance, interpretation, documentation and unequal epistemic authority. Fairer safeguarding requires structurally informed, anti-racist and epistemically just practice.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background & Rationale

Child protection in England is a statutory welfare system intended to safeguard and promote children's welfare, support children in need and their families, and intervene where there is reasonable cause to suspect that a child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm

(Children Act 1989, ss. 17 and 47; Children Act 2004, ss. 10–11; Children and Social Work Act 2017; HM Government, 2026). In principle, this framework combines protection, early help, family support and partnership with parents. In practice, however, research has consistently shown that child protection does not operate evenly across social groups. Studies of child welfare inequalities in England identify strong associations

between deprivation, ethnicity and statutory intervention, including children in need, child protection plans and entry into care (Owen & Statham, 2009; Bernard & Gupta, 2008; Bywaters, 2015; Bywaters et al., 2016; Bywaters et al., 2017; Webb et al., 2020; Okpokiri, 2021). Research on Black African and Black children in serious case reviews further shows that race, culture, poverty and professional interpretation can shape how safeguarding concerns are recognised, assessed and acted upon (Bernard & Gupta, 2008; Bernard & Harris, 2019; Okpokiri, 2021).

These inequalities cannot be adequately explained by isolated poor practice, cultural misunderstanding, or socioeconomic deprivation alone. Poverty is strongly associated with child welfare intervention, but it does not fully explain why ethnic disparities persist or why similar forms of hardship may be interpreted more punitively for some families than for others

(Bywaters et al., 2016; Bywaters et al., 2017; Goldacre & Hood, 2022; Okpokiri, 2021; Adjei

& Minka, 2018). This raises broader questions about how risk, need, parental adequacy, and family legitimacy are constructed within safeguarding systems shaped by managerial accountability, welfare retrenchment, housing insecurity, and immigration-related precarity (Parton, 2014; Featherstone et al., 2018; Bernard & Harris, 2019). It also raises questions about how parenting is interpreted, whose accounts are treated as credible, and how routine professional judgements may produce unequal effects even when presented as neutral.

This thesis focuses on first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents engaged with child protection services in England. The term Sub-Saharan African is used not to erase internal diversity, but to identify families whose experiences are shaped by intersecting racialised and migratory positions within British institutions. Families from this region differ in

nationality, ethnicity, religion, language, class and migration pathway, yet may still encounter safeguarding through broad racialised categories that flatten those differences while exposing them to common forms of institutional scrutiny and misrecognition (Bernard & Gupta, 2008; Okpokiri, 2021; Nationality and Borders Act, 2022; Webb & Bywaters, 2024; Ladson-Billings, 2020).

For many first-generation Sub-Saharan African families, involvement with children's services takes place within conditions of intersecting disadvantage, including insecure immigration status, welfare exclusion, unstable or overcrowded housing, labour market marginalisation and unequal access to services. Such conditions may intensify contact with statutory agencies while constraining families' ability to meet the implicit norms embedded within professional judgement and safeguarding assessment (Featherstone et al., 2018; Bernard & Harris, 2019; Okpokiri, 2021; Terreffe, 2025). Child protection involvement may therefore emerge not only from concerns about parenting but also through broader processes of structural inequality, institutional visibility, and cumulative scrutiny.

Despite substantial scholarship on disproportionality in child protection, parents' perspectives remain underdeveloped compared with administrative, policy and professional accounts. Existing research identifies patterns of inequality but is less able to explain how safeguarding is experienced, interpreted and navigated by families subject to intervention (Bywaters et al., 2015; Bywaters et al., 2016; Featherstone et al., 2018). This gap is particularly important for African migrant families, whose encounters with child protection may be shaped by race, immigration control, welfare restriction, housing insecurity, language barriers, mental distress and wider forms of state scrutiny (Bernard & Harris, 2019; Okpokiri, 2021; Pinter & Leon, 2025).

There is also a theoretical gap. While UK scholarship has documented racial disproportionality in child welfare, relatively little research has used Critical Race Theory systematically to analyse how racialised power operates through routine safeguarding practice and how apparently neutral procedures may generate unequal outcomes (Gillborn, 2015; Mohammed et al., 2021; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Aldana & Vazquez, 2020; Tate, 1997). Less attention has been given to child protection as a site of knowledge production, where credibility is unevenly distributed, parental accounts are filtered through professional interpretation, and structural hardship may be recoded as parental risk.

The rationale for the study is therefore both empirical and theoretical. Empirically, it addresses the limited attention given to the lived experiences of Sub-Saharan African parents in UK child protection research. Theoretically, it develops a more explicit account of how racialised inequality is reproduced through ordinary safeguarding processes rather than only through overt prejudice or exceptional failures. In doing so, the thesis argues that child protection should be understood not only as a welfare response to harm, but also, in important respects, as a form of racialised governance structured through visibility, surveillance, institutional judgement, parenting norms and unequal credibility.

1.2 Aim of the Study

This study aims to explore how first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents experience and navigate child protection involvement in England, and to examine how safeguarding decisions are shaped by racialised institutional processes within broader systems of inequality. Rather than treating disproportionality only as an outcome, the study investigates how child protection functions in practice: how concerns are interpreted, how

assessments are conducted, how professional judgements are justified, how parenting and parental credibility are evaluated, and how interventions are sustained, escalated, or normalised over time.

A further aim is to examine how structural conditions, including poverty, housing insecurity, welfare restriction, immigration precarity, mental distress, and racialised marginalisation, are mediated through safeguarding frameworks organised around accountability, defensibility, and risk management. The study, therefore, considers how these institutional logics influence interpretations of parenting, credibility, cooperation, compliance, harm, and need, and how they shape the trajectory of intervention for racially minoritised migrant families (Bywaters et al., 2015; Bywaters et al., 2017; Featherstone et al., 2018; Keddell et al., 2019; Esposito et al., 2022; Keddell, 2023; Rothwell & Jud, 2022).

The study also aims to examine how parents themselves interpret and respond to safeguarding involvement, including through caution, adaptation, emotional restraint, selective disclosure, compliance, and resistance, and how those responses are then institutionally read. In doing so, it attends not only to intervention as an external process, but also to the ways families are required to navigate surveillance, unequal credibility, and normative assumptions about parenting within everyday professional encounters.

In pursuing these aims, the thesis seeks to make a clearer original contribution by showing that child protection inequality is not only a matter of unequal outcomes but of unequal institutional pathways. It argues that disproportionality is produced through cumulative

processes of visibility, surveillance, interpretation, documentation, and credibility judgment. By applying Critical Race Theory as its main analytical framework, the study moves beyond descriptive accounts of inequality to explain more precisely how child protection can operate as a form of racialised safeguarding governance.

1.3 Research Questions

This study is guided by research questions that explore parents' lived experiences of child protection, situating these experiences within wider institutional, structural, and racialised contexts. Consistent with the study's qualitative and interpretive design, the questions are exploratory rather than predictive. They focus on meaning, process, and power within safeguarding practice and are informed by Critical Race Theory and Critical Race Methodology, both of which foreground racialised institutional processes, unequal credibility, and experiential knowledge (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Aldana & Vazquez, 2020; Gillborn, 2015). They are also shaped by the study's concern with how child protection is experienced not only as an intervention but also as a process of visibility, surveillance, judgment, and institutional meaning-making.

The research focused on these questions:

1. How do first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents experience entry into and engagement with the child protection system in England?
2. How do parents interpret professional judgement, assessment, surveillance, and credibility within safeguarding practice?

3. In what ways do race, migration status, language, culture, poverty, housing insecurity, and mental distress or mental health needs shape parents' interactions with child protection services?
4. How do parents respond to child protection involvement, including through compliance, silence, adaptation, self-presentation, and resistance, and how are those responses institutionally interpreted?
5. What do parents' accounts suggest for rethinking child protection practice, policy, and knowledge production in relation to racialised and migrant families?

In this study, parents serve as the main providers of information. Social workers' perspectives are included to provide organisational and institutional context rather than to construct a separate comparative dataset. This reflects the study's commitment to centring the experiential knowledge of those subject to intervention while situating that experience within the professional environment in which safeguarding decisions are made (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

1.4 Theoretical & Epistemological Positioning

This study is grounded in Critical Race Theory and Critical Race Methodology. Concurrently, these frameworks provide the conceptual and epistemological basis for examining how racialised inequality is produced, normalised, and sustained within child protection systems. Rather than treating racism as exceptional, individual, or accidental, Critical Race Theory directs attention to the ways inequality can become embedded in routine institutional processes, policy frameworks, and apparently neutral forms of

judgment (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Gillborn, 2015; Tate, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 2020). This orientation is particularly important in child protection, where systems framed as universal and welfare-based may nonetheless produce unequal experiences and outcomes.

Critical Race Theory shifts the analysis away from deficit explanations that locate difficulty primarily within families, culture, or behaviour, and towards the institutional logics through which parenting, harm, credibility, and risk are interpreted. It makes it possible to analyse how dominant norms of family life shape professional judgement without reducing the argument to individual prejudice alone. The concern here is therefore with how ordinary safeguarding procedures may generate racialised effects through their routine operation as institutional practices, including through the interpretation of parenting, the construction of risk, and the differential allocation of credibility (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2020; Mohammed et al., 2021; Gillborn, 2015; Bernard & Harris, 2019).

Critical Race Methodology complements this by foregrounding the epistemic significance of lived experience. It challenges hierarchies in which professional assessments, records, and institutional narratives are treated as inherently authoritative while the accounts of racially marginalised families are treated as partial, secondary, or unreliable. In this study, parents' narratives are not used as anecdotal illustrations. They are treated as analytically significant accounts of how safeguarding power is encountered, interpreted, negotiated, and lived in everyday life (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This is important because the study is concerned not only with what child protection does, but also with how it comes to know families, how some accounts acquire institutional authority more readily than others, and

how professional knowledge becomes stabilised through interpretation and documentation.

Epistemologically, the thesis adopts a critical interpretive stance. It rejects the assumption that child protection can be fully understood through administrative measurement or formal outcomes alone, and instead treats knowledge as socially situated and shaped by power. Parents' narratives are approached as context-bound accounts produced in relation to institutional authority, surveillance, and constraint, but also as forms of knowledge capable of revealing dimensions of safeguarding practice that may remain hidden in official records. This position aligns with Critical Race Theory, Critical Race Methodology, and wider critical social work scholarship concerned with reflexivity, power, and the limits of dominant institutional perspectives (Gillborn, 2015; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Rogowski, 2014; Mohammed et al., 2021).

The study is also informed by the concept of epistemic injustice, which becomes more central later in the thesis as a way of understanding how some parents' accounts may be doubted, reframed, or given less authority within safeguarding encounters. This concept is particularly helpful in analysing child protection as a site of knowledge production, where parents may be invited to speak yet not be equally recognised as credible interpreters of their own family lives (Fricker, 2007). Although epistemic injustice does not organise the research design in the same way as Critical Race Theory and Critical Race Methodology, it strengthens the study's ability to analyse how voice, credibility, and professional authority operate unequally.

Although Critical Race Theory and Critical Race Methodology provide the main framework for the study, other critical perspectives are drawn on later to deepen the analysis. They do not, however, organise the research design itself. This preserves theoretical coherence while allowing the thesis to remain responsive to the data and to the layered realities of safeguarding as both intervention and interpretation.

A fuller account of the theoretical framework is provided in Chapter 4. At this stage, the key point is that the thesis approaches child protection not only as a safeguarding system but also as a site where racialised governance, epistemic inequality, and institutional authority are enacted through routine practice.

1.5 Methodological Overview

To address the research aims and questions, the study adopts a qualitative design informed by Critical Race Theory and Critical Race Methodology. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the thesis is concerned with lived experience, meaning-making, and institutional power rather than prediction or causal modelling (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Willig, 2013). It seeks to explore how child protection is experienced, interpreted, negotiated, and remembered by those subject to safeguarding intervention, and how those experiences are shaped by wider structures of race, migration, inequality, and institutional authority.

The primary data were generated through semi-structured Zoom interviews with 19 first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents who had direct experience of the child protection system in England. Parent interviews lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. This method

enabled participants to narrate their experiences in their own words and created space for complexity, reflection, emotional nuance, and institutional critique that are often absent from professional or administrative records (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Consistent with Critical Race Methodology, parents' narratives are treated as epistemically significant rather than supplementary to official accounts. They are understood as analytically important forms of knowledge about how safeguarding is lived, interpreted, and navigated.

To provide contextual insight into the institutional setting in which safeguarding decisions are made, a smaller set of semi-structured Zoom interviews was also conducted with statutory social workers. Social worker interviews lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. These interviews were not used to verify parents' accounts or construct a parallel comparative dataset.

Rather, they provided contextual understanding of the procedural, organisational, and accountability pressures within which parental experiences were produced, interpreted, and acted upon (Denzin, 1978; Flick, 2018; Patton, 2015). Parents remained the primary source of knowledge throughout the study, while practitioner interviews helped situate those accounts within the institutional environment of safeguarding practice.

The study was preceded by a pilot phase used to refine interview wording, sequencing, pacing, trauma-informed safeguards, role boundaries, and prompts for practitioner interviews. Pilot data were not included in the final analysis. The main dataset was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Coding remained open and data-led, while interpretation was informed by concerns central to Critical Race Theory, including

racialisation, surveillance, credibility, parenting normativity, power, and compliance (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2021). This approach supported close engagement with participants' narratives while allowing patterns of institutional process and unequal meaning-making to emerge across the dataset.

Reflexivity was treated as methodological accountability rather than autobiography. Throughout the research process, attention was paid to positionality, insider-outsider dynamics, trust and mistrust within the interview relationship, power relations, emotional labour, and analytic discipline, particularly given the sensitivity of child protection involvement and the potential risks associated with discussing such experiences. Special care was taken to ensure that parents' narratives were not treated as transparent or self-evident, but as situated accounts produced within relations of fear, surveillance, and unequal institutional power.

Ethical considerations were central to the study. Informed consent, confidentiality, and participants' emotional well-being were prioritised throughout, and ethical approval was secured in line with university requirements. A fuller discussion of research design, sampling, recruitment, analysis, reflexivity, and ethics is provided in Chapter 5.

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to scholarship, policy and practice by offering a Critical Race Theory-informed, parent-centred analysis of inequality in child protection in England. Although racial disproportionality in child welfare has been well documented, less attention has been paid to how safeguarding is experienced, interpreted and negotiated by

those subject to it, particularly first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents (Bywaters et al., 2015; Bywaters et al., 2016; Bywaters et al., 2017; Bernard & Harris, 2019). By centring parents' lived experience, the thesis addresses an important empirical and epistemic gap.

The study also makes a theoretical contribution by arguing that child protection inequality should be understood not only as disproportionality in outcome, but as a process of racialised governance. It shows how visibility, surveillance, professional judgement, parenting normativity, documentation and credibility operate together to reproduce inequality through routine safeguarding practices. In this respect, the thesis reconceptualises child protection as a site through which racialised inequality is organised, interpreted and reproduced in everyday institutional life.

Methodologically, the study contributes to debates about knowledge production in sensitive institutional settings. Treating parents' narratives as analytically generative rather than merely illustrative challenges hierarchies that privilege professional records and institutional accounts as inherently more authoritative. In doing so, it extends Critical Race Methodology and counter-storytelling within UK child protection research (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Broadhurst et al., 2010; Modiri, 2012; Nakaoka & Ortiz, 2018).

In policy and practice terms, the study shows how poverty, housing insecurity, immigration precarity, language barriers, parenting differences and mental distress may be reinterpreted as signs of parental risk, poor credibility or non-compliance. It also shows how parents' responses, including compliance, silence, emotional restraint, selective disclosure and strategic self-presentation, may be misread if detached from the unequal contexts in which they emerge. By making these processes visible from the perspective

of those most affected, the thesis provides a stronger basis for fairer assessment, threshold decision-making, recording practice, anti-racist supervision and contextually informed support (Featherstone et al., 2018; Bernard & Harris, 2019; Tedam, 2021).

The significance of the thesis lies not only in documenting inequality, but in explaining how it is institutionally produced and sustained. It contributes to wider anti-racist and decolonising debates in social work by challenging dominant assumptions about expertise, neutrality, family normativity and institutional authority in safeguarding.

1.7 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is organised into nine chapters.

Chapter 1 introduces the study, setting out the background and rationale, research aims and questions, theoretical and epistemological positioning, methodological overview, and significance of the research.

Chapter 2 outlines the historical, legislative, and institutional context of child protection in England. It examines the development of the child protection system and the wider influence of welfare reform, immigration governance, managerialism, and accountability cultures on safeguarding practice.

Chapter 3 reviews the literature on racial disproportionality, safeguarding inequality, and child welfare intervention. It examines key debates on poverty, migration, racialisation, surveillance, parenting normativity, parental voice, mental health and distress, credibility, and professional interpretation, and identifies the empirical and theoretical gaps this study addresses.

Chapter 4 sets out the theoretical framework. Drawing on Critical Race Theory and Critical Race Methodology, the study explains its conceptual foundations, its use of counter storytelling, and its approach to analysing child protection as a form of racialised governance. It also introduces the relevance of epistemic injustice to understanding credibility, voice, and professional authority within safeguarding.

Chapter 5 outlines the research design and methodology. It details the qualitative approach, sampling and recruitment, data generation, analysis, reflexivity, and ethical considerations.

Chapter 6 presents the findings from interviews with first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents. Organised thematically, it explores experiences of entry into the system, surveillance, professional judgement, credibility, fear, compliance, adaptation, resistance, emotional and psychological impact, and supportive encounters.

Chapter 7 presents findings from interviews with statutory social workers. These accounts illuminate the institutional and organisational contexts in which safeguarding decisions are made and help situate parents' experiences within wider professional and procedural settings.

Chapter 8 discusses the findings. It brings the parent and practitioner data into dialogue and interprets them through Critical Race Theory and related critical social work scholarship to explain how racialised governance, Eurocentric normativity, epistemic injustice, structural harm, and constrained agency operate within safeguarding practice.

Chapter 9 concludes the thesis by restating the main argument, clarifying the contribution to knowledge, considering implications for policy and practice, acknowledging limitations, and identifying directions for future research.

CHAPTER 2: CONTEXTUALISING RACIALISED CHILD PROTECTION IN ENGLAND

2.1 Introduction

This chapter situates the study within the historical, legislative, political, and organisational context of child protection in England. While Chapter 3 reviews the academic literature on racial disproportionality, safeguarding inequality, and child welfare intervention, this chapter focuses on the institutional setting within which those inequalities are produced, managed, and normalised. Its central argument is that child protection does not operate as an isolated or neutral welfare service. It functions through a layered system of law, statutory guidance, welfare governance, multi-agency coordination, professional regulation, and organisational accountability that shapes how families come to official attention, how risk and need are interpreted, and how intervention is authorised (Children Act 1989; Children Act 2004; Children & Social Work Act 2017; Department for Education, 2023; HM Government, 2026).

This framing is especially important for understanding the experiences of first-generation Sub-Saharan African families in England. Their contact with children's services does not arise only from isolated parenting incidents or singular safeguarding events. It is also shaped by wider conditions such as racialised inequality, migration precarity, housing insecurity, welfare restriction, and unequal exposure to public institutions. In this context, the issue is not simply whether intervention occurs, but how vulnerability, parental adequacy, and risk are constructed within unequal social conditions (Bywaters et al.,

2017; Featherstone et al., 2018; Gillborn, 2015; Mohammed et al., 2021; Cooper, 2021; Skinner et al., 2023).

Contemporary safeguarding is also historically produced. Its current legal and procedural forms emerged through a long process in which concern for children developed alongside the expanding powers of assessment, recording, information sharing, and inter-agency intervention. The present framework, organised around the Children Act 1989, the Children Act 2004, the Children & Social Work Act 2017, the Children's Social Care National Framework, and *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (2026), places child protection within a wider system of family help, multi-agency cooperation, and evidential accountability (Children Act 1989;

Children Act 2004; Children & Social Work Act 2017; Department for Education, 2023; HM Government, 2026).

The chapter argues that this formal structure cannot be separated from its political and organisational environment. Current policy emphasises family support, anti-discriminatory practice, multi-agency collaboration, and the need to distinguish structural hardship from actual harm (Department for Education, 2023; HM Government, 2026). At the same time, research on child protection shows that practice remains shaped by managerialism, defensibility, resource scarcity, and risk-oriented cultures, with important consequences for threshold decisions and family experience (Munro, 2011; Parton, 2014; Featherstone et al., 2018).

For racialised and migrant families, these pressures are intensified by the overlap between safeguarding and other systems of governance. Housing, schools, welfare administration, healthcare, and immigration control do not simply sit beside child protection; they help organise the conditions in which family life becomes visible, assessed, and regulated. Families experiencing immigration restriction, insecure housing, or welfare exclusion may become more visible to services while being less able to satisfy the implicit norms embedded in assessment and professional judgement. Child protection, therefore, operates not only as a mechanism of support and protection but also, at times, as a mode of governance through which family life is unevenly regulated across lines of race, class, and migration status (Bernard & Gupta, 2008; Mohammed et al., 2021; Bernard & Harris, 2019; Gillborn, 2015; Parton, 2014).

The chapter proceeds in seven parts. Section 2.2 outlines the historical development of child protection in England. Section 2.3 reviews the legislative and policy framework. Section 2.4 examines welfare reform and austerity. Section 2.5 considers immigration governance and No Recourse to Public Funds. Section 2.6 addresses inspection, accountability, and risk cultures. Section 2.7 discusses racial categorisation and professional language. Section 2.8 draws these strands together to argue that racial disproportionality is best understood as a system-level feature of contemporary child protection.

2.2 Historical Development of Child Protection in England

The history of child protection in England is best understood as an uneven process in which concern for children developed alongside the expansion of state powers of

assessment, intervention and regulation. Early legislation, including the Prevention of Cruelty to, and Protection of, Children Act 1889, the Children Act 1908 and the Children and Young Persons Act 1933, gradually moved cruelty and neglect from the private sphere of family life into public and legal concern. However, historians of child welfare have shown that protection and social control developed together, shaped by classed assumptions about morality, domestic order and family responsibility (Dingwall, Eekelaar & Murray, 1983; Hendrick, 2003).

Post-war developments further widened state responsibility for children's welfare. The death of Dennis O'Neill in 1945 and the Curtis and Clyde inquiries of 1946 exposed serious deficiencies in childcare and contributed to the Children Act 1948, which expanded local authority responsibility for children deprived of a normal home life. Although this marked a shift towards a broader welfare model, the system remained selective and reactive, with race and migration largely absent from policy debate (Hendrick, 2003; Parton, 2014).

From the 1970s, child protection became increasingly shaped by public inquiries into child deaths and professional failure. The death of Maria Colwell in 1973 intensified concern with inter-agency communication, professional judgement and state responsibility. Later cases reinforced demands for clearer procedures and more decisive intervention. The first Working Together guidance in 1988 reflected this shift and helped establish child protection as a more procedural, coordinated and risk-conscious field of practice (Parton, 2014; NSPCC, 2025).

The Children Act 1989 remains the central legal framework for child protection in England and Wales. It brought together support for children within their families, where possible, and statutory intervention where significant harm is suspected. While this dual

structure is often presented as a strength, critical scholarship notes that it also institutionalised a lasting tension between welfare and surveillance by locating support and coercive intervention within the same statutory framework (Parton, 2011; Parton, 2014).

Further reform followed the inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié and the publication of *Every Child Matters*. The Children Act 2004 strengthened inter-agency duties, expanded information-sharing and placed safeguarding within a wider children's wellbeing agenda. These changes recognised the need for coordinated support across agencies but also widened professional visibility into family life and reinforced expectations around recording, accountability and defensible judgement (Parton, 2005; Parton, 2014).

By the late 2000s and early 2010s, concerns grew that child protection had become increasingly procedural and defensive. The Munro Review argued that the system had become overly focused on compliance, recording and process, often at the expense of professional judgement and meaningful work with children and families (Munro, 2011). This critique became more significant under austerity, as reductions in early help meant more families encountered children's services at crisis point rather than through preventive support (Featherstone et al., 2018).

The Children and Social Work Act 2017 introduced further restructuring by replacing Local Safeguarding Children Boards with safeguarding partner arrangements led by local authorities, police and health services. More recent policy developments, including the Children's Social Care National Framework and *Working Together to Safeguard Children*, place greater emphasis on family help, anti-discriminatory practice and

distinguishing poverty-related hardship from abuse or neglect (Department for Education, 2023; HM Government, 2026).

Largely, the development of child protection in England has been marked by a persistent tension between welfare and regulation. Contemporary safeguarding therefore inherits both protective and surveillance functions, enabling child protection to operate simultaneously as support, intervention, and governance.

2.3 Legislative & Policy Framework

Child protection in England is governed by a layered framework of legislation, statutory guidance, equality duties, and local multi-agency arrangements. The core instruments are the

Children Act 1989, the Children Act 2004, the Children and Social Work Act 2017, the Children's Social Care National Framework, and *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (2026). Subsequently, these establish duties to safeguard and promote children's welfare, expectations for family help and child protection intervention, and the arrangements through which agencies cooperate locally (Children Act 1989; Children Act 2004; Children and Social Work Act 2017; Department for Education, 2023; HM Government, 2026).

The Children Act 1989 remains foundational. Under section 17, local authorities have a duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in need and, where consistent with that duty, to promote their upbringing by their families. Under section 47, where there is reasonable cause to suspect that a child is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm, the local authority must make enquiries to determine whether action is needed to

safeguard or promote the child's welfare. This structure is significant because it brings family support and protective intervention together within one statutory system.

That dual structure also creates a core tension. The same framework that authorises supportive intervention also authorises intrusive investigation. As a result, family support often operates in the shadow of the possibility of escalation to section 47 enquiries, child protection conferences, or care proceedings. This does not render the framework incoherent, but it does mean that support and surveillance are institutionally entwined rather than clearly separated (Parton, 2014; Featherstone et al., 2018).

A key ambiguity lies in the threshold of significant harm. The legislation provides legal authority for intervention, but it does not offer a fixed formula for determining when family circumstances cross that threshold. Meaning is shaped through professional judgement, statutory guidance, case law, and local procedures (Children Act 1989; HM Government, 2026). This flexibility is necessary because neglect, emotional harm, and family distress do not present in uniform ways. Yet it also creates space for inconsistency, since assessments of supervision, home conditions, parental insight, and neglect are influenced by institutional norms and assumptions about adequate parenting (Parton, 2014; Bernard & Gupta, 2008).

The Children Act 2004 strengthened inter-agency cooperation. Section 10 requires local authorities to promote cooperation between themselves and relevant partners to improve children's well-being, while Section 11 places duties on designated agencies and bodies to ensure their functions are discharged regarding safeguarding and promoting children's welfare. These provisions formalised the multi-agency basis of contemporary

safeguarding and reinforced the idea that child protection is not the responsibility of social work alone.

The Children & Social Work Act 2017 replaced Local Safeguarding Children Boards with safeguarding partner arrangements led by the local authority, police, and health services. In principle, this model was intended to strengthen shared accountability and improve local responsiveness. In practice, it also deepened the procedural and organisational character of safeguarding by embedding partnership structures, local threshold documents, review systems, and shared evidential responsibilities.

Statutory guidance remains central to translating legislation into practice. *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (2026) sets out expectations for family help, assessment, information-sharing, child protection enquiries, and multi-agency governance. The 2026 guidance is particularly notable for its stronger emphasis on anti-racist and anti-discriminatory practice, local analysis of disproportionality, and the integration of early help and section 17 support through a coordinated family help model (HM Government, 2026).

The Children's Social Care National Framework is also important. It states that children's social care should support children, young people, and families; protect children through decisive intervention when harm is likely; and provide care for those who need it. It also explicitly states that children's social care should distinguish between adversity associated with poverty and family stress, and circumstances involving parental abuse or neglect (Department for Education, 2023). This is significant because it formally

recognises that structural hardship should not be automatically recoded as parental deficit, even if implementation remains uneven.

This legislative and policy framework also sits within a wider race-equality and antidiscrimination context. Earlier race relations legislation, including the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, strengthened duties on public authorities to address racial discrimination, while the Macpherson Report gave institutional racism a central place in public debate by showing how apparently neutral organisations may still reproduce unequal treatment. More broadly, section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 requires public authorities to have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity, and foster good relations between groups. Social Work England's Professional Standards similarly require social workers to promote rights, strengths, wellbeing, partnership, and recognition of disadvantage and discrimination (Equality Act 2010; Social Work England, 2024). These legal and professional duties matter because they make clear that safeguarding does not operate in a race-neutral policy vacuum. At the same time, their existence does not guarantee substantively anti-racist practice. Formal equality commitments may coexist with professional norms, organisational cultures, and decision-making routines that continue to interpret poverty, migration precarity, cultural difference, and racialised family life in uneven ways.

Comprehensively, the legal and policy framework is extensive and formally committed to welfare, partnership, proportionality, and equality. However, it does not operate outside broader social relations. Its meaning depends on professional judgement, local interpretation, organisational culture, and wider structural inequality. This is why a formally neutral framework, even one operating alongside equality duties and anti-

discrimination principles, may still produce uneven and racialised intervention in practice.

2.4 Welfare Reform, Austerity, & the Reshaping of Safeguarding

Since the early 2010s, child protection in England has operated within the wider context of welfare reform, local government austerity and increasing pressure on statutory services. This period involved more than spending reductions. It reshaped the balance between family support and statutory intervention, weakening preventive provision while high-cost child protection and care services absorbed growing resources. As local authorities lost capacity to provide early, practical and relational support, children's services became increasingly oriented towards crisis response, threshold management and late intervention (Parton, 2014; Webb & Bywaters, 2018).

Following the 2008 financial crisis, fiscal consolidation had major consequences for English local authorities. The Institute for Fiscal Studies reports that between 2010–11 and 2024–25, councils' core funding was projected to remain lower in real terms, with particularly severe effects in deprived areas (Ogden & Phillips, 2024). This mattered because authorities serving poorer populations often faced greater levels of need while relying on weaker local tax bases. Pressures from adult social care and other statutory duties further reduced discretionary space, leaving early help and community-based provision especially vulnerable.

Children's services spending reflects this shift. NSPCC analysis identifies a long-term movement away from early intervention and towards late intervention, suggesting that councils have become less able to provide timely support before family difficulties escalate into statutory concern (NSPCC, 2024). As Featherstone et al. (2018) argue, this has contributed to a more reactive, investigatory and crisis-driven child protection system.

One consequence has been the raising of support thresholds. As family centres, youth services, community provision and early help have contracted, families have become less likely to encounter children's services through voluntary support and more likely to enter through formal assessment, child-in-need planning or child protection enquiries. Research on intervention patterns in England shows that deprivation, local scarcity and service demand are closely linked, meaning that contact with safeguarding is shaped not only by parental behaviour but also by how systems manage pressure and resource constraint (Bywaters et al., 2017; Hood et al., 2020; Goldacre & Hood, 2022).

Welfare reform intensified these pressures by increasing material insecurity among low-income households. Policies such as benefit caps, sanctions, Universal Credit design and the two-child limit were justified through ideas of work incentives, fairness and fiscal restraint, but evidence has consistently shown their implications for child poverty. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation reports that 21 per cent of the UK population lived in poverty in 2023/24, including 4.5 million children, with very deep poverty reaching its highest level in its time series (House of Commons Library, 2026; JRF, 2026). Family hardship therefore cannot be separated from welfare design.

The relationship between poverty and safeguarding is now well established. Bywaters et al. (2022) argue that higher family income reduces rates of abuse and neglect, while economic shocks increase risks unless mitigated by welfare protection. In practice, hardship may appear as school absence, poor housing, food insecurity, parental stress or neglect concerns, but these conditions are often shaped by income, debt, employment and access to support. Child protection can therefore end up managing the consequences of poverty while obscuring poverty itself as a structural cause (Gupta, 2017; Rogowski, 2020).

Austerity also altered what practitioners could realistically do. Social workers have worked under conditions of high demand, service scarcity, workforce instability and limited access to practical family support. Department for Education statistics show that there were 6,000 child and family social worker vacancies in England in September 2025, representing a 14 per cent vacancy rate (Department for Education, 2025). These pressures help explain why assessment, monitoring and documentation often dominate practice, while reflective and relationship-based work becomes harder to sustain (Munro, 2011; Parton, 2014).

These developments do not affect all groups equally. Runnymede's analysis shows that Black and minority ethnic people in the UK are more likely than white people to experience relative and deep poverty, while JRF shows that poverty is concentrated among renters, larger families, disabled people and households with children (Edmiston, Begum & Kataria, 2022; JRF, 2026). This does not mean racial disproportionality in child protection can be reduced to poverty alone. It does, however, show that austerity and welfare reform intensified pre-existing inequalities, increasing the likelihood that racialised families would encounter safeguarding systems while access to effective support was weakened (Harris & Hackett, 2008).

Contemporary child protection cannot therefore be understood without reference to welfare restructuring. Early support has contracted, late intervention has expanded, and children's services increasingly manage the social consequences of poverty, insecurity and weakened welfare protection. This context is essential for understanding why structurally disadvantaged families, including racialised and migrant families, are disproportionately drawn into safeguarding systems.

2.5 Immigration Governance, NRPF, & Child Protection

For migrant families, child protection involvement is shaped not only by safeguarding law but also by immigration governance. In England, this overlap is particularly visible in the relationship between section 17 of the Children Act 1989 and the No Recourse to Public Funds condition imposed on many people subject to immigration control (NRPF Network, 2017). At the same time, section 55 of the Borders, Citizenship & Immigration Act 2009 requires the Secretary of State to ensure that immigration functions are discharged with a view to safeguarding and promoting children's welfare. This creates an internal tension: immigration law contains a formal child welfare duty while also imposing restrictions that can deepen family hardship (Borders, Citizenship & Immigration Act 2009; Jolly, 2018; Farmer, 2021).

NRPF is a key mechanism through which immigration governance shapes family life. Although it is formally a rule about immigration status and welfare entitlement rather than a child protection measure, its consequences are highly relevant to children's welfare. Where income is lost, relationships break down, or housing becomes unstable, exclusion from mainstream benefits and housing support can expose children to severe hardship. Research argues that NRPF produces forms of state-made vulnerability that are later managed through children's social care. Jolly (2018) describes this as a form of statutory neglect, while Farmer (2021) shows how NRPF involves social workers in the governance of "illegality" Jolly (2022), the NRPF Network (2017), and Jolly and Gupta (2024) further link NRPF to destitution, fear of services, inconsistent support and profound insecurity, especially for racialised women.

Within child protection contexts, the effects of NRPF may appear as safeguarding concerns. Families may struggle to secure stable housing, food, heating, transport, or childcare, not because of indifference to children, but because they are excluded from the welfare systems that ordinarily prevent destitution. This does not mean professionals should ignore unmet needs. Rather, the issue is that visible signs of hardship may be read as evidence of poor parenting, without adequate recognition of how deprivation has been intensified by immigration policy itself (Jolly, 2018; Farmer, 2021).

Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 provides an important but limited safety net. The NRPF Network's guidance states that local authorities may provide accommodation and financial support where children are in need and families are homeless, at risk of homelessness, or unable to meet children's basic needs (NRPF Network, 2024). However, the same guidance notes that there is no dedicated statutory framework for supporting families with NRPF. Practice depends on general legislation, case law, safeguarding guidance, and local procedures, producing significant variation (NRPF Network, 2024; Jolly et al., 2022). NRPF Connect data show that support can also be lengthy and highly conditional: in 2024–25, average support periods were substantial, with some families remaining on support for 1,000 days or more (NRPF Network, 2025). Section 17 can therefore prevent destitution, but often through prolonged assessment, review, and dependence rather than rapid stabilisation.

The literature also shows how immigration governance reshapes relationships between families and professionals through fear and mistrust. Jolly et al. (2022) found that

migrants were often fearful of services because of concerns about deportation, destitution, and the possibility of losing their children. Such responses should not be too readily interpreted as concealment or non-cooperation. They may also be rational responses to overlapping systems of scrutiny, assessment, and immigration vulnerability.

Immigration governance is also racialised. Farmer (2021) situates NRPF within the governance of racialised populations, while Jolly et al. (2022) show its disproportionate impact on racialised women. This is particularly important for the present study because first-generation Sub-Saharan African families may encounter child protection not only as migrants, but also as families already read through racialised assumptions about dependency, culture, and deservingness. Immigration precarity, welfare exclusion, and racialisation therefore intersect rather than operate separately.

Overall, child protection involvement for migrant families cannot be understood without attention to immigration policy, NRPF, and unequal welfare entitlement. The framework contains protective elements, including section 17 support, section 55 duties, and routes by which NRPF conditions may be lifted in cases of destitution or child welfare concerns (Home Office, 2026). Yet the evidence indicates that immigration governance often creates the insecurity that later appears as family risk within safeguarding. The issue is not simply that migrant families experience hardship, but that policy-driven precarity may be misrecognised as parental failure while its structural causes remain insufficiently addressed.

2.6 Inspection, Accountability, & Risk Cultures

Contemporary child protection practice is shaped not only by law and guidance but also by inspection and accountability systems that influence how decisions are made, justified, and reviewed. Ofsted's framework for inspecting local authority children's services states that inspection is intended to assess how effectively authorities help and protect children, support children in care and care leavers, and provide leadership and oversight (Ofsted, 2025). Such scrutiny performs an important public function. Child protection is a high-stakes field in which failure can have grave consequences, and oversight is both necessary and expected.

Inspection became especially significant because repeated child deaths and public inquiries generated concern that drift, weak management, and inter-agency failure might otherwise go unnoticed. Under the ILACS framework, Ofsted examines whether children receive help at the right time, whether threshold decisions are appropriate, whether assessments and plans are effective, and whether leaders understand and improve frontline practice (Ofsted, 2025). This can expose poor decision-making and weak oversight. However, the literature also shows that accountability does not operate neutrally. When inspection outcomes matter organisationally, authorities may become increasingly focused on compliance, timeliness, and defensibility, and those priorities can reshape everyday practice itself (Munro, 2011; Parton, 2014).

This tension was central to the Munro Review. Munro (2011) argued that child protection had become overly focused on compliance, targets, and prescribed procedures, often at the expense of understanding children's lived experiences and effectively supporting

families. Broadhurst et al. (2010) similarly argued that efforts to improve safety through formalised procedures and information systems could themselves generate new systemic weaknesses. These critiques do not suggest that procedure is unnecessary. Instead, they show that when accountability is organised primarily through audit, paperwork, and performance management, it can distort judgement and narrow the space for reflective, relational, and contextual practice.

Risk culture is central to this dynamic. Child protection necessarily operates under uncertainty and is oriented towards the possibility of future harm rather than only proven events. Current information-sharing guidance explicitly supports early sharing where there is established, suspected, or possible future risk (HM Government, 2024). In one sense, this is justified: waiting for certainty may leave children unprotected. Yet critical scholarship has long argued that when risk becomes the dominant organising principle, uncertainty itself may justify ongoing monitoring, repeated assessment, and precautionary escalation even where evidence is partial or ambiguous (Parton, 2011; Parton, 2014).

These pressures shape both organisational culture and individual judgement. Under heightened scrutiny, managers and practitioners may prioritise institutionally defensible decisions over those that are more relationally sensitive but harder to justify retrospectively. Continued oversight, repeated reassessment, and more formal intervention may come to seem safer than de-escalation, especially in situations of uncertainty or when organisational blame is feared (Featherstone et al., 2018; Parton, 2014).

Accountability also shapes how knowledge is produced and stabilised. Records, assessments, and reports do not simply document events; they translate family life into institutional categories that circulate across teams and agencies. Once concerns are recorded in official language, those interpretations may acquire cumulative authority and shape future judgements before any new encounter occurs. This helps explain why families may find it difficult to move beyond earlier concerns once these have been institutionalised in case records (Broadhurst et al., 2010).

For racialised and migrant families, these dynamics may be particularly uneven in their effects. Bernard & Harris (2019) found that race and culture were often insufficiently examined in serious case reviews involving Black children, while Okpokiri (2021) showed how Nigerian parents experienced child welfare through the intersecting effects of race, power, and cultural difference. The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel's *report, It's Silent*, argues that safeguarding systems have too often failed to address race, racism, and bias explicitly, even where these were relevant to children's experiences and professional responses (Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2025). Under risk-averse organisational conditions, unfamiliarity, guardedness, migration-related anxiety, or cultural difference may therefore be interpreted as indicators of danger or non-engagement rather than as signals requiring deeper contextual understanding.

At the same time, it would be too simple to cast inspection and accountability only as mechanisms of control. There is evidence that policymakers and regulators have recognised that high-stakes accountability may itself distort practice. Ofsted confirmed in late 2025 that the overall effectiveness judgement would be removed from ILACS as of

April 2026, reflecting concerns that a single headline grade can oversimplify complex work (Ofsted, 2025). This does not diminish the importance of scrutiny, but it does suggest that the relationship between inspection and good practice remains contested.

Inspection, accountability, and risk culture are therefore best understood as double-edged features of modern child protection. They are necessary because safeguarding requires oversight, justification, and public confidence. But they can also normalise proceduralism, defensive practice, and prolonged surveillance, especially where uncertainty and fear of error dominate institutional thinking.

2.7 Racial Categorisation, Professional Language, & the Governance of Difference

Racial categorisation plays an important role in how populations are made visible to the state and, in turn, how families are interpreted within child protection systems. Administrative labels such as Black, ethnic minority, BME, and BAME have long been used in policy and monitoring as tools for recording ethnicity and identifying disparity (Aspinall, 2002; Aspinall, 2020). In one sense, such classification is necessary: without some form of categorisation, it becomes much harder to identify disproportionality or hold institutions accountable for racial inequality. Yet categorisation is never purely technical. It is also political and administrative, shaped by the purposes for which populations are recognised and governed (Aspinall, 2020).

The evolution of racial terminology in Britain reflects wider shifts in how race has been organised and contested. Collective terms such as Black once served important anti-racist

political purposes by articulating shared experiences of exclusion across differently racialised groups (Hall, 1988; Brah, 2005). Yet later critiques showed that umbrella terms could also flatten differences of migration history, religion, language, ethnicity, and class (Modood, 1994; Brah, 2005). UK government guidance now advises against terms such as BAME and BME because they can conceal significant differences in outcomes between groups (Ethnicity Facts & Figures, 2025).

In child protection, this matters because broad categories may both reveal inequality and hide its mechanisms. Categories such as Black or African may make statistically visible patterns of disproportionate intervention, but they do not explain how those patterns arise. Bernard & Gupta (2008) show that work with Black African children in child protection involves tensions around culture, child-rearing, and family strengths, while Bernard & Harris (2019) show that race and culture are often insufficiently explored in serious case reviews involving Black children. If broad categories are treated as explanations in themselves, culture may become a substitute for analysis, and institutional inequality may remain underexamined.

For first-generation Sub-Saharan African families, these limitations are especially pronounced. Even relatively detailed official categories, such as African, are often too broad to capture differences in migration route, legal status, language, religion, social class, housing insecurity, or exposure to immigration control. Census classification itself recognises this diversity by allowing write-in categories such as Nigerian, Somali, or Ghanaian (ONS, 2022; ONS, 2023). In child protection, this matters because a newly

arrived parent with insecure status and NRPF restrictions may be grouped with a settled Black British family whose institutional position is entirely different. Broad classification can therefore reveal disproportionality while obscuring the specific mechanisms through which it is produced.

These issues are not merely descriptive; they shape governance. Gillborn's (2015) analysis of racism as ordinary and institutional is useful here because it shows how seemingly neutral categories and procedures can reproduce inequality without explicit racial language. In safeguarding, broad racial labels may function as silent cues within systems already organised around normative assumptions about parenting, emotion, communication, and family life. The problem is not only that categories are broad; it is that categorisation becomes part of the institutional process through which some families are made more visible as different, more discussable as complex, and more vulnerable to scrutiny.

Professional language plays a similar role. Terms such as *non-compliant*, *hard to engage*, *chaotic*, *resistant*, and *disguised compliance* do not simply describe behaviour; they shape how professionals understand risk, parental capacity, and the likelihood of harm. While such language can communicate concern across agencies, it is also interpretive and normative, shaped by assumptions about what counts as proper parenting, appropriate cooperation, and credible behaviour (Bernard & Harris, 2019; Leigh et al., 2020).

The language of *disguised compliance* illustrates this clearly. Used cautiously, it may alert practitioners to the risk of superficial reassurance. Yet Leigh et al. (2020) argue that it has become an overly flexible catchphrase that can justify suspicion without deepening understanding. Similar problems arise with broader labels such as “resistant” or “hard to engage”. Taggart et al. (2020) argue that parental non-engagement should not be understood only as refusal or risk but may reflect parents’ histories of trauma, fear, shame, unequal power relations and previous coercive professional involvement. What appears to be resistance may therefore be a response to a perceived threat rather than straightforward evidence of parental risk.

Once recorded, such language can become durable. Case notes, assessments, and reports travel across time and agencies, meaning that later professionals often encounter families first through documentation rather than relationship. Broadhurst et al. (2010) show how organisational pressures and standardised systems shape the framing of cases at the point of entry, while Gorin et al. (2024) found that parents described records as containing inaccuracies and inappropriate wording that continued to influence professional perception. Professional language, therefore, does not simply reflect concern; it helps stabilise and reproduce it.

For racialised families, these effects may be intensified by broader assumptions about parenting, discipline, communication, and family differences. Barn (2007) argues that child welfare practice must navigate carefully between cultural recognition and stereotyping, while Bernard & Gupta (2008), Bernard & Harris (2019), and Okpokiri (2021) show that Black African parents’ experiences are shaped by how professionals interpret parenting, authority, and family life. Caution, guardedness, or self-monitoring in

encounters with child welfare may be understood as evasiveness or non-engagement rather than as responses to fear, unequal power, or cultural misrecognition.

Together, racial categorisation and professional language form part of the governance of difference. They are necessary for administration and professional communication, but they are not neutral. They can homogenise diverse populations, obscure structural context, attach durable meanings to families, and help convert hardship, fear, migration-related stress, or cultural unfamiliarity into signs of parental deficiency.

2.8 Racial Disproportionality as a System-Level Feature

Cumulatively, the historical, legislative, political, and organisational contexts outlined in this chapter suggest that racial disproportionality in child protection should be understood not as an anomaly or the result of isolated poor decisions, but as a system-level feature of how safeguarding is structured and practised. This claim must be made carefully. Disproportionality does not prove that every decision is racist, nor can all differences in intervention be reduced to individual prejudice. A stronger argument is that unequal outcomes arise from the interplay of deprivation, welfare restructuring, immigration control, institutional categorisation, professional language, and organisational defensiveness (Bywaters et al., 2017; Webb et al., 2020; Jing et al., 2024).

Research shows that ethnic inequality emerges at multiple stages of state intervention in family life, but not uniformly. Bywaters et al. (2017) argue that ethnicity and deprivation interact in shaping child protection and care rates in England, while Webb et al. (2020) show that the social gradient in child welfare intervention varies significantly by ethnic

group. This complicates two simplistic explanations: that disproportionality is only poverty in another form, and that it can be explained by race alone without reference to classed and spatial inequality. Instead, disproportionality emerges where racialised inequality and socioeconomic inequality intersect within intervention systems.

Official and quasi-official evidence suggests that these uneven patterns remain visible in contemporary children's social care. Department for Education analysis shows that escalation following referral differs by ethnic group, while the Local Government Association reports over-representation of Black and mixed-ethnicity children in some longer-term interventions and variation in pathways through the system (Department for Education, 2022; Local Government Association, 2024). Nuffield Family Justice Observatory research further shows that Black and Asian children may experience different trajectories through care proceedings, including age at first entry and differing case outcomes (Jing et al., 2024). Disproportionality is therefore not reducible to a single narrative of "more intervention" in every respect. It is better understood in relation to timing, pathway, and type of intervention.

For first-generation Sub-Saharan African families, these patterns are further shaped by immigration policy, welfare restrictions, and broad ethnic classification. Families may be recorded under aggregated labels such as *Black* or *African*, while the specific pressures of insecure status, NRPF, unstable housing, and restricted welfare entitlement remain weakly visible in official data. As earlier sections have shown, such conditions may increase hardship and institutional visibility without necessarily indicating parental

neglect or significant harm. Broad categories may thus expose statistical disproportionality while concealing its specific mechanisms for migrant families.

Organisational risk cultures reinforce these patterns. Where child protection is organised through inspection, performance management, and risk aversion, continued monitoring may appear institutionally safer than de-escalation, especially in cases marked by uncertainty or unfamiliarity. Families already viewed as culturally different, difficult to assess, or organisationally complex may therefore encounter more cautionary responses even where harm is unclear. In this way, disproportionality may be reproduced through ordinary processes such as threshold decisions, information-sharing, assessment language, and case recording, rather than through explicit references to race.

Recent safeguarding review work supports this interpretation. The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel's *Its Silent* report argues that race, racism, and racial bias continue to shape how professionals identify, understand, and intervene in the lives of Black, Asian, and Mixed Heritage children and families, while often remaining insufficiently examined within safeguarding systems (Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2025). This is significant because it suggests that disproportionality persists not only through overt bias but through routine institutional failure to recognise how race shapes practice.

Racial disproportionality should therefore be understood as a system-level feature of child protection, though not in an overly simplified sense. It is neither explained adequately by

practitioner prejudice alone nor dismissible as a neutral reflection of need. It arises through the interaction of structural inequality, racialisation, migration control, institutional categorisation, professional interpretation, and organisational risk management. Child protection thus operates not only as a system of safeguarding, but also, in important respects, as a form of governance that regulates family life unevenly across lines of race, class, and migration status.

2.9 Chapter Summary

This chapter has shown that contemporary child protection in England is shaped by the interaction of historical development, legislative design, welfare restructuring, immigration governance, organisational accountability, and professional risk culture. Safeguarding is not a neutral or isolated welfare function. It is a historically layered system in which support and regulation remain closely connected (Hendrick, 2003; Parton, 2014).

The legal and policy framework is formally grounded in child welfare, partnership, and proportionality, yet it contains significant ambiguity and discretion, particularly around thresholds of need, risk, and significant harm (Children Act 1989; Children Act 2004; Department for Education, 2023; HM Government, 2026). These legal structures are also inseparable from the wider political economy of austerity and welfare reform. Since 2010, cuts to local authority funding, contraction of early help, and tighter welfare provision have pushed children's services towards assessment, crisis management, and statutory oversight rather than sustained family support (Featherstone et al., 2018; Webb & Bywaters, 2018; Bywaters et al., 2022).

For migrant families, these pressures are compounded by immigration governance. NRPF and related restrictions show that immigration status is not merely a background variable but an active condition that shapes access to housing, income, and stability, while increasing reliance on children's social care as a residual source of support (Jolly, 2018; Farmer, 2021; Jolly et al., 2022). The chapter has also shown that inspection, accountability systems, and risk-oriented professional cultures help shape how concerns are interpreted, recorded, and sustained over time. For racialised families, broad administrative categories and problem-focused professional language may intensify scrutiny while obscuring structural context and institutional misrecognition.

Collectively, these strands support the chapter's central argument: racial disproportionality in child protection is best understood as a system-level feature produced through the interaction of welfare governance, racialisation, migration control, professional categorisation, and organisational risk management, rather than as the simple product of isolated bias or parental failure. This does not mean that all interventions are unjustified, nor that safeguarding is reducible to oppression. It means that systems designed to protect children may also govern families unevenly across lines of race, class, and migration status.

CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter situated child protection in England within a wider institutional context shaped by legal mandates, welfare reform, immigration control, accountability systems, and racialised processes of classification and risk assessment (Parton, 2014;

Featherstone et al., 2018; Bywaters et al., 2017). Building on that contextual foundation, this chapter reviews the academic literature that has sought to explain how inequalities in child protection are produced, experienced, and maintained. Its purpose is not simply descriptive. Rather, it critically evaluates the dominant explanations for inequality in safeguarding and identifies the empirical and conceptual gaps that this study addresses.

A substantial body of research has shown that child protection intervention is socially patterned. Studies consistently demonstrate that involvement with children's social care is strongly associated with poverty, deprivation, and wider welfare inequality, indicating that state intervention in family life is unevenly distributed and closely tied to structural disadvantage (Bywaters, 2015; Bywaters et al., 2020; Featherstone et al., 2018). At the same time, research on race, ethnicity, and child welfare suggests that racialised families may encounter systems that struggle to distinguish between harm, hardship, migration-related insecurity, cultural difference, and institutional bias (Bernard & Gupta, 2008; Bernard & Harris, 2019; Okpokiri, 2021). However, these bodies of work do not always speak to each other sufficiently. Literature on poverty and austerity can under-theorise race, while work on race, ethnicity, and culture does not always engage adequately with the political economy of welfare retrenchment and service rationing (Bennett et al., 2020; Featherstone et al., 2018; MacAlister, 2022).

This chapter argues that child protection cannot be adequately understood through individualised explanations centred only on parenting behaviour, compliance, or practitioner judgement, nor through cultural explanation alone. The literature increasingly indicates that safeguarding operates at the intersection of structural inequality,

racialisation, migration governance, professional risk frameworks, and organisational accountability (Gillborn, 2015; Parton, 2014; Jolly, 2018; Mohammed et al., 2021). This intersection is especially important for first-generation Sub-Saharan African families, whose experiences are frequently absorbed into broad administrative categories such as Black, African, minority ethnic, BME, or BAME, obscuring the specific effects of immigration status, welfare exclusion, housing insecurity, and racialised misrecognition (Aspinall, 2020; Bernard & Gupta, 2008).

The review is organised across six interrelated areas. Section 3.2 examines the literature on poverty, deprivation, and child protection intervention. Section 3.3 considers austerity and welfare retrenchment, focusing on the shift from support towards surveillance. Section 3.4 reviews research on race, ethnicity, and disproportionality in children's social care. Section 3.5 turns to the more limited but important literature on Black African families and child welfare intervention. Section 3.6 explores migration, immigration status, and No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF). Section 3.7 examines professional language, risk assessment, and the construction of family difference, while Section 3.8 discusses institutional racism, cultural misrecognition, and the relevance of Critical Race Theory. The chapter concludes by identifying the principal gaps in the literature and clarifying the contribution of the present study.

The chapter is guided by the study's Critical Race Theory (CRT) perspective. CRT is analytically valuable because it directs attention to the routine, institutional, and often normalised ways in which racial inequality is reproduced through policies, procedures, professional assumptions, and claims to neutrality, rather than only through overt

prejudice (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Rollock & Gillborn, 2011; Mohammed et al., 2021; Gillborn, 2015). Read alongside poverty-aware and social models of child protection, CRT enables a more critical examination of how safeguarding systems classify, monitor, and intervene in the lives of racialised families, particularly when hardship, migration, precarity, and cultural difference are interpreted through professional frameworks of risk (Featherstone et al., 2018; Saar-Heiman & Gupta, 2020).

The central argument developed throughout this chapter is that, while the literature has significantly advanced understanding of inequality in child protection, important gaps remain.

Research specifically focused on first-generation Sub-Saharan African families in England is limited. The interaction of race, poverty, and immigration precarity remains insufficiently integrated in much of the literature. There is also comparatively little parent-centred qualitative research examining how safeguarding is interpreted and experienced by those who live through it (Bernard & Harris, 2019; Okpokiri, 2021). These gaps provide the rationale for the present study.

3.2 Poverty, Deprivation and Child Protection Intervention

One of the most established findings in child welfare research is the strong relationship between poverty, deprivation and state intervention in family life. Children living in poorer households and neighbourhoods are significantly more likely to be referred to children's social care, assessed as children in need, made subject to child protection plans and placed in out-of-home care than children living in more affluent conditions

(Bywaters, 2015; Bywaters et al., 2016; Bywaters et al., 2017). The Child Welfare Inequalities Project demonstrated a clear social gradient in intervention rates in England, with children in the most deprived localities experiencing substantially higher levels of state involvement than those in the least deprived areas (Bywaters et al., 2016; Bywaters et al., 2017). This evidence makes it difficult to sustain any claim that child protection operates independently of wider social and economic inequality.

The literature is careful, however, not to equate poverty with maltreatment. Poverty does not automatically cause abuse or neglect, and most families experiencing economic hardship do not harm their children (Pelton, 2015; Featherstone et al., 2018). This distinction is analytically and ethically important because reducing poverty to maltreatment risks reproducing stigmatising assumptions about poor families. At the same time, poverty shapes housing, food security, stress, health, social participation and access to support, all of which affect family life and the likelihood of coming to the attention of welfare agencies (Slack et al., 2011; Gupta, 2017).

This issue is particularly significant in relation to neglect, which is often closely entangled with material deprivation, overcrowded housing, inadequate heating, food insecurity, parental exhaustion and limited practical support (Slack et al., 2011; Daniel, 2015). Indicators such as poor home conditions, irregular school attendance, inadequate supervision or limited nutrition may be treated as evidence of parental failure, while also being shaped by low income, insecure employment, welfare inadequacy or homelessness (Gupta, 2017; Featherstone et al., 2018). Neglect therefore becomes a key site where structural disadvantage can be translated into individualised parental deficit.

Recent evidence strengthens the case for treating poverty as central to child protection analysis. Bywaters et al. (2022) argue that increased family income reduces rates of abuse and neglect, while economic shocks raise risks unless families are buffered by welfare support. This shifts the debate beyond simple correlation and suggests that income, welfare protection and social policy are not external to child welfare, but part of the conditions through which harm may be prevented.

Critical scholarship has therefore challenged the tendency to individualise family difficulties while obscuring their material context. Featherstone et al. (2018) develop a social model of child protection, while Saar-Heiman and Gupta (2020) argue for a poverty-aware paradigm that places material conditions at the centre of analysis. These approaches do not deny the reality of serious harm. Rather, they argue that safeguarding may misrecognise structural deprivation as parental inadequacy and address the symptoms of inequality while leaving its causes intact.

A balanced reading must also avoid reducing all safeguarding intervention to poverty management. Serious abuse, coercive control, domestic abuse and other forms of harm cannot be explained by deprivation alone (Daniel, 2015; Parton, 2014). The stronger argument is that poverty shapes the distribution of intervention, the interpretation of need and the conditions under which concerns escalate (Featherstone et al., 2018; Saar-Heiman & Gupta, 2020). The key analytical task is therefore not to choose between poverty and parenting as explanatory frames, but to examine how institutions connect, separate and prioritise them.

For the present study, this literature is necessary but insufficient. It explains why child protection intervention is socially patterned, but it does not fully account for how poverty intersects with race, migration status, labour market exclusion, housing precarity and institutional misrecognition in the lives of first-generation Sub-Saharan African families. It therefore provides an essential foundation, but not a complete explanation.

3.3 Austerity, Welfare Retrenchment and the Shift from Support to Surveillance

A major theme in recent child protection scholarship is that safeguarding in England cannot be understood apart from austerity, welfare retrenchment and the restructuring of local authority services after 2010. Although tensions between family support and social control have long existed within child welfare, austerity sharpened these tensions by reducing access to preventive, practical and relationship-based support while maintaining or intensifying investigatory and risk-focused interventions (Parton, 2014; Featherstone et al., 2018). Its significance lies not only in reduced spending, but in the way it reordered the institutional priorities of children's services.

Webb and Bywaters (2018) show that reductions in local authority expenditure were accompanied by rationing and inequality, with the greatest pressure often falling on services outside core statutory intervention. More deprived local authorities, already facing higher levels of need, were required to absorb sharper fiscal pressures while continuing to meet legal duties around child protection. Austerity therefore did not simply shrink the system; it restructured it.

One of the clearest effects was the contraction of early help and preventative provision. NSPCC (2024) documents a sustained shift in spending from early intervention to late intervention, suggesting that local authorities became less able to respond to hardship before it escalated into statutory concern. This changed the form of contact families had with the state. When preventative services were weakened, children's services were more likely to enter families' lives later, under more coercive conditions, and through risk-oriented rather than supportive pathways.

Featherstone et al. (2018) argue that this contributed to a broader transformation in child protection, from a system in which support remained a meaningful aspiration to one increasingly organised around surveillance, assessment and threshold management. Their social model critique does not deny the need for intervention where children face serious harm. Rather, it argues that austerity intensified a system already inclined to individualise distress and manage risk, while eroding its capacity to provide material and relational support.

Poverty-aware child welfare literature strengthens this argument. Gupta (2015), Rogowski (2020), Featherstone et al. (2018), and Saar-Heiman and Gupta (2020) show how contemporary safeguarding often addresses the consequences of poverty while obscuring poverty itself as a structural cause of family distress and intervention. Under austerity, welfare cuts, insecure housing and reduced support services increase the likelihood that families present with difficulties later interpreted as neglect, instability or

parental incapacity. Structural deprivation may therefore be translated into family risk, especially where supportive infrastructures have already been weakened.

The literature does not suggest that austerity explains all interventions. Serious abuse and coercive family dynamics cannot be collapsed into welfare cuts, and some reforms were motivated by legitimate attempts to improve coordination and prevent children from falling through gaps in provision (Munro, 2011; Parton, 2011). The stronger argument is that austerity changed the conditions under which intervention takes place. It increased the likelihood that families would encounter children's services after support had diminished, and that difficulties would be processed through investigative and threshold-based systems rather than accessible help.

These changes also affected practitioners directly. High caseloads, staff shortages, limited services and pressure to prioritise acute cases restricted opportunities for sustained relational practice (Parton, 2014; Featherstone et al., 2018; Murphy, 2023). Under such conditions, assessment, recording and defensible decision-making can displace ongoing support, not necessarily because practitioners prefer surveillance, but because the system makes supportive practice harder to sustain.

This body of work is especially relevant to racialised inequality. Poverty, insecure housing and precarious work are unevenly distributed, meaning that austerity does not affect all communities equally. Racialised families are more likely to be exposed to the material conditions that increase both need and institutional visibility (Webb & Bywaters, 2018;

Bywaters et al., 2017). For first-generation Sub-Saharan African families, these pressures may be compounded by immigration restrictions, NRPF and weaker access to stable support. The austerity literature therefore helps explain why child protection becomes socially patterned, but it must be read alongside work on race and migration to explain why some families are also more susceptible to being understood through risk-based institutional frameworks.

3.4 Race, Ethnicity and Disproportionality in Child Protection

A substantial literature now shows that child protection in England does not operate uniformly across ethnic groups, although the pattern of disproportionality is neither straightforward nor identical across all forms of intervention (Bywaters et al., 2017; Webb et al., 2020; Department for Education, 2022; Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2025). The strongest studies avoid framing disproportionality as a single or self-explanatory phenomenon. Instead, they examine how ethnicity interacts with deprivation, local context, referral routes, threshold decisions, and institutional processes to produce different forms of contact with children's social care.

Bywaters et al. (2017) provide one of the most influential contributions in this area by demonstrating that ethnicity and deprivation are interlinked in shaping child protection and outof-home care rates in England. Their work is particularly important because it challenges any attempt to treat ethnic disproportionality as separable from wider socioeconomic inequality. It shows that intervention rates differ across ethnic groups, and that these differences are shaped by neighbourhood deprivation and local context.

Disproportionality is therefore better understood as emerging from the intersection of racialised and socioeconomic inequalities rather than from ethnicity alone.

Webb et al. (2020) deepen this analysis by showing that the relationship between deprivation and intervention is not uniform across ethnic groups. This is significant because it undermines overly general claims about “minority ethnic disproportionality.” It suggests that ethnicity must be analysed relationally and intersectionally, rather than as a single explanatory variable detached from place, poverty, and institutional practice.

Official evidence broadly confirms that ethnic inequality exists in children’s social care, while also showing that it is patterned unevenly. The Department for Education (2022) found that escalation following referral varies by ethnic group and intervention stage. Some groups, such as children of Mixed White and Black Caribbean heritage, were more likely to escalate across several outcomes, while some Asian groups and Black African children were less likely than White British children to reach certain acute outcomes after controls were applied. These findings matter because they complicate any simple narrative of universal overrepresentation. They indicate that disproportionality is real, but not identical in form across all minoritised populations.

Family justice research similarly demonstrates that ethnic inequality cannot be reduced to a simple “more intervention” narrative. The Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (2023) found that Black and Asian children are, on average, older when first entering care proceedings and less likely to be subject to adoption or placement orders than some other

groups. This suggests that disproportionality may manifest in differences in timing, pathways, and outcomes rather than solely in the volume of intervention.

These findings are politically and conceptually important. They warn against treating all racialised groups as similarly positioned and resist the reduction of disproportionality to a demographic pattern detached from institutional processes. Bernard & Harris (2019) push this analysis further by showing that race and cultural factors were often insufficiently examined in serious case reviews involving Black children. Their work shifts attention from counting inequalities to analysing how race is made visible, ignored, or superficially handled within safeguarding itself.

Recent review work reinforces this concern. The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel's report, *It's Silent*, argues that race, racism, and racial bias continue to shape how professionals identify, interpret, and respond to the lives of Black, Asian, and Mixed Heritage children and families (Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2025). The significance of this report lies in its explicit recognition that safeguarding systems may reproduce racial inequality through routine assumptions, silences, and ordinary practices, even where equality language is formally present.

A further problem concerns classification. Broad categories such as Black, African, or BAME are often too coarse to capture meaningful differences in migration history, legal status, language, religion, class, or welfare entitlement. This is particularly significant for first-generation Sub-Saharan African families. Much of the disproportionality literature

demonstrates systemic inequality at a high level, but does not adequately capture how immigration status, NRPF, recent arrival, housing insecurity, or racialised assumptions about African parenting shape institutional visibility and interpretation. The literature can therefore show that ethnic inequality exists but often leaves the mechanisms affecting African migrant families underdeveloped.

The most convincing interpretation of this body of work rejects two simplistic explanations: first, that disproportionality merely reflects greater need among some groups; and second, that it is fully explained by individual practitioner prejudice. The stronger literature instead suggests that ethnic inequality arises through the interaction of deprivation, migration, classification, local service conditions, professional judgement, and organisational risk cultures, with these factors combining differently across groups and settings (Bywaters et al., 2017; Webb et al., 2020; Bernard & Harris, 2019; Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2025). This intersectional and structurally grounded understanding is central to the present study.

3.5 Black African Families and Child Welfare Intervention

Compared with the broader literature on poverty, deprivation, or disproportionality, research specifically focused on Black African families in child protection remains limited. This relative scarcity is itself analytically significant because Black African families are often made visible in policy, administrative data, and professional discourse only through broader categories such as Black, African, or minority ethnic, while their distinct experiences of migration, settlement, welfare exclusion, housing insecurity, and professional encounter remain comparatively underexplored. Bernard and Gupta's (2008)

work remains foundational because it directly addressed Black African children and families in the child protection system, while Okpokiri's (2021) study of Nigerian parents in Britain has provided an important parent-centred perspective on fear, cultural tension, and racialised misrecognition.

Bernard and Gupta (2008) are particularly important because they locate Black African families' encounters with child protection within wider social and structural conditions rather than explaining intervention simply through parenting behaviour. Their analysis highlights poverty, migration-related disruption, insecure housing, social isolation, and limited access to support as key factors shaping the circumstances in which African families encounter services. This is analytically important because it resists cultural reductionism. It shifts attention away from the suggestion that concern arises simply from "African parenting" and towards the broader conditions of migration, settlement, and inequality within which family life is lived and judged.

At the same time, the literature identifies tensions around parenting practices, discipline, family authority, and expectations of children. Bernard and Gupta (2008) note that some forms of child-rearing and family organisation may be viewed negatively within British child protection frameworks, particularly where practitioners operate with normative assumptions rooted in white, middle-class models of parenting. Barn (2007) makes a related argument, warning against both cultural blindness and cultural essentialism. This is important because it clarifies that the central issue is not cultural difference itself, but how difference is interpreted within institutional settings.

Although the parenting style literature, particularly Baumrind's typology of authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive parenting, has been influential in discussions of child-rearing and child outcomes, this thesis does not adopt such models as its primary analytical framework (Baumrind, 1966; 1971; 1989; 1991). This is because the present study is less concerned with classifying parents according to predefined parenting categories than with examining how parenting practices are interpreted, racialised, and judged within child protection systems. As Bernard and Gupta (2008) show in their work on Black African children and the child protection system, the key issue is not simply parental behaviour in isolation, but the professional and institutional lenses through which parenting is read and responded to. A CRT-informed approach is therefore more appropriate to the aims of this study because CRT directs attention to how apparently neutral standards and normative assumptions can reproduce racialised inequality through routine processes of institutional judgement, interpretation, and credibility assessment (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Gillborn, 2015; Mohammed et al., 2021). In this sense, the central concern of this thesis is not parenting style in the abstract, but how culturally situated practices of discipline, authority, care, and protection may be misrecognised through Eurocentric professional norms and embedded within wider relations of race, power, and institutional control (Bernard & Gupta, 2008; Bernard & Harris, 2019).

A valuable strand of this literature moves beyond deficit-based representations and foregrounds strengths within Black family and community life. Bernard and Thomas (2016) advocate strengths-based approaches when working with Black families, while Barn (2016) emphasises the importance of kinship, collectivism, and community support. These contributions are significant because they challenge longstanding welfare framings that view Black families primarily through a lens of risk or dysfunction. However, the

literature also indicates that such strengths-based and anti-racist approaches remain unevenly embedded in routine practice.

Okpokiri's (2021) work is especially important because it places parents' voices at the centre of analysis. Her concept of "parenting in fear" captures the way Nigerian parents in Britain may modify their parenting, communication, and self-presentation in anticipation of being misunderstood, reported, or judged by authorities. This is highly relevant to the present study because it shows that child protection involvement can reshape family life not only through formal intervention, but also through the anticipatory anxiety produced by surveillance and misrecognition.

This also helps explain why engagement may become fragile or ambivalent. If parents fear that openness will be misinterpreted or that cultural differences will intensify suspicion, guardedness may function as a protective response. Yet, as the literature on professional language suggests, such guardedness may then be read institutionally as evasiveness, noncooperation, or resistance. Okpokiri's findings are therefore closely connected to wider research on risk, professional interpretation, and documentation. Parents' strategies of caution may be rational responses to unequal power, while still being incorporated into safeguarding systems as further signs of concern.

Research on Black children more broadly also guards against cultural oversimplification. Bernard & Harris (2019) show that race and cultural factors are often insufficiently explored in serious case reviews involving Black children. This indicates that the problem

is not always one of over-culturalisation. In some contexts, race and culture are marginalised, silenced, or handled only superficially, thereby preventing fuller analysis of how institutional bias may have shaped professional responses. Black African families may therefore be over-culturalised in some encounters and under-analysed in others.

Recent practice-oriented resources suggest growing awareness of these issues but also confirm the continuing gap. Materials from Research in Practice, NSPCC, and Marovatsanga and Garrett (2022) increasingly highlight bias, stereotypes, communication barriers, and the need for more context-sensitive support when working with Black and African families (Research in Practice, 2019; NSPCC, 2025; Marovatsanga & Garrett, 2022) increasingly. However, the existence of such materials also indicates that generic diversity language remains insufficient and that more explicit, empirically grounded work on African family experiences is still needed.

A balanced reading of this literature should not romanticise Black African families or imply that child protection concerns are always misread. Barn (2007) and Bernard and Gupta (2008) are clear that the challenge is to avoid both stereotyping and cultural relativism. The key point is not that intervention is never justified, but that it must be grounded in contextual understanding rather than presumption. What remains underdeveloped in the literature is a sustained body of research on first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents in England and how they interpret referral, assessment, monitoring, and longer-term engagement with child protection. This is a central gap that the present study addresses.

3.6 Migration, Immigration Status and No Recourse to Public Funds

An expanding body of research suggests that migrant families' experiences of child welfare cannot be understood through safeguarding frameworks alone because immigration governance actively shapes the conditions in which family life is lived, assessed, and regulated. In the UK, this is evident in the coexistence of child welfare obligations and immigration control. Section 55 of the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009 requires the Secretary of State to discharge immigration functions in relation to children's welfare, yet immigration rules simultaneously restrict many families' access to mainstream welfare through NRPF (Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009; Jolly, 2018; Farmer, 2021). The result is a contradictory framework in which children's welfare is formally recognised, while the material conditions necessary for family stability may be undermined by immigration policy.

NRPF is central to this literature because it shows how immigration status can shape vulnerability before any formal safeguarding concern arises. Home Office guidance states that NRPF restricts access to specified benefits and housing assistance and applies to many temporary migrants and some people without secure immigration status (Home Office, 2025; Home Office, 2026). The importance of the literature lies not merely in describing this policy but in showing how it can convert immigration status into a material crisis when employment is lost, relationships break down, or illness disrupts income and housing.

Jolly's work is especially important in this regard. Jolly (2018) argues that undocumented migrant families excluded from mainstream welfare often depend on statutory children's

services as one of the few remaining sources of support, describing this condition as a form of statutory neglect. This insight is significant because it reframes children's social care as a residual and highly conditional welfare provider for families denied support elsewhere. Hardship is not incidental background here; it is partly produced through immigration policy itself.

Subsequent work strengthens this argument. Jolly et al. (2022) show that NRPF is associated with destitution, severe poverty, inconsistent support, and fear of services, with disproportionate effects on racialised women. Farmer (2021) broadens the analysis by showing how social work may become implicated in the governance of "illegality," positioning children's social care as one of the institutional sites where care, exclusion, and border control intersect. Together, these studies make clear that immigration policy is not simply external to child welfare; it actively shapes the conditions under which family difficulties arise and are institutionalised.

This is also reflected in the safeguarding case review analysis. Jolly and Gupta (2024) found that exclusionary immigration policies exacerbated deprivation, instability, and isolation in serious child safeguarding cases involving families subject to NRPF. This is important because it suggests that immigration-related exclusion can intensify the very conditions in which safeguarding risk accumulates, while simultaneously making it harder for families to secure support before difficulties deepen. The literature does not claim that NRPF mechanically causes maltreatment. Its argument is more careful: that immigration exclusion can produce chronic insecurity, thereby worsening the contexts in which children live, and professionals intervene.

Although migrant families with NRPF are not wholly outside support systems, the safety net available through section 17 of the Children Act 1989 is limited, discretionary, and unevenly implemented. Data from the NRPF Network indicate that families receiving section 17 support often remain dependent for long periods, with many experiencing prolonged assessment and review rather than rapid stabilisation (NRPF Network, 2025). This suggests that section 17 may function less as a secure route out of destitution than as a minimal and conditional mechanism of survival.

These conditions help explain the prominence of fear and mistrust in the literature. Where immigration status determines access to welfare, and children's services become one of the few possible routes to support, families may reasonably fear that seeking help will increase visibility and scrutiny. Jolly et al. (2022) found that migrant families were often fearful of services because of concerns about deportation, destitution, and intervention in relation to their children. Farmer (2021) similarly argues that NRPF practice can entangle social work in bordering processes. Child welfare involvement may therefore be experienced as both protective and dangerous.

This literature is especially relevant to race. Jolly et al. (2022) show that NRPF disproportionately affects racialised women, while Farmer (2021) situates NRPF within wider racialised processes of governance and deservingness. For first-generation Sub-Saharan African families, immigration precarity may intersect with racial categorisation, labour market exclusion, housing insecurity, and cultural misrecognition in ways that intensify institutional visibility while weakening access to stable support. This is precisely

why immigration governance must be incorporated into any serious account of racialised inequality in child protection.

3.7 Professional Language, Risk Assessment and the Construction of Family Difference

Child protection is shaped not only by legal rules and structural inequalities, but also by the professional language through which families are described, classified, and managed. Terms such as non-engagement, non-compliance, hard-to-reach, resistant, chaotic, and disguised compliance are not neutral descriptors. They shape how professionals interpret behaviour, stabilise concerns, and justify future intervention. Parton's work is useful here because it shows how safeguarding has increasingly oriented itself around the anticipation and management of risk rather than only the response to established harm (Parton, 2011; Parton, 2014). Within such systems, language becomes one of the key mechanisms through which uncertainty is made governable.

The concept of disguised compliance is especially revealing. Leigh et al. (2020) argue that it has become a catchphrase in social work discourse, often used to explain professional unease without necessarily deepening understanding of family circumstances. NSPCC (2025) similarly notes that the term can obscure rather than illuminate the reasons why caregivers may appear hesitant, inconsistent, or guarded in their engagement with services. The issue is not that practitioners should ignore superficial cooperation, but that such language may become overly elastic and shut down inquiry rather than strengthen it.

Related critiques appear in the literature on parental non-engagement. Taggart, et al., (2020) argues that non-engagement should not be automatically treated as evidence of resistance or risk, while Mason et al (2020) suggest that trauma and epistemic mistrust may shape parents' difficulty in engaging with child protection services. These studies are important because they shift the analytical frame from behaviour alone to the relational and institutional conditions in which engagement takes place.

Professional labels also matter because they do not remain confined to interpersonal encounters. Broadhurst et al. (2010) show how organisational procedures, IT systems, and time pressures shape the early classification of cases, while Gorin et al. (2024) demonstrate how parents who access their social care records often feel that inaccurate or loaded descriptions continue to shape professional responses to them over time. This indicates that professional language accumulates institutional authority. Once a family is documented in a particular way, later practitioners may encounter them through those interpretations before encountering them directly.

This does not mean professional terminology is unnecessary. Safeguarding systems require language capable of communicating concern, coordinating multi-agency work, and recording evidence. The issue is therefore not the existence of professional language, but how it is used. It aids practice by sharpening analysis and sustaining professional curiosity. It hinders practice when it becomes shorthand that replaces contextual understanding.

These concerns are magnified where family differences are racialised. Barn (2007) argues that child welfare practice must negotiate carefully between attending to cultural context and avoiding stereotyping. Bernard & Harris (2019) show that race and cultural factors are often insufficiently explored in reviews involving Black children, while *It's Silent* concludes that race, racism, and racial bias shape how professionals understand and act on safeguarding concerns involving Black, Asian, and Mixed Heritage children and families (Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2025). Professional language is therefore never only about behaviour. It is also about who is being interpreted, by whom, and within what institutional norms.

A further strand of literature relevant to this discussion concerns parental voice, credibility, and the unequal distribution of interpretive authority within child protection. While research has increasingly examined parental participation in safeguarding processes, participation does not necessarily translate into equal recognition as a credible knower of one's own family life. Parents may be invited to meetings, asked to respond to concerns, and included procedurally, yet still find that professional assessments, case notes, and institutional narratives carry greater authority than their own explanations (Broadhurst et al., 2010; Morris et al., 2018). This is especially important in cases involving racialised and migrant families, where communication, emotion, parenting differences, and guardedness may be interpreted through pre-existing assumptions about culture, compliance, and parental adequacy (Bernard & Harris, 2019; Okpokiri, 2021).

Fricker's (2007) concept of epistemic injustice is useful here because it helps explain how some parents' accounts may be granted less credibility not only because of evidential uncertainty but also because institutional settings are structured in ways that privilege professional knowledge and dominant norms of intelligibility. In child protection, this suggests that the issue is not simply whether parents can speak, but whether what they say is heard, believed, and allowed to shape the case's meaning.

This is particularly important for Black African families. Okpokiri (2021) shows that Nigerian parents in Britain may approach child welfare encounters with caution, fear, and self-monitoring shaped by prior experiences of misrecognition and unequal power. Behaviours that professionals may read as guardedness or reluctance may therefore be grounded in rational concern about how difference will be interpreted. Terms such as "resistant" or "difficult to engage" may sometimes tell us as much about institutional framing as about parental intent.

In conjunction, this literature suggests that professional language does not simply describe family circumstances; it actively participates in the construction of concern. Missed appointments may signal non-engagement; hardship may be recoded as neglect; caution may be mistaken for evasiveness; and unfamiliarity may be mistaken for dysfunction. For the present study, this provides a crucial framework for analysing how first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents may experience child protection not only through formal decisions, but through everyday language that renders them intelligible to the system as risky, problematic, or inadequate.

3.8 Institutional Racism, Cultural Misrecognition and Critical Race Theory

A major limitation of parts of the child protection literature is that race is often treated as a demographic characteristic rather than as a structuring feature of institutional life. Critical Race Theory is useful because it challenges this limitation. Rather than treating racism as exceptional, CRT understands it as ordinary, systemic, and embedded in apparently neutral rules, categories, and routines. In social work, Kolivoski et al. (2014) argue that CRT provides a framework for analysing how race, racism, and power shape systems and lived experience, while UK anti-racist practice literature similarly emphasises that race-blind approaches can conceal contemporary forms of racism in professional decision-making (Kolivoski et al., 2014; Research in Practice, 2022).

The concept of institutional racism is particularly relevant. Macpherson (1999) defined institutional racism as the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service because of colour, culture, or ethnic origin, linking it to unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness, and stereotyping. Although developed in relation to policing, the concept has broader significance because it offers a way to understand how unequal outcomes may arise without relying on a narrow model of intentional prejudice. In child protection, this is important because it shifts attention from whether individual practitioners are personally racist to whether institutional routines, standards, and assumptions systematically disadvantage racialised children and families.

CRT deepens this analysis by challenging the sufficiency of formal equality commitments. Research in Practice (2022) argues that race-blindness obscures how racism continues to operate, while anti-racist scholarship in social work stresses the need

to examine white privilege, organisational culture, and institutional defensiveness. This matters in child protection because safeguarding often presents itself as universal and child-centred, yet remains organised around dominant assumptions about parenting, communication, emotion, credibility, and cooperation. In such contexts, claims to neutrality may themselves be part of how inequality is reproduced.

This is why cultural competence, while important, is insufficient on its own. Earlier diversity-oriented literature emphasised the importance of understanding family beliefs, child-rearing norms, and culturally specific forms of support. More recent anti-racist work argues that a culture-only approach can become depoliticised if it substitutes “difference” for an analysis of racism, whiteness, and institutional power (Research in Practice, 2018; Research in Practice, 2022). The issue is not whether culture matters, but whether culture is being used to deepen structural understanding or to avoid naming racism.

The literature on serious case reviews and safeguarding reviews illustrates the consequences of this limitation. Bernard & Harris (2019) show that race often shaped Black children’s experiences and professional responses to them yet remained insufficiently analysed in reviews. The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel’s *It’s Silent* reaches a similar conclusion, identifying a persistent silence around racism and racial bias in review cultures and institutional learning (Bernard & Harris, 2019; Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2025). This matters because it suggests that cultural misrecognition is not simply an interpersonal misunderstanding. It is embedded in the

production of professional knowledge and in systems that continue to struggle to treat racism as a safeguarding issue.

Adultification bias provides a particularly clear example. The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (2025), Meheux & Miller (2026) and the IOPC (2024) all note that Black children are sometimes perceived as older, less innocent, and less vulnerable than their peers (Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2026; Owens, 2023). Although much of the adultification literature has emerged from policing contexts, the concept is highly relevant to child protection because it illustrates how racialised children may be rendered less childlike within systems that purport to protect them.

CRT also helps explain why anti-racist reform can be slow and partial. Rather than if evidence of inequality will automatically generate structural change, CRT draws attention to how institutions contain, manage, or selectively acknowledge racism. This is reflected in recent shifts from generic diversity language towards more explicit anti-racist resources and leadership frameworks in social work (BASW, 2021; Research in Practice, 2024). These developments are important, but they also indicate that anti-racist practice is not yet securely embedded within mainstream safeguarding.

For first-generation Sub-Saharan African families, these insights are particularly valuable. A culture-only explanation risks reducing family-professional tensions to misunderstanding, while a poverty-only explanation risks underplaying the role of

racialisation in how hardship is interpreted. CRT allows these dynamics to be analysed together. It highlights how migration precarity, welfare exclusion, communication differences, parenting norms, and institutional anxiety may all be refracted through racialised assumptions about deservingness, family adequacy, and risk. It also reinforces the methodological importance of parent narratives, since counter-storytelling is central to CRT's challenge to dominant institutional accounts.

3.9 Gaps in the Literature and Contribution of the Present Study

The literature reviewed in this chapter makes major contributions to understanding inequality in child protection, but it also reveals several clear gaps. First, there is a problem of population specificity. Much of the literature relies on broad categories such as Black, African, minority ethnic, BME, or BAME (Aspinall, 2002; Bywaters et al., 2017; Department for Education, 2022). While useful for administrative monitoring, such categories can conceal major differences in migration route, legal status, language, religion, class, housing security, and family structure. Bernard and Gupta (2008) remain important precisely because they focused on Black African families, but few subsequent studies maintain that level of specificity. As a result, first-generation Sub-Saharan African families remain under-examined as a distinct analytical group.

Second, much of the strongest evidence remains at the administrative and system levels. Large-scale studies are invaluable for demonstrating social gradients, disproportionality, and escalation patterns (Bywaters et al., 2017; Webb et al., 2020; Department for Education, 2022), but they cannot easily capture how inequality is lived and interpreted by families themselves. They show that disparities exist, but they explain less about how

fear, migration, precarity, cultural misrecognition, or professional labelling are experienced in everyday practice.

Third, there is relatively little parent-centred qualitative research focused on Black African or Sub-Saharan African families in England. Okpokiri (2021) provides a valuable exception, and Bernard and Gupta (2008) and Bernard & Harris (2019) offer important related insights, but the wider literature remains sparse regarding parents' own interpretations of referral, assessment, professional language, surveillance, and longer-term involvement with children's services.

Fourth, race, poverty, and migration are often insufficiently integrated within a single explanatory framework. Some scholarship powerfully analyses poverty and deprivation but says less about racialisation and migration. Other work foregrounds race and disproportionality but does not always engage fully with welfare retrenchment, housing insecurity, or immigration exclusion. A further body of literature addresses NRPF and migrant hardship but is not always brought into direct conversation with child protection research on risk, surveillance, and professional language. For first-generation Sub-Saharan African families, these are not separate realities. One contribution of this study is therefore to bring these literatures into closer analytical conversation.

Fifth, there remains limited empirical attention to how professional interpretation and institutional misrecognition are experienced by parents. Research on nonengagement,

disguised compliance, and professional recording shows that language matters profoundly in safeguarding systems (Leigh et al., 2020; Research in Practice, 2020; Gorin et al., 2024). Anti-racist literature and safeguarding reviews likewise show that race and racism are often inadequately addressed in the framing of concern (Bernard & Harris, 2019; Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2025). Yet there is still relatively little research examining how first-generation African parents themselves understand these interpretive processes.

Sixth, although CRT has clear relevance to child protection, its explicit use in empirical work on African migrant families in England remains limited. CRT is widely acknowledged as useful for thinking about racism, power, and counter-storytelling (Kolivoski et al., 2014; Gillborn, 2015; Mohammed et al., 2021), but much empirical research in child protection remains descriptively framed in terms of monitoring diversity or inequality. This study uses CRT not simply as a background theory, but as an analytical lens through which race, migration, poverty, and institutional power can be examined together.

These gaps justify the present study. The thesis contributes in five main ways. First, it centres first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents in England as a distinct analytical group rather than subsuming them within broad ethnic categories. Second, it prioritises parents' lived experiences and counter-narratives, addressing the relative scarcity of parent-led qualitative work in this field. Third, it brings together literature on poverty, race, migration, welfare exclusion, and professional risk culture rather than treating them as separate explanatory domains. Fourth, it applies CRT explicitly to the child protection

experiences of African parents, enabling closer analysis of how apparently neutral safeguarding processes may reproduce racialised inequality. Fifth, it provides new empirical evidence in an area where the literature remains comparatively limited.

The significance of this contribution is both empirical and theoretical. Empirically, the study offers qualitative evidence on how first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents understand referral pathways, assessment processes, professional language, support deficits, and the broader meaning of child protection intervention in their lives. Theoretically, it advances existing debates by showing how child protection may be understood not only as a welfare or risk-management system, but also as a racialised institutional encounter shaped by structural inequality, migration governance, and epistemic power.

3.10 Chapter Summary

This chapter has shown that the child protection literature is both substantial and fragmented. Existing research demonstrates that intervention is shaped by poverty, austerity, race, migration, professional interpretation, and organisational risk cultures, but these strands are not always adequately integrated. The strongest literature makes clear that child protection cannot be understood as a neutral response to family difficulty alone. Rather, it is embedded in wider structures of deprivation, welfare retrenchment, racialisation, migration control, and institutional judgment (Bywaters et al., 2017; Featherstone et al., 2018; Bernard & Gupta, 2008; Jolly et al., 2022).

The review has also shown that broad ethnic aggregation, administrative analysis, and culture-only explanations are insufficient for understanding how safeguarding is

experienced when racialisation, structural disadvantage, and migration precarity intersect. Research specifically focused on first-generation Sub-Saharan African families in England remains limited, particularly regarding parents' own accounts (Bernard & Gupta, 2008; Okpokiri, 2021). These gaps justify the need for the present study.

The next chapter sets out the theoretical and conceptual framework used to analyse these experiences, explaining how Critical Race Theory, together with supporting concepts around racialisation, structural inequality, and institutional power, informs the study's analytical approach.

CHAPTER 4: THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter demonstrated that child protection in England cannot be understood solely through individualised explanations of parental behaviour, culture, or compliance. Rather, intervention is shaped by the interaction of poverty, welfare retrenchment, racialisation, immigration controls, professional risk frameworks, and organisational accountability (Bywaters et al., 2017; Featherstone et al., 2018; Jolly, 2018; Bernard & Harris, 2019). Building on that review, this chapter sets out the theoretical and conceptual framework guiding the study. Its purpose is not simply to introduce abstract theory, but to show how the study conceptualises race, power, inequality, and institutional process, and how these concepts inform the interpretation of first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents' experiences of child protection services in England.

For clarity, intersectionality is not treated in this thesis as a separate or competing theoretical framework alongside Critical Race Theory. Rather, it is used as a core analytical tenet within CRT scholarship. Following Crenshaw's foundational work, intersectionality enables the study to examine how racialised power is produced through overlapping systems of gender, class, migration status, language, religion, family structure and socioeconomic position, rather than through race as an isolated category (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This is important because the experiences of first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents in child protection cannot be adequately understood by separating race from migration, poverty, welfare exclusion, housing insecurity, gendered parenting expectations or institutional credibility.

Within this study, therefore, intersectionality functions as part of the CRT framework by showing how racialised inequality is lived and institutionally interpreted through multiple, mutually constitutive forms of social positioning. It helps explain why safeguarding encounters may be experienced differently by parents who are simultaneously racialised as Black or African, positioned as migrants, affected by poverty or welfare restrictions, and judged through dominant professional norms of parenting, cooperation and risk. Intersectionality is therefore not an additional framework added to CRT, but rather one of the ways in which CRT is operationalised in the analysis of child protection as a racialised system of governance (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Gillborn, 2015; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

The principal framework adopted is Critical Race Theory (CRT). Originally developed within United States legal scholarship, CRT has since become an interdisciplinary approach for examining how racism is embedded within law, policy, institutions, and everyday social practice (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Mohammed et al., 2021; Kolivoski et al., 2014). Its relevance lies in its refusal to treat racism as exceptional, episodic, or reducible to individual prejudice. Instead, CRT understands racism as systemic, historically rooted, and reproduced through apparently neutral institutional routines and dominant ways of knowing (Gillborn, 2015; Mohammed et al., 2021). This is especially pertinent to child protection, which is typically presented as universal, child-centred, and professionally objective, yet may still generate racially uneven scrutiny, intervention, and credibility through routine organisational practice (Bywaters et al., 2017; Bernard & Harris, 2019).

Alongside CRT, the chapter draws on related concepts such as racialisation, intersectionality, institutional racism, and counter-storytelling. Race is not treated here as a biological fact or fixed identity category, but as a social and institutional process through which families are classified, interpreted, and governed. This matters because first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents may be positioned not only through ethnicity in a descriptive sense, but also through professional assumptions about migration, culture, parenting, compliance, and risk.

The concept of racialisation, therefore, moves the analysis beyond static labels such as Black, BME, or minority ethnic, towards an examination of how difference is actively

produced and made meaningful within safeguarding systems (Gillborn, 2015; Mohammed et al., 2021; Aspinall, 2020; Bhopal & Preston, 2012).

Intersectionality is central to this thesis because the experiences of first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents cannot be understood through race alone. Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality shows how systems of power overlap, meaning that race, gender, class, migration status, language, religion and family structure may combine to produce distinctive forms of marginalisation. In the context of child protection, this means that African parents' encounters with safeguarding services may be shaped not only by racialisation, but also by poverty, immigration status, gendered expectations of motherhood or fatherhood, and professional assumptions about culture and risk. Additionally, intersectionality is employed within this CRT framework to capture how race is lived and governed alongside other forms of inequality. Crenshaw's work showed that legal and policy frameworks often fail to recognise experiences shaped by multiple, overlapping forms of subordination (Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw, 1997; Matsuda et al., 2018; Wound, 1993; Bhopal & Preston, 2012). This is particularly relevant to the present study because the experiences of first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents cannot be understood through race alone, nor through poverty, migration status, gender, or housing insecurity in isolation. Rather, these dimensions intersect in ways that shape institutional visibility, access to support, exposure to surveillance, and the interpretation of family life within child protection systems.

The concept of institutional racism is also central. The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry defined institutional racism as the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate

and professional service because of colour, culture, or ethnic origin, and located that failure in organisational processes, attitudes, and practices rather than only in overt hostility (Macpherson, 1999). This understanding is useful here because it allows child protection to be analysed as an institutional field in which unequal outcomes may arise through routine assessment, documentation, categorisation, and threshold decision-making, even where explicit racist intent is absent or denied.

The chapter argues that CRT offers more than a general critique of racism. It provides a framework for conceptualising child protection as a system of governance in which power operates through assessment, documentation, classification, and professional interpretation (Parton, 2014; Gillborn, 2015; Mohammed et al., 2021). This is especially important in a study centred on parents' narratives. Within CRT, counter-storytelling is not a peripheral methodological device but an epistemological challenge to dominant institutional accounts, positioning the lived experiences of marginalised families as vital to understanding how systems work (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Kolivoski et al., 2014).

The chapter proceeds by outlining the core principles of CRT and their relevance to the study, before clarifying the key concepts used in the analysis: race, racialisation, institutional racism, intersectionality, and counter-storytelling. It then applies these ideas to child protection and social work, arguing that safeguarding can be understood not only as a welfare response to harm, but also as a racialised system of governance. In doing so, the chapter provides the conceptual basis for the methodological approach adopted in the following chapters.

4.2 Critical Race Theory: Origins, Core Principles and Relevance to the Study

Critical Race Theory provides the central theoretical framework for this thesis because it offers a systematic way of analysing how racism is produced, normalised and sustained within institutions that present themselves as neutral, lawful and universally committed to fairness or welfare. Rather than treating racism as exceptional or reducible to individual prejudice, CRT recognises it as ordinary, structural and embedded within the routine operation of social systems (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Gillborn, 2015; Mohammed et al., 2021). This orientation is particularly relevant to child protection in England, where safeguarding is formally grounded in children's welfare, partnership with families and professional responsibility, but may nevertheless generate racially uneven forms of surveillance, intervention and credibility.

CRT emerged in the United States in the late 1970s and 1980s as a critique of the limits of mainstream civil rights scholarship. Early CRT scholars argued that formal legal equality, antidiscrimination doctrine and incremental reform had not dismantled deeper structures of racial power embedded within law and public life (Bell, 1980; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Matsuda et al., 1993). Bell was especially influential in arguing that racism was not an aberration from democratic ideals, but a persistent and adaptive feature of legal and political life (Bell, 1980; Bell, 1992). CRT therefore challenges liberal assumptions that neutrality, objectivity, colour-blindness and gradual reform are sufficient to address racial injustice.

Although CRT originated in legal scholarship, it has since been applied across education, sociology and social work because its central insights are not confined to law. In social

work, Kolivoski et al. (2014) argue that CRT offers a valuable framework for examining how race, racism and power shape institutional practice and service users' experiences. This is especially relevant to child protection, which is not only a legal arena but also an administrative and interpretive system in which categories such as need, risk, parental capacity and nonengagement are constructed through professional authority.

Several CRT principles are particularly important to this study. The first is the ordinariness of racism. CRT holds that racism is not rare or exceptional but a routine feature of social life, often reproduced without explicit racist intent (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Gillborn, 2015). Applied to child protection, this means racially unequal outcomes need not arise only from openly racist professionals or explicitly discriminatory rules. They may also emerge through ordinary assessment processes, threshold judgements, recording practices, inter-agency communication and assumptions about parenting, cooperation and risk.

A second principle is CRT's critique of neutrality, objectivity and colour-blindness. CRT scholars argue that claims to objectivity can obscure the historical and social assumptions built into policy, law and professional judgement, while colour-blind approaches may preserve inequality by refusing to recognise how race structures lived experience and institutional response (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Gillborn, 2005). In child protection, this matters because safeguarding is often framed as universally child-centred and needs-led. CRT prompts a more critical question: whether the standards through which need, harm, parental capacity and cooperation are assessed

are themselves shaped by dominant norms, including white and middle-class assumptions about family life.

A third principle is the social construction of race. CRT does not treat race as a biological reality, but as a historically contingent system of classification and meaning that organises social relations and legitimises unequal treatment (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). This prevents first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents from being essentialised as a fixed cultural group. Instead, it directs attention to the institutional processes by which race acquires significance in child protection, through categorisation, interpretation, and assumptions about belonging, vulnerability, and parental competence.

A fourth principle is the value of experiential knowledge and counter-storytelling. CRT scholars argue that the lived experiences of racially marginalised groups are not supplementary to formal knowledge, but central to understanding how institutions operate in practice (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In child protection, professional assessments, case notes, and statutory decisions often carry official authority, while parents' accounts may be treated as subjective, emotional, or defensive. CRT challenges this hierarchy by recognising experiential knowledge as analytically and epistemologically important. For this reason, the present study treats parents' narratives not as ancillary data but as vital evidence of how institutional power is encountered, negotiated and resisted.

Finally, CRT is concerned with the relationship between racism and structural power. It does not view racism as separate from wider systems of law, governance, class and institutional authority, but as intertwined with them (Crenshaw, 1991; Gillborn, 2015). This is important because the experiences of first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents are shaped not only by racialisation, but also by migration status, housing insecurity, poverty, welfare exclusion and gendered care responsibilities.

CRT is not without criticism. One limitation is that it developed within a specific United States legal and historical context and therefore requires careful adaptation when applied to English child protection. A further criticism is that CRT can be accused of interpretive overreach if every unequal outcome is presumed to be caused by racism. In this thesis, CRT is therefore used as a critical analytic lens rather than a totalising explanation. It does not assume that all interventions involving racialised families are unjustified or racist. Rather, it provides conceptual tools for asking when, how and through what institutional processes race shapes visibility, credibility and intervention. In this sense, the framework is applied cautiously and in conjunction with analysis of poverty, migration, housing insecurity and welfare governance.

These principles make CRT well suited to the present study. Its recognition of racism as ordinary helps explain how unequal outcomes may arise through routine safeguarding processes. Its critique of neutrality questions universal claims made by professional systems. Its understanding of race as socially constructed prevents the essentialisation of African families. Its commitment to experiential knowledge and counter-storytelling legitimises the prioritisation of parents' narratives. Its structural orientation enables the

study to analyse how race, migration, poverty and institutional governance interact in shaping child protection experiences.

4.2.1 Operationalising Critical Race Theory in this Study.

This study draws on CRT to examine how race, power and institutional knowledge shape the experiences of first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents involved with statutory child protection in England. Rather than treating racism as exceptional or individualised, CRT enables the analysis to consider how racialised assumptions may become embedded within everyday professional judgement, assessment practices and safeguarding decision-making.

CRT concept	Key sources	Application in this study
Racism as ordinary and systemic	Delgado & Stefancic (2017); Gillborn (2015)	Used to examine how racialised assumptions about African parenting may appear within routine practice rather than only in overt discrimination.
Interest convergence	Bell (1980)	Used to consider whether institutional reforms around race and safeguarding gain legitimacy when aligned with dominant institutional priorities.

Social construction of race	Delgado & Stefancic (2017)	Used to analyse how categories such as “Black African,” “BME,” “BAME” or “ethnic minority” can simplify diverse cultural, national, linguistic and migration experiences.
Differential racialisation	Delgado & Stefancic (2017)	Used to explore how Sub-Saharan African families may be racialised through safeguarding, immigration, poverty and cultural discourses.
Experiential knowledge and counter-storytelling	Solórzano & Yosso (2002); Delgado & Stefancic (2017)	Used to centre parents’ accounts as valid knowledge and to challenge deficit-based explanations of African family life.
Intersectionality	Crenshaw (1991); Gillborn (2015); Ladson-Billings (1998); Bhopal & Preston (2012)	Used to examine how race intersects with gender, class, immigration status, disability, lone parenthood and housing insecurity.
Critique of colour-blindness	Crenshaw (1988); Bonilla-Silva (2014); Gillborn (2008)	Used to challenge approaches that claim neutrality while overlooking how race affects recognition, interpretation and institutional response.

Whiteness property	as	Harris (1993)	Used to analyse how white British norms may become positioned as the implicit standard for “appropriate” parenting, communication and cooperation.
-----------------------	----	---------------	--

This framework informed the research design, interview focus, coding and interpretation of findings. It supported an analysis that moved beyond individualised explanations of parental behaviour and instead examined the racialised institutional conditions through which safeguarding concerns are identified, interpreted and escalated.

4.3 Race, Racialisation, Institutional Racism and Intersectionality

To apply CRT effectively to child protection, the key concepts used in the study require clear definition and careful positioning within the wider theoretical framework. Race, racialisation, institutional racism and intersectionality are not treated here as interchangeable terms. However, neither are they used as separate or competing frameworks. Rather, they operate as interrelated conceptual tools within the overarching Critical Race Theory framework adopted in this thesis. CRT provides the central framework for analysing how racialised power becomes embedded in institutional practices, professional judgement, policy categories and apparently neutral safeguarding processes. Intersectionality strengthens this CRT analysis by showing how racialised power is experienced and reproduced through overlapping structures of gender, class, migration status, language, religion, family structure, poverty and welfare exclusion (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

This clarification is important because the study does not examine race as an isolated variable. The experiences of first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents are analysed as racialised, but also as shaped by migration histories, immigration status, socioeconomic insecurity, gendered parenting expectations, language, religion, family structure and unequal institutional credibility. Intersectionality is therefore used as a core tenet of CRT, enabling the thesis to examine how these dimensions operate together within child protection encounters. It helps move the analysis away from individualised or culture-only explanations and towards a fuller account of how institutional power works through classification, interpretation, surveillance, documentation and governance.

Race is understood here as a social and political construct rather than a biological fact. CRT scholars reject essentialist understandings of race, arguing instead that racial categories are historically produced and maintained through law, policy, administration, and everyday practice (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Omi & Winant (2015) similarly argue that race is shaped through processes of racial formation in which social meanings are attached to bodily and cultural markers and embedded within political and institutional structures. This is important for the current study because it prevents African families from being treated as naturally or inherently different. Instead, it directs attention to how race becomes institutionally meaningful through norms, assumptions, and categories that shape professional judgement.

In safeguarding, race may operate subtly rather than explicitly. Families are rarely assessed in openly racialised language, yet institutional processes may still rely on assumptions about appropriate parenting, trustworthy behaviour, emotional regulation,

home environment, and cooperation with professionals. Gillborn (2015) argues that racism frequently operates through routine institutional practices rather than overt expressions of hostility. In this sense, race matters in child protection not simply because families are categorised ethnically, but because those categories are embedded within broader systems of meaning that shape how family difference is perceived and acted upon.

The concept of racialisation extends this argument by focusing not on race as a fixed category, but on the active processes through which individuals and groups are assigned meaning, visibility, and significance according to historically produced racial logics (Murji & Solomos, 2005; Gillborn, 2015). This concept is especially useful for the present study because it captures how parenting practices, emotional expression, migration histories, speech, family structures, and material hardship may acquire racialised meaning within safeguarding systems, even where race is not explicitly named. Racialisation, therefore, helps explain how some families become more readily associated with risk, difference, or complexity in institutional settings.

This is one reason why broad ethnic descriptors such as Black, African, BME, or BAME are insufficient on their own. As Aspinall (2002; 2020) argues, administrative ethnic categories are never merely descriptive; they are also representational and political. While they may be useful for monitoring inequality, they can flatten internal differences and obscure the processes through which groups are governed. For this reason, the term racialised first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents is preferred in this thesis. It is more specific than umbrella terminology, while also emphasising that the study is

concerned not with inherent group characteristics but with the institutional processes through which this population is rendered visible, interpreted, and governed within child protection.

The concept of institutional racism is essential for understanding how these processes become embedded in organisational life. The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry remains a key UK reference point, defining institutional racism as the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service because of colour, culture, or ethnic origin, and locating that failure in organisational processes, attitudes, and behaviours rather than solely in overt prejudice (Macpherson, 1999). Its value lies in showing that inequality can be reproduced through routine organisational norms, decision-making structures, and professional cultures. This makes the concept particularly relevant to safeguarding, where intervention is organised through procedures, assessments, thresholds, and record-keeping that may appear neutral but can still produce racially uneven outcomes.

In child protection, institutional racism helps explain how welfare systems may disadvantage racialised families without practitioners necessarily expressing overt racism. Bernard & Harris (2019) argue that race and culture have often been insufficiently addressed in serious case reviews involving Black children. This is important because it suggests that racial inequality may operate not only through what is done, but through what remains unexamined, unnamed, or normalised within safeguarding discourse. Institutional racism also illuminates how professional knowledge becomes authoritative. Assessments, case notes, and multi-agency records carry institutional weight, yet they are

produced within contexts shaped by accountability, defensibility, and normative assumptions about good parenting, cooperation, and acceptable risk (Parton, 2014; Broadhurst et al., 2010). Where racialised families are already read as unfamiliar or difficult to assess, professional interpretation may carry greater authority than parental explanation.

Intersectionality is crucial because race never operates in isolation from other axes of inequality. Crenshaw's foundational work challenged single-axis approaches that could not account for experiences shaped by multiple, intersecting forms of subordination (Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw, 1991; Matsuda et al., 2018; Wound, 1993). In this study, intersectionality is especially important because the experiences of first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents are shaped not only by racialisation, but also by migration status, poverty, gendered caregiving, housing insecurity, welfare exclusion, and, in some cases, immigration precarity. To analyse race without these dimensions' risks of abstraction; to analyse them without race risks reproducing the erasures CRT seeks to expose.

In child protection, these dimensions rarely appear separately. A parent may be positioned simultaneously as Black, migrant, poor, a lone mother, insecurely housed, and dependent on limited welfare support. These are not merely additive characteristics. They interact in ways that shape how needs are recognised, how risks are interpreted, and what forms of intervention become likely. An intersectional framework, therefore, strengthens the analytical precision of the study by recognising both common patterns of structural disadvantage and variation within the group under study.

Jointly, these concepts form the core analytic vocabulary of the thesis. Race refers to the social significance attached to human difference. Racialisation describes how that difference is actively produced and rendered meaningful within institutional settings. Institutional racism explains how routine organisational processes may reproduce inequality without requiring overt racist intent. Intersectionality shows how race intersects with migration, poverty, gender, and other forms of inequality to shape lived experience. Together, these concepts allow child protection to be analysed not simply as a welfare system, but as a racialised institutional arena in which visibility, credibility, intervention, and governance are unevenly distributed.

4.4 Counter-Storytelling and the Value of Lived Experience

Counter-storytelling is central to this thesis because it provides a way to challenge dominant institutional narratives about risk, parenting, compliance, and safeguarding interventions. CRT scholars argue that official narratives are never neutral: they are shaped by power, by assumptions about whose knowledge counts, and by institutional hierarchies of credibility (Delgado, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Counter-stories contest these hierarchies by centring the experiences of those who are marginalised, distorted, or subordinated within official discourse. In child protection, this is especially important because parents' experiences are often mediated through assessments, reports, and case notes rather than recorded in their own terms.

Solórzano & Yosso (2002) describe counter-storytelling as an approach that exposes and challenges dominant accounts of social reality. Its purpose is not merely to add alternative voices into an existing frame, but to question how that frame has been produced and

whose interests it serves. This distinction is important. Counter-storytelling is not simply a gesture towards inclusion or participation. It is an epistemological challenge to institutional authority. For a study of first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents in child protection, this is especially significant because it allows parents' accounts to be treated not as peripheral commentary but as analytic interventions into dominant professional narratives.

This emphasis on lived experience is closely linked to CRT's broader commitment to experiential knowledge. CRT scholars argue that the lived experiences of racially marginalised groups are essential to understanding how institutions operate in practice, particularly when institutional power obscures its effects (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Collins (2000) similarly argues that subordinated groups may develop situated forms of knowledge that reveal dimensions of power less visible from dominant institutional standpoints. In this thesis, lived experience is not treated as unmediated truth or as beyond interpretation. Rather, it is recognised as a legitimate and necessary source of knowledge about how safeguarding is encountered, negotiated, and felt.

This is particularly important in child protection because institutional knowledge often carries greater authority than family knowledge. Professional assessments, legal documents, and case files are frequently treated as definitive accounts, while parents' explanations may be dismissed as emotional, defensive, or unreliable (Broadhurst et al., 2010; Morris et al., 2018). Fricker's (2007) concept of epistemic injustice is useful here, especially the idea that some speakers are granted less credibility because of identity-

based prejudice. Although not a CRT concept in origin, it helps illuminate how racialised parents' accounts may be devalued within safeguarding contexts. Counter-storytelling resists this by insisting that parents' narratives be treated as epistemically significant accounts of institutional life.

Counter-storytelling is also important because official child protection narratives often become cumulative and self-reinforcing. Once concerns are recorded in files, reports, and chronologies, they can shape subsequent interpretation before fresh contact with families occurs (Broadhurst et al., 2010). Parents may therefore encounter a system in which they are already known through professional descriptors and institutional summaries that do not fully capture the complexity of their circumstances. Counter-storytelling does not assume that parental narratives are automatically more truthful than professional accounts. Rather, it creates analytic space to examine how official narratives are constructed, how they acquire authority, and how they are experienced, resisted, or internalised by families themselves.

For racialised parents, this is especially important. Dominant institutional narratives often portray racial inequality as incidental, exceptional, or external to routine practice (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Gillborn, 2015). Counter-stories can therefore reveal forms of racialisation that official records minimise or fail to name. For first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents, safeguarding may be experienced through migration precarity, welfare exclusion, linguistic difference, cultural misrecognition, and fear of institutional authority, yet these conditions may be depoliticised in formal documentation. Counter-storytelling allows these experiences to be understood on their own terms and in relation to wider structures of racialised governance.

The value of lived experience also lies in its ability to capture dimensions of child protection that administrative and policy records often miss. Institutional documentation may record attendance, compliance, referrals, thresholds, and assessment outcomes, but it is less able to capture fear, shame, confusion, mistrust, self-monitoring, or the experience of living under scrutiny. Yet these are often central to how intervention is lived. This matters in the present study because it shifts attention from what safeguarding formally records to how those subjected to it experience it.

At the same time, this thesis does not romanticise lived experience. Parent narratives are not treated as transparent windows onto reality, but as situated accounts shaped by memory, context, language, emotion, and relationship. This preserves analytic rigour while rejecting the assumption that institutional accounts are inherently more objective. The methodological significance of counter-storytelling, therefore, lies not in replacing all other forms of knowledge but in exposing what dominant institutional knowledge cannot fully see.

4.5 CRT in Social Work and Child Protection

4.5.1 Cultural Misrecognition, Deficit Thinking and the Governance of Difference

CRT is particularly valuable to this study because it helps explain how child protection functions as a racialised field of professional judgement. In social work and child welfare scholarship, CRT has increasingly been used to examine how apparently neutral systems of assessment, decision-making, and intervention can reproduce unequal outcomes for

racialised families (Kolivoski et al., 2014; Gillborn, 2015; Bernard & Harris, 2019). This is especially relevant in child protection, where professional authority operates through interpretation: practitioners decide whether behaviour is concerning, whether parenting is sufficient, whether cooperation is genuine, and whether future harm is likely. CRT enables these processes to be analysed not as purely technical acts of assessment, but as institutional sites where race, power, and dominant norms shape what becomes legible as risk, need, or parental legitimacy.

One way this occurs is through cultural misrecognition. Cultural misrecognition refers to the process by which family practices, values, communication styles, or care arrangements are misunderstood or negatively reinterpreted through dominant institutional norms. Barn (2007) argues that child welfare practice requires a careful balance between recognising cultural context and avoiding stereotyping, while Bernard & Gupta (2008) show that Black African families' experiences of child protection are often shaped by how their parenting and family life are interpreted by professionals. This is significant to the present study because first-generation Sub-Saharan African families may draw on forms of kinship, authority, interdependence, and discipline that do not map neatly onto dominant white, middle-class parenting norms. Where contextual understanding is limited, difference may be read not as variation, but as disorder, deficiency, or risk.

CRT sharpens this analysis by showing that cultural misrecognition is not merely a matter of insufficient cultural knowledge. It is also about whose norms are treated as ordinary, neutral, and professionally legitimate in the first place. A culture-only explanation risks

implying that the problem lies simply in practitioners failing to understand “other cultures.” CRT pushes further by asking which family forms are taken as unmarked standards against which others are judged. In this sense, cultural misrecognition is inseparable from racialised institutional power.

Closely related to this is deficit thinking. Deficit thinking refers to interpretive frameworks in which the difficulties experienced by marginalised groups are attributed primarily to their supposed shortcomings rather than to wider structural conditions (Valencia, 2010). In child protection, deficit thinking may arise where poverty is reframed as poor parenting, migration related instability as family disorder, or mistrust of services as non-compliance rather than as a response to previous coercive encounters. Featherstone et al. (2018) argue that contemporary safeguarding often individualises family difficulties while overlooking the structural inequalities that shape them, and (Rogowski, 2020; Gupta, 2016). similarly criticises the conversion of poverty-related hardship into parental deficit. CRT deepens this critique by showing that deficit thinking is often not only classed, but racialised.

A further contribution of CRT lies in its capacity to conceptualise the governance of difference. Child protection does not simply respond to harm; it organises, classifies, and regulates family difference through assessment, documentation, and intervention. Families become known to the system through institutional categories such as child in need, neglect, significant harm, nonengagement, cooperation, and risk, all of which carry practical consequences (Parton, 2014; Broadhurst et al., 2010). From a CRT perspective, these categories do not operate in a social vacuum. They may be applied unevenly and

interpreted through racialised and classed assumptions about what counts as a normal, ordered, and competent family life. Difference is therefore not merely observed in safeguarding; it is governed.

For first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents, these dynamics are particularly important. Poverty, migration, precarity, settlement stress, family complexity, and institutional mistrust may all be interpreted through categories that appear professional and neutral but are shaped by dominant norms. Cultural misrecognition may transform difference into concern; deficit thinking may translate structural hardship into parental inadequacy; and the governance of difference may normalise heightened scrutiny of families already marked by race, migration, and economic insecurity. CRT, therefore, enables the study to move beyond simple descriptions of disproportionality and towards a more critical understanding of how child protection functions as a racialised interpretive system.

4.6 Conceptualising Child Protection as a Racialised System of Governance

The preceding sections have argued that CRT offers more than a vocabulary for naming racism within child protection. It provides a framework for understanding safeguarding as a system of governance in which family life is made visible, categorised and regulated through institutional processes that are not socially neutral. Although child protection is formally organised as a welfare function concerned with children's safety and wellbeing, critical scholarship has shown that it also operates through surveillance, assessment, categorisation and intervention (Donzelot, 1979; Parton, 2014). In this thesis, child protection is therefore conceptualised as a racialised system of governance: a domain in

which law, policy, professional judgement and organisational routine intersect to regulate family life unevenly across race, class and migration status.

This formulation does not deny the protective purpose of safeguarding, nor does it reduce child protection to social control. Rather, it asks how intervention is organised, which family lives become most visible to professional scrutiny, and how ordinary institutional processes may reproduce unequal levels of concern, credibility and intervention even where the stated objective is child welfare. Governance shifts the analytic focus from isolated decisions to the broader processes through which concern is generated, legitimised, recorded and sustained.

A key feature of this system is routine classification and interpretation. Families are made knowable through referrals, assessments, chronologies, reports, thresholds, plans and reviews, all of which translate lived experience into institutional categories such as neglect, risk, parenting capacity, cooperation and non-engagement (Parton, 2014; Broadhurst et al., 2010). These categories do not merely describe family life; they organise what professionals see, record, escalate and act upon. From a CRT perspective, such processes may become racialised when dominant norms are presented as universal but produce unequal consequences for families whose lives do not conform to them.

This is especially significant for first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents. These families may encounter child protection at the intersection of racialisation, migration precarity, poverty, welfare exclusion, housing insecurity and cultural misrecognition

(Bernard & Gupta, 2008; Jolly, 2018; Okpokiri, 2021). Child protection, therefore, does not meet them on neutral ground. It encounters them within stratified social conditions and through institutional frameworks that may convert structural hardship into parental concern. Poverty may be read as neglect, guardedness as non-engagement, migration-related instability as disorganisation, and cultural difference as risk.

This framework is directly relevant to the study. The thesis does not aim simply to document negative experiences or describe disproportionality. It seeks to understand how these experiences are produced through the interaction of structural conditions and institutional interpretation. It therefore examines how poverty, migration status, housing insecurity and welfare exclusion shape families' contact services, and how those conditions are interpreted within professional frameworks of parenting, risk and compliance.

This is also why parents' narratives are central. If child protection is understood as a racialised system of governance, institutional accounts alone are insufficient for understanding how it operates. Policy, guidance and professional records show how safeguarding is intended to function, but they cannot fully capture how governance is lived by those subjected to it. Counter-storytelling enables parents' narratives to illuminate the gap between procedural neutrality and lived racialisation.

The framework also shapes how social workers' interviews are understood. Practitioners' accounts are not treated as competitors to parents' narratives, but as accounts produced within professional cultures shaped by accountability, organisational pressure, risk

management and statutory obligation (Munro, 2011; Parton, 2014). This allows the thesis to analyse how practitioners may participate in racialised institutional processes without reducing those processes to individual motive or prejudice.

Overall, conceptualising child protection as a racialised system of governance provides the clearest framework for the study. It explains why the thesis centres lived experience, adopts a CRT-informed approach, and analyses race, migration and poverty as interconnected dimensions of safeguarding. The framework does not presume that every intervention involving Sub-Saharan African families is unjustified or discriminatory. Rather, it insists that such intervention must be understood within the wider institutional and political conditions that shape how families are perceived, judged and governed.

4.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined the theoretical and conceptual framework underpinning the study. It has been argued that the experiences of first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents in child protection cannot be adequately understood through individualised explanations of parenting, culture or compliance alone, but must be analysed in relation to racialisation, institutional power, migration governance and structural inequality (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Gillborn, 2015; Parton, 2014). By adopting CRT, the thesis conceptualises child protection not only as a welfare system concerned with protection, but also as a racialised system of governance in which visibility, credibility, risk and intervention are unevenly organised.

The chapter has also clarified the relationship between CRT and intersectionality. Intersectionality is not used in this thesis as a separate or competing framework alongside CRT. Rather, it is treated as a core analytical tenet within CRT scholarship, enabling the study to examine how racialised power operates through overlapping structures of migration status, poverty, housing insecurity, language, gendered parenting expectations, religion, welfare exclusion and institutional credibility (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). This is important because the experiences of first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents are not shaped by race alone, but by the interaction of racialisation with other social, economic, cultural and institutional positions.

Race, racialisation, institutional racism, intersectionality and counter-storytelling are therefore used as interrelated conceptual tools within the overarching CRT framework. Together, they support the thesis's analysis of child protection as a system in which professional judgement, safeguarding categories, documentation and credibility assessments may produce racialised effects even when they appear formally neutral. At the same time, the chapter has acknowledged that CRT must be applied carefully within the English child protection context rather than imported uncritically from its origins in the United States. This framework provides the conceptual basis for the methodological approach set out in the next chapter and for the interpretation of the empirical findings that follow.

CHAPTER 5: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

5.1 Introduction to the Methodological Approach

This chapter outlines the research design and methodological procedures used to examine the lived experiences of first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents involved with child protection services in England, as well as the perspectives of a smaller group of social workers. Building on the theoretical and conceptual framework established in Chapter 4, it explains how the study was designed, implemented, and analysed to investigate how safeguarding is experienced, interpreted, and negotiated within contexts shaped by race, migration, poverty, and institutional power. The chapter details the qualitative design, epistemological orientation, research setting, participant groups, sampling and recruitment, pilot study, data generation, analytical approach, reflexivity, ethics, trustworthiness, and methodological limitations.

The methodological approach is grounded in a critical qualitative tradition that understands research as a situated process of knowledge production rather than a neutral means of uncovering objective social facts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Braun & Clarke, 2021). This is particularly important in child protection research, where institutional knowledge is often privileged through assessments, case records, legal documents, and professional accounts, while parents' own understandings of intervention may be minimised or treated as less authoritative (Broadhurst et al., 2010; Morris et al., 2018). A qualitative design was therefore appropriate because it allows close engagement with meaning, interpretation, lived experience, and institutional encounter, all of which are

central to understanding how safeguarding is perceived and experienced by those subject to it.

The study proceeds from the premise that child protection cannot be fully understood through outcome measures or prevalence data alone. Quantitative research has been essential in documenting disparities in referral, assessment, and intervention, but it is less able to illuminate how families themselves experience and interpret safeguarding processes (Bywaters et al., 2017; Bernard & Harris, 2019). This study is concerned not only with whether racial inequalities in child protection exist, but with how first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents understand referral pathways, professional judgement, surveillance, support, fear, and institutional power during their encounters with children's services. A qualitative methodology is especially well suited to such questions because it allows complexity, contradiction, and narrative depth to be retained, while revealing links between institutional procedures and lived experience that more standardised methods may miss (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015); 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

The design was also informed by Critical Race Methodology (CRM) and by counter storytelling as a means of challenging dominant institutional narratives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Parker & Lynn, 2002). This did not mean that the study sought to produce a single unified counter-narrative in opposition to professional accounts, nor that parents' perspectives were treated as uniform or beyond critical interpretation. Rather, the research was intentionally designed to centre voices that are often marginalised within safeguarding systems and within child protection scholarship. Parents' narratives were

treated as legitimate forms of knowledge about how intervention is experienced, interpreted, and negotiated, while social workers' accounts were used to illuminate the professional, organisational, and institutional conditions within which practice takes place (Bonilla-Silva, 2017; Crenshaw, 1989).

Consistent with this framework, the study adopted a qualitative design centred on semi structured interviews. This method enabled participants to provide detailed accounts of their experiences and supported the identification of recurrent themes across cases, including pathways into child protection, experiences of assessment and monitoring, understandings of support, perceptions of bias, and the relationship between family life and broader systems of welfare and migration governance. Semi-structured interviewing was particularly appropriate because it offered flexibility while maintaining sufficient coherence across the dataset (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Methodological decisions were also shaped by the ethical and political demands of the research context. Research involving child protection experiences requires careful attention to trust, confidentiality, emotional risk, and the potential consequences of misrepresentation, particularly where participants belong to racially marginalised communities that may already view institutions with caution (Smith, 2012; Bernard & Harris, 2019). Reflexivity is therefore treated here not as autobiographical commentary, but as methodological accountability. It concerns the ways in which the researcher's positionality, community relationships, and interpretive role shaped access, rapport, meaning making, and analysis throughout the study (Finlay, 2002; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

The chapter is organised as follows. Section 5.2 outlines the overall research design. Section 5.3 discusses the study's epistemological and methodological alignment with its critical interpretive, CRT, and CRM commitments. Section 5.4 situates the research within the context of child protection in England. Sections 5.5 to 5.8 address participant groups, sampling, recruitment, and the pilot study. Sections 5.9 to 5.11 explain data generation, COVID-19 considerations, and data analysis. Sections 5.12 to 5.15 examine reflexivity, ethics, trustworthiness, and methodological limitations. Section 5.16 concludes the chapter.

5.2 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore how first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents experience child protection intervention in England and how those experiences are shaped by wider institutional, social, and professional contexts. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study was not concerned with measuring prevalence or establishing causal relationships, but with understanding meaning, interpretation, lived experience, and the operation of institutional power in everyday safeguarding practice (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Braun & Clarke, 2021). Its purpose was therefore interpretive and explanatory rather than predictive. More specifically, it sought to understand how parents interpret referral, assessment, support, surveillance, and professional judgement, and how those experiences are shaped by race, migration, poverty, and institutional authority.

Qualitative research is especially valuable when the aim is to investigate socially situated experiences in depth, particularly when participants' voices have historically been

marginalised within dominant systems of knowledge (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This is highly relevant in child protection, where official understandings of family life are often mediated through assessments, reports, case files, and legal documentation, and where parents' own narratives may be subordinated to professional interpretation (Broadhurst et al., 2010; Morris et al., 2018). A qualitative design enables attention to the texture and complexity of participants' accounts, including ambivalence, contradiction, emotion, and uncertainty, rather than reducing experience to categories such as compliance, service satisfaction, or outcomes.

The design was also appropriate because the research questions were inherently contextual and relational. Child protection involvement does not occur independently of the wider social and material conditions in which families live. Parents' experiences of safeguarding may be shaped by poverty, housing insecurity, immigration status, welfare exclusion, contact with schools and police, health concerns, and prior institutional encounters. These interlocking dimensions cannot be easily captured by standardised or narrowly outcome-focused methods. A qualitative design enabled the study to explore how these factors were collectively experienced and how participants understood the relationship between their family circumstances and child protection interventions (Featherstone et al., 2018; Jolly, 2018; Bernard & Gupta, 2008).

The selection of a qualitative design was further informed by the study's CRT and CRM orientation. CRT is concerned not only with the existence of racial inequality but with the processes through which such inequality is normalised and reproduced within institutions that present themselves as neutral and universal (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Gillborn, 2015). Qualitative inquiry is especially valuable in this context because it allows detailed

exploration of the meaning's participants assign to institutional interactions and of how professional processes are lived, interpreted, and negotiated. It also creates space for narratives that may challenge dominant institutional understandings of risk, parenting, and intervention.

The design was exploratory in character. Although previous research has documented racial disproportionality and examined aspects of Black African family experience in relation to child protection, relatively little qualitative work has focused specifically on the narratives of first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents regarding referral, assessment, and ongoing statutory involvement in England (Bernard & Harris, 2019; Okpokiri, 2021). An exploratory design was therefore appropriate because it allowed themes to emerge through sustained engagement with participants' accounts rather than imposing a rigid explanatory framework at the point of data generation. This does not mean the study was atheoretical. Theory informed the framing of the research questions and the interpretation of the data, while the design remained sufficiently open to capture complexity in participants' own terms (Patton, 2015; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

The design was also interpretive in that it recognised research as an active process of meaning-making rather than a simple uncovering of facts. Participants' narratives were treated as situated accounts shaped by memory, emotion, context, and the interview encounter itself, rather than as transparent reproductions of events (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2021). This was important because the study was concerned not only with what had happened to participants, but with how they understood and narrated those experiences.

A further strength of the design was its ability to incorporate multiple perspectives while maintaining a clear analytical centre. Although the study's primary focus was parents' lived experiences, a smaller group of social workers was included to situate those accounts within broader professional and organisational contexts. This did not turn the research into a balanced comparison between two equivalent viewpoints. Instead, it enabled the study to consider how institutional logics, professional pressures, and risk cultures were described from within practice, while still retaining parents' narratives as the main source of empirical insight (Munro, 2011; Parton, 2014).

The design also has limitations. It does not support statistical generalisation, and the findings cannot be taken as representative of all first-generation Sub-Saharan African families involved with child protection in England. Rather, it supports in-depth analysis, conceptual development, and contextual understanding (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This is consistent with the study's aim of exploring how racialised inequalities are experienced and understood rather than determining their prevalence.

Overall, a qualitative design was the most appropriate choice because it aligned with the research questions, the study's epistemological commitments, and the critical theoretical framework set out in Chapter 4. It enabled the research to centre lived experience, investigate institutional processes in context, and examine how safeguarding is understood by those directly affected.

5.3 Epistemological and Methodological Alignment

The qualitative design adopted in this study is closely aligned with its epistemological and methodological foundations. As outlined in Chapter 4, the research is located within a critical interpretive epistemology that understands knowledge as socially situated, contested, and shaped by power relations rather than as a neutral reflection of reality (Harding, 1991; Collins, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This is especially important in child protection contexts, where institutional knowledge is often treated as authoritative through assessments, case files, review procedures, and legal documents, while parents' own accounts may be viewed as partial, emotional, or unreliable (Broadhurst et al., 2010; Morris et al., 2018). The methodological design was therefore developed to ensure coherence between how knowledge is conceptualised and how it is generated, interpreted, and represented.

This coherence matters because research design is never purely technical. Methods always carry assumptions about what counts as knowledge, whose perspectives matter, and how social reality can be understood. A positivist design may have been appropriate if the study had sought to measure prevalence, test correlations, or predict safeguarding outcomes. However, such approaches would have been less suited to the present study's concern with lived experience, institutional interpretation, and racialised governance. The research questions required methods capable of exploring not only what participants experienced, but how they understood those experiences and how institutional power shaped that understanding (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

The study's alignment with a critical interpretive epistemology is evident first in its treatment of parents' accounts as valid and meaningful forms of knowledge. This position departs from traditions in child protection research that often privilege professional and institutional narratives as more objective or reliable than family perspectives. Instead, the study proceeds on the basis that parents' narratives are situated but analytically significant accounts of institutional encounter and can reveal dimensions of safeguarding practice that are difficult to access through official records or service data alone (Collins, 2000; Smith, 2012). This does not mean that parents' accounts are regarded as transparent or beyond interpretation. Rather, they are treated as epistemically important and indispensable to the study's aims.

The methodological orientation is also shaped by CRT and CRM. CRT challenges claims of institutional neutrality and emphasises the ordinariness of racism within systems that appear universal and impartial (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Gillborn, 2015). CRM extends these concerns into research practice by asking whose voices are foregrounded, whose interpretations are legitimised, and how hierarchies of knowledge are reproduced within the research process itself (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Parker & Lynn, 2002). The design reflects these commitments by positioning first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents as the primary source of empirical insight, while including social workers not as ultimate interpretive authorities but as participants who can illuminate the organisational and professional conditions in which safeguarding decisions are made.

The use of semi-structured interviews further reflects this epistemological and methodological alignment. Semi-structured interviewing is well-suited to research concerned with meaning, interpretation, and lived experience because it allows

participants to describe events in their own terms while also providing enough structure to ensure coverage of key themes across interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015, 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2021). This was particularly important in a study of racialised child protection experiences, where participants needed space to articulate not only what had happened but how they made sense of professional language, statutory processes, and the relationship between safeguarding intervention and broader issues such as poverty, migration, and mistrust.

The alignment between epistemology and method is also evident in the analytical strategy. Reflexive thematic analysis was selected because it is compatible with interpretive and critical qualitative traditions and explicitly acknowledges the active role of the researcher in constructing themes and meaning from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2021). This approach rejects the idea that themes simply emerge from data as objective entities waiting to be found. Instead, it treats analysis as an interpretive process shaped by theoretical commitments, reflexive engagement, and analytic judgement. That position is entirely consistent with the study's critical epistemology, which does not claim researcher neutrality but instead demands transparency about how interpretation is produced.

A further aspect of this alignment concerns reflexivity. In critical qualitative inquiry, reflexivity is not an optional addition but an essential part of rigorous knowledge production (Finlay, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This is particularly important in research involving racially marginalised communities and sensitive institutional experiences. The study, therefore, recognises that the researcher's positionality,

relationships, assumptions, and interpretive role shape access, rapport, questioning, analysis, and representation. Reflexivity is treated as methodological accountability: a disciplined awareness of how knowledge is co-constructed and how power operates within the research process (Smith, 2012; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

The alignment of the design with the study's critical framework is also evident in how the institutional context is addressed. A narrowly phenomenological approach might have centred individual experience without sufficiently attending to the structural and organisational conditions in which that experience takes place. Conversely, a purely policy-focused design might have foregrounded institutions while marginalising family voice. The present study sought to avoid both limitations. Its design enabled lived experience to remain central while situating that experience within wider frameworks of risk, accountability, poverty, migration governance, and racialisation.

The inclusion of a smaller group of social workers reflects the same logic. Their participation was not intended to displace parents' accounts or produce an artificial balance between family and institutional perspectives. Instead, it was designed to provide contextual insight into the professional, organisational, and risk-focused environment in which safeguarding operates. Social workers' narratives are therefore used to illuminate context rather than to arbitrate the truth of parents' accounts.

Overall, the study's methodological design is closely aligned with its epistemological and theoretical commitments. The qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews, parent-

centred focus, contextual use of social worker perspectives, reflexive thematic analysis, and sustained emphasis on reflexivity together ensure that the study's claims about power, voice, race, and institutional authority are supported rather than undermined by its methodological choices.

5.4 Research Setting and Context

The study was conducted within the context of contemporary child protection practice in England. This setting is important because child protection does not function as a single abstract system, but is organised through specific legal duties, statutory guidance, local authority structures, and inter-agency processes that shape how families come into contact with services and how professional concern is translated into intervention (Children Act 1989; Children Act 2004; Department for Education, 2023). The principal legal, policy, and scholarly framework for the thesis is therefore grounded in England, where concepts such as children in need, significant harm, early help, assessment, and multi-agency safeguarding partnerships are defined most clearly in both legislation and practice guidance.

The setting is also significant because child protection in England extends beyond social work alone. It operates through a network of institutional actors, including schools, health services, the police, housing providers, and local authority children's services, all of which may contribute to referral, information sharing, assessment, and ongoing monitoring (Department for Education, 2023; Parton, 2014). Families may therefore encounter child protection through multiple points of institutional visibility rather than

via a single route. This is particularly relevant to the present study because many of the issues described by first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents, including school concerns, health-related referrals, housing insecurity, and welfare difficulties, formed part of the pathways through which safeguarding systems became involved in their lives.

My understanding of this institutional setting was also informed by professional and advocacy work that involved direct engagement with a wide range of agencies involved in safeguarding and family intervention, including the police, local authorities, the Home Office, NHS services, universities, immigration solicitors, family lawyers, prisons, schools, and colleges. This experience reinforced the fact that child protection is rarely encountered by families as a single service. Rather, it is often experienced through overlapping institutional contacts, information-sharing processes, and multi-agency forms of decision-making. Including this wider institutional field is therefore important to the study's context, because it reflects the broader environments through which families become visible to the state and through which concerns may be escalated, interpreted, or acted upon.

The wider social context is equally important. As discussed in earlier chapters, contemporary child protection practice has developed within conditions shaped by austerity, welfare retrenchment, migration governance, and increasing organisational accountability (Featherstone et al., 2018; Jolly, 2018; Parton, 2014). These pressures affect both families and practitioners. For families, they shape access to housing, income, welfare support, and early help services. For practitioners, they influence workload, thresholds, service availability, and the organisational emphasis on risk, defensibility, and

procedural compliance (Munro, 2011; Webb & Bywaters, 2018). The research setting must therefore be understood not only as the formal child protection system but also as a broader institutional environment in which structural inequality and safeguarding interventions intersect.

This context is especially important for first-generation Sub-Saharan African families. As outlined in earlier chapters, such families may experience children's services within circumstances shaped by migration histories, insecure employment, housing instability, social isolation, welfare exclusion, and racialised institutional scrutiny (Bernard & Gupta, 2008; Okpokiri, 2021). The research setting thus includes not only child protection agencies themselves, but also the wider sphere of institutional contact through which these families become visible to the state. The study is therefore situated in a context where race, migration, and socioeconomic disadvantage may all shape how concerns arise, how families are interpreted, and how intervention is experienced.

The setting was also influenced by the mode of data generation. All interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom, reflecting practical and ethical considerations associated with working across different locations and with participants whose experiences were often emotionally sensitive. Remote interviewing enabled participation by individuals who may otherwise have been excluded due to geography, caring responsibilities, work schedules, or discomfort with face-to-face disclosure. At the same time, the use of Zoom became part of the research environment itself and affected how rapport, privacy, and participant comfort were managed.

The organisational context is also important for the inclusion of both parent and social worker participants. Parents' narratives illuminate how safeguarding is experienced by those subject to intervention, while social workers' narratives shed light on the professional and institutional contexts in which decisions are made. The research setting is therefore both structural and relational. It encompasses formal legal and policy frameworks, as well as professional cultures, accountability pressures, and interpretive routines through which families and practitioners encounter one another.

Overall, the setting of this study is shaped by the intersection of child protection law and policy, inter-agency safeguarding practice, welfare restructuring, migration governance, and racialised inequality. These conditions are not simply background context. They are integral to understanding how first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents experience children's services and how they interpret their involvement.

5.5 Participant Groups and Rationale

The study involved two participant groups: first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents with experience of statutory child protection involvement in England, and a smaller group of social workers with experience in safeguarding and children's services. The parent group formed the core of the study, while the social worker group was included to provide professional and organisational context for understanding how safeguarding concerns are framed, interpreted, and managed in practice. This design reflects the study's focus on lived experience, institutional power, and racialised inequality, and is consistent with its CRT and CRM commitments to centre the voices of those subject to intervention while

remaining attentive to the systems through which intervention is organised (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Gillborn, 2015).

The inclusion of first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents as the primary participant group was directly informed by the empirical and conceptual gaps identified in Chapter 3. Although existing research has documented racial disproportionality in children's social care and explored aspects of Black African family experience in relation to child protection, relatively little work has focused specifically on the voices of first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents in England (Bernard & Gupta, 2008; Bernard & Harris, 2019; Okpokiri, 2021). Administrative and policy research has been essential in demonstrating unequal outcomes but is less able to reveal how parents interpret referral pathways, professional language, assessment procedures, support deficits, and broader institutional scrutiny. The parent group was therefore selected to address this gap by foregrounding the experiences of those who are often marginalised within both safeguarding systems and child protection research.

The focus on first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents requires further clarification, as the study does not treat “Sub-Saharan African”, “Black African”, “BME”, or “migrant” as interchangeable categories. While these labels may overlap in policy, professional and administrative usage, they do not capture the same social, cultural, historical or institutional positions. In this thesis, “Sub-Saharan African” is used to identify a specific group of first-generation parents whose experiences of child protection in England are shaped by migration from countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, adult socialisation outside the UK, racialisation as Black or African within British institutions, and encounters with

safeguarding systems that may interpret parenting, authority, discipline, family responsibility and help-seeking through dominant UK norms.

The focus on first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents requires further clarification, as the study does not treat “Sub-Saharan African”, “Black African”, “BME”, or “migrant” as interchangeable categories. While these labels may overlap in policy, professional and administrative usage, they do not capture the same social, cultural, historical or institutional positions. In this thesis, “Sub-Saharan African” is used to identify a specific group of first-generation parents whose experiences of child protection in England are shaped by migration from countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, adult socialisation outside the UK, racialisation as Black or African within British institutions, and encounters with safeguarding systems that may interpret parenting, authority, discipline, family responsibility and help-seeking through dominant UK norms (Bernard & Gupta, 2008; Bernard & Harris, 2019; Okpokiri, 2021; Gillborn, 2015).

This focus is analytically distinct from a broad “Black African” or “BME” category because those broader categories can flatten important differences in nationality, region, language, ethnicity, migration route, religion, class, legal status, and prior experience with state institutions. The study therefore does not assume that all Black families, all African families, or all first-generation migrant families experience child protection in the same way. Rather, it examines how a particular group of first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents described navigating safeguarding within conditions shaped by racialisation, migration, welfare restriction, housing insecurity, cultural misrecognition and unequal

institutional credibility (Bywaters et al., 2017; Featherstone et al., 2018; Bernard & Harris, 2019; Okpokiri, 2021).

The distinction is important because participants' accounts often reflected experiences associated with migration and adult resettlement as well as racialised positioning. These included limited familiarity with UK safeguarding thresholds, uncertainty about professional language, fear of child removal, concerns about how African parenting practices were interpreted, and the emotional burden of being assessed by institutions whose expectations were not always transparent. These experiences cannot be reduced to "culture" alone, nor can they be explained only by race, poverty or migration in isolation. They are better understood intersectionally through the interaction of race, migration history, socioeconomic position, gendered parenting expectations, legal status, language and institutional power (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

At the same time, the thesis avoids treating Sub-Saharan African parents as a homogeneous cultural group. The participants came from different national, regional, linguistic, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds. The purpose of using the category is therefore not to essentialise African parenting or to suggest a single Sub-Saharan African experience. Instead, it provides an analytical focus for examining how broad racialised categories used in safeguarding can obscure internal diversity while still exposing families to shared forms of institutional scrutiny and misrecognition. This is consistent with the thesis's critique of flattened BME-type labels and with its CRT-

informed concern with how racial categories are produced, used and acted upon within institutions (Gillborn, 2015; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

5.5.1 Participant Characteristics

Participant characteristics are presented not merely as background information but as analytically relevant features that shape how child protection interventions are experienced, interpreted, and navigated by Sub-Saharan African families and frontline practitioners. In line with the study's CRM approach, these characteristics are situated within broader contexts of racialisation, migration, socioeconomic position, and institutional power. The purpose is not to present participants as culturally uniform but to show how shared structural locations may shape encounters with safeguarding systems (Gillborn, 2015; Bernard & Harris, 2019).

5.5.2 Parent Participant Characteristics

The final parent sample comprised nineteen first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents, all of whom had direct experience of statutory child protection involvement in England. All had migrated to the UK as adults and had been primarily socialised within African cultural contexts before settling. This was methodologically important, as it enabled the study to examine how migration, racialisation, and cultural misrecognition intersect within safeguarding practice.

Participants were raising between two and five children and were located across a range of regions in England, including the Northwest, Yorkshire, the West Midlands, the South

of England, the Southeast, and the East of England. They were at different stages of child protection involvement, including referral and assessment, child-in-need processes, child protection planning, and post-intervention contexts. This variation enabled exploration of safeguarding as a cumulative and evolving process rather than a single event (Broadhurst et al., 2010).

Table 1. Parent Participant Demographics

To strengthen demographic contextualisation, Table 1 provides additional information on parent participants' country of origin, region of residence, immigration status, education, occupation, gender, age group, religion, marital status, number of children and disability status. This is important because the study focuses on first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents and does not treat "Sub-Saharan African", "Black African", "BME" or "migrant" as interchangeable categories. Including country of origin helps demonstrate the internal diversity of the sample while supporting the thesis's critique of broad racialised labels that may flatten differences in nationality, migration history, region, class, religion and family circumstances (Bernard & Gupta, 2008; Bernard & Harris, 2019; Okpokiri, 2021; Gillborn, 2015). From a CRT perspective, this demographic contextualisation is also important because racial categories are not neutral descriptors; they are produced, interpreted and acted upon within institutional settings (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Table 1. Parent Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Gender	Age Group	Education Level	Occupation	Country of Origin	UK Region	Immigration Status	Children	Disability	Marital Status	Religion
PB01 Karen	Black African	Female	40–49	University Undergraduate	Social Worker	Kenya	Southeast England	British Citizen	2–5	No	Single	Christian

Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Gender	Age Group	Education Level	Occupation	Country of Origin	UK Region	Immigration Status	Children	Disability	Marital Status	Religion
PB02 Isaac	Black African	Male	40–49	Secondary	Taxi Driver	Rwanda	Northwest England	Refugee / Leave to Remain	2–5	No	Married	Christian
PB03 Rehema	Black African	Female	30–39	University Undergraduate	Senior Carer	Uganda	Northwest England	Refugee / Leave to Remain	2–5	No	Separated	Christian
PB04 Yusuf	Black African	Male	50–59	Secondary	IT Engineer	Uganda	Northwest England	British Citizen	2–5	No	Separated	Muslim
PB05 Faith	Black African	Female	40–49	Postgraduate	Domestic Violence Worker	Kenya	Northwest England	British Citizen	2–5	No	Married	Christian
PB06 Grace	Black African	Female	30–39	University Undergraduate	Public Health Specialist	Kenya	Northwest England	Refugee / Leave to Remain	2–5	No	Widow	Christian
PB07 Milkah	Black African	Female	50–59	University Undergraduate	Accountant	Kenya	Northwest England	British Citizen	2–5	No	Single	Muslim
PB08 Fatuma	Black African	Female	30–39	University Undergraduate	Criminologist	Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)	Northwest England	British Citizen	2–5	No	Single	Muslim
PB09 Aisha	Mixed White and Black African	Female	30–39	A-Levels	Full-time Mother	Kenya	Northwest England	British Citizen	2–5	No	Divorced	Muslim
PB10 John	Black African	Male	50–59	Postgraduate	Teacher	Cameroon	West Midlands	British Citizen	2–5	No	Single	Christian
PB11 Janet	Black British	Female	30–39	Secondary	Full-time Housewife	Ghana	Northwest England	British Citizen	2–5	No	Married	Christian
PB12 Akanke	Black African	Female	30–39	University Undergraduate	Law Student	Nigeria	Northwest England	Refugee / Leave to Remain	2–5	No	Single	Christian
PB13 Mercy	Black African	Female	60+	Secondary	Nurse/Midwife	Kenya	Yorkshire	Indefinite Leave to Remain	2–5	No	Married	Christian
PB14 Gladys	Black African	Female	30–39	A-Levels	Taxi Driver	Malawi	Northwest England	Defendant Visa	2–5	No	Married	Christian
PB15 Jamila	Black African	Female	40–49	Postgraduate	Nurse	Kenya	East of England	British Citizen	2–5	No	Divorced	Orthodox
PB16 Alan	Black African	Male	40–49	A-Levels	Engineer	Nigeria	South of England	British Citizen	2–5	No	Divorced	Christian
PB17 Edna	Black African	Female	30–39	Secondary	Student Nurse	Ethiopia	Northwest England	British Citizen	2–5	No	Married	Orthodox
PB18 Susan	Black African	Female	50–59	Graduate	Support Worker	Zimbabwe	East of England	British Citizen	2–5	No	Single	Christian
PB19 Grace	Black African	Female	30–39	Postgraduate	Project Manager	Uganda	South of England	British Citizen	2–5	No	Married	Christian

Note: The table is descriptive and is used to contextualise the parent participant group.

All parent participants had between two and five children, and none reported a personal disability in the sociodemographic questionnaire. Country of origin is included to strengthen contextualisation while protecting confidentiality. The table should not be read as a basis for making comparative claims between national, ethnic, regional, or religious sub-groups.

The parent participant group included participants from East, Central, West and Southern Africa. The largest number of participants originated from East Africa, including Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda and Ethiopia. Other participants came from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Cameroon, Ghana, Nigeria, Malawi and Zimbabwe. This regional spread supports the study's use of "Sub-Saharan African" as an analytical focus while also demonstrating that the participant group was not culturally, nationally, religiously or regionally

homogeneous. The table is therefore used to contextualise diversity within the sample, not to create national or ethnic sub-group comparisons.

Additional methodological note

Although the parent sociodemographic questionnaire included an item on tribe or ethno-cultural identity, this variable was not used as a formal comparative category in the analysis. It was collected to allow participants to describe their identities in their own terms and to recognise that Sub-Saharan African identity is internally diverse rather than culturally uniform. However, during reflexive thematic analysis, tribe or ethno-cultural identity did not emerge as a consistent explanatory pattern across participant accounts. Participants more commonly framed their child protection experiences through migration, parenting expectations, fear of social services, poverty, housing, immigration status, professional judgement, cultural misrecognition and racialised institutional encounters.

For this reason, tribes or ethno-cultural identity was not used to divide participants into sub-groups or to make claims about specific ethnic communities. Doing so would have risked over-interpreting limited demographic data, essentialising participants' experiences and increasing the risk of identification within small migrant communities. Where participants referred to language, cultural background, family norms, religion or country-specific experience, these were considered contextually within the analysis rather than treated as fixed tribal explanations. This decision reflects analytic caution, confidentiality and careful representation within a small and sensitive qualitative sample (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Shenton, 2004).

Sexuality was not retained in the parent participant demographic table because it was not used as an analytical category in the findings. The analysis focused on the dimensions that participants themselves foregrounded in relation to child protection involvement, including race, migration, parenting expectations, poverty, housing, immigration status, religion, language, professional judgement, cultural misrecognition and fear of social services. Sexuality did not emerge as a significant or recurring feature in participants' accounts and was therefore not used to structure the analysis or to make explanatory claims. Removing it from the main demographic table avoids presenting a descriptive category as analytically significant where it was not subsequently analysed.

Most parents were mothers, with a smaller number of fathers. This gendered pattern is analytically significant because mothers are often positioned as primary caregivers and are more likely to be held responsible for meeting safeguarding expectations within child protection practice (Featherstone et al., 2018; Phoenix, 2009). The sample also showed internal diversity across countries of origin, ethnicity, occupation, age, religion and family circumstances. This diversity is important because it supports the study's argument that Sub-Saharan African parents should not be treated as a homogeneous group, even where they may encounter shared forms of racialisation, cultural misrecognition and institutional scrutiny. Pseudonyms were assigned to all parent participants, and identifying details were removed or modified to preserve anonymity.

5.5.3 Social Worker Participant Characteristics

In addition to the parent sample, five frontline statutory child protection social workers participated in the study. Their accounts were included to provide institutional and

practice context rather than to create an equivalent comparison group with parent participants. All were qualified social workers with at least five years of frontline child protection experience, and all had direct professional experience of working with Black and minority ethnic families.

All five social worker participants were women, reflecting the feminised nature of the child protection workforce in England (Baginsky et al., 2020). Four were identified as Black African and one as White British. While this limits the scope for racial comparison within the practitioner sample, the inclusion of Black African social workers provided valuable insight into how safeguarding systems may be understood from positions shaped by both professional authority and racialised institutional experience.

The social worker participants were employed in statutory child protection settings across different regions of England, including the Northwest, Yorkshire, the West Midlands, and the East of England. Exact local authority names are not provided to protect confidentiality, particularly given the small number of practitioner participants and the potentially identifiable nature of local safeguarding roles. Instead, regional and practice-context information is used to situate the professional environments in which participants worked. This contextualisation is important because child protection practice is shaped not only by national legislation and statutory guidance, but also by local thresholds, resource pressures, organisational cultures and multi-agency safeguarding arrangements (Munro, 2011; Parton, 2014; Featherstone et al., 2018).

The practitioner experience categories in Table 2 are used as descriptive demographic bands rather than analytical categories. They indicate that the practitioner sample was experienced, with two participants reporting 5–9 years and three reporting 10–20 years. These bands avoid over-specifying individual professional histories within a small sample and are not used to compare practitioners by experience level. Instead, they provide context for interpreting the social worker accounts as professionally informed reflections on child protection practice.

Table 2: Demographic characteristics of the social worker participant group.

Table 2. Social Worker Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Age Group	Region / Practice Context	Years of Child Protection Experience	Ethnicity	Disability Reported
PSW01 Katie	Female	50–59	Northwest England	5–9 years	Black African	No
PSW02 Judy	Female	40–49	Yorkshire	10–20 years	Black African	No
PSW03 Agnes	Female	50–59	Northwest England	5–9 years	Black African	No
PSW04 Sylvia	Female	30–39	West Midlands	10–20 years	White British	No
PSW05 Linda	Female	40–49	East of England / Luton area	10–20 years	Black African	No

Note: Demographic information is reported descriptively to contextualise the practitioner sample. Regional descriptors are used instead of exact local authority names to protect participant confidentiality. Disability was recorded descriptively; none of the social worker participants reported a disability in the demographic questionnaire.

Sexuality was collected as part of the demographic questionnaire but has not been retained in the revised demographic table because it was not used as an analytical category in the findings. It did not emerge as relevant to participants' accounts of child protection practice, race, culture, professional judgement, organisational pressure or institutional decision-making. Removing it from the table avoids presenting a descriptive category as analytically significant where it was not subsequently analysed.

The social worker accounts are analysed as institutional and professional accounts. Their purpose is to illuminate professional language, risk assessment, organisational pressures, local practice contexts and the institutional conditions within which safeguarding decisions are made.

5.6 Sampling Strategy and Participant Selection

This study used purposive and snowball sampling to generate an information-rich qualitative dataset on how statutory safeguarding is experienced and navigated by first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents in England. The study did not seek statistical representativeness. Instead, the aim was to recruit participants whose experiences were directly relevant to the research questions and whose accounts could provide the depth, complexity, and contextual richness required for theoretically informed qualitative analysis (Patton, 2015; Braun & Clarke, 2021). Purposive sampling was selected as the primary strategy because it enabled recruitment to be guided by analytic relevance rather than numerical logic. Snowball sampling was used as a supplementary strategy, recognising that participation in safeguarding research may be constrained by fear of

stigma, emotional vulnerability, perceived institutional risk, and mistrust of systems associated with statutory authority (Atkinson & Flint, 2001; Noy, 2008).

Sampling decisions were explicitly shaped by the study's critical framework. CRT and CRM emphasise the importance of centring racially marginalised experiential knowledge and creating space for counter-stories that challenge dominant institutional narratives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Gillborn, 2008). Intersectionality also informed the sampling rationale by underscoring the need to avoid broad, homogenising racial categories that obscure variation within groups and flatten the ways in which race intersects with migration history, gender, poverty, language, and institutional power (Crenshaw, 1991; Phoenix, 2009). For this reason, the sampling frame focused on a clearly defined group, first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents, rather than broader categories such as Black, BME, or BAME, which would have reduced analytic precision and risked cultural oversimplification.

The principal participant group consisted of first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents with direct experience of statutory child protection intervention in England. Inclusion criteria required participants to be adults, to self-identify as first-generation migrants from Sub-Saharan African countries, and to have direct experience of formal statutory child protection involvement in England, including referral, assessment, child protection planning, or care proceedings. Parents whose contact with children's services had been limited to early help or voluntary support without statutory child protection involvement were excluded, because the study focused specifically on formal safeguarding authority, surveillance, and intervention. Parents whose involvement occurred only outside England

were also excluded, since the study was situated within the legal, policy, and institutional context of English child protection.

A smaller supplementary sample of social workers was recruited to provide a professional and organisational context. Inclusion criteria required participants to have experience in safeguarding or statutory children's services and to possess sufficient familiarity with work involving African and migrant families to contribute meaningfully to the study's contextual aims. Social workers were not recruited as a representative sample of the workforce. Rather, they were included to illuminate professional and organisational issues such as risk culture, statutory thresholds, accountability pressures, and interpretations of family engagement (Munro, 2011; Featherstone et al., 2018).

Across both participant groups, 39 potential participants were initially identified through purposive and snowball sampling, comprising 28 parents and 11 social workers. After withdrawals, exclusions, and incomplete participation, the final sample comprised 19 parents and 5 social workers. Attrition occurred for several reasons, including voluntary withdrawal, cancelled or unfinished interviews, bereavement, sudden family trauma, practical family constraints, and ethical exclusion where prior professional involvement created a conflict of interest. These losses were not treated simply as procedural matters but as part of the real-world complexity of safeguarding research, in which participation may be shaped by distress, vulnerability, mistrust, and concern about potential consequences.

The parent sample was considered adequate for the study's aims because it enabled sustained engagement with individual narratives and supported comparison across accounts. Consistent with reflexive qualitative methodology, adequacy was judged not by numerical thresholds alone but by whether the dataset provided sufficient depth, richness, and coherence to support rigorous interpretation of the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2021). At the same time, the parent sample was gender-imbalanced, comprising fifteen women and four men. Although fathers' voices were included, the dataset offers a fuller account of mothers' experiences and limits the extent to which gendered claims can be generalised across Sub-Saharan African parental experiences. The greater attrition among men is itself analytically significant, suggesting possible gendered barriers to participation and pointing to a wider evidence gap in which Black and African fathers are often less visible in both research and practice discussions of parenting and safeguarding (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Gillborn, 2008).

The practitioner sample was also demographically limited. All five social workers were women, with four identifying as Black African and one as White British. This restricts the extent to which conclusions can be drawn about how practitioner gender and a broader range of ethnic backgrounds may shape interpretations of risk, authority, compliance, and family engagement. Practitioner findings should therefore be understood as limited contextual insights rather than as definitive claims about the wider workforce (Munro, 2011; Featherstone et al., 2018).

Sampling sufficiency was approached reflectively rather than mechanically. Sufficiency was not treated as the point at which no new information emerged, but as a judgement

shaped by the study's theoretical orientation, analytic aims, and methodological design (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013). In line with CRT and CRM, the aim was not exhaustive coverage of all possible experiences, but sufficient analytic depth to illuminate the institutional logics, structural pressures, and lived realities under examination. Sampling was therefore guided by analytic sufficiency rather than by claims of representational completeness (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Ethical safeguards were embedded throughout recruitment and sampling. In recognition of the sensitivity and perceived risks associated with participation, recruitment procedures were designed to protect autonomy and confidentiality. Participation was voluntary; informed consent was treated as an ongoing process; confidentiality and the right to withdraw were repeatedly emphasised; and procedures remained attentive to emotional well-being through debriefing and, where appropriate, signposting (British Sociological Association, 2017). Snowball recruitment was carefully managed to reduce pressure and preserve confidentiality: personal details were not shared by third parties, and potential participants were invited to self-refer if they wished to receive further information and consider participation.

Table 3: Sample flow and attrition across participant groups

Group	Initially identified	Final included	Attrition reasons
--------------	-----------------------------	-----------------------	--------------------------

Parents	28 (13 men; 15 women)	19 (4 men; 15 women)	Voluntary cancelled/noncompleted bereavement/acute family trauma; family constraints; ethical exclusion due to conflicts of interest	withdrawal; interviews;
Social workers	11 (gender distribution at identification not fully captured)	5 (all women; 4 Black African; 1 White British)	Withdrawal/non-completion after initial agreement and recruitment procedures	

5.6.1 Pseudonyms, Confidentiality and Timing of Data Collection

Pseudonyms were used for all parent and social worker participants to protect anonymity and confidentiality. Participants were not identified by their real names in transcripts, coding documents or the final thesis. Pseudonyms were allocated by the researcher rather than selected by participants. This approach ensured consistency across the dataset, reduced the risk of participants choosing names that might be personally meaningful or identifiable, and maintained clear separation between consent records, interview data and written analysis. Identifying details, including specific locations, local authority names, case-specific information and family circumstances that could increase identifiability, were removed, generalised or modified during transcription and analysis. This approach was consistent with ethical principles in qualitative research, where anonymity, confidentiality and careful handling of identifiable information are especially important in small and sensitive samples (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018; Liamputtong, 2007).

Ethical approval was granted in October 2022, and no interviews were conducted before it was obtained. Following approval, recruitment, fieldwork planning and data collection took place between October 2022 and December 2023. The pilot phase was conducted in November 2022 and informed the refinement of the interview schedules, question order, pacing and distress-management procedures. The main parent interviews were conducted between October 2022 and September 2023, while the social worker interviews were conducted between November 2022 and December 2023. All interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom. This mode of data collection was shaped by COVID-19-related considerations, participant availability, geographical spread and the need to provide a flexible and safe environment for discussing sensitive child protection experiences.

The period between data collection and thesis submission was used for transcription, anonymisation, repeated reading of transcripts, coding, theme development, reflexive memo-writing and writing up. This process was important because the study involved sensitive and emotionally demanding material, and the analysis required careful attention to confidentiality, contextual interpretation and the relationship between participant accounts and the study's CRT-informed framework. This extended analytic process is consistent with reflexive thematic analysis, where themes are developed through sustained engagement with the data, reflexive interpretation and iterative movement between codes, themes and the wider theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

5.7 Recruitment and Access

Recruitment was undertaken through a combination of community outreach, personal and professional networks, organisational contacts, and online promotion, including

Facebook, WhatsApp, and email. This multi-route approach was necessary because child protection experiences are often highly sensitive, stigmatised, and emotionally difficult to discuss. Research involving marginalised communities and sensitive institutional topics frequently requires flexible, trust-based routes of access rather than sole reliance on formal gatekeeping structures (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Ritchie et al., 2014). Recruitment, therefore, proceeded through multiple overlapping channels to broaden access while carefully safeguarding confidentiality, voluntariness, and participant safety.

For the parent group, initial access was developed through broader knowledge of and engagement with Black African and migrant communities, alongside recruitment through relevant organisations, informal networks, online forums, and social media. Recruitment was also supported through community contacts linked to BAME HUB-UK and by circulating study information and flyers within community-based spaces, including churches and mosques, where Black African and migrant families were already connected through social, welfare, and support networks. This was particularly important because potential participants were unlikely to be reachable through child protection services, and direct recruitment through statutory services would not have been appropriate given the ethical and power-related implications of approaching parents through institutions associated with surveillance and intervention. Community-based recruitment, therefore, enabled access outside formal statutory pathways and reduced the risk that participation would be understood as connected to ongoing professional scrutiny (Liamputtong, 2010; Patton, 2015).

Social media extended recruitment reaches by enabling potential participants to encounter the study outside face-to-face community spaces and to consider participation privately

before making contact. This was particularly useful in a study focused on child protection experiences, where participants may have wished to reflect carefully on the implications of taking part before responding. At the same time, online recruitment was not treated as a neutral or sufficient form of access. Digital visibility can widen reach, but it does not automatically generate trust. For that reason, online recruitment was most effective when combined with community credibility, clear participant information, and opportunities to ask questions before participating (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; British Sociological Association, 2017).

Recruitment of the social worker group was more focused and professionally targeted. This access was also informed by my wider professional and advocacy networks across agencies and institutions connected to safeguarding, including local authorities, education, health, legal, and immigration-related settings, although these networks were used to support access and contextual understanding rather than to recruit through direct case-related relationships. Social workers were approached through established professional networks, including local authority contacts and other connections likely to know practitioners with direct safeguarding experience. The aim was not to assemble a large or representative sample of practitioners, but to recruit a small number of participants who could reflect on the organisational, procedural, and risk related contexts in which safeguarding decisions are made. Recruitment materials made it clear that the study was not designed to appraise individual practice, but to examine organisational conditions, professional pressures, and institutional interpretations that shape safeguarding work (Munro, 2011; Featherstone et al., 2018).

Across both groups, recruitment materials outlined the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, the broad eligibility criteria, data handling arrangements, and the right to withdraw. Interested potential participants received further information and, where appropriate, were invited to discuss the study before making a decision. This phased approach was particularly important given the sensitivity of the topic. It enabled individuals to make informed choices and reduced the likelihood of hasty or pressured agreement to participate (British Sociological Association, 2017; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018).

Access to parents was strongly shaped by trust issues. In child protection, many parents have experienced fear, disempowerment, prejudgment, or institutional misrecognition, and such experiences can understandably affect willingness to participate in research or to speak openly about personal experiences (Bekaert et al., 2021; Mason et al., 2020; Okpokiri, 2021). Some potential participants were cautious because they were unsure how their narratives would be used, whether confidentiality could be guaranteed, or whether participation might expose them to further scrutiny. These concerns are well recognised in research with children and families, where child protection anxieties and fear of institutional consequences may shape both consent and engagement (Morrow, 2009; Dickson-Swift et al., 2007; Liamputtong, 2010). Access was therefore understood not as a one-off procedural step, but as a relational process requiring clarity, reassurance, responsiveness, and respect for participants' boundaries.

Recruitment also involved withdrawal and attrition, particularly among parents. Some individuals initially expressed interest but later chose not to continue, while others withdrew after reflecting on the emotional demands of revisiting child protection

experiences. A small number of potential participants were also deemed unsuitable for recruitment via certain routes due to concerns about role boundaries, community conflict, or conflicts of interest. Cases in which I had prior involvement through BAME HUB-UK in child protection matters, especially child removal cases and any live or ongoing child protection cases, were excluded from participation. These challenges reinforced the point that recruitment in safeguarding research cannot be treated as merely a technical exercise, particularly where trauma, contested institutional histories, and close-knit community networks are involved. Decisions not to pursue or continue recruitment in such circumstances were made to protect participant well-being, uphold ethical standards, and preserve the integrity of the study (Gatwiri et al., 2025; British Sociological Association, 2017).

The combination of community-based access, organisational contacts, faith-based circulation routes, networked recruitment, and social media outreach inevitably shaped the sample. It enabled access to participants who might otherwise have been difficult to reach and supported recruitment in a context where trust was essential. At the same time, it affected which participants became visible to the study, particularly those connected to community or support networks, or those willing to respond to outreach in those spaces. This does not invalidate the sample, but it reinforces the interpretive nature of the study and the importance of recognising that access is always socially and relationally produced rather than neutral or comprehensive (Noy, 2008; Atkinson & Flint, 2001).

Reflexivity remained central throughout recruitment. Access was shaped not only by recruitment strategy but also by my positionality as a Black African woman with

community knowledge and safeguarding experience, and by my visibility through community advocacy work, including BAME HUB-UK. Shared cultural reference points and community familiarity helped facilitate trust and rapport with some parent participants, particularly where suspicion of institutions was high. At the same time, this required careful management of expectations, confidentiality concerns, and role boundaries, especially within small or overlapping community networks. Recruitment, therefore, involved continuous reflexive attention to insider-outsider dynamics, relational ethics, and the need to maintain methodological and professional boundaries.

Overall, recruitment and access were achieved through a flexible, ethically sensitive, and relational process that reflected both the topic's sensitivity and the characteristics of the participant groups. The use of community contacts, organisational routes, faith-based circulation, social media, and network-based recruitment enabled the study to reach participants whose experiences are often underrepresented in child protection research, while careful management of trust, withdrawal, conflicts of interest, and role boundaries helped preserve methodological integrity.

5.8 Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted before full data collection to strengthen the methodological fit, ethical sensitivity and practical feasibility of the research design. In qualitative research, piloting is often used to test recruitment processes, participant-facing materials, interview schedules, timing and logistical arrangements, particularly when participants may be vulnerable, difficult to reach, or asked to discuss sensitive experiences (van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). In the present study, piloting

was particularly important because the research concerned parents' experiences of statutory safeguarding intervention, a topic likely to be emotionally demanding and shaped by fear, institutional mistrust and racialised scrutiny. Within a CRT and CRM framework, the pilot also served as a check to determine whether the interview design could support rich experiential accounts and counter-stories rather than reproducing professionalised or deficit-oriented narratives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; hooks, 2003).

The pilot involved seven participants in total: five parent pilot participants and two social worker pilot participants. The parent pilot participants reflected a range of gender, educational, occupational, migration and family backgrounds. They included a lecturer educated to postgraduate level, a security officer with high school/secondary-level education, an unemployed participant with no formal qualifications, a supervisor educated to undergraduate level, and a support worker educated to master's level. The two social worker pilot participants, one male and one female, were qualified social workers and were included to test whether the practitioner interview schedule was appropriate for eliciting professional reflections on child protection practice, risk, culture, organisational pressure and work with Black and minority ethnic families.

Table 4.1 summarises the demographic and professional profile of the pilot participants. Pilot participants were assigned pilot identifiers to distinguish them from the main study participants, and pilot interviews were excluded from the final analysis. The purpose of the pilot was not to generate data for the final findings, but to refine the tools and procedures used in the main study.

Table 4. Pilot Participant Demographic and Professional Profile

Pilot ID	Participant Group	Ethnicity	Gender	Age Group	Education Level	Occupation / Professional Status	Country of Origin	UK Region	Immigration Status	Children	Disability	Marital Status	Religion	Included in Final Analysis
PPP01	Parent pilot participant	Black African	Female	40–49	Postgraduate	Lecturer	Rwanda	Northwest England	British Citizen	2	No	Married	Christian	No
PPP02	Parent pilot participant	Black African	Male	50–59	High school / secondary level	Security Officer	Kenya	East of England	Indefinite Leave to Remain	4	No	Married	Christian	No
PPP03	Parent pilot participant	Black African	Female	20–29	No formal qualification reported	Unemployed	Eritrea	Northwest England	Refugee	2	No	Single	Orthodox	No
PPP04	Parent pilot participant	Black African	Male	30–39	Undergraduate	Supervisor	Nigeria	West Midlands	Dependant Visa	3	No	Married	Christian	No
PPP05	Parent pilot participant	Black African	Female	50–59	Master's level	Support Worker	Kenya	East of England	British Citizen	1	No	Single	Christian	No
PSWP01	Social worker pilot participant	Black African	Male	40–49	Undergraduate	Qualified Social Worker	Ghana	Greater London	British Citizen	Not applicable	No	Married	Christian	No
PSWP02	Social worker pilot participant	Black African	Female	50–59	Undergraduate	Qualified Social Worker	Eritrea	Southwest England	British Citizen	Not applicable	No	Single	Orthodox	No

Note: The pilot involved seven participants: five parent pilot participants and two social worker pilot participants. The parent pilot group included three women and two men, while the social worker pilot group included one man and one woman. Pilot interviews were used to refine the research design and were not included in the final analysis. The table is descriptive and should not be read as part of the final analysed sample.

The pilot was conducted before the main phase of Zoom-based interviews to assess the feasibility and suitability of the interview schedules, the clarity of key terms and prompts, and the emotional pacing of the interview encounter. It focused on whether questions were understood as intended, whether the order of questions supported participant comfort and narrative flow, and whether the interview structure enabled depth and coherence rather than fragmented or overly procedural responses (van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018).

Reflection on the pilot led to several important refinements. Some questions were reworded to reduce ambiguity and avoid professional or safeguarding jargon that might be unfamiliar, intimidating or emotionally charged. Prompts about parenting, discipline, and cultural expectations were revised to encourage reflection rather than to imply

judgement or assessment, thereby reinforcing the study's focus on participants' perspectives and avoiding deficit framings (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015, 2018). The order of the interview guide was also revised so that broader biographical and family-background questions came before more sensitive questions about statutory intervention, investigation, child removal, racialised judgement and institutional fear.

The pilot underscored the need for reassurance at the outset of interviews. In research contexts where participants may fear institutional consequences, clarity about the study's independence, confidentiality measures, voluntariness and the right to pause, skip questions or withdraw is essential for creating conditions in which participants feel able to speak openly (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, 2018; Liamputtong, 2010). The introductory script was therefore revised to explain the study's purpose, participants' rights and the limits of confidentiality more clearly.

For parents, refinements focused on improving narrative depth, reducing the likelihood of misunderstanding and minimising institutional language that might reproduce the feel of assessment. For social workers, broad questions were supplemented with more focused prompts to encourage reflective discussion of organisational pressures, decision-making contexts and institutional interpretations of first-generation Sub-Saharan African and migrant families. This strengthened the contextual value of practitioner interviews without displacing the study's parent-centred focus (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Pilot data were not included in the final analysis. This decision preserved consistency across the final dataset because the interview schedules and procedures were refined following the pilot. Excluding pilot interviews ensured that all analysed data were generated through the finalised process rather than through instruments still undergoing adjustment (van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015, 2018). Overall, the pilot strengthened the rigour, ethical sensitivity and theoretical coherence of the study by improving the wording of questions, sequencing, participant briefing, interview pacing and interactional practice.

5.9 Data Generation Methods

Data for this study were generated through in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom. Semi-structured interviewing is widely recognised as a valuable qualitative method for producing detailed accounts of lived experience while maintaining sufficient flexibility to follow participants' priorities and interpretations (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015); 2018; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This approach was particularly appropriate because it enabled participants to describe not only what had happened during child protection involvement but also how those encounters were understood, remembered, and situated within broader histories of migration, racialisation, and institutional power. The method also aligns closely with CRM, which recognises narrative and counter-storytelling as central tools for examining racialised institutional structures and for foregrounding the experiential knowledge of marginalised groups (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Given the study's focus on how first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents interpret their experiences of child protection in England, and on how social workers understand

the institutional environments in which they practise, semi-structured interviews provided a suitable means of exploring the emotional, cultural, and structural dimensions of these encounters. Interviews were approached not as neutral extractions of information, but as relational and interpretive exchanges through which participants' narratives could be explored in depth (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015); 2018; Brinkmann, 2018).

Interviews were conducted between October 2022 and December 2023 with participants across England. The use of Zoom enhanced accessibility and flexibility, allowing participants to engage from spaces that felt manageable and safe. This was especially important given the emotional sensitivity of the topic and the practical pressures many participants faced, including caring responsibilities, work demands, travel limitations, and ongoing stress related to child protection involvement. Remote interviewing also enabled continuity in data generation while requiring careful attention to privacy, rapport, and emotional support (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, 2018; Liamputtong, 2010).

Parent interviews typically lasted 45 to 60 minutes, whereas social worker interviews lasted 30 to 45 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent. In addition to recordings, fieldnotes were taken where appropriate to document contextual observations, emotional tone, and emerging analytic reflections. These notes informed later interpretation, particularly when affective or relational dimensions were not fully evident in the transcription alone (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011).

Two interview guides were developed, one for parent participants and another for social workers. Both were informed by CRT and CRM and designed to encourage reflection on

racialised experience, institutional procedures, and participants' interpretations of their interactions with child protection services. The parent interview guide explored experiences of statutory involvement, perceptions of surveillance and risk, cultural misunderstanding, fear of child removal, emotional and psychological effects, and participants' views on meaningful institutional change. The social worker guide focused on professional decision-making, organisational pressures, risk assessment, cultural competence, and working with Sub-Saharan African families. Although the guides provided structure, they were used flexibly. They served as prompts to support consistency across interviews while allowing participants to shape the direction and emphasis of the conversation (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, 2018).

This flexibility was methodologically important because qualitative interviewing recognises that meaning is co-constructed in the interview encounter rather than simply retrieved from it (Brinkmann, 2018; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

In this study, flexibility was especially important because participants often narrated complex, emotionally charged experiences that did not fit neatly into procedural or professional categories. Allowing participants to focus on what mattered most to them helped keep the interviews close to lived experience and more consistent with CRM's aim of creating conditions in which counter-stories can emerge without being constrained by institutional assumptions (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

The interview process required substantial emotional and ethical sensitivity. Many parent participants described distressing experiences, including prolonged investigations, racially charged accusations of harm, fear of child removal, and enduring mistrust of statutory services. When participants became upset, interviews were slowed, paused, or rescheduled in line with their emotional readiness. Participants were reminded that they could decline any question, take breaks, or withdraw entirely without consequence. A brief debrief was provided at the end of each interview, together with signposting to culturally appropriate support where distress was evident. This trauma-informed approach shaped data generation and is consistent with broader ethical guidance for research involving institutional harm and vulnerability (Gatwiri et al., 2025; Campbell, 2023; Alessi & Kahn, 2023; Liamputtong, 2010).

Data generation was also shaped by the need to manage dual roles and role boundaries. As a community advocate known through BAME HUB-UK, I sometimes entered interviews with a degree of pre-existing relational trust. While this could facilitate openness, it also required careful boundary-setting. The researcher's role, rather than that of adviser or advocate, was made explicit. Advice on ongoing child protection cases was not provided, and participants seeking practical support were signposted to relevant services where appropriate. Managing this insider-outsider dynamic required continuing reflexivity and transparency (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Finlay, 2002).

Alongside interview recordings and transcripts, a fieldwork journal was maintained to document contextual observations, emotional tone, and emerging analytic insights. These notes supported reflexivity and allowed for more contextualised interpretation of

participants' narratives, especially where pauses, hesitations, or affective intensity were not fully captured in transcription alone (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011). The journal also contributed to the study's audit trail by documenting methodological decisions, interview reflections, and early interpretive questions arising during fieldwork.

Overall, the data generation process was relational, iterative, and guided by the principles of CRT and CRM. Semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom enabled participants to narrate their experiences in their own words, foregrounded experiential knowledge, and revealed how racialised power was lived within child protection in England. The method generated the empirical material required for the analytical chapters that follow while remaining consistent with the study's critical, reflexive, and participant-centred commitments.

5.10 COVID-19 Considerations

Although all interviews in this study were conducted remotely via Zoom, COVID-19 remained an important methodological and ethical consideration in planning data collection (Lobe, Morgan & Hoffman, 2020; Newman, Guta & Black, 2021; Keen, Lomeli-Rodriguez & Joffe, 2022). Remote interviewing reduced infection risk enabled participation across different locations and offered a flexible mode of engagement for participants who may have been clinically vulnerable, self-isolating, or reluctant to meet face-to-face (Lobe, Morgan & Hoffman, 2020; Keen, Lomeli-Rodriguez & Joffe, 2022). It also supported individuals managing caring responsibilities, work pressures, health concerns, or stress related to child protection involvement, consistent with wider methodological arguments that virtual qualitative research can increase accessibility

where face-to-face engagement is difficult or undesirable (Keen, Lomeli-Rodriguez & Joffe, 2022; Newman, Guta & Black, 2021).

COVID-19 precautions were nevertheless included in the project's formal risk assessment in case face-to-face contact became necessary. These measures included vaccination and booster protection for the researcher, the use of masks and hand sanitiser, social distancing, avoiding unnecessary travel, and conducting any in-person contact in open or well-ventilated spaces. Participants who were self-isolating were not expected to meet in person and could instead participate remotely. Although these contingency arrangements were not ultimately used, their inclusion reflected responsible pandemic-era planning and ensured that the study remained attentive to participant welfare and the ethical challenges of conducting qualitative research during and after the pandemic (Newman, Guta & Black, 2021).

More broadly, the COVID-19 context formed part of the study's temporal setting and reinforced the value of flexible, participant-centred methods in research involving vulnerable or potentially distressed participants (Keen, Lomeli-Rodriguez & Joffe, 2022).

5.11 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), interpreted through the study's CRT framework and informed by CRM. RTA was selected for its flexible yet rigorous approach to identifying patterned meaning in qualitative data, while remaining compatible with interpretive and theoretically informed analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006;

Braun & Clarke, 2021). In this study, themes were understood not as neutral entities waiting to be discovered, but as analytic constructions developed through sustained engagement with participants' narratives, the research questions, and the wider interpretive framework. This aligns with both the epistemological assumptions of RTA and CRT's rejection of value-free knowledge production (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

The analytical process began with immersive familiarisation. Interview transcripts were read repeatedly to develop sensitivity to participants' language, narrative flow, emotional tone, and the interactional dynamics of recall, particularly when accounts involved fear, uncertainty, or anticipatory self-monitoring in relation to statutory authority. Throughout this stage, reflexive memo-writing and structured analytic notes were used to record emerging interpretations, questions, and tensions, thereby increasing transparency in how analytic attention developed over time (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Nowell et al., 2017).

Initial coding was conducted inductively across the dataset, allowing codes to be generated from participants' accounts rather than imposed from the outset through predefined categories. This preserved analytic flexibility and reduced the risk of forcing lived experience into a fixed conceptual template. Coding attended to both semantic content and underlying meanings, capturing, for example, how routine safeguarding practices such as repeated home visits, documentary demands, parenting scrutiny, or risk-focused language were experienced as surveillance, credibility testing, cultural misrecognition, or institutional opacity. Coding was iterative, with earlier transcripts

revisited as analytic understanding deepened (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Although coding began inductively, it was not theoretically neutral. CRT provided the main critical framework, CRM shaped the methodological orientation, and intersectionality functioned as an essential analytic lens. This combination was important because it allowed the analysis to remain grounded in participants' own language and priorities while retaining critical attention to structural processes, credibility hierarchies, and overlapping relations of power. Intersectionality was particularly important in demonstrating that parents' safeguarding experiences could not be understood through race alone but were shaped by the interplay of racialisation, migration history, gendered expectations, poverty, and institutional authority (Crenshaw, 1991; Phoenix, 2009). CRT further informed interpretation by emphasising racism as systemic rather than exceptional and by questioning institutional claims to neutrality that may conceal racialised outcomes (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRM, in turn, reinforced the epistemic significance of participants' counter-narratives as analytically meaningful accounts rather than anecdotal supplements to professional knowledge (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

As coding progressed, related codes were grouped into candidate themes through movement across coded extracts, the dataset, and the research questions. Themes were refined not on frequency alone, but on analytic coherence, internal consistency, and explanatory power in relation to the study's aims. The objective was to identify patterned meanings that illuminated the relationship between lived experience and institutional process, while treating divergence, contradiction, and variation as analytically important

rather than dismissing them as noise (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2021). Theme development was documented through memos, iterative theme maps, and a traceable decision trail, thereby strengthening transparency and rigour (Nowell et al., 2017).

Only after the thematic structure had been developed inductively were the themes interpreted more explicitly through the study's critical theoretical lens. This sequence strengthened analytic integrity by reducing the risk of beginning with fixed CRT categories and then seeking confirmatory extracts. Instead, CRT concepts were used to deepen understanding of patterns already evident within the data, clarifying how seemingly routine safeguarding procedures could function as racialised institutional processes within participants lived experience (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRM's emphasis on counter-storytelling further shaped both thematic refinement and interpretive framing. Parents' narratives were treated as epistemically significant accounts capable of challenging dominant safeguarding discourse, rather than as anecdotal material requiring validation through institutional perspectives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

The analysis also remained attentive to the role of administrative systems, documentation practices, and bureaucratic routines in shaping interventions. When participants described forms, reports, monitoring, or procedural demands, the interpretation examined how seemingly neutral administrative processes could reproduce inequality through everyday institutional practice (Eubanks, 2018).

The social worker interviews were analysed separately as a contextual dataset. They were not used to validate parents' narratives, nor were they granted equal epistemic status. Instead, they were examined to illuminate the organisational conditions under which safeguarding decisions are made, including institutional pressures, procedural constraints, and practice environments. This contextual use added interpretive depth while preserving the primary analytical focus on parents' lived experience, consistent with CRM's caution against privileging institutional voices in research centred on racially marginalised experiential knowledge (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Featherstone et al., 2018).

Reflexivity was integrated throughout all stages of analysis and was treated as central to analytic rigour rather than as an optional addition. Reflexive journaling and analytic memos documented evolving assumptions, emotional responses, interpretive tensions, and moments where my own position required caution. This supported disciplined awareness of how interpretation is shaped by standpoint and context and helped guard against the uncritical reproduction of dominant institutional perspectives (Finlay, 2002; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

NVivo was used as a data management tool to support the organisation, storage, and retrieval of coded material. It did not generate the themes. The analysis remained interpretive and recursive, developed through repeated engagement with transcripts, memo-writing, and movement between data and theory (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Overall, the final thematic framework was developed through an iterative process of familiarisation, inductive coding, thematic construction, reflexive review, and critical interpretation. Reflexive thematic analysis provided the flexibility and rigour needed to identify patterned meanings across accounts, while CRT, CRM, and intersectionality together supported the interpretation of how safeguarding experiences were shaped by racialised, gendered, migratory, and institutional relations of power without reducing participants' narratives to deficit-based or institution-centred explanations.

5.12 Reflexivity and Positionality

Reflexivity in this study is understood not as personal memoir, but as a form of methodological accountability. In qualitative research concerned with institutional power and racialised inequality, reflexivity is an ethical and epistemological necessity because it makes visible the conditions under which knowledge is produced, interpreted, and authorised (Finlay, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). From a Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Race Methodology (CRM) perspective, reflexivity requires the researcher's positionality, assumptions, and interpretive decisions to be subjected to disciplined scrutiny, rather than treating analysis as if it emerges from a neutral or detached standpoint (Gillborn, 2015; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Hartlep, 2009).

I approached this research as a Black African woman, mother, community advocate, safeguarding practitioner, and university researcher. This positionality facilitated meaningful connections with many parent participants and often fostered trust, openness, and rich discussions of institutional surveillance, misrecognition, and harm. Shared racial, cultural, and migratory reference points can reduce some power asymmetries and create conditions for more dialogic forms of knowledge production (Collins, 2000; Smith, 2012). However, experiential proximity does not produce neutrality. It can also generate

assumptions of shared understanding, emotional alignment, or protective identification. Reflexivity, therefore, required sustained vigilance where empathy, familiarity, or political commitment risked replacing analytic discipline (Finlay, 2002).

My worldview has also been shaped by living between cultural, national, and legal contexts. I was raised in a Kenyan, Kikuyu cultural background and later migrated to England, where I became a British citizen through naturalisation. This positioned me as both personally connected to migration and legally settled in the UK. As a result, I became attentive to the ways in which parenting, childhood, discipline, kinship, belonging, and state authority can be understood differently across social, cultural, and migration settings. My own migration journey also gave me experiential insight into the uncertainty, adaptation, identity negotiation, and institutional navigation that can accompany settlement in a new country.

In the communal contexts with which I am familiar, child-rearing is often not viewed solely as the responsibility of individual parents, but as embedded within wider networks of family, elders, neighbours, faith communities, and community members. Children are often socialised through collective expectations around respect, responsibility, resilience, moral conduct, care for others, and belonging. These cultural reference points shaped my sensitivity to how first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents may interpret statutory child protection interventions, particularly when professional concerns about parenting are experienced as a judgement not only of individual behaviour but also of cultural identity, family honour, migration status, and community belonging.

At the same time, reflexivity required me to avoid treating African or Kikuyu cultural practices as fixed, uniform, or beyond critique. My cultural and migration proximity to participants created opportunities for recognition and understanding, but it also carried the risk of assuming shared meanings where experiences may differ by generation, gender, class, religion, migration pathway, education, legal status, citizenship, and personal history. I therefore approached participants' accounts not as simple expressions of "African culture", but as situated narratives shaped by migration, racialisation, institutional power, parenting expectations, and encounters with the English child protection system. This positional awareness strengthened the study by enabling a culturally sensitive yet critically cautious interpretation of how families made sense of the safeguarding intervention.

My positionality was further shaped by the breadth of my professional and advocacy work across institutions connected to safeguarding and family intervention. Through this work, I have engaged directly with and overseen work involving police, local authorities, the Home Office, NHS services, universities, immigration solicitors, family lawyers, prisons, schools, and colleges. This gave me wider institutional literacy regarding how safeguarding concerns can be generated, escalated, interpreted, and acted upon across different systems. At the same time, this knowledge required careful reflexive management. I had to remain alert to the possibility that professional familiarity could create overconfidence, lead me to assume understanding too quickly, or shape my interpretation of participants' accounts.

My reflexive position was also shaped by personal experience of seeking protection and support in circumstances involving serious threat, harm, and what I experienced as institutional failure. In that context, police and children's services did not provide the required level of safeguarding response, and alternative private safeguarding arrangements had to be secured to protect my children. I recognise that such experiences heightened my sensitivity to questions of risk, institutional responsibility, unequal protection, and the consequences of not being heard or adequately supported. However, reflexivity required me to avoid collapsing the distinction between my own experiences and those of participants. Rather than treating similarity as equivalence, I used reflexive journaling, supervisory dialogue, fieldnotes, and analytic memos to ensure that participants' accounts remained central and were not subsumed into my own.

My reflexive orientation was also shaped by participation in academic and professional conferences in the United States, the Philippines, and the United Kingdom. Critical questions and discussions at these conferences encouraged me to think more analytically about the study's assumptions, concepts, and implications. These exchanges broadened my engagement with debates on child protection, anti-racist social work, structural inequality, and state intervention, and encouraged me to situate participants' accounts within wider structural and comparative debates. At the same time, these intellectual influences did not predetermine the analysis; interpretations remained grounded in participants' narratives and in patterns across the dataset.

Shared identity did not erase power differentials within the research encounter. As a university-affiliated researcher, I retained authority over the design, conduct,

interpretation, and representation of the study. CRM emphasises that even when research is conducted within one's own community, participants' counter-narratives must be represented ethically and carefully, without appropriation or assumptions of transparent access to meaning (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In practice, this required me to resist over-identification, question assumptions of shared meaning, and treat participants' narratives as situated and interpretive accounts rather than self-evident truths.

Trust also could not be assumed. Although I approached the study as a Black African woman, mother, and community advocate, my university affiliation, professional background, and visible engagement with statutory and multi-agency contexts sometimes left me in an ambiguous position in participants' eyes. For some, I may have been read not only as an insider or supporter, but also as someone too close to the very systems they feared, resisted, or distrusted. In this sense, I had to remain reflexively alert to the possibility that my proximity to statutory structures would be interpreted as a form of betrayal and position me as a "traitor" to the community. This did not mean that trust was absent; rather, trust had to be slowly negotiated, demonstrated, and earned within a research context shaped by fear, surveillance, and painful prior encounters with state institutions.

This tension was analytically significant because it reflected the broader institutional mistrust at the centre of the study. Some participants appeared cautious, particularly at the beginning of interviews, and it remained possible that they moderated their narratives, withheld details, or tested my trustworthiness before speaking more openly. Such caution should not be dismissed as irrational paranoia. It can be understood as a response intensified by histories of surveillance, disbelief, unequal protection, and traumatic

encounters with statutory agencies. My own experience of feeling unheard, unsupported, hopeless, and mistrustful of the system helped me understand how institutional fear can become heightened through lived experience. At the same time, my later experience of learning how systems operate and supporting others navigating difficult encounters with those systems reinforced the urgent need for trust-building between statutory services and racialised migrant communities.

Data generation was also shaped by the need to manage dual roles and role boundaries. As a community advocate known through BAME HUB-UK, I sometimes entered interviews with a degree of pre-existing relational trust. While this could facilitate openness, it also required careful ethical boundary-setting. The role of the researcher, rather than that of an adviser or advocate, was made explicit throughout the research process. Advice on ongoing child protection matters was not provided during interviews, and participants seeking practical support were appropriately signposted. To manage potential conflicts of interest arising from my role within BAME HUB-UK, all cases in which I had prior involvement through the organisation in child protection matters, particularly child removal cases and any live or ongoing child protection cases, were excluded from participation in the study. Managing this insider–outer dynamic, therefore, required transparency, role clarity, and continuous ethical reflection (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Finlay, 2002).

Reflexivity was embedded throughout data generation and analysis. A reflexive journal was maintained to record interview content, emotional tone, narrative shifts, moments of tension, and my own affective and interpretive responses. Fieldnotes documented

moments of discomfort, surprise, resonance, and uncertainty, while analytic memos interrogated emerging interpretations during coding and theme development. Care was taken to ensure that analytic claims were grounded in patterns across the dataset rather than in isolated emotional reactions or assumptions shaped by prior experience. Reflexivity, therefore, served to slow interpretation and to ask whether an apparent pattern was analytically robust or merely personally salient (Finlay, 2002).

Positionality also shaped recruitment and access. Some participants expressed relief at being interviewed by someone they perceived as culturally and racially understanding, while others voiced concern about confidentiality within small or overlapping community networks. These dynamics required clear communication, strong assurances of anonymity, and sustained attention to expectations, trust, and role boundaries. Engagement with professional participants required a different reflexive stance. While maintaining a critical focus on structural inequality, I also needed to avoid an adversarial posture that might inhibit open discussion with social workers. At the same time, I remained attentive to how professional narratives may reproduce institutional logics or normalise bureaucratic routines. Reflexivity in this part of the study involved balancing rapport with analytic distance, so that practitioners' accounts could be understood in context without institutional perspectives overshadowing parents' voices (Bernard & Harris, 2019).

Emotional labour formed another important dimension of reflexive practice. Listening to parents' accounts of fear, surveillance, loss, and distress required attentiveness not only to participants' well-being but also to my own emotional responses. Affect was analytically significant as well as ethically important, since emotional resonance can both

illuminate and narrow interpretation. Reflective journaling and supervisory dialogue were therefore used throughout the study to examine these responses and to guard against premature interpretive closure or the over-privileging of particularly affecting accounts (Finlay, 2002).

Reflexivity is therefore presented here not as confessional disclosure, but as a commitment to methodological transparency, ethical accountability, and analytic rigour. Although experiential knowledge is epistemically valuable (Collins, 2000; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), rigorous interpretation still requires that emerging explanations be tested through iterative comparison, theoretical dialogue, and sustained engagement with the dataset. By embedding reflexivity throughout the research process, this study sought to strengthen the transparency, credibility, and theoretical coherence of the analysis.

5.13 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the University of Essex Ethics Sub-Committee 2 prior to data collection (Ref. ETH2122-1093). All research activities were conducted in accordance with the University of Essex's ethical requirements and wider UK ethical standards relating to informed consent, confidentiality, safeguarding, data protection, and participant wellbeing. Appendices. However, consistent with the study's Critical Race perspective, ethics was understood as more than mere procedural compliance. Researching racialised inequality in child protection required an ongoing and reflexive ethical stance attentive to power asymmetries, emotional safety, relational responsibility, and the potential harms involved in interpretation and representation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

A central ethical principle throughout the study was informed and voluntary participation. All participants received an information sheet explaining the purpose of the study, what participation would involve, potential risks and benefits, data-handling arrangements, and their right to withdraw without penalty. Information was presented in accessible and non-technical language (British Sociological Association, 2017). Written informed consent was obtained prior to each Zoom interview, and participants were reminded that they could decline any question, pause the interview, or withdraw entirely at any stage. Consent was therefore treated as an ongoing process rather than as a one-off procedural formality (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). Several participants withdrew during recruitment or before the interview, and those decisions were respected without pressure or further pursuit.

Confidentiality and anonymity were particularly important given the sensitivity of child protection experiences and the possibility of indirect identification through case details, professional roles, or overlapping community networks. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants, and identifying details were removed, generalised, or carefully obscured in transcripts and written reports. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely in accordance with the University of Essex's data protection requirements, the Data Protection Act 2018, and the UK GDPR. Given that all interviews were conducted via Zoom, additional care was taken to protect privacy in the interview setting, to use secure meeting arrangements, and to minimise avoidable risks to confidentiality in online participation.

Because the study explored experiences of institutional intervention, fear, trauma, state power, and racialised surveillance, emotional safety remained a central ethical concern.

Many parent participants described distressing experiences, including prolonged investigations, fear of child removal, racialised accusations, and enduring mistrust of services. A trauma-informed approach, therefore, guided the conduct of interviews (Campbell et al., 2020). Participants were encouraged to control the pace and depth of disclosure, with sensitive topics introduced gradually rather than abruptly. Interviews were slowed, paused, or rescheduled where distress became apparent. Participants were reminded that they could skip questions or take breaks, and each interview ended with a short debrief, including signposting to appropriate support where necessary.

Safeguarding responsibilities were managed transparently. Although the research itself was not a child protection intervention, clear procedures were in place if a disclosure indicated an immediate risk of serious harm. Participants were informed of these limits on confidentiality in advance to ensure that safeguarding obligations were clear. This was particularly important in a study where fear of statutory intervention was already a salient part of many participants' experiences. Safeguarding procedures were therefore handled in a way that balanced legal and ethical duties with sensitivity to participants' existing mistrust, anxiety, and experiences of institutional power.

The researcher's positionality introduced additional ethical considerations. As a Black African woman, mother, community advocate, safeguarding practitioner, and researcher, I was known to some participants or to people within their wider networks. This familiarity could facilitate trust, but it also carried the risk of blurred expectations, particularly where participants might assume an advocacy, advisory, or supportive role beyond the boundaries of the research. It was therefore essential to make clear that my

role within the study was solely that of researcher. I did not provide case-specific advice, and participants in need of practical support were directed to appropriate services. Individuals I had previously supported in a professional capacity were excluded from participation to avoid conflicts of interest and to maintain clear ethical and relational boundaries (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Finlay, 2002).

Ethical responsibility also extended to interpretation and representation. Black and African families have often been represented through deficit-oriented or pathologising frameworks in research, policy, and practice (Bernard & Harris, 2019; Phoenix, 2009). In response, participants in this study were approached as knowledge-holders rather than as cases or problems to be explained. Their narratives were analysed within wider racialised, institutional, and structural contexts rather than being treated as evidence of individual failure. Counter stories were therefore handled with care and respect, recognising that representation is itself ethically significant (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Throughout the research process, reflexivity supported ethical decision-making. A reflexive journal and supervisory discussions were used to examine how my own identity, assumptions, emotional responses, and interpretive tendencies shaped the research encounter and analytic process. These practices helped ensure that ethical judgement remained active throughout the study rather than being confined to the point of formal approval (Finlay, 2002; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

Overall, the study's ethical practice combined procedural safeguards with trauma-informed, culturally responsive, and reflexive attention to participants' circumstances. Ethics was understood not only as the prevention of harm, but also as respectful representation, protection of autonomy, and accountability to the power relations inherent in research on racialised inequality and institutional intervention.

5.14 Trustworthiness and Rigour

Ensuring trustworthiness was central to the integrity of this study, particularly given its concern with racialised experience, institutional power, and child protection involvement. In qualitative research, trustworthiness is commonly discussed in terms of the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). In this study, however, these principles were not treated as purely technical checks detached from theory. Rather, they were understood in relation to the epistemological and methodological commitments of CRT and CRM. Rigour, therefore, depended not on claims to neutrality but on transparency, reflexive accountability, analytic discipline, and careful engagement with participants' knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Nowell et al., 2017).

Credibility was strengthened through sustained engagement with the data and through methods that enabled participants to narrate their experiences in depth and in their own terms. Semi-structured Zoom interviews created space for clarification, elaboration, and participant-led meaning-making rather than restricting responses to fixed categories (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). Credibility was further enhanced through repeated readings of transcripts, close attention to tone, affect, and narrative structure, and recursive

movement among data, coding, memo writing, and thematic development (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2021). The pilot study also enhanced credibility by refining the wording, sequencing, pacing, and emotional sensitivity of the interview schedules prior to the collection of full data (van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

Member checking was not undertaken as a formal validation procedure. This decision was made for methodological and ethical reasons. The study explored sensitive experiences of child protection involvement, fear, surveillance, migration insecurity and institutional mistrust. Returning transcripts or interpreted themes to participants could have created additional emotional burden, risked reactivating distress, or been experienced as another form of scrutiny, particularly for participants who had described feeling monitored by statutory systems. In addition, within reflexive thematic analysis, themes are not treated as simple summaries to be verified by participants, but as interpretive patterns developed through sustained engagement with the dataset, theoretical positioning and analytic reflexivity (Braun & Clarke, 2021). For these reasons, credibility was pursued through analytic transparency, reflexive journaling, repeated transcript review, careful coding, supervisory discussion and preservation of an audit trail, rather than through formal participant validation.

Data integrity was supported through the secure handling of recordings, transcripts, consent forms, and anonymised data, in line with the study's ethical approval and data-management commitments. Interview recordings were transcribed, checked against the audio where necessary, anonymised, and stored securely. Identifying information was

removed or modified during transcription and analysis, and pseudonyms were used consistently across the thesis. Coding records, reflexive notes and theme-development documents were retained to support an audit trail and to make the analytic process transparent and traceable.

In a CRT-informed study, credibility also depends on whether the research creates conditions in which marginalised experience can be articulated without being prematurely filtered through dominant institutional assumptions. For this reason, parental narratives were treated as epistemically significant accounts rather than as anecdotal additions to professional knowledge (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Collins, 2000). Counter-storytelling was particularly important, as it enabled the study to foreground interpretations of child protection that are often marginalised within official systems and professional discourse (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Social worker interviews added contextual depth but were not used to validate, disprove, or override parents' accounts.

Transferability was addressed by providing detailed contextual information on participants, institutional settings, and the broader social and policy conditions in which child protection encounters occurred. Although the study does not claim statistical generalisability, thick description enables readers to assess the relevance of the findings to other contexts involving racialised, migrant, or otherwise marginalised families (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Geertz, 1973; Shenton, 2004). The study, therefore, aims for analytic rather than statistical transferability, offering insight into wider institutional processes and structural dynamics that may resonate beyond the immediate sample (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Dependability was supported by careful documentation of the research process. Records were kept of sampling decisions, recruitment pathways, inclusion and exclusion criteria, interview procedures, pilot refinements, coding development, theme construction, and interpretive decisions. Reflexive memoing and journaling were integral to this decision trail, enabling the tracing of analytic development over time (Nowell et al., 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability was further strengthened by maintaining conceptual consistency throughout the methodology chapter, ensuring that research design, data generation, analysis, reflexivity, ethics, and limitations remained aligned rather than fragmented (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Confirmability was maintained through reflexive practice and methodological transparency. In this study, confirmability did not entail distancing the researcher from interpretation but making the interpretive process visible and accountable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Finlay, 2002). My positionality as a Black African woman, mother, community advocate, and researcher inevitably shaped access, rapport, and interpretation. Rather than treating this as a threat to rigour, the study addressed it through reflexive journaling, memo-writing, supervisory dialogue, and sustained questioning of whether emerging interpretations were robust across the dataset or merely emotionally salient (Finlay, 2002; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

Rigour was also strengthened by the analytical approach itself. Reflexive thematic analysis provided a systematic yet flexible process, moving from immersion in the data to coding, thematic construction, and theoretically informed interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2021). Coding was inductive in the early stages, while

CRT served as a sensitising and explanatory framework rather than a rigid coding template. This strengthened analytic integrity by allowing patterns to emerge from participants' narratives before they were interpreted more explicitly in relation to structural racism, racialised surveillance, cultural misrecognition, and institutional power (Gillborn, 2015; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). NVivo was used to organise and retrieve coded material, but the analysis itself remained interpretive, recursive, and researcher-led (Silver & Lewins, 2014).

A further dimension of rigour concerned representational integrity. Given that the thesis examines communities that have often been pathologised in policy, practice, and research, particular care was taken to avoid deficit-based framings or decontextualised interpretations (Bernard & Harris, 2019; Phoenix, 2009). Participants were approached as knowledge-holders whose narratives required careful, ethical, and contextually grounded analysis (Collins, 2000; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This meant preserving contradictions, tensions, and differences in the data rather than smoothing them into overly tidy or uniform narratives. Divergent cases were treated as analytically valuable rather than as weaknesses in the dataset (Silverman, 2017).

Finally, trustworthiness in this study was closely linked to ethics. Trauma-informed interviewing, clear role boundaries, confidentiality, the right to withdraw, and sensitivity to emotional distress all contributed to the integrity of the research process (British Sociological Association, 2017; Gatwiri et al., 2025). Trustworthiness was therefore achieved not merely through procedural technique, but through consistent alignment of theory, method, reflexivity, ethics, and analysis.

Taken together, the trustworthiness of the study rests on transparent procedures, reflexive accountability, theoretical coherence, and disciplined interpretation. Rather than aspiring to detached objectivity, the study demonstrates rigour by showing clearly how knowledge was generated, interpreted, and presented within a race-conscious, ethically grounded, and methodologically reflexive framework.

5.15 Limitations of the Methodology

While this study offers detailed insight into the racialised experiences of first-generation Sub-Saharan African families within England's child protection system, several methodological limitations should be acknowledged. Recognising these limitations is part of methodological integrity, as it situates the findings within their appropriate analytical boundaries rather than overstating their scope (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

First, the study relied on a non-probability sample recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. These approaches were appropriate for a qualitative study seeking analytic depth rather than representativeness (Patton, 2015; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), but they limit statistical generalisability. Recruitment through trusted networks may also have excluded parents who were more socially isolated, less connected to community organisations, or more reluctant to participate because of fear, stigma, or mistrust of institutions. The findings should therefore be understood as analytically transferable rather than statistically generalisable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Second, although the parent sample provided substantial analytic depth, it could not capture the full diversity contained within the category of first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents. This group includes significant variation in nationality, migration pathway, immigration status, religion, language, family structure, and socioeconomic position. While such variation is recognised within the analysis, no single qualitative study can fully represent the breadth of African diasporic experience in England (Bernard & Harris, 2019). This is especially important in a study informed by intersectionality, which recognises that race is always lived through other social positions and conditions rather than as a singular or homogeneous category.

Third, the sample's demographic composition was uneven. Of the nineteen parent participants, fifteen were women, and four were men. The findings therefore provide a fuller account of mothers' experiences than of fathers'. The underrepresentation of fathers limits the study's ability to fully examine how African fathers experience surveillance, authority, and child protection interventions, and it reflects a wider gap in research and practice, in which Black and African fathers are often less visible (Bernard & Harris, 2019; Phoenix, 2009). The social worker sample was also limited: all five participants were women, four identified as Black African, and one as White British. This restricts the breadth of professional perspectives represented in the study.

Fourth, the inclusion of social worker interviews was intentionally limited and contextual. Their purpose was to illuminate institutional logics, organisational pressures, and professional risk discourses rather than to capture the diversity of social work practice across England (Munro, 2011; Featherstone et al., 2018). Although these interviews added

valuable contextual depth, the size and composition of the practitioner sample mean that conclusions about professional culture must be treated as partial rather than comprehensive.

Fifth, the study relied on retrospective narrative accounts of child protection involvement. Participants' accounts were shaped by memory, emotion, and the passage of time, all of which may have influenced recall, emphasis, and interpretation. Within a CRT framework, such narratives are not treated as flawed merely because they are affectively mediated; rather, they are understood as situated accounts that reveal how safeguarding interventions were lived, remembered, and made meaningful (Riessman, 2008; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Nevertheless, retrospective narration limits the study's ability to verify exact procedural details or reconstruct precise institutional timelines.

Sixth, all interviews were conducted in English. Although participants were sufficiently proficient in English to take part, many were multilingual and may have understood and expressed their experiences across multiple linguistic and cultural registers. English-only interviewing may therefore have constrained the expression of complex emotions, culturally embedded meanings, or linguistically specific forms of explanation. It may also have contributed to the underrepresentation of families with limited English proficiency, who are often among the most vulnerable to miscommunication, reduced access to services and institutional misrecognition in child protection and wider social work contexts (Chand, 2005; Križ & Skivenes, 2010; Temple & Young, 2004; Holmes et al., 2013; Westlake & Jones, 2018).

Seventh, the researcher's positionality was both a strength and a limitation. Shared racial and cultural reference points fostered trust and deeper disclosure, particularly in a context marked by institutional mistrust. At the same time, social proximity carried the risk of overidentification, assumed shared meanings, or interpretations shaped by emotional resonance rather than sufficient analytic distance (Finlay, 2002; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Although these risks were mitigated through reflexive journaling, memo-writing, and supervisory dialogue, interpretation remains situated and context-dependent rather than neutral or detached.

Finally, the study's temporal context is significant. Data were collected during and in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, alongside ongoing austerity pressures within local authorities and wider instability in children's services. These conditions may have intensified family stress, reduced access to support, and altered how safeguarding was practised and experienced, including through remote, delayed, or reduced contact (Baginsky & Manthorpe, 2021). The study, therefore, reflects not only enduring structural issues within child protection but also a specific historical moment when those pressures were particularly acute.

These limitations do not undermine the study's contribution. Rather, they define its analytical scope. The findings should be understood as both theoretically and contextually significant, offering insight into the mechanisms of racialised safeguarding governance, rather than claiming to provide a comprehensive representation of all first-generation Sub-Saharan African families or of all child protection practice in England.

This chapter has outlined the study's methodological foundations and demonstrated how its epistemological and theoretical commitments were operationalised in practice. Guided by CRT and CRM, the study adopted a qualitative, interpretive design to examine how first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents experience and navigate child protection involvement in England.

The chapter has explained the rationale for the sampling strategy, recruitment process, pilot study, Zoom-based semi-structured interviews, reflexive thematic analysis, reflexivity, ethics, trustworthiness, and methodological limitations.

In general, these methodological choices provide a rigorous, ethically grounded, and theoretically coherent foundation for the empirical chapters that follow. The next chapter presents the findings from the parent interviews.

CHAPTER 6: EMPIRICAL FINDINGS: SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN PARENTS' EXPERIENCES OF UK CHILD PROTECTION

6.1 Introduction and Analytical Orientation

This chapter presents the empirical findings generated through interviews with first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents who had experienced child protection

involvement in England. A smaller group of frontline social workers also participated, providing contextual insight into organisational pressures, professional reasoning and safeguarding practice. The chapter examines how race, migration, socioeconomic precarity, family circumstances and institutional practice intersected in parents' encounters with the child protection system.

Parent narratives form the main foundation of the chapter. Consistent with the study's Critical Race Theory and Critical Race Methodology orientation, experiential knowledge is treated as analytically significant rather than as anecdotal or secondary to institutional accounts (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Social worker interviews are used to illuminate the organisational and professional contexts in which safeguarding decisions were made, but the analysis remains centred on parental experience.

The participant accounts are interpreted within their broader biographical, social and institutional contexts rather than as isolated encounters with children's services. Participants' experiences are therefore read in relation to migration history, family structure, socioeconomic position, region of residence, immigration status, religion, professional background, parenting history and prior engagement with UK institutions. This contextualisation is important because the study's intersectional CRT framework does not treat race, migration, poverty, gender, religion, family form or legal status as separate variables, but as mutually shaping conditions through which safeguarding was experienced and interpreted (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The analysis therefore attends not only to what participants said

happened, but also to why particular encounters carried specific racialised and affective significance for them as first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents navigating welfare, migration and child protection systems in England.

The findings are organised into five interconnected thematic areas: Pathways into Child Protection and Institutional Visibility; Surveillance, Professional Judgement and the Construction of Risk; Living Through Safeguarding Intervention; Agency, Resistance and Counter-Narrative; and Reimagining Safeguarding Through Lived Experience. These themes are not presented as separate or self-contained categories. Rather, they show how safeguarding was experienced as a cumulative process shaped by structural inequality, administrative practice and racialised interpretation.

The findings indicate that child protection was experienced not as a single event but as a layered, evolving institutional process. Families often became visible through routine contact with schools, health services, housing systems, police, welfare services or other agencies under conditions of poverty, insecurity and limited support. That visibility could then be translated into monitoring, assessment, and intervention through the practices of documentation, professional judgement, and risk interpretation. The sections that follow develop this argument through the five thematic domains identified above.

6.1.1 Analytical and Thematic Structure of the Chapter

The findings in this chapter were developed through reflexive thematic analysis of interviews with first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents, supported by a smaller set

of interviews with frontline social workers who provided institutional and organisational context (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2021). In line with the study's Critical Race perspective, parent narratives are treated as epistemically significant rather than as anecdotal or secondary to professional or administrative accounts (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Social worker interviews are therefore used to illuminate practice environments, organisational pressures, and professional reasoning, but the chapter remains centred on parental experience.

Initial coding generated a larger number of interconnected patterns, which were subsequently organised into five broader thematic areas for analytical clarity. These are: Pathways into Child Protection and Institutional Visibility; Surveillance, Professional Judgement and the Construction of Risk; Living Through Safeguarding Intervention; Agency, Resistance and Counter-Narrative; and Reimagining Safeguarding Through Lived Experience. These themes are not treated as discrete or isolated categories. Rather, they are understood as interconnected domains that together show how safeguarding was experienced as cumulative, layered, and shaped by structural inequality, institutional practice, and racialised interpretation.

Although the themes were developed inductively from participants' narratives, their interpretation was later informed by CRT as a sensitising analytical framework rather than a deductive template imposed in advance (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Gillborn, 2015). This approach allowed the analysis to remain grounded in participants' accounts while also examining how race, power, credibility, and institutional norms shaped what became visible and actionable within safeguarding processes. In this sense, the chapter does not

simply describe parental experiences; it analyses how those experiences were structured through ordinary institutional practices.

Taken together, the findings suggest that child protection can be understood as a process in which institutional visibility leads to surveillance, surveillance informs interpretation, interpretation is stabilised through documentation, and these processes in turn shape parental emotional responses, adaptation, and resistance. Safeguarding, therefore, appears not as a single event, but as a recursive institutional process through which family life is interpreted and governed over time. The sections that follow develop this argument through the five thematic domains identified above.

For clarity, Table 5 summarises the coding structure for the parent interview data, and Table 6 summarises the coding structure for the social worker interview data. These tables provide an overview of how subthemes were organised into broader thematic domains during the analysis. The themes were developed through iterative reflexive thematic analysis rather than mechanical counting alone (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Table 5. Coding Grid: Parent Findings Themes

Theme	Subtheme	No. of Sources	No. of References

Theme 1: Pathways into Child Protection and Institutional Visibility	1.1 Pathways into Child Protection: Visibility, Referral and Institutional Entry 1.2 Structural Conditions, Poverty, Immigration, and State-Produced Risk 1.3 Institutional Context as Experienced by Parents	8	57
Theme 2: Surveillance, Professional Judgement and the Construction of Risk	2.1 Surveillance, Monitoring and the Experience of Being Watched 2.2 Professional Judgement, Risk Construction and Credibility	13	108
Theme 3: Living Through Safeguarding Intervention	3.1 Fear, Compliance, Adaptation and Survival Strategies 3.2 Emotional and Psychological Impact of Safeguarding	18	64
Theme 4: Agency, Resistance, and Counter-Narrative	4.1 Resistance, Agency, and Counter-Narrative	19	156

Theme 5: Reimagining Safeguarding Through Lived Experience	5.1 Reimagining Safeguarding; Participant-Informed Reform	19	119
	5.2 Supportive Encounters and Relational Practice		

Note: “No. of Sources” refers to the number of parent interviews in which the subtheme appeared. “No. of References” refers to the number of coded extracts assigned to that subtheme.

Table 6. Coding Grid: Social Worker Findings Themes

Theme	Subtheme	No. of Sources	No. of References
Theme 1: Professional Language, Categorisation and the Construction of Difference	1.1 Professional Language, Race and The Politics of “BME”	3	29
	1.2 Cultural Interpretation and Parenting Norms		
Main Theme 2: Risk Accountability and Professional Judgement	2.1 Risk Culture and Fear of Blame 2.2 Engagement, Compliance and Professional Judgement	5	38

Main Theme 3: Structural Constraints in Safeguarding Practice	3.1 Structural Constraints and Limits of Support	4	56
Main Theme 4: Reframing Practice Through Culturally Responsive Reform	4.1 Practitioner Reflections on Reform and Culturally Responsive Practice	5	34

Note: “No. of Sources” refers to the number of social worker interviews in which the subtheme appeared. “No. of References” refers to the number of coded extracts assigned to that subtheme.

The following four figures are presented as analytical synthesis and conceptual models developed from the study findings, rather than as a priori frameworks imposed on the data. They were developed retrospectively after coding and theme development to visually organise relationships that became apparent across participant accounts and the wider analysis. Their purpose is explanatory rather than predictive: they clarify how the study moves from individual narratives to a broader CRT-informed argument about racialised safeguarding governance. Drawing on scholarship on child protection, risk, surveillance, documentation, institutional judgement and racialised power, the figures

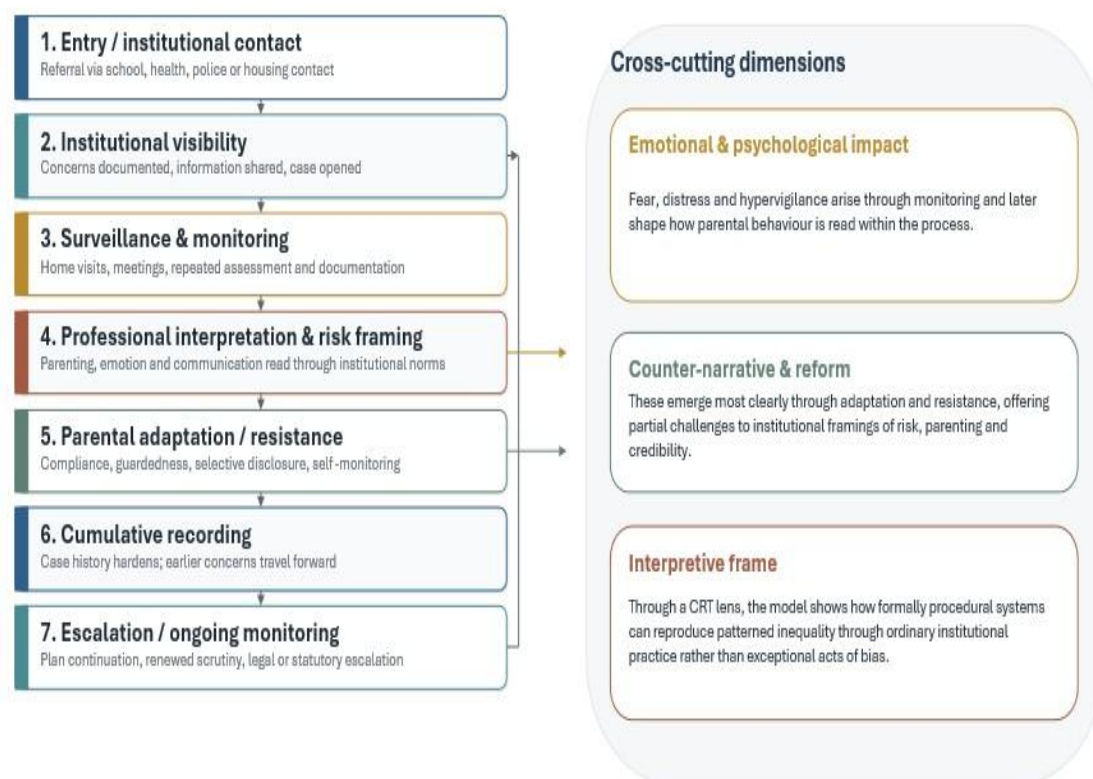
condense the relationships between structural inequality, institutional visibility, professional interpretation, cumulative recording, parental response, resistance and reform (Munro, 2011; Parton, 2014; Broadhurst et al., 2010; White et al., 2009; Featherstone et al., 2018; Gillborn, 2015).

Figure 1 presents safeguarding as a sequential but cumulative process, while Figure 2 shows safeguarding as a layered institutional structure shaped by structural conditions, professional judgement and lived experience. Figure 3 develops this further by conceptualising safeguarding as a recursive cycle in which referral, assessment, documentation, interpretation and renewed professional judgement may feed back into future intervention. Figure 4 brings these processes together within an Integrated CRT Framework of Racialised Safeguarding Governance, linking structural conditions such as poverty, migration status, housing insecurity and welfare exclusion with CRT concepts including racialisation, institutional power, counter-storytelling and unequal credibility (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Fricker, 2007; Gillborn, 2015).

Together, the figures should be read as working theoretical models grounded in participant accounts, informed by the coding process and interpreted through the study's CRT framework. They are not intended to provide a universal model of all child protection practice, but to make visible the relationships between the empirical themes and the thesis's broader conceptual argument.

Figure 1: Sequential Architecture of Racialised Governance in Child Protection in England

Figure 1. Sequential Architecture of Racialised Governance in Child Protection in England (Model A)

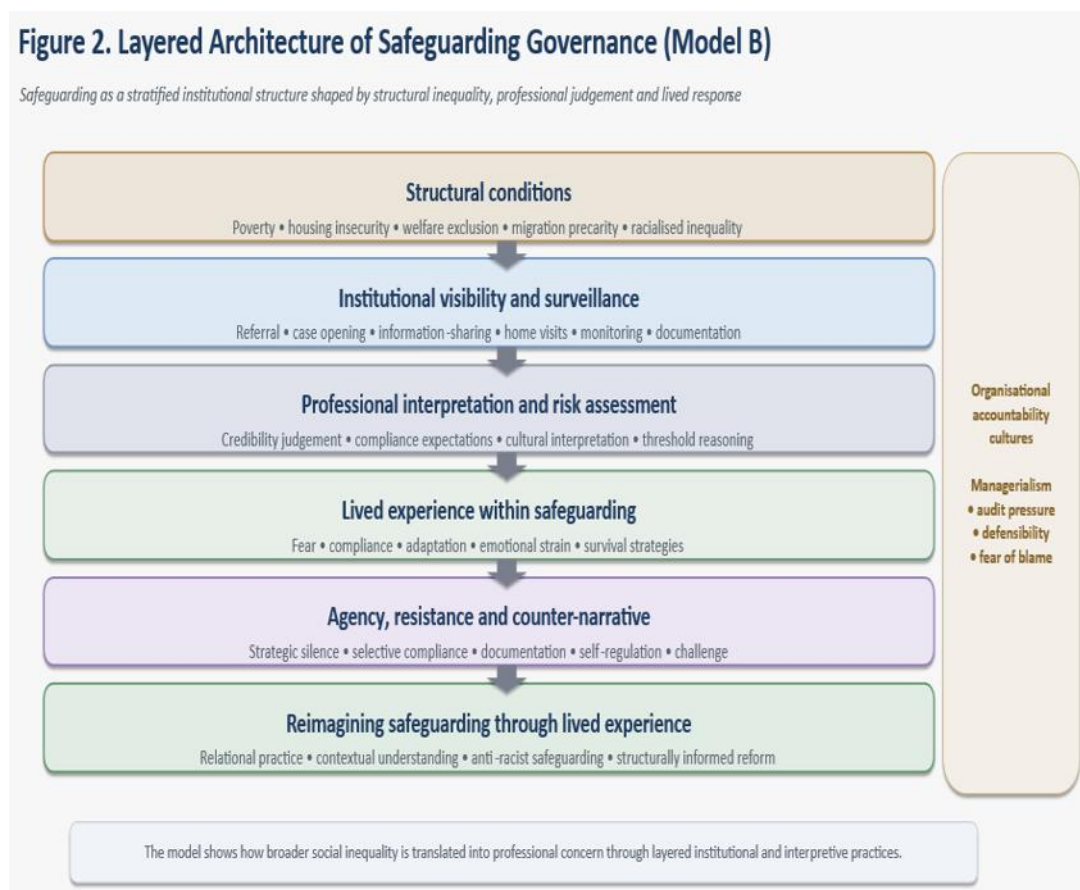


Note: This figure should be interpreted as an analytical synthesis model developed from the findings of this study, rather than as an a priori framework imposed on the data. The analytical structure was first drafted manually by the researcher during the coding and theme development process, and later visually refined in PowerPoint and Canva using AI, solely to improve clarity and presentation. The AI-assisted tool did not generate the analytical model, thematic structure, interpretation or wording. These remain the author's own.

Source: Author's conceptualisation, developed from the study findings and informed by Featherstone et al. (2018), Parton (2014), Munro (2011), White et al. (2009), Broadhurst et al. (2010), Solórzano and Yosso (2002), Delgado and Stefancic (2017), and Gillborn (2015). Figure 1 presents safeguarding as a sequential yet cumulative process, moving

from referral and institutional entry through visibility, surveillance, professional interpretation, parental adaptation, cumulative recording, and possible escalation. Its purpose is to show how routine contact with services may develop into sustained scrutiny over time, and how documentation, monitoring and professional judgement can reinforce one another across successive encounters. The model was developed retrospectively from thematic analysis to synthesise recurring relationships identified in participants' accounts. Through a CRT-informed lens, it illustrates how formally routine safeguarding processes may reproduce patterned inequality through ordinary institutional practice rather than only through overtly discriminatory acts.

Figure 2: Layered Architecture of Safeguarding Governance (Model B)

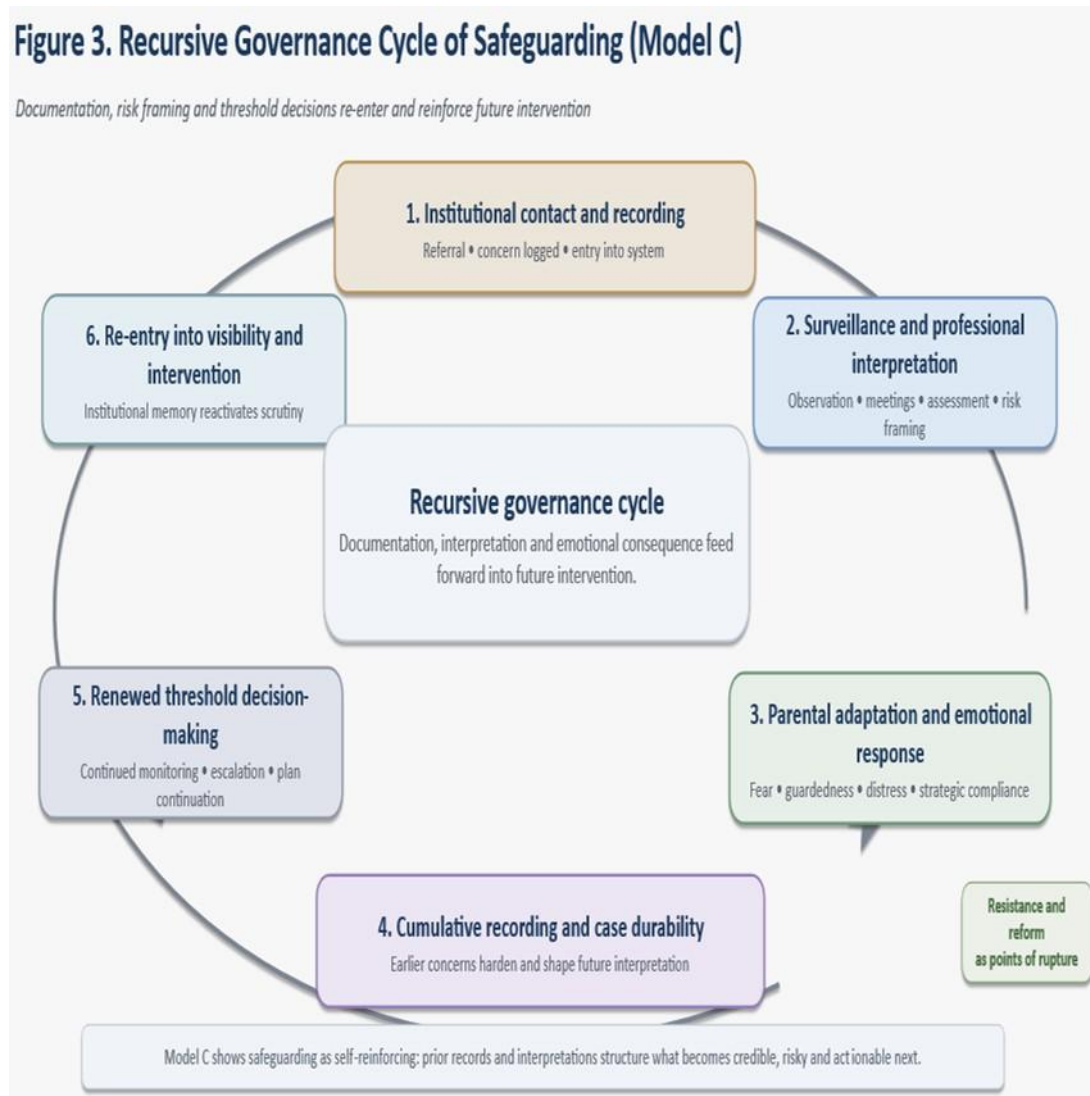


Note: This figure should be interpreted as an analytical synthesis model developed from the findings of this study, rather than as an a priori framework imposed on the data. The analytical structure was first drafted manually by the researcher during coding, theme development, and conceptual mapping, and was later visually refined in PowerPoint and Canva, with AI used solely to improve clarity and presentation. The AI-assisted tool did not generate the analytical model, thematic structure, interpretation or wording. These remain the author's own.

Source: Author's conceptualisation, developed from the study findings and informed by Parton (2014), Munro (2011), Featherstone et al. (2018), Bernard and Gupta (2008), Bernard and Harris (2019), Fricker (2007), Gillborn (2015), Solórzano and Yosso (2002), and Delgado and Stefancic (2017).

Figure 2 presents safeguarding as a layered institutional structure rather than a simple linear sequence. It shows how structural conditions, institutional visibility, professional judgement, organisational accountability, lived experience, resistance and reform interact across different levels of child protection practice. The model was developed retrospectively through thematic analysis to show how broader social inequalities may be translated into professional concern through layered institutional and interpretive practices. Through a CRT-informed lens, it illustrates that safeguarding intervention is shaped not only by family circumstances, but also by welfare systems, migration pressures, racialised inequality, organisational defensibility and professional judgement.

Figure 3: Recursive Governance Cycle of Safeguarding (Model C)



Note: This figure should be interpreted as an analytical synthesis model developed from the findings of this study, rather than as an a priori framework imposed on the data. The analytical structure was first drafted manually by the researcher during coding, theme development, and conceptual mapping, and was later visually refined in PowerPoint and Canva, with AI used solely to improve clarity and presentation.

The AI-assisted tool did not generate the analytical model, thematic structure, interpretation or wording. These remain the author's own.

Source: Author's conceptualisation, developed from the study findings and informed by Broadhurst et al. (2010), White et al. (2009), Munro (2011), Parton (2014), Solórzano and Yosso (2002), Fricker (2007), Delgado and Stefancic (2017), and Gillborn (2015).

Figure 3 conceptualises safeguarding as a recursive cycle in which institutional contact, surveillance, interpretation, emotional response, cumulative recording and renewed decision-making feed back into one another over time. The model was developed retrospectively through thematic analysis to explain how child protection involvement was often experienced not as a single event but as an ongoing institutional process in which earlier concerns, case histories, and professional judgements shaped the interpretation of later family circumstances. Its purpose is to show how documentation, professional memory and threshold reasoning may reinforce future scrutiny and intervention. Through a CRT-informed lens, the model contributes to the overall argument by illustrating how racialised safeguarding governance can operate through ordinary practices of recording, assessment and professional interpretation, rather than only through overtly discriminatory acts.

Figure 4: Integrated CRT Framework of Racialised Safeguarding Governance

Integrated CRT Framework of Racialised Safeguarding Governance

Source: Author's conceptualisation, informed by Crenshaw (1991), Fricker (2007), Delgado and Stefancic (2017), and Gillborn (2015).

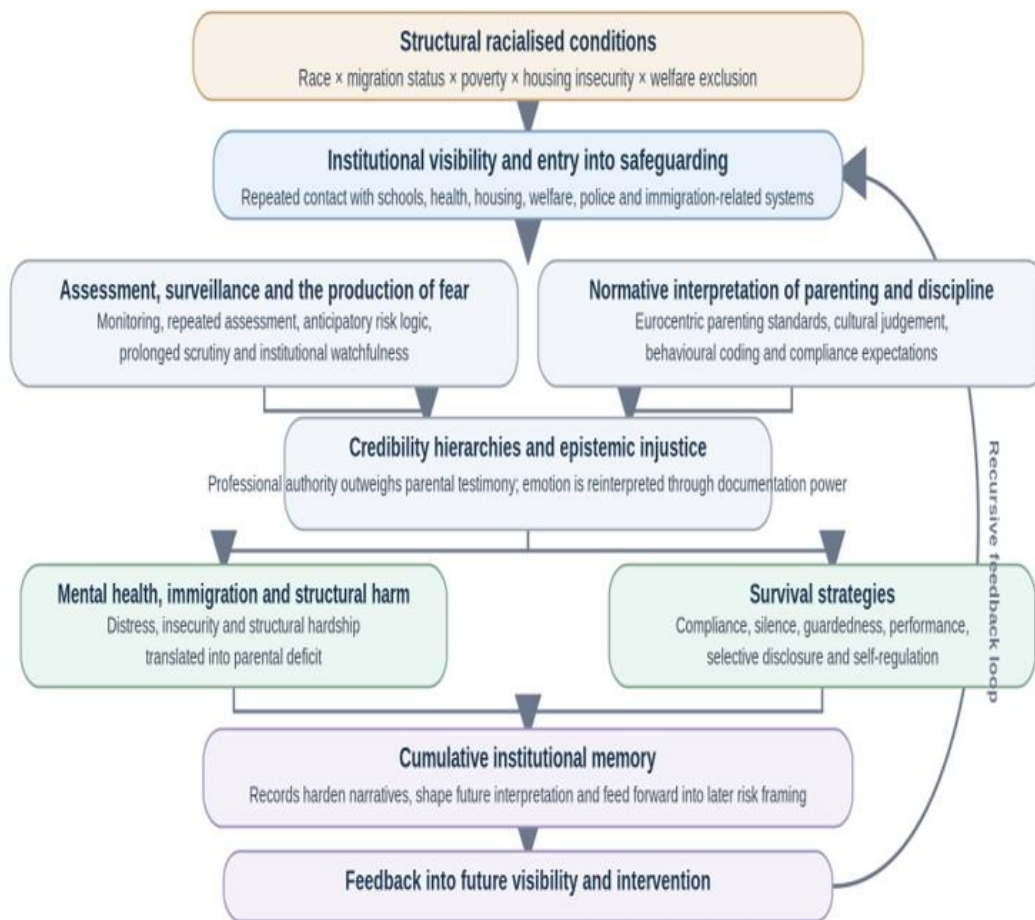


Figure 4. Integrated CRT Framework of Racialised Safeguarding Governance

Note: This figure should be interpreted as a working theoretical model developed from the findings of this study and interpreted through the thesis's Critical Race Theory framework, rather than as an a priori framework imposed on the data. The analytical structure was first drafted manually by the researcher during coding, theme development and conceptual mapping, and was later visually refined in PowerPoint and Canva using AI solely to improve clarity and presentation. The AI-assisted tool did not generate the analytical framework, interpretation or wording. These remain the author's own.

Source: Author's conceptualisation, developed from the study findings and informed by Crenshaw (1991), Solórzano and Yosso (2002), Fricker (2007), Delgado and Stefancic (2017), and Gillborn (2015).

Figure 4 presents the Integrated CRT Framework of Racialised Safeguarding Governance. It was developed retrospectively after coding and theme development to show how the empirical findings connect to the thesis's wider conceptual argument. The framework brings together structural conditions, institutional processes and lived experience. At the structural level, it shows how race, migration status, poverty, housing insecurity, welfare exclusion and related pressures shape the conditions under which first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents become visible to safeguarding systems. At the institutional level, it shows how that visibility may be translated into assessment, surveillance, documentation, professional judgement, risk interpretation and credibility evaluation. At the experiential level, it shows how parents responded through fear, guardedness, compliance, silence, adaptation, resistance and counter-narrative.

The purpose of the framework is to help readers understand how the thesis moves from participant accounts to a broader CRT-informed explanation of child protection as a racialised system of governance. It links the empirical findings to key CRT concepts, including racialisation, intersectionality, institutional power, counter-storytelling and unequal credibility. In doing so, it shows that the parents' experiences were not produced by race, poverty, migration or culture in isolation, but through the interaction of these conditions within safeguarding systems organised around professional interpretation, documentation and risk. The framework therefore contributes to the thesis's central

argument by making visible the connections among structural inequality, institutional processes, and lived experience, while remaining an interpretive synthesis of this study rather than a universal model for all child protection practice.

6.2 Main Theme 1: Pathways into Child Protection and Institutional Visibility

This theme examines how first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents became visible to child protection services in England. Participants' pathways into safeguarding were not experienced as neutral or isolated referral routes. Rather, they were shaped by the interaction of welfare systems, migration histories, housing insecurity, schools, health services, police contact, domestic abuse support and limited access to informal family networks. For many parents, contact with statutory agencies occurred at moments of pressure, including poverty, overcrowding, relationship breakdown, children's behavioural concerns, mental distress, immigration uncertainty or difficulties understanding UK safeguarding expectations. These conditions increased institutional visibility while not always producing meaningful support.

The significance of these pathways is that structural hardship could translate into concerns about parenting capacity, cooperation, or risk. Participants did not describe child protection involvement as emerging solely from individual family problems, but rather from how professional systems interpreted their circumstances. For first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents, this interpretation was shaped by race, migration, socioeconomic position, language, cultural expectations of parenting and unequal institutional credibility. This is where the racialised effect of safeguarding became visible: families were not only referred because concerns were raised, but were also assessed

through assumptions about migrant parenting, cultural difference, poverty, discipline, family responsibility and risk (Bywaters et al., 2017; Featherstone et al., 2018; Parton, 2014; Jolly, 2018).

6.2.1 Visibility, Referral and Institutional Entry

Participants' accounts show that entry into the child protection system rarely started with allegations of serious or intentional harm. Instead, involvement usually arose through routine contact with statutory and universal services. Schools, health professionals, housing services, and the police acted as points of referral, often in ways that initially seemed procedural rather than punitive. It was through these everyday encounters that families became visibly recognised by institutions.

Yusuf (PB04), a Ugandan-born Black African father living in Northwest England, was Muslim, separated, professionally employed in IT and had become involved with child protection in the context of family separation and concerns about parenting. His account is important because it shows how African fathers may experience safeguarding not only as a welfare intervention but also as a process through which masculinity, culture, discipline, separation and parental credibility are assessed. The racialised significance of his experience lies in the way his fatherhood was interpreted within professional systems where Black African male authority could be read through suspicion rather than care.

Yusuf (PB04) described his experience of referral after a conversation at school about his son's behaviour. He explained that he believed the meeting was "just to talk about how

he was settling,” but shortly afterwards received notification that a safeguarding assessment had been initiated. He recalled feeling confused about “how something small became something serious.” Similarly, Aisha (PB09) reported that a housing complaint regarding overcrowding served as the trigger for the referral. She noted that she had already informed the council that she was seeking alternative accommodation, but “instead of helping, they reported.” In her account, structural constraint was reinterpreted as parental failure.

Several parents also described initiating safeguarding processes with limited prior knowledge of how child protection operates in England. Participants explained that, before their involvement, they knew little about referral routes, assessment procedures, or professional terminology. Rehema (PB03) stated, “I didn’t know what social services really do. When they said there was a safeguarding concern, I didn’t even understand what that meant.” Karen similarly reflected: “They were talking about assessments and reports, but nobody explained clearly what the process was. I felt like I was already inside something I didn’t understand.” For many participants, their understanding of safeguarding procedures improved only after they were formally involved. This unfamiliarity with procedures heightened fear and uncertainty, as parents felt expected to navigate institutional processes whose rules and expectations had never been clearly explained to them.

These accounts align with research recognising the expansion of risk-focused child protection practice, in which everyday challenges are increasingly integrated into formal assessment systems (Featherstone, White & Morris, 2018; Parton, 2014). Visibility

through routine services was not neutral; once recorded, concerns acquired institutional significance. Several parents described how quickly the situation escalated. Isaac noted that “no one asked me first; they just opened the case.” He described the shift from school communication to social work involvement as sudden and procedural, transforming his role from a parent seeking help to a subject under scrutiny.

Another safeguarding measure involved cumulative documentation. Akanke (PB12) described how repeated reports of lateness, attributed to unreliable transport and shift work, were compiled across school records. She explained that each instance “looked bad on paper,” even though she believed the context was clear. Jamila (PB15) also reported temporary stress during a period of financial instability, alongside concerns about her child’s mood at school. Individually, she considered these issues manageable. However, she later realised that “when they put everything together, it sounds like risk.” These accounts show how cumulative recording could lead to escalation even without a single incident of serious harm.

Gillborn (2015) argues that institutional processes often produce patterned inequality through seemingly neutral procedures. Parents’ accounts support this view. Documentation practices that appear routine may disproportionately affect families who are already socially visible. The findings also indicate that entry into child protection was influenced by unequal familiarity with institutional procedures. From a Critical Race perspective, this disparity shows how seemingly neutral administrative systems can disadvantage those without access to institutional knowledge (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Gillborn, 2015).

Generally, these accounts show that referrals and institutional entry were socially shaped rather than neutral. Child protection involvement often did not begin with a single safeguarding event but occurred within broader contexts of institutional contact, where structural hardship, racialised visibility, and professional concern intersected.

6.2.2 Structural Conditions, Poverty, Immigration and State-Produced Risk

A key aspect of participants' stories was that child protection involvement could not be separated from the structural conditions shaping everyday family life. Housing insecurity, welfare exclusion, financial strain, immigration-related precarity, disability-related care burdens, and limited access to practical support were not described as peripheral background pressures. Instead, they were central to the circumstances that made many families visible to statutory services in the first place. Parents' accounts suggested that material hardship often increased institutional exposure while reducing access to meaningful assistance, leaving the state more inclined towards scrutiny than support.

For some participants, housing conditions were directly linked to help-seeking. Edna (PB17) explained that professionals were already aware of "all the problems I was facing in terms of lacking the extra support for my daughter, such as house issues, benefits and others." She said she hoped social work involvement might "help me to look for a better house because the one I am living in is in poor condition, which exacerbates Jessica's condition." In this account, poor housing was not incidental to family difficulties; it was part of the context in which parenting occurred, and support was sought. Yet the practical need she identified did not necessarily elicit a supportive response.

Parents also described how prolonged financial strain and inadequate welfare support increased family vulnerability. Aisha (PB09) recounted severe hardship linked to disability-related care, delayed entitlements, and housing issues, explaining that “we were really struggling financially,” that “we weren’t getting the right support in terms of the financial part of things,” and that the family eventually “had to take insolvency because we couldn’t meet our bills.” She also detailed major housing difficulties, noting that although adaptations had been suggested, “18 months down the line, we still didn’t have any housing,” leaving her disabled child in unsuitable conditions. This account is important because it shows that structural hardship was experienced not only as poverty but also as a combination of welfare delays, disability-related exclusion, housing failures, and service fragmentation.

Other parents spoke openly about the contradiction between the lack of early support and the high cost of later intervention. Rehema (PB03) questioned why systems that claim to protect children do not first invest in helping families cope with difficulties, asking, “Why, don’t I support the family to look after this child properly,” before criticising the logic of removal by adding, “But you okay, taking the child away from the parents and paying thousands of money to keep that child in fair [care].” She also pointed out how everyday material deprivation could be moralised within safeguarding, observing that school uniform and children’s presentation could become grounds for judgement: “If they go to school when they address that one... they are not clean. Then that’s negligence on the parents' part... If you’re not working, how are you gonna manage that?” These remarks show how structural deprivation may be framed as parental failure when practical support is missing or insufficient.

Yusuf (PB04) similarly described the financial damage caused by prolonged involvement in child protection. Reflecting on lengthy court proceedings, she said, “I had court proceedings for four years. I couldn’t keep my job.” This is important to analyse because it shows that hardship was not only pre-existing; in some cases, intervention itself worsened financial instability. Child protection, then, did not merely respond to vulnerability. It could also become part of the process through which vulnerability deepened.

Immigration and language barriers further heightened these pressures. Edna (PB17) described being refused an interpreter despite repeatedly stating that her English was inadequate for a safeguarding conversation. She recalled that professionals told her, “The level of my English is good,” and that she did not need an interpreter until police involvement ultimately led to one being called. She linked racialisation, limited English, and migrant status directly to her treatment, stating, “I believe if I was white, they could not have treated me the way they did, but because I am black with limited English, and to make matters worse, I was a new immigrant.” This account illustrates how immigration-related insecurity and language disadvantage contributed to the conditions under which risk was experienced and perceived.

Across these accounts, a recurring pattern is that structural hardship is repeatedly treated as something that increases institutional visibility without offering meaningful support. Parents describe inadequate housing, lack of benefits, disability-related financial

pressures, insecure work, and language barriers as conditions shaping their parenting, yet these are not always recognised first as state- or policy-related harms. Instead, they can be absorbed into professional narratives of instability, neglect, or insufficient parental capacity. This aligns with critical scholarship arguing that contemporary child protection often manages the consequences of poverty and exclusion rather than addressing their causes (Gupta, 2017; Featherstone et al., 2018).

A balanced perspective remains crucial. Structural issues do not automatically dismiss safeguarding concerns, nor do they resolve all questions of parental responsibility. However, the accounts presented here suggest that hardship was often inadequately contextualised. Parents were not simply claiming that social workers should ignore risk; rather, they were criticising a system that too readily equated economic insecurity, unsuitable housing, disability related burdens, and limited support with parenting problems, without first addressing the structural conditions that created those pressures.

This subtheme, therefore, highlights a crucial process within the study: transforming socially created vulnerability into institutional concern. Poverty, immigration-related disadvantages, housing insecurity, and welfare exclusion were not neutral background conditions. They influenced visibility to the state, increased family stress, limited help-seeking, and affected how parenting was judged.

6.2.3 Institutional Context as Experienced by Parents

Participants' accounts also highlighted a perceived imbalance between investigative intervention and supportive assistance. Several described limited support when seeking help for family difficulties before formal safeguarding involvement, while investigative responses appeared to occur more quickly once concerns had been documented. In these accounts, requests for help with behavioural challenges, financial pressures, or family stress were met with delayed or limited responses, whereas once a referral was made, multiple professionals became involved and assessments were swiftly initiated. This contrast shaped participants' views of child protection as being more responsive to risk than to support.

Milkah (PB07) reflected, "When I needed help before, nobody really listened. But when someone reported something, suddenly everyone was involved." Similarly, Mercy (PB13), a Kenyan-born Black African mother in her sixties living in Yorkshire, was married, a Christian, trained as a nurse and midwife, and had extensive experience with caring responsibilities both within the family and professionally. Her account is therefore significant because she approached child protection not as someone unfamiliar with care, safeguarding, or vulnerability, but as a mother whose own caring knowledge was not always recognised in professional assessments. This context matters because her experience of intervention was shaped by the intersection of race, migration, motherhood, disability-related family needs, professional care knowledge and unequal institutional credibility.

Mercy (PB13) stated, “It felt like when there is a problem, they come very fast, but when you are asking for help, it takes much longer.” For these parents, the system appeared to mobilise more efficiently in response to suspicion than to need, reinforcing the sense that investigation rather than assistance was its dominant orientation.

These accounts highlight broader critiques that contemporary safeguarding systems have become increasingly focused on risk and management (Parton, 2014; Munro, 2011). In such settings, professional practice may shift towards identifying, recording, and controlling perceived risks rather than providing preventative or relational support (Featherstone, White and Morris, 2018). Research on austerity and the reduction of early intervention services further suggests that families often encounter statutory agencies mainly when concerns reach safeguarding thresholds (Bywaters et al., 2016; Featherstone, Gupta and Morris, 2016). In this environment, support may become increasingly contingent on risk identification, so help is often sought only once formal assessment procedures are initiated.

From the parents' perspectives in this study, these institutional dynamics contributed to a sense that safeguarding primarily depended on oversight and regulation. While many participants recognised professionals' responsibility to protect children from harm, they still recounted experiences in which investigative processes appeared more visible and structured than supportive engagement. In this way, safeguarding could be viewed not only as a protective measure but also as a form of institutional surveillance, through which parenting practices were monitored and evaluated.

This initial main theme, therefore, lays the foundation for the governance framework discussed in the chapter. Once families became part of safeguarding systems, visibility did not remain static. Instead, it evolved into continuous monitoring and interpretive assessment. The subsequent main theme explores how institutional visibility was transformed into structured surveillance and professional judgement.

6.3 Main Theme 2: Surveillance, Professional Judgement and the Construction of Risk

This theme examines how parents experienced child protection involvement as a process of being watched, assessed and interpreted. The concern raised by participants was not only that professionals entered family homes or asked questions about parenting, but also that these encounters took place within unequal relationships of power, where their words, emotions, homes, parenting practices, and children's behaviour could be read as evidence of risk. For first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents, this process carried racialised significance because professional judgement was experienced through the combined effects of race, migration history, cultural difference, socioeconomic position, family structure and unequal institutional credibility.

The racialised effect of surveillance therefore did not depend only on overt racism or explicitly discriminatory language. It could operate through ordinary safeguarding practices, including home visits, assessment questions, written records, professional observations and judgements about cooperation. Participants described becoming aware that everyday aspects of family life, such as cleanliness, discipline, emotional expression, food, sleeping arrangements, communication style and children's behaviour, could be interpreted through professional assumptions about parenting capacity and risk. This

theme therefore shows how safeguarding assessment could transform the private family space into an institutional site of observation, where parents attempted to manage how they were seen, judged and recorded (Parton, 2014; Featherstone et al., 2018; White et al., 2009).

6.3.1 Surveillance, Monitoring and the Experience of Being Watched

If entry into child protection marks the point at which families become visible to institutions, surveillance is the stage at which that visibility is organised, maintained, and officially recorded. Participants described safeguarding involvement not as a one-off assessment focused on a single concern, but as an ongoing process of observation that transformed everyday life. Monitoring extended into the domestic sphere, encompassing parental communication, emotional expression, and anticipatory behaviour.

Consistent with scholarship on the managerial and risk-oriented expansion of child protection systems (Parton, 2014; Featherstone, White and Morris, 2018), participants' accounts show that safeguarding served both as a protective intervention and as administrative oversight. One of the most immediate signs of surveillance was the home visit. Milkah (PB07), a first-generation Kenyan-born Black African mother living in Northwest England, was a British citizen, a single parent, Muslim, university-educated, and employed as an accountant. Her account needs to be understood in this biographical context rather than treated as a generic example of parental discomfort during professional visits. Milkah's child protection involvement was also connected to her relationship with her adopted daughter and her concern that she had not always been able to meet her daughter's emotional and psychological needs. In her broader interview, she

reflected on adoption, migration, intergenerational adjustment, and the different childhood experiences of children raised in the UK and those who migrated later. Her experience of the home visit, therefore, sat at the intersection of race, migration, single motherhood, adoption, professional respectability, emotional care and cultural transition.

Milkah described thoroughly preparing before each visit, ensuring that the house was “perfect” and that her children were calm and quiet. Although the social worker was polite, she felt that “everything was being looked at.” Cleanliness, food storage, sleeping arrangements, and interaction patterns were experienced not simply as ordinary features of a safeguarding assessment but as criteria by which her family life, motherhood, and credibility could be judged. The significance of this account is therefore not only that a professional entered the private home. Rather, for Milkah, the visit carried the possibility that her parenting, household organisation and relationship with her children would be interpreted through deficit assumptions about African migrant families, single mothers, adoption, emotional attachment and cultural difference.

This example illustrates how surveillance may operate through ordinary professional practices without requiring overt hostility or explicit racism. The social worker did not need to act aggressively for Milkah to experience the visit as evaluative. The racialised effect lay in the wider conditions under which her home and parenting became legible to the safeguarding system: as a Black African migrant mother, she was aware that the domestic space could be read as evidence of competence, risk, cooperation or failure. Her preparation of the home can therefore be understood as anticipatory self-surveillance. She attempted to manage how the family would be seen, recorded and judged. In this sense,

the home was transformed from a private and culturally significant space into a site of institutional inspection, where every day domestic arrangements became part of professional risk interpretation (Parton, 2014; Featherstone, White and Morris, 2018).

The findings also show how structural hardship can be reframed as a safeguarding concern through everyday assessment practices. Parents described how monitoring household space, food access, and material conditions was seen as a sign of parental competence. While these observations aim to safeguard children's welfare, they can also personalise structural disadvantages. Families experiencing housing insecurity, financial hardship, or immigration restrictions may become more visible within safeguarding systems because their circumstances are shaped by broader inequalities. Consistent with research on the link between deprivation and child protection intervention (Bywaters et al., 2016; Featherstone, White and Morris, 2018), the findings suggest that evidence of poverty can be incorporated into professionals' risk assessments, thereby reinforcing surveillance of families already marginalised by structural inequalities.

Akanke (PB12) similarly observed that she became "very aware" of how family members interacted during visits. The presence of extended family, which she regarded as normal and supportive, could be misinterpreted. Although no participant reported outright hostility during these encounters, many described heightened self-consciousness. The evaluative gaze retained interpretive authority even without explicit judgment.

Surveillance also occurred through written documentation. Several parents expressed concern about what was recorded in case files. Aisha (PB09) stated that “once it is written, it stays there,” conveying a sense of permanence attached to recorded interpretations. She recalled reading a report that summarised her explanation in language she felt “made it sound worse.” Her worry was not only about accuracy but also about how wording could influence future decisions. Documentation did not merely record events; it shaped narrative coherence and institutional memory. Parents were acutely aware that hesitation, emotional distress, or disagreement might be documented as non-cooperation. The power to define events in text was perceived as unequal.

Several parents also described how everyday material conditions at home became the focus of professional scrutiny during safeguarding visits. For example, Mercy (PB13) reflected on a home visit in which the emphasis shifted to the food in the kitchen, explaining, “They opened the fridge and started asking about the food. It made me feel like they were checking if I was a good mother just by looking at what was there.” Similarly, Aisha (PB09) described how overcrowded housing conditions became a concern during assessment: “We share rooms because the house is small, but that doesn’t mean the children are not cared for. Sometimes it felt like the house itself was being judged.” For families facing financial pressures or housing limitations, such observations reinforced the impression that structural hardship was being interpreted as evidence of parental inadequacy.

Monitoring also extended across institutional networks. Participants reported that once known to one service, they became visible to others. Jamila (PB15) explained that after a

school referral, she began to feel that “everyone was connected.” Information seemed to circulate between teachers, health professionals, housing officers, and social workers. Although such coordination is formally described as safeguarding collaboration, parents often experience it as diffuse and opaque. Isaac reflected that he did not always know “who had access to what.” This lack of transparency contributed to a sense of hypervisibility. Behaviour in schools, medical appointments, and other institutional settings gained potential significance within a broader evaluative framework.

Surveillance extends into anticipatory self-regulation. Several parents described adapting their behaviour in anticipation of how they might be perceived. Rehema (PB03) explained that she adjusted her tone of voice, being careful “not to sound angry,” even when frustrated. Rehema (PB03) noted that she sometimes avoided seeking support during periods of stress because she feared that vulnerability might “start something again.” Monitoring, therefore, influenced decision-making even without active intervention. Safeguarding involvement was experienced not only as institutional action but also as a condition affecting everyday parenting performance.

The emotional impact of being watched was also significant. Participants described anxiety, caution, and a constant need to prove their competence. Janet (PB11) explained that she felt she was “always proving” herself, even when no immediate concern was raised. Some parents distinguished between trusting a particular practitioner and mistrusting what they called “the system.” This suggests that surveillance was perceived as a structural concern rather than merely an interpersonal one. In several cases, feelings of scrutiny persisted even after formal case closure. Gladys (PB14) described how they

still felt cautious during routine health visits long after safeguarding involvement had ended.

These accounts show that surveillance in child protection operates through layered mechanisms: spatially examining the home, documenting records, exchanging information across networks, and internalising psychological aspects. Monitoring becomes both a process and a setting. It influences professional judgement and shapes parental behaviour, creating the conditions in which risk is later interpreted. Within a Critical Race framework, such surveillance should not be seen as neutral. Families whose structural position leads to greater contact with public institutions may face increased scrutiny through routine administrative practices (Gillborn, 2015). Oversight may therefore reflect patterned exposure rather than individual misconduct.

6.3.2 Professional Judgement, Risk Construction and Credibility

If surveillance defines the scope of observation, professional judgement determines how what is observed acquires institutional significance. Risk does not arise automatically from behaviour itself; rather, it is interpreted within frameworks shaped by normative expectations, professional training, organisational pressures, and wider social narratives. Participants' accounts consistently suggested that safeguarding concerns were not experienced as neutral discoveries of harm, but as interpretations of behaviour, circumstance, culture, and family life. This subtheme, therefore, examines how risk was constructed, how credibility was negotiated, and how cultural difference and structural hardship could be translated into safeguarding categories. In this sense, professional judgement is not simply a technical assessment; it is an interpretive process shaped by

institutional power, normativity, and unequal credibility (Fricker, 2007; Featherstone, White and Morris, 2018).

A recurring theme across the interviews was that parenting was often judged against implicit standards that were rarely made fully explicit to families. These standards appeared in professional responses to discipline, communication, emotional expression, family authority, and expectations of children. Practices rooted in cultural norms, such as firm authority, emotional restraint, communal responsibility, and expectations of respect, were sometimes experienced as overly harsh, distant, or concerning. Yusuf (PB04), for example, argued that many migrant parents felt they had to “pretend to act” because what they understood as moral guidance and responsible parenting could quickly be reinterpreted as abuse or risk. Karen (PB01) similarly described “a big, big, big difference” between parenting in Kenya and parenting in the UK, explaining that in England “the children in the UK... they are given a voice,” whereas parents could feel that “the parents almost don’t have a voice.” These accounts suggest that safeguarding judgements were not simply about what parents did, but about how those actions were interpreted through dominant assumptions about healthy parenting and childhood.

Rehema (PB03) expressed this especially clearly when she described migrant parents as “trying to strike the balance” between what they had grown up knowing as right and what the UK system treated as acceptable. She explained that, for many families, the problem was not wilful harm but the difficulty of adjusting inherited disciplinary frameworks to a setting in which the same actions might now be reclassified as abuse. She repeatedly returned to the point that “it’s education, educating the parents,” rather than assuming that

swift escalation or separation is always the most appropriate response. Molina (PB06) made a related point when she contrasted a context in which parental authority and respect were expected with a UK setting in which “the kid can talk to her parent with no respect,” adding that “back home you can’t try to insult a parent.” Together, these accounts indicate that cultural differences were not peripheral to assessment. It shaped how conduct was read and how quickly concern could attach to family life (Bernard & Harris, 2019).

A second major aspect of this subtheme concerns credibility. Participants repeatedly described situations in which their own accounts were doubted, reframed, or granted less authority than professional interpretations. Explanations for behaviour, distress, family dynamics, or hardship were sometimes heard but not fully incorporated into the meaning ultimately attached to the case. Edna (PB17) described this forcefully, explaining that during a school-based meeting, she was not given the chance to articulate her own concerns because the social worker “developed her own questions on my behalf.” At one point, she recalled being told to “shut up because I know what you want to say.” This was not merely an unpleasant interaction. It illustrates how parents may be formally present in safeguarding encounters yet be denied meaningful authority over how their own circumstances are narrated. In this sense, participation did not necessarily translate into interpretive power.

Communication barriers further complicated credibility, particularly where parents were expected to respond quickly and confidently within unfamiliar professional settings. Isaac (PB02) reflected that “sometimes they ask questions very fast, and if you don’t answer quickly, they think you are hiding something,” when in fact

“sometimes it is just that you are trying to understand the question.” Jamila (PB15) similarly explained that professionals used words that were “not easy to understand,” leaving her worried that she might “say the wrong thing.” Gladys (PB14) connected this difficulty to migration and parental education, arguing that if the state expects migrant parents to parent “in the UK,” then parents should first be taught what that means. Mercy (PB13), a Kenyan-born Black African mother in her sixties living in Yorkshire, was married, a Christian, trained as a nurse and midwife, and had extensive experience in care, both professionally and within her family. Yet she described being spoken to “like somebody who has never gone to school” and felt that her knowledge carried little weight when she tried to advocate for her daughter. This is analytically significant because Mercy’s account cannot be explained by a lack of education or care knowledge. Rather, it shows how professional authority could override parental and professional knowledge when that knowledge came from a racialised migrant mother positioned as less credible within safeguarding encounters. These accounts show that credibility was shaped not only by honesty, but by institutional fluency, professional language, race, migration, classed assumptions about competence, and unequal epistemic authority (Fricker, 2007).

This aligns closely with Fricker’s (2007) concept of epistemic injustice, in which some speakers are granted less credibility because of their social position. In safeguarding contexts, the authority to define risk rests largely with professionals, creating an asymmetry in how knowledge circulates. Parents may know the practical, emotional, and cultural realities of their own family lives, yet their accounts can carry less institutional

weight than professional records, reports, and inferred meanings. Yusuf (PB04) suggested that information could be written “upside down just to support their case,” while Fatuma (PB08) objected that “they wrote things that made it sound worse than it was.” Milkah (PB07) described reviewing a report and insisting that “if something is not true, it should not stay there,” while Jamila (PB15) explained that she sometimes wanted written agendas in advance so she could “know what they are saying about me before I walk in.” These accounts reveal that parents were not only contesting factual details. They were also contesting the authority of institutional texts to fix the meaning of their family lives.

Participants further described how disagreement itself could become part of the risk narrative. Challenging case notes, questioning assessments, or expressing frustration could be re-read as defensiveness, aggression, or non-compliance. Isaac (PB02) described being left feeling “powerless” and “voiceless,” suggesting that once a family entered the system, almost anything they said or did could be interpreted with suspicion rather than understanding. Rehema (PB03) made a related point when she argued that minority families were not always given the same opportunity to be educated, warned, or supported before stronger action was taken. Instead, intervention could move rapidly from allegation to separation, particularly where parenting practices were already seen through a lens of cultural difference. Mercy (PB13) similarly described trying to explain the realities of culture, faith, disability, and family care, yet feeling that the interpretation had already been formed before the family had truly been heard. In risk-averse systems, disagreement can therefore cease to function as part of dialogue and instead become woven into the evidence base for intervention itself (Munro, 2011).

Professional judgement also operated in close relation to structural context. Housing insecurity, immigration status, income instability, overcrowding, disability, and lack of practical support were not external to safeguarding but frequently central to how families were interpreted. Rehema (PB03) criticised the logic by which overcrowded housing could suddenly become a serious concern once children had entered care, even though the same arrangements had previously been deemed acceptable for the family. Mercy (PB13) described repeated requests for support around her daughter's disability and mental health that, in her view, were not treated primarily as care needs but became entangled with suspicion and control. Edna (PB17) likewise described professional responses that did not adequately engage with the realities of disability, support needs, and everyday care, instead reducing those realities to a more individualised set of parental concerns. These accounts suggest that hardship and need were not always recognised as structural or relational. They could instead be reinterpreted as weak capacity, poor judgment, or deficient parenting.

Some participants were explicit that these processes could not be understood outside of race and institutional inequality. Rehema (PB03) stated plainly, "it's systematic," arguing that the treatment of minoritised families could not be reduced to isolated misunderstandings or individual prejudice alone. Yusuf (PB04) similarly described "a lot of institutional racism," linking this not only to child protection but to wider authority systems that shaped how Black children and Black families were read. Mercy (PB13) also suggested that if Black families "fall into the wrong hands," they can suffer greatly, particularly where a worker does not see them "as a human being like any other." These accounts are analytically important because they move the discussion beyond individual bad practice. They point instead to patterned forms of judgement in which race, culture,

parenting, and risk are already connected before any single family has fully explained itself.

This subtheme, therefore, shows that professional judgement operates at the intersection of observation, normativity, and institutional authority. Parenting was judged against implicit standards, credibility was distributed unevenly, and disagreement could itself become evidence of concern. Structural hardships were often attributed to parental inadequacy, while cultural differences could intensify professional suspicion rather than invite deeper understanding. From a Critical Race perspective, these dynamics do not require explicit hostility to produce racialised effects. Normative standards, institutional caution, and unequal credibility can combine to generate patterns of intervention that are experienced as deeply uneven, even when professionals understand themselves as acting neutrally (Gillborn, 2015; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

6.4 Main Theme 3: Living Through Safeguarding Intervention

This theme examines how parents experienced child protection involvement emotionally, practically, and relationally. Participants' responses were not simply individual reactions to professional intervention; they were shaped by migration history, limited knowledge of the UK child protection system, fear of child removal, lack of extended family support, socioeconomic pressure, immigration insecurity and unequal institutional credibility. For many parents, involvement with safeguarding created a sense that ordinary family life had to be carefully managed, explained, and performed in ways acceptable to professionals.

Fear, compliance and adaptation therefore need to be understood as responses to unequal institutional power rather than as straightforward acceptance of child protection concerns. Parents described learning what to say, what not to say, how to prepare for visits, how to manage children's behaviour and how to avoid appearing angry, defensive or uncooperative. These responses carried racialised significance because participants were conscious that Black African migrant parents could be misread through assumptions about discipline, culture, emotional expression, parental authority and risk. In this sense, living through safeguarding involved not only responding to professional concerns, but also managing the possibility of being misinterpreted within a system that had the authority to define family life (Fricker, 2007; Gillborn, 2015; Featherstone et al., 2018; Roberts, 2022).

6.4.1 Fear, Compliance, Adaptation and Survival Strategies

Across the interviews, involvement in safeguarding was consistently described as an experience shaped by fear. This fear was not always articulated in dramatic or explicit terms. More often, it appeared as a persistent undercurrent that shaped how parents spoke, behaved, interpreted professional interactions, and managed themselves in everyday life. The possibility of child removal, whether openly stated or silently understood, served as a powerful organising force within many narratives. Fear was therefore not simply an emotional response to a single event; it became part of the conditions under which parenting itself was lived. As wider child protection literature suggests, risk-averse systems can intensify self-monitoring, compliance, and defensive interaction, particularly

where families experience intervention within unequal power relations (Munro, 2011; Parton, 2014).

For many parents, uncertainty about safeguarding thresholds intensified fear because parenting in England was experienced as taking place under unfamiliar rules and unequal institutional power. Rehema (PB03), a Ugandan-born Black African mother living in Northwest England, was separated, Christian, working as a senior carer, and had refugee/leave-to-remain status. Her account of “trying to strike the balance” between what she had grown up understanding as right and what the UK system might now read as abuse therefore needs to be understood within the context of migration, legal insecurity, single parenting, care work and adjustment to a new safeguarding culture. Gladys (PB14), a Malawian-born Black African mother living in Northwest England on a dependant visa, made a similar point when she argued, “if you want me to be a parent in the UK, then I should learn how to be a parent in the UK,” adding, “I can’t give you what I don’t have.” These accounts show that fear was not simply a personal emotional reaction. It was produced through the racialised and migratory experience of being judged against professional standards that were not always explained, while knowing that misunderstanding could be interpreted as parental failure, non-cooperation or risk.

Where removal had taken place, fear was rooted in real consequences rather than abstract possibility. Isaac (PB02) described the experience of separation as socially and emotionally devastating, explaining that “in that situation you are a loser,” and asking, “Why do you think you deserve to be next to someone when your own children cannot be next to you?” He also insisted that, under such circumstances, “you’ve got to be

strong.” His account captures both the depth of fear and the necessity of endurance. Rehema (PB03) similarly warned that once children are removed, “that family is not gonna be the same ever as it was before.” Yusuf (PB04) echoed this in a slightly different form, insisting that “there’s no child” who goes into care and “comes back the same.” These accounts show that fear was inseparable from the knowledge that intervention could alter families in lasting ways.

Several parents described responding to this environment through visible compliance, but compliance was rarely presented as genuine agreement. More often, it functioned as protection against escalation. John (PB10), for example, reflected that “even if I don’t agree, I just say yes,” because doing otherwise might create “more problems.” Aisha (PB09) similarly implied that once families were under scrutiny, calmness and caution became tactical rather than natural responses. Isaac (PB02) also described a position in which one felt “powerless” and “voiceless,” suggesting that silence or restraint could become safer than protest. These accounts indicate that compliance was less a sign of trust in the process than an attempt to survive within it.

This adaptation extended into emotional self-management. Grace (PB19) explained that “you have to be calm... if you show emotion, they write it down,” suggesting that emotional expression itself could become risky in safeguarding settings. Susan (PB18), in a related way, stated that “strength does not always look soft,” resisting the expectation that parents, and especially mothers, must perform a particular kind of gentleness or vulnerability to be seen as credible. Together, these accounts suggest that families were

not only regulating behaviour, but also regulating tone, body language, and affect. In such settings, emotional containment became part of strategic survival.

Adaptation also extended into parenting practice itself. Karen (PB01) described having to recalibrate disciplinary approaches she had known from her upbringing, explaining that “back home, you correct a child firmly. Here, I had to change everything.” Her account did not present this as a simple rejection of her values, but as a necessary adjustment under institutional scrutiny. Rehema (PB03) similarly suggested that she had become increasingly aware of how actions might be interpreted, implying that parenting could no longer be lived innocently but had to be filtered through the imagined gaze of professionals. In this sense, monitoring became internalised. Parents were adapting not only to direct intervention, but to its anticipated possibility.

Selective disclosure was another important strategy. Gladys (PB14) strongly implied that some parents learned to say less, not because they had nothing to say, but because they no longer trusted that stress, conflict, or vulnerability would be understood as grounds for support. Instead, such admissions could become evidence. Aisha (PB09) similarly suggested that “explaining too much makes it worse,” capturing a wider pattern in which parents filtered what they shared in anticipation of how it might later be documented or circulated. This kind of narrative restraint is significant because it shows that families were not merely responding emotionally to scrutiny; they were actively trying to manage its consequences.

At the same time, these forms of adaptation did not necessarily mean inward agreement with professional interpretations. Isaac (PB02) maintained a distinction between how he had to conduct himself and what he still knew about himself as a father. Susan (PB18), likewise, did not equate adaptation with surrender. Her reflections suggest that although the process could be “mentally draining,” it did not erase parental identity or care. Mercy (PB13) also demonstrates this tension. Despite prolonged trauma and repeated institutional pressure, her account shows a continuing refusal to accept the official meanings imposed on her family. She did not stop contesting how events were being interpreted, even while living in the fear those interpretations produced. These accounts are important because they reveal that compliance and resistance could coexist. Outward adjustment did not necessarily signal internal consent.

Some participants also described fear as affecting broader family and community relationships. Gladys (PB14) suggested that involvement with social services could alter how parents spoke about family life with others, while Isaac (PB02) described a form of social withdrawal rooted in shame and loss. Fear, therefore, extended beyond direct institutional contact. It affected social confidence, public self-presentation, and everyday interaction. In this sense, safeguarding became atmospheric rather than episodic: a condition families felt themselves living inside, not merely an event they attended.

From a Critical Race perspective, fear, compliance, selective disclosure, and emotional self-regulation should not be read as passivity. They are better understood as rational responses within unequal power relations in which credibility is unevenly distributed, cultural difference is easily misread, and vulnerability may be reclassified as risk. When

parents know that disagreement may be written down as resistance, emotion as instability, and uncertainty as concealment, adaptation becomes a survival strategy rather than a sign of endorsement. This subtheme, therefore, shows that safeguarding was not only carried out on families through formal intervention. It was also something lived internally, through fear, anticipation, restraint, and the ongoing effort to remain intact under scrutiny.

6.4.2 Emotional and Psychological Impact of Safeguarding

Beyond procedural outcomes, safeguarding involvement carried a considerable emotional and psychological burden. Parents described not only the practical demands of meetings, court processes, reports, and assessments, but also the stronger effects of scrutiny on confidence, trust, dignity, and emotional stability. Anxiety, shame, hypervigilance, humiliation, and loss of self-belief recurred across the interviews. These responses were not peripheral to safeguarding; they were part of how it was lived, and they reflect wider research showing that child protection processes can intensify distress when intervention is experienced through mistrust, surveillance, and unequal power (Featherstone, White and Morris, 2018; Parton, 2014).

Several participants described anxiety as a continuous condition rather than a reaction confined to formal meetings. Janet (PB11) explained that she was “always thinking about the next meeting,” suggesting that worry did not remain within official appointments but moved into sleep, concentration, and ordinary daily life. Isaac (PB02) similarly described how involvement with social services altered his sense of self and his movement through the world. Reflecting on the period of separation, he stated, “In that situation, you are a loser,” and asked, “Why do you think you deserve to be next to someone when your own

children cannot be next to you?” He further described the process as leaving parents “powerless” and “voiceless.” These reflections show that the emotional impact of safeguarding was not only procedural stress. It was also social and existential, affecting dignity, belonging, and parental identity.

For some parents, the emotional impact was tied directly to removal and to the sense that the family had been permanently altered. Rehema (PB03) argued that once a child is taken, “that family is not gonna be the same ever as it was before,” while Yusuf (PB04) insisted that there is “no child” who goes into care and “comes back the same.” These accounts frame intervention not simply as a temporary measure, but as a rupture with effects that spread across the whole family. They also suggest that emotional distress was not limited to parents’ fear of investigation. It was intensified by the belief that what had happened could leave lasting psychological and relational damage.

Shame also emerged strongly in the data. Isaac (PB02) linked separation from his children to a sense of humiliation that made ordinary social life difficult. He implied that social contact itself became painful because he felt publicly diminished as a father. Gladys (PB14), in a different but related way, suggested that involvement with social services carried a stigma within community life, where simply hearing that “social services” were involved could lead others to assume something serious or shameful had happened in the family. This indicates that emotional harm did not arise only from what professionals did in formal settings. It was also shaped by the broader social meanings attached to safeguarding interventions, particularly within migrant and minority communities, where reputation, dignity, and family standing mattered deeply.

Hypervigilance was another important pattern. Rehema (PB03) repeatedly returned to the pressure of “trying to strike the balance” between inherited parenting norms and UK expectations, and her account suggests that this balancing act produced ongoing self-monitoring. After involvement, parenting no longer felt secure or spontaneous. Ordinary conduct, discipline, and even tone of voice could be lived under the shadow of possible interpretation. Aisha (PB09) similarly suggested that even after the formal case had ended, she remained careful in how she spoke to professionals and stayed alert to how things might be understood. In this way, safeguarding extended beyond formal intervention and entered everyday consciousness.

For some, emotional distress was inseparable from watching harm unfold in their children. Isaac (PB02) described the visible impact of separation on his sons, saying one child felt ashamed “when he’s walking around with older people than his own parents when his parents are still alive,” while another gained “over ten kilos within less than a month.” He contrasted this with the institutional claim that the children were being “saved,” asking how such visible damage could be ignored. These reflections are significant because they show that parental suffering was about being accused or monitored. It was also about witnessing children struggle emotionally, socially, and physically under the very system claiming to protect them.

Mercy (PB13) provides one of the strongest examples of prolonged psychological trauma. She described years of social services involvement around her daughter’s pregnancy, disability, mental health, and later care arrangements as so distressing that it made her

ask, “Why did I come to the United Kingdom?” and she said plainly that the experience “totally made me hate myself.” She further reflected that what she went through “could even push you to mental illness.” Mercy’s (PB13) account is especially important because it shows how emotional harm may be intensified when race, religion, disability, family care, and institutional disbelief converge. The impact she described was not only emotional but also economic, relational, and existential, extending into legal costs, exhaustion, fear for her daughter’s life, and a pervasive sense of helplessness.

Mercy (PB13) also illustrates how emotional suffering was compounded by watching a loved one deteriorate while institutions insisted they were acting in her best interests. She described seeing her daughter become withdrawn, depressed, physically unwell, and increasingly disconnected while the family’s warnings were repeatedly dismissed. Her account is particularly painful because it suggests not only that support failed, but that the family was forced to witness decline while being unable to intervene meaningfully. The emotional burden here was therefore intensified by helplessness: not simply fear, but fear mixed with powerlessness.

Edna (PB17) similarly connected safeguarding involvement to acute distress. She described becoming so upset after repeated failures of promised support that she “started crying” and felt that her “mental health was compromised.” Her interpretation was that social workers were “doing this to me deliberately,” an expression that may not be accepted institutionally as fact, but which is analytically important because it shows how intervention was experienced from her side: not as a neutral helping process, but as something that could push a parent towards emotional collapse and then continue to

operate through that collapse. This is especially significant in a findings chapter because it captures the lived meaning of the intervention, regardless of how it may have been intended professionally.

The findings also suggest that emotional expression itself could become risky. Parents felt that fear, crying, upset, and desperation were not always read as understandable responses to crisis, but could be reinterpreted as instability, incapacity, or further evidence of concern. Grace (PB19) implied that emotional control became necessary because if you appeared too distressed, that distress could be written into the case in ways that worked against you. Susan (PB18), in a related but more resistant form, stated that “strength does not always look soft,” challenging the assumption that mothers or parents must display a recognisable gentleness to be seen as caring and credible. These accounts suggest that safeguarding could demand emotional performance as well as parental compliance.

At the same time, emotional strain did not necessarily mean surrender. Several participants described distress alongside resilience and determination. Isaac (PB02) insisted that, however difficult the process became, “you’ve got to be strong.” Susan (PB18), as reflected in the wider dataset, similarly described the process as “mentally draining” but did not equate that exhaustion with giving up on her children. These accounts complicate any deficit reading of distress. Parents were not simply overwhelmed subjects of intervention. Many were also actively trying to endure, adapt, and continue caring under profoundly unequal conditions.

This subtheme, therefore, shows that safeguarding involvement was experienced not only as administrative oversight but as a form of psychological intervention in family life. Anxiety, shame, humiliation, hypervigilance, and emotional exhaustion were central to how families lived through investigation, separation, and prolonged uncertainty. The emotional burden was intensified where parents felt powerless, unheard, culturally misread, or forced to watch damage unfold while still being told that the system was acting in the child's best interests. This reflects broader research demonstrating that child protection interventions can deepen distress when families experience the process through adversarial dynamics, mistrust, and unequal power (Featherstone, White and Morris, 2018; Parton, 2014).

6.5 Main Theme 4: Agency, Resistance and Counter-Narrative

Main Theme 4 examines how parents challenged, negotiated, and reinterpreted safeguarding interventions. Although many participants described changing their behaviour in response to scrutiny, their accounts also revealed continuing forms of agency and resistance. These did not always take the form of open confrontation. More often, they appeared through correcting professional interpretations, reframing institutional language, asserting parental love and competence, questioning the fairness of intervention, and insisting on alternative ways of understanding family life. In this sense, parents were not simply acted upon by the safeguarding system; they also interpreted, responded to, and contested its meanings. This is important because, from a Critical Race Methodology perspective, counter-storytelling treats such narratives not as secondary reactions but as forms of knowledge that challenge dominant institutional accounts (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

A recurring feature of these accounts was that parents did not passively accept professional framing. Yusuf (PB04), for example, challenged the way safeguarding could reduce parenting to isolated concerns while ignoring the larger labour of care. He argued that professionals often “only see the problem” and “do not see the effort,” suggesting that what was overlooked was not only cultural differences but parental commitment itself. This is significant because it shows that resistance did not always involve denying difficulty. Sometimes it involved insisting that the family be seen in fuller and more relational terms than the official narrative allowed.

Rehema (PB03) offered one of the clearest examples of counter-narrative. She rejected the assumption that child removal should be treated as the obvious response to culturally rooted disciplinary practices, insisting instead that “it’s education, educating the parents.” She further argued that authorities “have to do everything possible to keep our family together,” thereby proposing an alternative framework in which explanation, cultural understanding, and family preservation are foregrounded over punishment and separation. This is important because her account does more than criticise the system; it actively redefines what good intervention should look like. Rather than accepting the dominant framing of risk, she presents a counter-story in which support and education, not only coercion, are central to child welfare.

Isaac (PB02) also resisted institutional reduction by asserting the effort he had continued to make as a parent despite the shaming effects of intervention. His account suggests that, although the system left him feeling humiliated and diminished, he did not accept that this meant he had failed morally as a father. He instead emphasised persistence,

endurance, and commitment, insisting that, however difficult the process became, “you've got to be strong.” He also made clear that he did not simply withdraw into passivity but continued to hold on to parental identity and responsibility even under conditions that made that identity difficult to sustain. In this sense, resistance did not appear through dramatic confrontation but through sustained refusal to equate institutional accusation with truth.

Other forms of agency emerged through parents' efforts to correct their representation. Fatuma (PB08) challenged professional documentation directly, stating that “they wrote things that made it sound worse than it was.” Milkah (PB07) described reviewing a case report and insisting that “if something is not true, it should not stay there.” Jamila (PB15) similarly explained that she sometimes wanted written agendas before meetings so that she could “know what they are saying about me before I walk in.” These examples are important because they show resistance operating at the level of institutional text. Parents were not only reacting emotionally to the intervention; they were also contesting the written forms through which the intervention became durable and authoritative. This is a significant form of epistemic resistance because it challenges the assumption that professional records should be accepted as uncontested.

Mercy (PB13) also offered a powerful counter-narrative. Her account did not simply describe social services involvement as painful. It reinterpreted it as a process of racialised disbelief, moral humiliation, and profound institutional misrecognition. She repeatedly described trying to explain the cultural, religious, medical, and family context of her daughter's situation, only to feel that the family had already been cast as wrong.

Her resistance took the form of continuing to speak, to contest, and to insist that what was called protection was often experienced as harm. Particularly significant here is that Mercy (PB13) grounded her resistance not only in feeling but in knowledge. Drawing on her own background as a nurse and midwife, she challenged the idea that professionals automatically knew better than the family about care, dignity, risk, and support. Her narrative, therefore, contests both factual misrepresentation and the wider hierarchy of expertise that subordinates parental knowledge.

Resistance also appeared through the reassertion of emotional and moral meanings that professional discourse tended to flatten. Susan (PB18), as reflected in the wider dataset, challenged narrow assumptions about maternal presentation by insisting that “strength does not always look soft.” This is particularly important because it resists the expectation that care, especially maternal care, must always appear in a recognisable institutional form. Her statement reclaims composure, firmness, and emotional containment as possible signs of strength rather than evidence of coldness, indifference, or non-cooperation. In doing so, her account challenges the cultural and gendered norms by which some parents are judged credible and others lacking.

Gladys (PB14) contributed to this theme by shifting the problem away from parental unwillingness and towards institutional failure to educate and support. She argued that if the state expected migrant parents to parent according to UK norms, then it also had a responsibility to teach them how the system worked. Her insistence that parents needed guidance, information, and orientation was not merely a matter of practical advice. It was also a challenge to a system that could punish people for not understanding rules they had

never been properly shown. This is another form of counter-storytelling because it shifts the problem from individual parental deficiency to state neglect in providing culturally responsive preparation and support.

The agency also appeared in the ways in which parents drew on other spaces of interpretation beyond formal safeguarding. For example, Faith (PB05), a Kenyan-born Black African mother in Northwest England, was married, Christian, postgraduate educated and working in domestic violence support. Her account is analytically important because she occupied both a service-user and a professional-support position. She understood domestic abuse, safeguarding and support systems, yet her own family experience still had to be negotiated within institutional structures that could interpret African migrant motherhood through risk, vulnerability or cultural difference. Her account, therefore, shows that knowledge of the system did not remove the racialised and gendered pressures of being assessed as a Black African mother.

Faith (PB05) described the church as a place where she could talk openly about what was happening and hear from “other mothers” who had been through similar things. Janet (PB11) similarly explained that she relied on friends who had already gone through social services to understand “what meetings are like and how to prepare.” These accounts suggest that community networks, churches, and diaspora spaces functioned not only as emotional support but also as alternative sites of knowledge production. From a Critical Race Methodology perspective, this matters because experiential knowledge is not produced solely by individuals; it can be shared, tested, and affirmed collectively (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). At the same time, the reliance on these spaces also reveals

something about the limits of statutory safeguarding itself. When parents look elsewhere to understand what is happening to them, that may indicate unresolved barriers of trust, cultural understanding, and accessibility within formal systems (Bernard & Harris, 2019; Okpokiri, 2021).

Importantly, resistance did not erase fear. Parents could be afraid and still resist; outwardly compliant yet inwardly oppositional; emotionally exhausted yet committed to asserting care, truth, and dignity. This layered quality is central to the findings. Agency was not always dramatic, collective, or immediately transformative. More often, it took the form of correction, clarification, reframing, survival, and the refusal to let institutional narratives stand uncontested.

This theme, therefore, complicates any portrayal of parents as passive recipients of professional categorisation. Even within unequal and tightly managed settings, participants defended their identities, asserted parental love, questioned institutional narratives, and proposed alternative understandings of what meaningful support should look like. Counter-narrative, in this sense, was not an optional addition to the data. It was one of the principal ways in which parents made sense of safeguarding and resisted being defined entirely by it.

6.6 Main Theme 5: Reimagining Safeguarding Through Lived Experience

The final theme moves beyond critique to consider how participants reimagined safeguarding through lived experience. Although parents described fear, humiliation,

misrecognition, and structural inequality, they did not only speak about what was wrong. Many also articulated how they believed safeguarding should differ. Their accounts, therefore, moved from testimony to proposal. In this sense, parents were not merely subjects of intervention but sources of insight into what fairer and more effective safeguarding might look like. This is significant because it shifts the analytical focus from professional design alone to participant-informed understandings of support, accountability, and care. It also aligns with Critical Race Methodology's emphasis on counter-storytelling as a source of knowledge that exposes institutional limits and imagines alternatives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

One of the clearest proposals across the interviews was that support should come earlier and should be more educative than punitive. Rehema (PB03) expressed this very directly when she insisted that "it's education, educating the parents," arguing that many families were judged before they had been helped to understand how the UK system worked. She further stated that authorities "have to do everything possible to keep our family together." These comments are important because they do not reject child protection altogether. Rather, they challenge the sequencing of the intervention. Instead of moving too quickly from concern to separation, Rehema (PB03) suggests that systems should first teach, explain, and support, especially where issues arise from cultural transition rather than deliberate harm.

Gladys (PB14) made a closely related argument but framed it more explicitly in terms of information and institutional preparation. She asked, in effect, how a parent could be expected to "be a parent in the UK" without being taught what that meant. Her reflections

on booklets, classes, and practical guidance are significant because they present safeguarding failure not only as individual misjudgement, but as a failure of the state to equip migrant parents with the knowledge it later expects them to possess. This is a substantive policy and practice recommendation emerging directly from lived experience: if parenting expectations are culturally and legally different in the UK, then structured orientation and support should be available before families encounter systems in crisis.

Several participants also reimagined safeguarding as something that should work with families rather than against them. Yusuf (PB04) argued that “the system should be able to work with the family and support the families,” asking plainly, “Why remove the children?” His point was not that intervention is never necessary, but that removal should not become the primary or automatic response where support, explanation, and culturally informed assessment might achieve more. Isaac (PB02) made a similar point when he reflected on how harshly the system had responded and suggested that many parents needed help “gently” and “efficiently,” in ways that preserved family relationships rather than destroyed them. Together, these accounts reframe safeguarding as a practice that should begin with relational support and careful assessment, rather than with institutional defensibility alone.

Another major theme in participants’ reimagining of safeguarding concerned cultural understanding. Many parents did not argue for cultural relativism or for professionals to ignore harm. Rather, they argued that child protection should be better able to distinguish between genuine danger and cultural difference. Mercy (PB13) repeatedly suggested that race, religion, disability, and family practice were not being understood in context, and

that families could suffer deeply if they “fall into the wrong hands.” Her recommendation that there should be more people available to support BME families, more advocacy, more signposting, and more culturally informed understanding is therefore not simply a complaint. It is a practice model grounded in lived institutional experience. Likewise, Molina (PB06) and Karen (PB01) both emphasised the need for professionals to recognise that parental authority, expectations of respect, and patterns of communication may vary across contexts and should not be read through a single dominant normative frame.

Participants also imagined safeguarding as something that should distribute support both materially and emotionally. Rehema (PB03) was especially strong on this point. She questioned why the system would readily spend large sums once a child entered care but not provide practical help earlier when a family was trying to remain stable. In a similar vein, some participants implied that families were left unsupported with issues such as housing, childcare, uniforms, transport, or emotional support, only for these same pressures to later be folded into narratives of parental inadequacy. This suggests that fairer safeguarding would require a stronger orientation toward material support, particularly where families are already living with poverty, insecure housing, welfare exclusion, disability, or migration precarity (Featherstone, White and Morris, 2018; Saar-Heiman & Gupta, 2020).

A further element of reimagined safeguarding concerned communication and trust. Participants repeatedly suggested that systems would function better if professionals spoke more honestly, listened more carefully, and approached families with less presumption. Mercy (PB13), for example, described the need for workers who would not

enter, already assuming the parent was wrong. Gladys (PB14) proposed that parents need information they can understand. Edna (PB17), through contrast, showed how damaging it was when support was promised but not delivered, or when parents felt spoken over rather than listened to. These accounts together imply that safeguarding needs not only better policy, but better relational practice: clearer communication, respectful listening, and a stronger presumption that families can contribute meaningfully to solutions.

Some participants also spoke about the need for support structures outside statutory systems. Faith (PB05), a Kenyan-born Black African mother living in Northwest England, was married, Christian, postgraduate educated and working in domestic violence support. Her account is important because she was not unfamiliar with safeguarding, vulnerability or support work; she understood professional systems, yet still identified churches, migrant networks and community spaces as vital sources of emotional reassurance, practical advice and interpretation of what social services were doing. Janet (PB11), a Ghanaian-born Black British mother living in Northwest England, similarly pointed to the importance of community and informal support. Read together, these accounts show that community spaces were not simply cultural preferences or informal extras. They were protective interpretive spaces where racialised migrant families could make sense of professional intervention, seek trusted advice and preserve dignity in contexts where statutory involvement was often experienced as intimidating or unclear. Reimagined safeguarding therefore requires closer collaboration with trusted community spaces rather than assuming that all meaningful support must be state delivered. Such an approach also speaks to wider calls for culturally responsive and community-accountable forms of intervention (Bernard & Harris, 2019; Okpokiri, 2021).

Another important aspect of this theme is that participants did not simply ask for less intervention. They often asked for better intervention. Rehema (PB03), Isaac (PB02), Gladys (PB14), and Mercy (PB13) all make this point in different ways. Their narratives suggest that the problem is not the existence of child protection itself, but how it is organised, interpreted, and delivered. They wanted systems that could protect children without prematurely breaking families, systems that could distinguish lack of knowledge from deliberate harm, and systems that recognised the importance of dignity, cultural context, and relational continuity. In this way, their accounts resist any simple reading of parental testimony as anti-professional or anti-safeguarding. What they offer instead is a more relational, educative, and socially aware model of safeguarding.

This theme also underscores the importance of family preservation as a guiding principle. Rehema's (PB03) insistence that authorities should "do everything possible to keep our family together" and Yusuf's (PB04) question of why removal should come so quickly both reflect an understanding that separation should be a genuine last resort rather than a routine response to ambiguity, difficulty, or cultural misunderstanding. This resonates with wider critiques of child protection systems that move too quickly towards surveillance and separation under conditions of organisational risk aversion (Featherstone, White and Morris, 2018; Parton, 2014).

This theme, therefore, shows that participants were not only describing failures. They were also proposing a different vision of safeguarding. That vision included earlier and clearer education for parents, stronger family support, greater cultural understanding, better communication, more material assistance, closer collaboration with trusted

community networks, and a firmer commitment to keeping families together wherever possible. Through lived experience, participants reimagined safeguarding not as a system that primarily watches, judges, and separates, but as one that understands, supports, and intervenes proportionately.

6.6.1 Supportive Encounters and Relational Practice

Although much of the data in this chapter points to fear, misrecognition, and unequal intervention, participants did not describe all safeguarding encounters as uniformly harmful. A smaller but important strand of the findings concerned moments where support was experienced as practical, humane, or relationally meaningful. These encounters matter analytically because they show that parents were not rejecting help in principle. Rather, they were distinguishing between forms of intervention that intensified fear and those that enabled trust, clarity, and cooperation. In this sense, the issue was not simply whether professionals became involved, but how that involvement was enacted and whether families experienced it as supportive, respectful, and proportionate. This aligns with wider arguments that relational social work depends not only on procedure, but on trust, communication, and recognition of family context (Featherstone, White and Morris, 2018; Ruch, Turney and Ward, 2018).

Mercy (PB13) offered one of the clearest examples of a supportive encounter. Reflecting on an earlier period of involvement, she explained that when she first sought help for her daughter, “I got a social worker who was really supportive,” someone “who would come and visit,” who would organise support, and who helped the family know “where to go” and how to access crisis services. She said plainly, “When I did seek the social workers’

help, I was supported.” This is important because it shows that families did not necessarily approach social services with fixed hostility. Where workers were present, practical, and willing to guide and support, support could be experienced as stabilising rather than punitive. Mercy’s (PB13) contrast between this earlier phase and later harmful experiences also makes a wider point: what families often remember is not the label of the service itself, but the quality of the relationship and whether it felt genuinely helpful.

Isaac (PB02) also described variation between workers, and his account similarly resists any simplistic portrayal of all professional involvement as uniformly oppressive. Reflecting on one later worker, he said, “My last one was so helpful,” adding that “they could understand.” Elsewhere, he described a social work response in relation to his daughter as “really a balancing situation between me and the social service.” These statements are important because they suggest that supportive practice was possible when workers listened, de-escalated, and did not approach the family only through accusation. In Isaac’s (PB02) account, helpfulness was tied not to leniency, but to being treated with some fairness, explanation, and recognition of complexity.

The importance of being listened to also emerged strongly in these more supportive accounts. What parents valued was often not abstract “service provision” alone, but human recognition. Supportive encounters were remembered as those in which workers explained processes clearly, did not rush to judgment, and showed some willingness to understand the family’s position before fixing meaning. This is one reason Mercy (PB13) spoke positively about earlier involvement while later describing severe trauma. The difference lay not simply in the type of case, but in whether support was experienced as relationally grounded or as institutionally imposed.

Some participants also implied that supportive practice was most visible when professionals recognised the difference between care need and parental fault. Isaac's (PB02) account suggests that help became possible when workers did not treat every difficulty as evidence of danger. Mercy (PB13), in her earlier positive reflections, also valued support that connected the family to services without immediately pathologising them. These accounts indicate that parents were more able to work with professionals when intervention was not felt as an accusation from the outset.

Relational support was not confined to statutory professionals alone. Participants also highlighted the importance of supportive encounters in churches, migrant communities, and informal peer networks. Faith (PB05) explained that in church, "other mothers told me their experiences and helped me see that I was not alone." Janet (PB11) likewise described drawing on friends who had already gone through social services, saying they told her, "What meetings are like and how to prepare." These examples are significant because they show that, from the parents' perspective, relational practice often extended beyond official social work contact. Trust was frequently built in spaces where parents felt they could speak without immediate judgment. Such encounters provided emotional steadiness, practical knowledge, and a sense of not facing the system alone.

These community-based forms of support are analytically important for two reasons. First, they show that parents often need accompaniment as much as intervention. Second, they suggest that where statutory systems were experienced as intimidating or culturally

distant, trusted community networks could function as interpretive and emotional bridges. In this sense, supportive encounters were not only about what professionals did directly, but also about whether families had access to people who could help them understand, prepare for, and survive safeguarding processes (Okpokiri, 2021; Bernard & Harris, 2019).

At the same time, the positive accounts were often fragile and contingent. Parents did not present supportive encounters as proof that the system was broadly fair. Instead, they tended to describe them as exceptions, moments, or individual relationships that stood out against the broader context of stress and mistrust. This makes them no less important. In fact, it strengthens their analytical value. Because parents could clearly distinguish between harmful and helpful practices, their accounts offer insight into what relationally competent safeguarding looked like from the ground up: listening, explaining, not assuming the worst too quickly, recognising context, and helping families navigate services rather than merely monitoring them.

This subtheme, therefore, complicates any wholly one-dimensional account of the findings. Participants did not reject support; they valued it deeply when it was respectful, explanatory, and practically useful. Supportive encounters were those in which workers were experienced as human, present, and willing to understand before judging. They were also those in which families were connected to knowledge, resources, and relationships that reduced isolation rather than deepened it. In that sense, the findings suggest that relational practice was not peripheral to effective safeguarding. It was one of the

conditions under which intervention could become bearable, credible, and, at times, genuinely supportive.

6.7 Chapter Summary and Transition

Overall, the findings in this chapter reveal that parents' experiences of safeguarding were shaped by far more than discrete professional decisions or isolated moments of intervention. Rather, they were produced through cumulative processes of institutional visibility, surveillance, interpretive judgement, structural constraint, emotional strain, and negotiated agency. Parents described fear, caution, and adaptation, but they also described resilience, resistance, critique, and clear proposals for reform. Their accounts therefore show that safeguarding was experienced not simply as a set of formal procedures, but as an ongoing relational and institutional process that could reshape family life, parental identity, and trust in public systems.

Moreover, the findings suggest that child protection in England operated through interlocking processes in which visibility invited monitoring, monitoring informed judgement, judgement shaped documentation, and documentation reinforced future intervention under conditions of structural inequality. At the same time, parents were not passive recipients of these processes. They interpreted them, challenged them, and produced counter-narratives that exposed the limitations of dominant institutional accounts.

The next chapter turns to the perspectives of social workers. It examines how professional reasoning, organisational pressure, procedural demands, and institutional structures shape frontline decision-making, and considers how these professional accounts intersect with, complicate, and illuminate the parental experiences presented in this chapter.

CHAPTER 7: SOCIAL WORK FINDINGS

7.1 Introduction

This chapter presents findings from interviews with five frontline social workers engaged in statutory child protection practice in England. Unlike Chapter 6, which centred on parents' lived experience, this chapter examines how practitioners described the institutional pressures, interpretive dilemmas, and organisational limits that shaped their work with first-generation Sub-Saharan African families. The purpose is not to treat practitioner accounts as a neutral benchmark against which parental narratives can be judged. Rather, these interviews illuminate the professional logic through which safeguarding decisions are made, justified, and constrained in practice.

The analysis was conducted using reflexive thematic analysis. Initial coding identified a wider set of related patterns, which were then organised into four broader thematic domains:

Professional Language, Categorisation and the Construction of Difference; Risk, Accountability and Professional Judgement; Structural Constraints in Safeguarding Practice; and Reframing Practice Through Culturally Responsive Reform (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2021). Given the small sample of practitioners, the chapter does not claim to represent the views of all social workers. Instead, it offers a focused account of how a small group of practitioners reflected on race, culture, uncertainty, defensibility, and the practical limits of support.

Analytically, the chapter remains cautious about over-generalisation. Where a pattern is raised by several practitioners, this is stated directly. Where a point comes from one or

two interviews, it is framed more tentatively. This matters because one risk in finding chapters is moving too quickly from selective evidence to broad claims. The aim here is therefore to keep participant voice central, to move carefully from quotation to interpretation, and to use theory only where it helps clarify the institutional significance of practitioners' accounts.

Although Critical Race Theory informs the wider thesis, the chapter is not an abstract theoretical exercise. Its central concern is empirical: how social workers described the categories they used, the pressures under which they worked, and the extent to which safeguarding systems could respond meaningfully to the structural conditions affecting families. Across the interviews, practitioners often described uncertainty rather than confidence, institutional caution rather than freedom, and constrained judgement rather than unlimited discretion. At the same time, some reflected critically on the limits of the language of generic diversity, the difficulty of interpreting parenting across cultural contexts, and the need for more structurally informed and culturally responsive practice.

7.2 Main Theme 1: Professional Language, Categorisation and the Construction of Difference

This theme examines how social workers describe the language used to name race, culture, difference, and family life in safeguarding practice. Their accounts suggested that terminology was not merely descriptive. It shaped how families were understood, how concerns were recorded, and how professional interpretation was organised. Two linked issues were especially prominent: the politics of broad institutional labels such as "BME", and the difficulty of interpreting parenting norms across different cultural and migratory contexts.

7.2.1 Professional Language, Race and the Politics of “BME”

Several practitioners reflected critically on the continued use of broad administrative terms such as “BME”. Katie (PSW01) explained that professionals are sometimes told to “engage the BME community”, but, as she noted, “no one specifies who that includes”. In her view, the term functions as bureaucratic shorthand, reducing important cultural, linguistic and migratory differences into a single category. Judy (PSW02) similarly described BME as “the label the system recognises”, noting that it is used “because it’s in the forms”, even though it “doesn’t really tell you much about the family”. Linda (PSW05) expressed the homogenising effect more directly, observing that BME “can blur very different communities into one group” and may hide “the specific challenges faced by African communities”. She emphasised that within Black African identities alone, there is “enormous diversity, language, tribe, migration story”, all of which shape engagement. These reflections suggest that while BME may satisfy institutional reporting requirements, it offers limited relational and analytical precision in practice.

Terminology was also described as a matter of recognition and respect. Sylvia (PSW04) noted that families increasingly prefer more precise descriptors, explaining that “saying African or Caribbean shows respect for their unique backgrounds”. She described routinely asking families how they identify and “honouring that”, recognising that self-definition can strengthen trust. Linda (PSW05) similarly remarked that “language shows whether people feel seen”, linking terminology to relational legitimacy.

At the same time, the interviews suggested that workers did not always feel confident naming race directly. Sylvia (PSW04) explained that “you’re careful how you mention race”, describing it as “dangerous territory” in formal documentation. Agnes (PSW03) similarly noted that practitioners are “very careful about mentioning race”, especially in written reports, because it may be viewed as inappropriate or discriminatory. Consequently, race was often substituted with indirect terms such as “culture”, “background”, or “communication style”.

Katie (PSW01) acknowledged that “we talk about cultural difference more easily than race”, describing culture as a safer category that signals variation without appearing to stereotype. However, culture often seemed to serve as a placeholder for the unfamiliar rather than a deeply analysed concept. Linda (PSW05) noted that “culture comes up when there’s something we don’t quite understand”, suggesting that it is sometimes invoked reactively rather than systematically explored. These accounts indicate that neutrality is frequently equated with professionalism, even when racialised dynamics may influence interpretation.

These reflections matter because language enters the case record and therefore helps shape institutional expectations. Judy (PSW02) noted that “people read the file before they meet the family”, adding that “language carries expectations”. Once descriptors such as “hard to engage” or “lacking insight” appear in documentation, they can influence subsequent assessments. Agnes (PSW03) similarly observed that “once certain phrases are written, they shape how the next worker sees the family”, emphasising how documentation creates narrative continuity.

Importantly, participants did not present themselves as intentionally mislabelling families. Instead, they described navigating organisational norms that prioritise defensible and standardised language. As Sylvia (PSW04) summarised, “you learn what’s acceptable language”, indicating that professional discourse is influenced by institutional boundaries as much as by individual judgement. Katie (PSW01) also noted that training on race was limited, commenting that “we get generic training”, but that “real conversations about race don’t happen often in supervision”.

Several participants acknowledged the limitations of avoiding direct engagement with race. Agnes (PSW03) reflected that “sometimes we’re talking around issues”, recognising that migration experiences and discrimination influence family interactions with the system, yet these may remain underexplored in assessments. Katie (PSW01) similarly noted that “by not saying it, we don’t really deal with it”. These findings show that professional language operates at the intersection of policy, identity and institutional culture. BME remains an entrenched administrative category, but its relational and analytical adequacy is called into question by practitioners themselves. Race is recognised but often displaced into culturally coded or seemingly neutral descriptions, reflecting broader institutional discomfort with explicit discussion. Language, therefore, shapes categorisation, credibility and interpretive framing within safeguarding practice.

7.2.2 Cultural Interpretation and Parenting Norms

Social workers described cultural interpretation as one of the most complex and uncertain aspects of safeguarding practice with first-generation Sub-Saharan African families. Participants consistently reflected on the difficulty of distinguishing between culturally embedded parenting norms and behaviours that may meet statutory thresholds for intervention. Although safeguarding principles are legally defined, their application was described as interpretive and context-dependent (Department for Education, 2018).

Several practitioners acknowledged that their professional training had not sufficiently prepared them to assess culturally specific parenting practices. Agnes (PSW03) explained that “there are times when you’re not sure if something is a safeguarding issue or just a different way of parenting”, noting that practices such as strict discipline could appear “unfamiliar” rather than clearly harmful. This uncertainty reflects wider concerns in social work scholarship about the limitations of culturally generic training in increasingly diverse practice contexts (Bernard & Harris, 2019; Tedam, 2021).

Physical discipline emerged as a common source of tension. Katie (PSW01) observed that “some African parents believe in physical discipline, like smacking, and they don’t hide it”, adding that “for them, it’s part of how they were raised”. Judy (PSW02) similarly recalled parents explaining that “that’s how I was disciplined and I turned out fine”, demonstrating the intergenerational transmission of disciplinary norms. At the same time, participants clarified that UK safeguarding law places clear boundaries around physical chastisement (Department for Education, 2018). Sylvia (PSW04) described situations in which parents were “shocked” to learn that practices viewed as normal in their countries

of origin could be interpreted as harmful in the UK. She explained that “it becomes a cultural clash”, especially when parents feel their intentions are misunderstood.

Social workers highlighted the importance of careful communication in such situations. Rather than framing disciplinary differences as immediate wrongdoing, some practitioners described adopting an explanatory approach. Linda (PSW05) explained that she would say, “in the UK, this could be seen differently”, before discussing “safer strategies”. This reflects attempts to balance legal compliance with relational sensitivity, a tension also identified in scholarship on culturally responsive safeguarding practice (Bernard & Harris, 2019).

Authority structures and expectations of obedience also played a significant role. Judy (PSW02) described working with recently arrived young people who were expected to show unquestioned respect towards adults, explaining that “children are expected to follow rules without argument”. She reflected that this dynamic could be misunderstood by professionals unfamiliar with hierarchical family structures. Conversely, children raised in the UK sometimes challenged parental authority in ways that increased intergenerational conflict. Katie (PSW01) noted that adolescents “absorb British norms very quickly”, which can lead to “conflict at home”. In such cases, practitioners reported difficulty distinguishing whether disputes posed safeguarding risks or reflected normative adaptation to a new cultural environment.

Communication styles were also open to interpretation. Sylvia (PSW04) noted that limited eye contact, silence during meetings, or formal modes of address could be misread as evasiveness. She explained that “in some cultures, not making eye contact is respectful”, yet within safeguarding contexts, it may be interpreted as avoidance. These examples illustrate how professional assessment is influenced not only by behaviour itself, but also by culturally embedded expectations about what constitutes openness, co-operation and appropriate emotional expression (White et al., 2009).

Some participants described consulting colleagues or seeking informal advice when uncertain. Agnes (PSW03) stated that she would “sense-check” her impressions with more experienced practitioners, although she acknowledged that “we don’t always have structured cultural guidance”. This reliance on informal knowledge, rather than systematic training, highlights institutional gaps in preparing practitioners for culturally complex assessments (Tadam, 2021).

Importantly, social workers did not describe cultural differences as inherently problematic. Several highlighted strengths within African family systems include strong extended-family networks and clear role expectations. Linda (PSW05) noted that “community involvement can be protective”, although it may sometimes be misunderstood within individualised safeguarding frameworks.

Nevertheless, participants recognised that uncertainty itself can heighten professional anxiety. Agnes (PSW03) admitted that when something feels “different or unfamiliar”, it may cause concern even without clear evidence of harm. In risk-focused systems, where practitioners are encouraged to anticipate worst-case scenarios, unfamiliarity may be interpreted with caution (Munro, 2011; Parton, 2014).

Across the interviews, social workers described navigating “grey areas” between cultural respect and statutory compliance. Sylvia (PSW04) summed up this tension by stating that “you’re trying to protect the child, but also not escalate something unnecessarily”. Cultural interpretation was therefore described as an ongoing negotiation rather than a fixed judgement.

These findings demonstrate that safeguarding assessments involving first-generation Sub-Saharan African families are shaped not only by statutory criteria, but also by culturally influenced interpretations of discipline, authority, communication and respect. Professional uncertainty did not stem solely from individual knowledge gaps or lack of goodwill; it also reflected the interpretive challenges of applying standardised safeguarding frameworks across diverse family contexts.

7.3 Main Theme 2: Risk, Accountability and Professional Judgement

Main Theme 2 explores how professional judgement is shaped by risk-focused organisational cultures, accountability pressures and interpretive assessments of parental behaviour. Social workers did not describe themselves as making decisions in isolation.

Instead, they framed safeguarding practice as taking place within contexts of uncertainty, defensibility and potential future blame. This theme is developed through two related subthemes: Risk Culture and Fear of Blame, and Engagement, Compliance and Professional Judgement.

7.3.1 Risk Culture and Fear of Blame

A recurrent finding across all five practitioner interviews was that safeguarding decisions are made in organisational environments where risk management is central. Participants described child protection practice as shaped by anticipation, accountability and retrospective review. Risk was not presented merely as an assessment outcome but as a guiding principle that influences daily professional reasoning (Munro, 2011; Parton, 2014).

Judy (PSW02) explained that “you’re always thinking about what could happen later”, indicating that even when immediate circumstances appear stable, professionals are trained to consider possible future harm. This aligns with Munro’s (2011) account of defensive practice, where fear of future harm and external review can influence intervention thresholds. Sylvia (PSW04) similarly noted that “it’s not just about what you see now, but what you might be asked about in the future”. Her account suggests that decision-making was influenced not only by current family circumstances, but also by anticipated scrutiny from managers, inspectors, courts or serious case review processes. This reflects broader scholarship on audit culture in social work, in which documentation and justifiability become central to professional reasoning (White et al., 2009; Featherstone, White and Morris, 2018).

Several participants described escalation as more institutionally defensible than de-escalation.

Katie (PSW01) stated that “doing more is easier to justify than doing less”, while Agnes (PSW03) observed that “closing a case carries more risk than keeping it open”, particularly where multiple family stressors are present. These accounts suggest that organisational cultures may encourage continued involvement because intervention is often easier to defend than withdrawal. Likewise, participants also described risk as cumulative. Linda (PSW05) explained that “once something is in the file, it carries weight”, adding that “it’s hard to step away from that”. This indicates that previous concerns can continue to shape later assessments, reinforcing existing case narratives in ways consistent with research on the durability of recorded suspicion (White et al., 2009).

Although no participant referred to a specific child protection inquiry, serious case reviews and media scrutiny were described as part of the wider professional context. Judy (PSW02) noted that “everyone knows what happens when something goes wrong”, illustrating how high-profile child protection failures continue to shape professional anxiety. As Munro (2011) argues, the legacy of such cases can embed blame avoidance within safeguarding culture.

Structural hardship was also described as a source of professional uncertainty. Agnes (PSW03) noted that “when there are many pressures on a family, it feels harder to step back”, adding that “uncertainty itself becomes a risk”. This suggests that poverty, housing insecurity and immigration-related instability may be interpreted within safeguarding

systems as indicators of concern, even when they are primarily effects of structural inequality (Featherstone, White and Morris, 2018).

Supervision was also described as shaped by defensibility. Sylvia (PSW04) explained that professional discussions often focus on whether decisions could be “defended if questioned”, rather than solely on relational or contextual understanding. Professional reasoning was therefore shaped not only by direct engagement with families, but also by accountability structures and organisational expectations (Parton, 2014). Subsequently, fear of blame was not described as panic, but as a constant background condition. Katie (PSW01) reflected that “fear is always in the background”, especially in cases involving unfamiliar cultural practices. When parenting appeared strict or culturally unfamiliar, practitioners reported increased anxiety about “missing something”, which could lead to cautious or precautionary intervention.

Importantly, social workers did not present themselves as deliberately over-intervening with Sub-Saharan African families. Instead, they described working within systems that prioritise anticipation, action and defensibility. As Judy (PSW02) stated, “it’s safer to act than to regret later”. In this context, precaution becomes a routine feature of practice. Consequently, these findings demonstrate that safeguarding decisions are shaped not only by individual professional judgement, but also by risk-focused institutional cultures. Anticipatory reasoning, managerial oversight and accountability frameworks influence how concerns are interpreted, how uncertainty is managed and how cases develop over time (Munro, 2011; Parton, 2014; Featherstone, White and Morris, 2018).

7.3.2 Engagement, Compliance and Professional Judgement

Social workers consistently identified parental engagement and compliance as key indicators in safeguarding decision-making. Attendance at meetings, responsiveness to communication, emotional presentation, and adherence to agreed plans were all described as factors influencing professional assessments of risk and parental capacity. Although safeguarding is formally framed as partnership working (Department for Education, 2018), participants' accounts suggest that engagement is often interpreted within organisational contexts shaped by anticipatory risk, managerial accountability and defensibility (Munro, 2011; Parton, 2014). In this context, parental responses to intervention become evidence.

Katie (PSW01) described engagement in practical terms, explaining that “turning up matters”, and that when “a parent attends meetings, answers calls, follows through with plans, that reassures people”. Similarly, Sylvia (PSW04) noted that when “parents are on board, it feels safer”, adding that “there’s less anxiety about what might happen next”. In these accounts, compliance functions not only as a form of collaboration but also as a source of reassurance within risk-oriented systems. At the same time, social workers recognised that engagement may be procedural rather than substantive. Agnes (PSW03) reflected that “you can have compliance on paper”, where parents “attend everything, say yes to everything”, while practitioners remain uncertain about “how they’re feeling underneath”. Linda (PSW05) similarly observed that “sometimes parents say yes because they’re scared”, emphasising that agreement does not necessarily indicate trust or genuine endorsement. Judy (PSW02) noted that “many African families come in already worried

about removal”, and that “that fear shapes how they respond”. In such cases, compliance may reflect self-protection rather than partnership.

Emotional presentation was also described as influencing professional judgement. Katie (PSW01) explained that “strong emotions can raise concern”, especially when a parent appears “very upset or very angry”. However, Agnes (PSW03) warned that “parents don’t always act like themselves when they feel threatened”, suggesting that emotional intensity should not be interpreted straightforwardly as incapacity. These accounts highlight the interpretive ambiguity of affect in high-stakes statutory encounters. Furthermore, challenge and disagreement were described as particularly sensitive. Sylvia (PSW04) acknowledged that when “a parent disputes an assessment, it can feel uncomfortable”, which may create anxiety about whether the parent accepts the seriousness of the concerns. Katie (PSW01) similarly admitted that “challenge can sometimes be written as a lack of insight”. These reflections echo research showing how professional systems may associate cooperation with credibility and disagreement with increased risk (Featherstone, White and Morris, 2018; White et al., 2009).

Communication style was also recognised as influencing professional perception. Linda (PSW05) noted that when “someone avoids eye contact or answers briefly, it can be read as evasive”, even though it “might just be fear”. Judy (PSW02) added that “some parents are very formal and quiet”, which “can be mistaken for non-engagement”. Participants therefore recognised that cultural norms around authority, restraint and deference may be misunderstood within safeguarding contexts. Additionally, organisational pressures

further influenced how engagement was assessed. Agnes (PSW03) explained that “there’s pressure to show progress” and that engagement “becomes part of how that progress is measured”. Sylvia (PSW04) described this process as becoming “quite binary”, with practitioners effectively asked: “Is the parent engaging? Is there a change?” In audit-driven contexts, visible cooperation provides measurable evidence to support defensible decision-making.

Some social workers described efforts to resist reductive interpretations. Linda (PSW05) stated, “I try to look beyond surface behaviour. If someone is defensive, I ask why.” Nonetheless, participants acknowledged that engagement assessments take place within systems that prioritise accountability and justification. Katie (PSW01) summarised this by stating, “You have to justify your decisions”, and “Engagement becomes part of the evidence”. Significantly, several practitioners explicitly recognised that compliance may be shaped by fear of child removal. Judy (PSW02) observed that “families often comply because they’re afraid of losing their children”, emphasising that this “doesn’t mean they trust the system”. Sylvia (PSW04) similarly reflected that “there’s no neutral ground” because social workers “hold authority, even when we’re trying to build a partnership”. These accounts highlight the unequal power relations embedded within statutory safeguarding practice (Munro, 2011; Parton, 2014).

Even social workers did not present themselves as intentionally equating compliance with safety. Instead, they described working within systems in which visible cooperation alleviates institutional anxiety, whereas disagreement increases uncertainty. Engagement, therefore, functions as both a relational process and an organisational measure.

Attendance, tone, body language, responsiveness and challenge are not neutral facts; they are interpreted through frameworks shaped by risk governance, professional accountability and unequal authority (Munro, 2011; Parton, 2014; Featherstone, White and Morris, 2018).

7.4 Main Theme 3: Structural Constraints in Safeguarding Practice

Main Theme 3 explores the material and organisational barriers shaping social work practice. Participants did not describe themselves as working within systems rich in preventative resources. Instead, they highlighted high thresholds, reduced early help services, housing shortages, immigration complexities, heavy paperwork demands, and limited time for relational work. This theme is developed through one cohesive subtheme: Structural Constraints and Limits of Support.

7.4.1 Structural Constraints and Limits of Support

Social workers' accounts consistently highlighted that safeguarding practice with first-generation Sub-Saharan African families takes place within materially limited institutional contexts. Rather than describing systems designed primarily around early and preventative support, participants described services shaped by high thresholds, scarce resources and organisational expectations focused on risk management. These conditions affected not only the type of support available but also how the intervention itself was perceived by families and practitioners.

Several practitioners described a decline in preventative support over time. Judy (PSW02) noted that “a lot of the early support we used to have just isn’t there anymore”, explaining

that families are often referred to statutory services only after concerns have escalated. Intervention therefore “comes in late, when things already look serious”, because community-based supports that might previously have stabilised family stress have been reduced. This reflects wider evidence of the retrenchment of early-help services in England under austerity and the restructuring of funding for children’s services (Featherstone, White and Morris, 2018; Bywaters et al., 2016).

More so, social worker participants frequently described a gap between recognising need and being able to meet it. Linda (PSW05) noted that “what families really need is housing stability or financial breathing space”, yet safeguarding teams “can’t fix those things”. Instead, practitioners are left “monitoring risk rather than solving the problem”. This distinction echoes research showing that socioeconomic hardship is often reframed in child protection as parental risk rather than structural inequality (Featherstone et al., 2018; Morris et al., 2018).

Housing precarity was described as a recurring background issue in cases involving Sub-Saharan African families. Katie (PSW01) explained that overcrowding and temporary accommodation “create stress in the home”, yet these pressures are seldom addressed through safeguarding intervention. Instead, they can become part of assessment narratives. As she stated, “You can see the strain, but the framework asks what the parent is doing about it”. Here, structural hardship is translated into evaluative judgements about parental capacity. This aligns with research showing that poverty and child protection involvement are closely linked, with economically marginalised families

disproportionately drawn into statutory systems (Bywaters et al., 2016; Featherstone et al., 2018).

Immigration-related uncertainty was also described as influencing safeguarding pathways. Agnes (PSW03) noted that families with insecure status “are already living with fear”, and that this affects how they engage with services. However, statutory teams have limited ability to alter immigration conditions: “We can’t change someone’s visa situation, but it still impacts everything.” Immigration insecurity was therefore recognised as a key aspect of family stress, yet it remains largely outside the scope of formal safeguarding intervention.

Time pressure imposed another constraint. Several participants noted that caseload complexity limited opportunities for trust-building and contextual understanding. Sylvia (PSW04) explained that “you’d like to spend time building trust, especially where there’s cultural misunderstanding, but you’re working to deadlines”. Statutory timescales, court schedules and performance targets set the pace of practice. This aligns with wider research on managerialism in children’s services, which shows that audit cultures and procedural accountability can limit relational work and prioritise documentation over ongoing engagement (Parton, 2014; White et al., 2009).

Recording requirements contributed to these pressures. Judy (PSW02) stated that “a lot of your time goes into writing”, noting that documentation is essential for defensibility

and inspection compliance. However, this administrative work reduces the time available for direct contact with families. As Munro (2011) argued, bureaucratic complexity can displace professional judgement and relationship-based practice. Participants' accounts indicate that these pressures remain deeply embedded in everyday safeguarding work.

Significantly, social workers did not present these constraints as socially neutral. Several acknowledged that structural limitations disproportionately affect racialised and migrant families, who are more likely to face poverty, housing instability and insecure immigration status. Linda (PSW05) noted that “when you have multiple stressors, the case feels heavier”, adding that cumulative hardship “raises professional anxiety”. Although expressed in practical terms, this aligns with research showing that structural inequality increases contact with child protection systems (Bywaters et al., 2016).

In the absence of sufficient preventative infrastructure, statutory involvement often became the main form of intervention. Katie (PSW01) described situations where “keeping the case open is the only way to ensure someone is watching out for the child”, even when the underlying issues were mainly economic or social. Monitoring, therefore, serves as a substitute for material support, reflecting broader criticisms of risk-focused welfare systems in which surveillance expands as redistributive support decreases (Parton, 2014).

These accounts illustrate that safeguarding practice with first-generation Sub-Saharan African families is shaped by complex structural constraints: reduced early help services, housing shortages, immigration uncertainty, high caseloads, and audit-driven

documentation requirements. Intervention intensity cannot, therefore, be viewed solely as a matter of individual professional choice. Instead, it must be understood within organisational and socioeconomic contexts that prioritise risk management over structural change.

7.5 Main Theme 4: Reframing Practice Through Culturally Responsive Reform

Main Theme 4 presents practitioners' reflections on what needs to change to improve safeguarding engagement with first-generation Sub-Saharan African families. Although social workers identified significant organisational and structural barriers, they also proposed reforms. These proposals did not involve weakening statutory safeguarding duties. Instead, they focused on making practice more culturally responsive, relational, structurally aware, and more reflective of race, migration and institutional power.

7.5.1 Practitioner Reflections on Reform and Culturally Responsive Practice

A recurring theme across the interviews was the inadequacy of generic diversity training. Social workers distinguished between broad awareness of equality and deeper, culturally responsive practice. Agnes (PSW03) explained that “we get general equality training, but it's not specific enough to understand African family systems”. For her, meaningful reform would require practical learning about parenting norms, authority structures, migration experiences and how these shape family behaviour.

Linda (PSW05) similarly argued that organisational commitment needs to go beyond terminology and become embedded in everyday assessment practice. As she noted, “it's not just about using inclusive language; it's about changing how assessments are done”.

This reflects broader critiques in social work scholarship that multiculturalism can become procedural rather than transformative if not accompanied by structural reflexivity and antiracist analysis (Bernard, 2020; Tendam, 2021).

Participants were not advocating cultural relativism or the suspension of safeguarding standards. Instead, they emphasised the importance of an interpretation that considers context. Katie (PSW01) stated that “safeguarding principles stay the same, but how you apply them has to consider the family’s background”. The concern was therefore not about the legitimacy of safeguarding itself, but about how statutory principles are interpreted across different cultural and migratory contexts.

Several social workers identified a significant preventative gap: the lack of early guidance for newly arrived families regarding UK child protection laws and expectations. Judy (PSW02) noted that “many families only learn about safeguarding expectations when they are already in crisis”, suggesting that clearer information should be available much earlier. Linda (PSW05) reinforced this point, explaining that “people come with parenting practices that are normal where they’re from, but not lawful here”. In this context, early legal and safeguarding orientation was viewed as a form of prevention rather than surveillance, particularly regarding physical discipline and other practices that may lead to referrals.

Practitioners also emphasised the importance of working with community organisations and trusted leaders. Judy (PSW02) recalled a case where a respected community figure “made the family feel safer talking”. Sylvia (PSW04) similarly suggested that working

with faith leaders and grassroots organisations could reduce fear and improve communication. These accounts reflect wider calls within anti-racist social work for partnership-based approaches that value community knowledge rather than relying only on statutory authority (Bernard & Harris, 2018; Tedam, 2021).

At the same time, practitioners recognised that community partnerships must remain ethical and voluntary. They raised concerns about confidentiality and the risk that mediation through community figures could leave families feeling exposed. Nevertheless, collaborative work was broadly viewed as a promising way to build trust, improve communication and support engagement.

Several practitioners also reflected on the importance of cultural humility. Katie (PSW01) observed that “families can feel the power imbalance immediately”, especially in racially asymmetrical encounters, and stressed the importance of “cultural humility, not colour-blindness”. Linda (PSW05) similarly advised: “Don’t assume. Ask. Let families explain how they see things.” These comments framed effective practice not as mastery of cultural facts but as openness, reflexivity, and a willingness to learn. This aligns with scholarship emphasising positional awareness, reflexivity and anti-racist practice in social work (Gillborn, 2015; Bernard, 2020).

Supervision was also identified as a crucial site for reform. Sylvia (PSW04) suggested that supervision should explicitly address race and bias rather than focusing narrowly on procedural compliance. This positions reform as an organisational issue rather than

merely an individual practitioner responsibility. Anti-racist reflection, therefore, needs to be incorporated into routine professional structures, rather than confined to isolated training sessions (Tadam, 2021).

Despite systemic pressures, participants also described relational and restorative aims within practice. Judy (PSW02) explained that when families make progress, “the goal is always reunification where it’s safe”, emphasising that children “do better in their families when support is there”. These comments complicate purely punitive interpretations of safeguarding and demonstrate that practitioners remained committed to family preservation where possible. At the same time, they acknowledged that such aspirations operate within systems shaped by resource scarcity, risk thresholds and anticipatory accountability (Munro, 2011; Parton, 2014).

Several participants argued that reform should occur at the institutional level rather than focusing only on individual practitioners. Linda (PSW05) stated that “training, recruitment, and leadership need to reflect the communities we serve”, emphasising that representation alone is insufficient without a broader structural commitment to equity. Agnes (PSW03) added that disproportionality data should be actively analysed within teams rather than treated as abstract statistics. This highlights wider concerns about institutional accountability for racial disparities in child protection (Bywaters et al., 2016).

Overall, practitioners' reflections on reform focused on several related priorities: culturally specific and practice-based training; earlier legal and safeguarding awareness for migrant families; stronger community collaboration; more reflective supervision; anti-racist organisational culture; and increased investment in preventative and early-help services. These proposals did not oppose safeguarding intervention. Instead, they aimed to reshape how safeguarding is understood, delivered and contextualised.

The social workers in this study did not present themselves as detached bureaucrats. Their accounts revealed professionals navigating legal obligations, organisational pressures, cultural uncertainty and relational aspirations. While operating within risk-focused systems, they nonetheless identified possibilities for more culturally responsive and preventative practice. Their reflections reveal a core institutional paradox: safeguarding systems prioritise protection, yet preventative cultural approaches and structural support remain limited. Reform, in these accounts, requires a shift from reactive crisis management towards earlier, more culturally humble and structurally informed support.

7.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter presents findings from interviews with five statutory social workers in child protection practice in England. Their accounts show that safeguarding work with first-generation Sub-Saharan African families is shaped by professional interpretation, institutional accountability, organisational constraint and wider structural pressures. The chapter has not treated practitioner accounts as neutral or superior to parents' lived experiences. Rather, it has used them to illuminate the professional and institutional contexts within which safeguarding decisions are made.

Across the four thematic areas, social workers described professional language as both necessary and limited. Terms such as “BME” were recognised as administratively useful but analytically blunt, often failing to capture the diversity of Black African, migrant and diaspora families. Participants also described discomfort around naming race directly, with race often displaced into safer terms such as culture, background or communication style. These findings suggest that language is not neutral; it shapes how families are categorised, recorded and understood within child protection systems.

The chapter also showed that cultural interpretation is central to safeguarding practice, particularly in relation to parenting norms, physical discipline, authority, communication and expectations of respect. Social workers did not argue that culture should override safeguarding duties. Instead, they highlighted the difficulty of applying standardised frameworks across diverse family contexts where migration history, racialisation, legal knowledge and family norms may influence how parents understand statutory intervention.

Risk and accountability were also central to practitioner accounts. Social workers described working within systems shaped by defensibility, future scrutiny and fear of blame. Their accounts suggest that professional judgement is not simply a matter of individual discretion, but is influenced by managerial oversight, audit culture, case recording and concern about what may happen if a decision is later questioned. In this context, escalation and continued monitoring may appear more institutionally defensible than stepping back.

The findings further showed that engagement and compliance are interpreted within unequal power relations. Attendance, responsiveness, emotional presentation and parental challenge can all become evidence within safeguarding assessments. However, practitioners also recognised that compliance may reflect fear, confusion or self-protection rather than trust. This complicates any simple reading of cooperation as safety or disagreement as risk.

Structural constraints formed another key finding. Social workers recognised that poverty, housing insecurity, immigration uncertainty, reduced early-help services, high caseloads and administrative demands shaped family circumstances and professional responses. However, they also described having limited capacity to address these structural issues directly. As a result, statutory intervention could become a mechanism for monitoring hardship rather than resolving the conditions that produced it.

Finally, practitioners identified several areas for reform, including more culturally specific training, earlier safeguarding and legal information for migrant families, stronger community partnerships, reflective supervision, anti-racist organisational practice and greater investment in preventative support. Their accounts did not call for weaker safeguarding standards, but for more contextual, relational and structurally informed practice.

Overall, this chapter demonstrates that social work practice with first-generation Sub-Saharan African families is shaped by a persistent tension between legal duty and interpretive uncertainty, structural awareness and limited intervention capacity, and formal equality commitments and the practical limits of current organisational cultures. These practitioner findings provide important institutional context for the parental accounts presented in Chapter 6. Chapter 8 brings both sets of findings into dialogue through a Critical Race Theory-informed discussion of racialised safeguarding governance, visibility, credibility and structural harm in child protection in England.

CHAPTER 8: DISCUSSION / ANALYSIS

8.1 Introduction

This chapter interprets the findings presented in Chapters 6 and 7 through a Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens to explain how first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents experienced child protection in England, and how social workers understood and practised statutory intervention within that same institutional space. While the earlier chapters documented these experiences empirically, the task here is different. This chapter moves from description to explanation. It asks not only what parents and practitioners said, but what their accounts reveal about the organisation of safeguarding itself: how risk is constructed, how credibility is allocated, how parenting is interpreted, and how structural inequalities are translated into institutional concern.

The central argument of this thesis is that child protection, as experienced by the parents in this study and described by the practitioners who worked within it, operates not simply as a neutral welfare response to harm, but as a form of racialised governance. By this, I

mean a system in which routine processes of referral, assessment, recording, interpretation, and intervention are shaped by wider hierarchies of race, migration, class, and institutional power. This does not suggest that child protection is illegitimate, that all intervention is oppressive, or that individual practitioners act in bad faith. Nor does it deny that some children require protection and that some safeguarding interventions are necessary. Rather, the argument is that the meaning and impact of intervention are socially patterned. Families do not enter safeguarding from positions of equal social standing, and they are not interpreted through neutral institutional lenses.

This is the distinctive contribution of the thesis. The study does more than apply CRT to an existing child protection debate. It shows, through the combined analysis of parent and practitioner accounts, that child protection involving first-generation Sub-Saharan African families in England is better understood as a process through which structural inequality becomes administratively legible as family risk. The findings demonstrate that poverty, insecure immigration status, housing precarity, cultural misrecognition, emotional distress, and limited familiarity with institutional norms do not remain in the background of safeguarding. They become part of the evidential field through which families are made visible, judged, documented, and governed. In that sense, this thesis reframes child protection not only as a site of welfare decision-making, but as a site where racialised inequality is reproduced through ordinary professional and organisational practice.

Analytically, bringing together the accounts of parents and social workers is crucial. Parents' narratives illuminate the lived consequences of intervention: fear, scrutiny,

misunderstanding, compliance, silence, and the sense that family life was being interpreted through a lens they could not fully control. Social workers' narratives illuminate the institutional conditions in which such experiences were produced: time pressure, evidential uncertainty, organisational defensiveness, threshold anxiety, procedural accountability, and limited capacity for meaningful early support. Read separately, each dataset offers only a partial account. Read together, they reveal the institutional interface at which private family life becomes subject to public judgement and where structural inequality is converted into professional concern. This combined reading also helps avoid two simplistic explanations: first, that parents' accounts can be reduced to misunderstanding or subjective grievance; and second, that practitioners can be treated as straightforward agents of oppression. The issue emerging from this study is more structurally complex than either position allows.

CRT provides the primary framework for interpreting these findings because it directs attention away from overt prejudice as the sole explanation for racial inequality and towards the routine institutional processes through which racialised outcomes are normalised (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Gillborn, 2015). This is especially important in safeguarding, where many of the professionals in this study described themselves as ethically committed, reflective, and motivated by concern for children. Their accounts matter and are not dismissed here. However, CRT recognises that benevolent intention does not prevent unequal outcomes. Procedures that appear neutral may still operate within historically racialised social conditions in ways that intensify scrutiny, suspicion, and intervention for some families more than others. In this study, that pattern was visible not only in overt moments of misrecognition, but in how ordinary processes of visibility, assessment, documentation, and judgement were experienced and enacted.

A second key concept in this chapter is racialised visibility. Parents' accounts showed that contact with child protection rarely emerged as a single isolated event. Rather, entry into safeguarding often occurred through repeated exposure to institutions such as schools, health services, police, housing systems, welfare agencies, and, for some, immigration-related structures. These forms of contact were not experienced as equal routes to help. Instead, they often became pathways through which already precarious family circumstances were rendered visible as potential safeguarding concerns. This matters because visibility was not evenly distributed. Families living at the intersection of racialisation, migration, poverty, and settlement insecurity were often more exposed to state observation while also being less able to shape how that observation was interpreted. The result was not simply contact with services but contact under conditions of unequal scrutiny.

The chapter also argues that safeguarding encounters were organised through credibility hierarchies. Parents frequently described feeling unheard, doubted, reframed, or reduced to administratively convenient labels when they attempted to explain themselves, challenge inaccuracies, or express distress. Their accounts suggest that participation did not necessarily lead to epistemic equality. Parents could be present in meetings yet remain marginal to the interpretation of their own circumstances. Fricker's (2007) concept of epistemic injustice is especially useful here because it helps explain how professional narratives acquire institutional authority while parents' experiential knowledge struggles to achieve equal legitimacy. In this study, that struggle was intensified by race, migration status, language, emotional strain, and the prior construction of some families as risky or

problematic. As a result, credibility was not simply a matter of whether parents spoke, but whether their speech fitted institutional expectations of reasonableness, cooperation, and insight.

Another major argument developed in this chapter concerns the interpretation of parenting, discipline, and family life through Eurocentric normative standards. Parents' accounts indicated that authority, discipline, emotional expression, and expectations for children were often assessed against dominant assumptions about "good" parenting that were presented as neutral or self-evident. The argument here is not that culture should excuse harmful practice, nor that all scrutiny of parenting is inappropriate. Rather, institutional assessments often lacked sufficient contextual, structural, and cultural reflexivity. Under these conditions, unfamiliar parenting practices could be too readily interpreted through a deficit lens, while the norms against which parents were being judged remained unnamed and therefore uncontested.

The chapter further examines how mental health, immigration precarity, poverty, and housing insecurity were frequently transformed into evidence about parental inadequacy rather than recognised first as socially produced forms of harm. Parents described fear, hypervigilance, shame, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion not simply as pre-existing vulnerabilities, but as consequences of prolonged scrutiny and uncertainty. Social workers, meanwhile, described systems that required them to document concerns, detect risk early, and make defensible decisions under pressure and with incomplete information. When read together, these accounts show how safeguarding may

individualise structural distress. In other words, the system may help produce the very emotional strain that is later used to justify further intervention.

Finally, the chapter argues that parental responses such as compliance, guardedness, silence, selective disclosure, and careful self-presentation should not be read simplistically as cooperation or resistance. Parents' narratives indicate that these were often survival strategies developed within relationships of unequal power. Such strategies reflected constrained agency rather than free or transparent participation. Many parents appeared to learn that openness could be risky, that emotional expression could be misread, and that disagreement might be documented as defensiveness or non-engagement. In this sense, compliance did not necessarily signal trust. It often reflected a calculated attempt to avoid further harm within a system experienced as potentially punitive and difficult to challenge.

At the same time, this chapter maintains an analytically balanced position. The findings do not support the claim that every safeguarding intervention involving African families is racialised in the same way, nor that all practitioners operate through cultural hostility or punitive intent. Some parents in this study distinguished clearly between the wider system and individual social workers who were experienced as respectful, communicative, and genuinely helpful. Likewise, some practitioners demonstrated reflexivity, ethical unease, and awareness of the limitations of existing systems. These accounts are important because they show that the thesis's argument is not anti-social work. On the contrary, they reinforce the point that the core problem is systemic rather than individual. Relational, contextually aware, and humane practice was possible and

recognisable to participants, but it appeared uneven, contingent, and often dependent on individual workers rather than embedded in the system's routine operations.

The chapter is structured around six interrelated analytical arguments. First, it examines entry into child protection as a process of racialised visibility rather than a neutral response to isolated incidents. Second, it explores how assessment was frequently experienced as surveillance, producing fear and self-monitoring. Third, it considers how parenting and discipline were interpreted through Eurocentric norms of family life. Fourth, it analyses how safeguarding was shaped by unequal distributions of credibility, generating forms of epistemic injustice. Fifth, it shows how immigration precarity, poverty, poor housing, and emotional distress were often reframed as indicators of parental deficit. Sixth, it interprets compliance, silence, and performance as adaptive survival strategies within unequal systems of institutional power.

Simultaneously, these arguments show that child protection in England is not best understood merely as a technical mechanism for identifying harm. As revealed through the experiences of the parents in this study and the institutional accounts of the practitioners who worked with them, it also functions as a recursive system in which visibility leads to surveillance, surveillance shapes interpretation, interpretation structures credibility, and credibility influences both the nature of support and the likelihood of further intervention. The significance of this thesis lies in making that process visible and in showing that what is often framed as neutral safeguarding may, in practice, operate as a racialised mode of governance.

8.2 Pathways into Child Protection as Racialised Visibility

A central finding of this study is that parents rarely experienced entry into child protection as a single response to a discrete incident. Instead, involvement often emerged through repeated contact with public institutions, including schools, health services, housing systems, police, welfare agencies and, for some participants, immigration-related structures. These points of contact did not operate as neutral routes to help. They frequently became pathways through which struggles around housing, parenting, communication, settlement and emotional wellbeing were rendered visible as safeguarding concerns. From a CRT perspective, this is significant because it shows that entry into child protection is shaped not only by immediate concerns about children, but also by wider processes through which some families become more exposed to institutional scrutiny than others (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Gillborn, 2015).

This shifts attention away from whether each individual referral was justified and towards how some families become more reportable, more interpretable through a risk lens and more likely to encounter state intervention in the first place. Pathways into child protection are therefore not merely procedural; they are social and institutional. They reflect how inequality is organised across everyday life and how families living under racialised and migratory forms of precarity may become more visible to state systems while having less control over the meaning attached to that visibility. The findings therefore support an understanding of child protection as part of a wider family regulation apparatus in which intervention is shaped not only by harm, but also by the unequal distribution of institutional attention (Parton, 2014; Featherstone et al., 2018).

Parents' narratives indicate that visibility was often linked to circumstances beyond their direct control, including unstable or overcrowded housing, school concerns, limited social support, unfamiliarity with institutional expectations, emotional strain, welfare restrictions and insecure immigration status. These factors did not remain background context. They became part of the route through which families were made legible to safeguarding. This supports arguments that child protection systems may individualise social suffering by translating structural hardship into family-level concern (Gupta, 2016; Rogowski, 2020). For some first-generation African parents, difficulties associated with settlement, poverty or instability were not first recognised as structural harms requiring support, but as indicators inviting further scrutiny.

A balanced interpretation is necessary. The argument is not that all referrals involving African families were racist or unjustified. Social workers have statutory duties, and some referrals arise from genuine concern for children's wellbeing. Practitioners in this study also described working under uncertainty, with incomplete information and pressure to act cautiously. The point is therefore not that institutional visibility is always oppressive, but that it is unevenly distributed and unequally interpreted. Families positioned at the intersection of race, migration and deprivation may be more exposed to public systems and more likely to have hardship converted into professional concern before meaningful support is offered.

The concept of racialised visibility captures this process. First-generation African families may become more visible because poor housing increases contact with local authorities, school difficulties attract professional concern, immigration insecurity intensifies

dependence on services, and limited settlement support heightens exposure to institutional oversight. These systems do not operate separately. Together, they form a connected governance environment through which some families become observable in ways others do not. What appears at the level of one referral as an ordinary professional act may therefore reflect a wider pattern of cumulative exposure to state scrutiny.

A further finding is that visibility was not matched by equivalent access to preventative or materially supportive intervention. Several parents described support as delayed, fragmented or limited before formal concern escalated, while investigative activity became more immediate once risk had been recorded. This reflects longstanding critiques of child protection systems as better equipped for assessment, monitoring and defensible intervention than for early, relational or materially supportive practice (Munro, 2011; Parton, 2014; Featherstone et al., 2018). For parents in this study, becoming visible often did not feel like the beginning of support. It felt like the beginning of watchfulness.

The social worker data deepen this interpretation by showing how racialised outcomes may arise even without deliberate targeting. Practitioners described organisational cultures shaped by threshold anxiety, limited resources, fear of blame and the need to document concern in defensible ways. These accounts suggest that the translation of visibility into intervention was not simply a matter of personal prejudice but was embedded in institutional routines that made already-visible families easier to draw further into safeguarding processes. This supports Bernard and Harris's (2019) argument that racial disproportionality cannot be explained adequately either through blaming families or through focusing only on individual workers.

Pathways into child protection were also epistemically significant. Once a family became visible through concern, that concern often shaped the interpretive frame for what followed. Initial referrals, case notes, school concerns and early professional judgements did not simply record events; they shaped how later events were understood. Stress could be read as instability, guardedness as evasiveness, disagreement as hostility, and unfamiliar parenting practices as evidence of risk. Entry into the system, therefore, created the narrative conditions under which future credibility, surveillance and assessment unfolded.

The findings suggest that routes into child protection are best understood as pathways of racialised visibility rather than socially neutral entry points. Parents' narratives show that involvement was frequently shaped by exposure to institutions structured by poverty, migration, housing insecurity and limited support. Social workers' accounts show how this exposure was translated into formal concern within risk-oriented organisational settings. This does not invalidate safeguarding as an essential public function. It does, however, challenge the assumption that entry into safeguarding occurs on level social ground. For many families in this study, child protection was experienced not as a last-resort response to clear harm, but as an early and disproportionate form of institutional involvement produced through unequal patterns of visibility.

8.3 Surveillance, Assessment and the Production of Fear

A second major finding is that parents often experienced assessment not simply as a professional process of understanding need and risk, but as an ongoing form of surveillance. Parents described home visits, repeated questioning, monitoring of household routines, attention to children's presentation, and the accumulation of

professional observations as extending beyond routine information-gathering. What mattered was not only that professionals asked questions, but that parents felt continuously watched, interpreted and judged. This suggests that safeguarding assessment, while formally justified as care and protection, may also function as a mechanism by which family life becomes increasingly knowable, governable, and open to correction (Parton, 2014).

This argument does not imply that assessment is inherently invalid. Assessment remains central to statutory child protection, and practitioners in this study described it as essential to their duty of care, especially when information was incomplete, conflicting or difficult to verify. However, the findings show that the meaning of assessment cannot be inferred solely from its official purpose. For many parents, what professionals described as safeguarding inquiry was experienced as observation organised by suspicion and unequal power. The issue is therefore not whether assessment should occur, but how it is structured, how it is lived and why its impact was particularly intense for racialised families already living with structural vulnerability.

This intensity is tied to the wider evolution of child protection practice. Research has shown that safeguarding systems in England have become increasingly shaped by risk management, managerial accountability, documentation and defensibility (Munro, 2011; Parton, 2014). In this context, assessment is not only concerned with current circumstances; it is also oriented towards anticipating future harm, managing uncertainty and producing evidence that professional vigilance has been exercised. Families are assessed not only for what has happened but also for what might happen and what a later

review might identify as missed. For parents, this anticipatory quality made scrutiny feel inescapable. Once concern had been raised, it was not always clear what would count as sufficient reassurance, compliance or proof of safety.

CRT deepens this analysis by showing that surveillance is not distributed equally. Families encounter assessment within social relations shaped by race, class, migration and credibility. In this study, parents' accounts suggest that first-generation African families often entered assessment from positions in which cultural difference, accent, emotional guardedness, strict parenting practices or unfamiliarity with institutional expectations had already become visible. Under such conditions, assessment could feel less like neutral inquiry and more like intensified scrutiny directed at what was already marked as different. The findings therefore support the CRT argument that formally neutral procedures may produce patterned inequality when operating within racialised contexts (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Gillborn, 2015).

Parents' narratives also show that surveillance did not simply observe behaviour; it reshaped it. Many described becoming more careful about what they said, how they expressed emotion, how they disciplined their children, how they responded in meetings and how they presented family life during visits. Surveillance was therefore productive rather than passive. It generated self-monitoring, emotional discipline and anticipatory self-correction. Parents were not only being assessed; they were learning to regulate themselves in response to the possibility of further interpretation.

The fear described by parents was not irrational. It arose from a context in which professionals could record, interpret, escalate, and intervene, and in which records could shape future action.

Parents reported anxiety about saying the wrong thing, showing too much emotion, disagreeing too openly or being judged as uncooperative. For some, the fear was linked directly to the possibility of child removal; for others, it reflected a broader sense that ordinary family life was being read through a professional lens they could not fully understand or influence. This reveals surveillance not only as observation, but as an unequal relationship of interpretive power.

Practitioner accounts complicate any simplistic reading of this process as mere hostility or cultural indifference. Social workers described environments shaped by blame, high caseloads, incomplete information and pressure to act preventively rather than reactively. They often understood repeated monitoring as a necessary response to uncertainty. These accounts show that intrusive oversight may be produced by organisational expectations of caution and defensibility, not only by personal prejudice. Yet this does not diminish its unequal effect. Rather, it reinforces the thesis's broader argument that racialised harm may be reproduced through routine institutional practice even without overt discriminatory intent.

The cumulative quality of surveillance was also evident. Parents did not describe it as a single episode with a clear endpoint. Earlier concerns shaped later expectations, case

records influenced future interpretation, and past observations appeared to linger in subsequent encounters. Once families were documented through a safeguarding lens, they often remained open to renewed interpretation through that same lens. This helps explain why parents spoke not only of isolated discomfort, but of ongoing unease, self-censorship and mistrust.

A balanced perspective remains necessary. All families involved in child protection may find assessment intrusive, and some oversight is unavoidable in a statutory system charged with protecting children. The argument here is not that discomfort alone proves racialised governance. It is that the conditions, interpretation and effects of assessment were not equally distributed. For the first-generation African parents in this study, assessment often intersected with migration insecurity, poverty, cultural misrecognition and awareness of racialised stereotypes. Under those conditions, the line between assessment and intimidation could become particularly thin.

Overall, assessment in child protection cannot be understood only as a neutral professional tool. For many parents in this study, it operated as surveillance: extended, anticipatory and productive of fear. For practitioners, it was shaped by uncertainty, organisational pressure and the demand for defensible decision-making. Assessment remains necessary, but in its current risk-oriented form, it may intensify scrutiny on already visible families and convert support needs into ongoing watchfulness. That process is central to understanding how racialised governance is enacted within child protection.

8.4 Parenting, Discipline and Eurocentric Normativity

A central argument of this study is that parenting is not treated as a culturally neutral domain in child protection. Parents' accounts suggest that caregiving practices, disciplinary approaches, emotional expression, and everyday family interaction were frequently interpreted through normative assumptions about what counts as "good" parenting. Read through Critical Race Theory, these accounts indicate that safeguarding practice can universalise White, Western, middle-class, or broadly Eurocentric models of parenting, presenting them as self-evidently child-centred, professionally objective, or simply common sense. The issue, therefore, is not only that cultural differences appear in child protection encounters, but also that institutional power determines which parenting norms are treated as standard, which are viewed with suspicion, and which are deemed to require explanation or correction. For first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents, this meant that parental authority, expectations of respect, collective family responsibility, and firmer behavioural boundaries could be interpreted not as contextual differences but as possible indicators of risk (Gillborn, 2015; Bernard & Harris, 2019; Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2025).

This argument does not depend on romanticising culture or implying that all parenting practices should be exempt from scrutiny in the name of diversity. Such a position would be neither ethically defensible nor consistent with the legal and welfare responsibilities of child protection. Children's safety remains a legitimate public concern, and some forms of discipline or family control may be harmful irrespective of cultural background. A balanced analysis must therefore avoid two equally problematic positions: uncritical cultural relativism on the one hand, and an assimilationist model that treats dominant British norms as the only legitimate framework for family life on the other. The findings

of this study support a more careful position. The question is not whether practitioners should intervene when there is harm, but whether institutional assessment too readily conflates cultural differences, migration-related adaptations, or nondominant parenting styles with parental deficiency. The core issue is one of normative authority. Ortega and Faller's work on cultural humility is especially useful here because it argues that child welfare practitioners should move beyond claims of cultural mastery and instead engage in continuing self-appraisal, openness, and attentiveness to power, intersectionality, and the limits of dominant professional assumptions (Ortega and Faller, 2011). More recent work continues to stress that protecting children requires practitioners to broaden their interpretive frames and recognise what dominant perspectives often fail to see (Ortega et al., 2025).

Critical scholarship has long demonstrated that parenting is not a fixed or universal category, but a socially and historically constructed ideal shaped by classed, racialised, and gendered assumptions. In late-modern welfare states, dominant understandings of "good parenting" often privilege reflective communication, emotional openness, negotiated parent-child relationships, intensive supervision, and institutionally legible engagement with schools and services. These norms are rarely named as culturally specific because they function as the benchmark against which family life is measured (Gillies, 2013; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Gillborn, 2015). CRT is especially valuable here because it reminds us that what appears universal often reflects the social values and practices of dominant groups, which then acquire the status of neutrality. In this study, parents' accounts suggest that safeguarding did not simply assess whether care was adequate; it also assessed whether parenting conformed to implicit expectations shaped by Eurocentric and professionalised models of family life.

This was particularly visible in relation to discipline. The findings suggest that discipline was one of the areas most vulnerable to cultural misrecognition within safeguarding. Across the parent interviews, firmer parental authority, expectations of obedience, and stricter behavioural correction were often framed as part of responsible parenting rather than as signs of dysfunction or cruelty. Karen (PB01), for example, described a “big, big, big difference” between parenting in Kenya and parenting in England, suggesting that in the UK children were given an institutional voice in ways that could leave parents feeling displaced in their own authority. Yusuf (PB04) similarly argued that some migrant parents felt they had to “pretend to act” because practices they associated with moral guidance and responsible upbringing could quickly be reinterpreted as abuse or danger. Rehema (PB03) captured this tension through her repeated descriptions of parents “trying to strike the balance” between what they had grown up knowing as right and what the UK system deemed acceptable. These accounts suggest that discipline became a key point at which cultural meaning could be translated into institutional suspicion.

This is analytically important because in many African family settings, discipline may be tied to broader moral expectations regarding respect for elders, collective responsibility, interdependence, and preparation for social adulthood. Such practices must remain open to scrutiny, but they cannot be fairly interpreted without attention to social and cultural context. The present study suggests that these meanings were not always fully explored in safeguarding encounters. Instead, discipline was often read primarily through professional concern about control, emotional tone, or possible harshness, with less attention to the wider parental ethic from which it emerged. Contemporary safeguarding guidance and recent review work similarly underline the need for anti-discriminatory, anti-racist, and context-sensitive practice, emphasising that practitioners should attend to

children's and families' economic and social circumstances, ethnicity, and lived experience, and should recognise and challenge bias and racism rather than pathologising difference (HM Government, 2026; Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2025).

The significance of this lies in the distinction between contextualisation and pathologisation. Child protection must involve close attention to how children are spoken to, corrected, and regulated within the home. However, parents in this study often described interpretations that appeared to move rapidly from observation to judgement, particularly when their practices diverged from dominant parenting norms. Roberts's work on the racial politics of child welfare remains especially important because it shows how Black families have historically been judged not only in relation to children's welfare, but also in relation to how far their family practices conform to dominant norms of domestic respectability (Roberts, 2002). Comparable patterns are visible in UK scholarship, where Black and minoritised parents may be interpreted more quickly through deficit-based frameworks that combine race, class, culture, and institutional concern (Bernard & Harris, 2019; Cornish, 2025). This study extends that argument by showing how first-generation African parents experienced disciplinary difference as a point at which cultural meaning could become institutional suspicion.

This does not imply that professionals were always wrong to raise concerns about discipline. Social workers have legal and ethical duties to assess whether children are exposed to fear, humiliation, coercion, or harm. Practitioners in this study also appeared to be aware that appeals to culture should not be accepted uncritically when genuine welfare concerns exist. That caution is necessary. Culture should never function as an

automatic defence against inquiry. Yet the opposite danger is equally significant: where practitioners lack sufficient structural and cultural literacy, culture may be viewed primarily as a source of risk. Under such conditions, unfamiliar practices that are not necessarily harmful may be met with disproportionate alarm, while context, intention, relational pattern, and actual impact on the child are insufficiently examined. Recent work on cultural humility in child protection and cultural competence in protective intervention similarly emphasises contextually grounded interpretation over rapid conformity to dominant norms (Ortega, 2025; Adonteng-Kissi, 2023).

The findings further suggest that parenting was assessed not only through discipline but also through broader expectations concerning communication, affect, and relational style.

Emotional expression is especially important here. Some parents suggested that firmness could be read as aggression, reserve as detachment, distress as instability, and strong protective concern as overreaction. Susan (PB18), for example, challenged narrow assumptions about acceptable maternal presentation when she insisted that “strength does not always look soft.” Her formulation is important because it unsettles the idea that care must always appear in emotionally legible and institutionally familiar ways. Mercy (PB13) likewise described being spoken to and treated as though she did not know what she was talking about, despite her professional background in nursing and midwifery, suggesting that her emotional intensity and insistence as a mother were read not as care but as excess, difficulty, or interference. These accounts indicate that the Eurocentric norm at issue extends beyond disciplinary technique to encompass assumptions about what constitutes a healthy parent-child relationship, how an emotionally competent parent

communicates, and how parents should present themselves to professionals. Once such assumptions become embedded within institutional practice, difference is no longer recognised as difference; it is assessed against pre-existing standards of parental adequacy.

A CRT-informed reading is particularly valuable here because it reveals how these benchmarks are tied to racialised relations of power rather than to benign professional consensus. Crenshaw's work on intersectionality is especially relevant because it highlights how first-generation African parents encounter parenting norms at the intersection of race, gender, migration, class, language difference, and sometimes disability or immigration precarity (Crenshaw, 1991). A Black migrant mother living in poverty, experiencing housing insecurity, and engaging with statutory services in a second language does not enter assessment from the same social position as a settled White middle-class parent whose parenting style already aligns more closely with institutional expectations. The same behaviour may therefore be interpreted differently depending on who performs it. Assertiveness may be read as aggression rather than advocacy, guardedness as evasiveness rather than self-protection, and strictness as authoritarianism rather than responsibility. The findings strongly suggest that parenting cannot be separated from these wider structures of perception.

At the same time, the analysis must avoid overstating cultural uniformity within African families. "African parenting" is not a fixed, unified, or uncontested model. Participants came from diverse national, religious, socioeconomic, and migratory backgrounds, and their accounts cannot be reduced to a single cultural script. The evidence supports a more

nuanced reading. Parents did not present themselves as culturally identical or uniformly opposed to British professional norms. Rather, they described friction where their understandings of parental authority, family responsibility, communication, and child socialisation came into conflict with institutional expectations treated as inherently correct. The argument, therefore, is not that African parenting constitutes one coherent alternative norm, but that safeguarding practice often lacked the interpretive flexibility to understand difference without subordinating it to dominant assumptions. This aligns with more recent calls for child protection to move beyond simplistic cultural categorisation towards deeper cultural humility and anti-racist reflexivity (BASW, 2022; Cornish, 2025; Ortega, 2025).

The practitioner data are important here because they complicate any simplistic claim that social workers straightforwardly imposed White norms in a conscious or deliberate way. Some practitioners appeared reflective about the difficulty of distinguishing harm from cultural difference and acknowledged uncertainty about how to work with families without either stereotyping them or colluding with harmful practice. These accounts matter because they show that the issue is not reducible to cultural ignorance alone. Practitioners often work in environments characterised by time pressure, organisational stress, and a strong demand for defensible judgment. In such settings, reliance on familiar normative frameworks may become more likely, not necessarily because practitioners wish to marginalise difference, but because organisational systems reward clarity, categorisation, and risk minimisation (Munro, 2011; Parton, 2014). This supports the thesis's broader argument that racialised inequality is reproduced through routine administrative practice rather than solely through overt discriminatory intent.

Nevertheless, systemic explanation does not diminish the importance of parents' accounts. When Eurocentric parenting norms are naturalised within safeguarding, some families are required to parent and to demonstrate parenthood under intensified conditions of translation. They must not only care for their children but also render that care intelligible to an institutional audience whose standards are only partially flexible. This creates a clear asymmetry. Dominant families may be judged against norms they already inhabit, whereas racialised migrant families may be judged against norms they must first decipher and then perform. Under such conditions, caution, self-surveillance, and performative conformity become more likely. Parents may hide culturally familiar practices, soften their tone, or avoid expressing frustration for fear that difference will be read as danger. In this way, Eurocentric normativity shapes not only professional judgement but also parental conduct through anticipatory adaptation (Cornish, 2025; Keddell, 2025).

This becomes especially problematic when combined with material hardship. Parenting is often judged without sufficient attention to the structural conditions in which it occurs. For first-generation African parents in this study, expectations around patience, emotional regulation, household order, school responsiveness, and engagement with services were frequently encountered amid poverty, overcrowded housing, insecure immigration status, disability, and limited support networks. Under such conditions, the distance between idealised notions of calm, reflective parenting and the realities of constrained survival may be considerable. Where institutions fail to recognise this gap, parents may be judged not only against Eurocentric standards, but against parenting ideals that would be difficult for any family to sustain under chronic stress. Recent research on perceptions of neglect

similarly highlights the importance of assessments that recognise how deprivation intensifies both family strain and professional interpretation, rather than relegating structural context to the margins.

A counter-position must still be taken seriously. It could be argued that emphasising Eurocentric normativity risks obscuring children's rights or encouraging hesitation where children are genuinely distressed by harsh or controlling parenting. That concern cannot simply be dismissed. However, this thesis does not privilege parental culture over children's safety. Rather, it argues that child protection is improved, not weakened, when practitioners more carefully distinguish among actual harm, culturally mediated difference, and structurally intensified parenting strain. Better contextual interpretation does not mean lower standards for children; it means fairer, more proportionate, and more accurate assessment. A system that mistakes unfamiliarity for danger is not more protective. It is less precise (Adonteng-Kissi, 2023; Ortega, 2023).

Overall, the findings show that parenting and discipline are key sites through which Eurocentric norms shape safeguarding. Parents' accounts indicate that authority, communication, emotional expression, and discipline, as shaped by their own social and cultural locations, were often interpreted through dominant assumptions that rendered them suspect. Social workers' accounts, meanwhile, reveal how such interpretations are conditioned by institutional pressure, uncertainty, and limited space for reflective contextualisation. The issue, therefore, is not whether parenting should be assessed, but how it is assessed, according to whose norms, and with what degree of cultural and structural understanding. This section has argued that racialised inequality in child

protection is sustained partly through the universalisation of dominant parenting standards and the misrecognition of difference. The next section examines how these interpretive processes shape parental credibility, voice, and epistemic status within safeguarding encounters.

8.5 Credibility, Power and Epistemic Injustice

A further key finding is that safeguarding encounters were shaped not only by assessments of risk, need and parenting capacity, but also by unequal distributions of credibility. Parents' accounts suggested that what mattered was not simply what they said, but whether their explanations were heard as believable, responsible and intelligible within institutional settings. Although parents were invited into meetings, asked questions and expected to participate in assessments, formal involvement did not guarantee epistemic equality. Many described feeling doubted, reframed, or reduced to labels such as "non-compliant," "defensive," or "lacking insight," even when they believed they were clarifying circumstances, correcting inaccuracies, or advocating for their children. Read through CRT and Fricker's (2007) concept of epistemic injustice, these accounts suggest that safeguarding functions not only as a site of intervention, but also as a site of knowledge production in which some voices acquire institutional authority more readily than others (Fricker, 2007; Gillborn, 2015; Bernard & Harris, 2019).

This matters because child protection is deeply interpretive. Risk is constructed through referrals, case notes, meetings, assessment frameworks and inter-agency communication. In such contexts, credibility becomes a form of power. Those whose accounts are received as objective, measured and professionally relevant are better positioned to shape the

institutional narrative, while those heard as emotional, resistant or self-interested may have less influence over how events are understood. Existing research shows that formal parental participation often coexists with limited substantive influence (Broadhurst et al., 2010; Featherstone et al., 2014; Morris et al., 2018). This study builds on that insight by showing that the issue is not only restricted participation but also hierarchical credibility.

Fricker's (2007) concept of testimonial injustice is especially helpful here. Testimonial injustice occurs when a speaker's account is granted less credibility than it deserves because prejudice or social devaluation shapes how it is received. Within safeguarding, parental testimony may be discounted not only because professionals are testing evidence, but also because the parent is already interpreted through categories that invite suspicion. For first-generation African parents, this dynamic was intensified by race, migration, class, language and the prior construction of their families as problematic. Once a family had entered safeguarding, later statements were often interpreted within an already developing institutional narrative. Credibility was therefore produced through professional authority, documentation and wider racialised assumptions about who counts as trustworthy, rational and insightful.

A balanced analysis must recognise that child protection professionals cannot accept every account at face value. Social workers operate in contexts where information is often contested, incomplete, and emotionally charged. It is legitimate for practitioners to weigh evidence, test consistency and consider that harm may be minimised or obscured. The argument here is not that parental accounts should automatically override all other sources, nor that professional scepticism is inherently unjust. Rather, the concern is that

scepticism is not distributed evenly. Some parents appear to face a lower threshold of disbelief and a higher burden of persuasion than others (Helm, 2011; Munro, 2011).

This asymmetry was evident in emotional expression and communication style. Edna (PB17), for example, described a school-based meeting in which the social worker “developed her own questions on my behalf” and then told her to “shut up because I know what you want to say.” This captures both silencing and substitution: the parent is interrupted and overwritten by the professional voice. Mercy (PB13) similarly described trying to explain her daughter’s disability, pregnancy, mental health and family support, yet feeling that social services approached her as though she was “the one who is wrong.” These accounts suggest that emotional intensity, insistence, and repeated clarification were not always interpreted as care or advocacy; they could instead be heard as difficulty, excess, or a lack of insight.

Credibility was also bound up with institutional fluency. Isaac (PB02) explained that “sometimes they ask questions very fast, and if you don’t answer quickly, they think you are hiding something,” even when he was simply trying to understand the question. Jamila (PB15) wanted written agendas before meetings so that she could “know what they are saying about me before I walk in,” while Gladys (PB14) suggested that parents were expected to respond fluently within systems they had never been taught to navigate. These accounts show that parents were more likely to be heard as reasonable when they could already speak the system’s language and tempo.

CRT deepens this analysis by showing that credibility is tied to racialised relations of power. Gillborn (2015) argues that institutional racism often persists through routine practices in which dominant norms appear universal and alternative forms of expression become problematic. Bernard and Harris (2019) similarly show that Black and minoritised parents may be more readily read as resistant, confrontational or difficult to engage with when they challenge professional authority. The findings support this argument. Parents had to do more than tell the truth as they understood it; they often had to present that truth in emotionally measured, professionally legible and deferential forms.

Credibility also became durable through documentation. Yusuf (PB04) suggested that professionals could write things “upside down just to support their case,” while Fatuma (PB08) objected that “they wrote things that made it sound worse than it was.” Milkah (PB07) insisted that “if something is not true, it should not stay there,” directly challenging the permanence of written records. These accounts show that credibility judgments were cumulative rather than episodic. Parents were not required to establish credibility only once; they were repeatedly measured against a documentary memory that had already positioned them within the case narrative. Recording, therefore, did more than preserve information; it stabilised interpretation and gave it institutional durability (White et al., 2009; Parton, 2014).

This point is central to the thesis’s wider argument about racialised governance. Safeguarding is powerful not only because it can intervene materially in family life, but also because it can produce authoritative definitions of what a family is and what it

signifies. Parents' voices were often included conditionally: welcomed when they confirmed institutional interpretations and problematised when they challenged them. Parents did not merely describe feeling unheard; many described feeling re-authored. Concern became denial, clarification became defensiveness, and disagreement became non-engagement. These dynamics exemplify testimonial injustice and, in some cases, approach hermeneutical injustice, where parents lack equal access to the interpretive resources needed for their experiences to be understood and legitimised (Fricker, 2007).

Language, migration and procedural familiarity intensified this inequality. Credibility in safeguarding often depends on knowing how to answer succinctly, demonstrate cooperation without appearing passive, challenge respectfully and narrate one's life in ways that align with professional categories. First-generation African parents may find these expectations difficult to meet, not because they lack an understanding of their circumstances, but because the setting privileges a particular communicative style. Accent, hesitation, unfamiliarity with procedure and culturally different forms of emotional expression may all affect how testimony is received. The findings therefore suggest that inequality need not rely on openly voiced stereotypes; it can operate through background assumptions about whose words sound credible and whose require further proof.

Practitioner data complicate any claim that social workers deliberately sought to silence parents. Some practitioners were alert to the risk of misinterpretation and aware that records could take on a momentum of their own. Others described the pressure to produce concise, defensible reports amid time constraints and organisational scrutiny. Epistemic

injustice in safeguarding is therefore not reducible to personal hostility; it is also organisational. Systems prioritising documentation, summarisation, categorisation and timely decision-making may compress complex parental accounts into administratively useful labels. Ambiguity may then be resolved in favour of caution, creating a gap between what parents believed they communicated and what the institution understood (Munro, 2011; Parton, 2014).

The cumulative effect is a loss of credibility with concrete consequences. It affects whether parents are trusted to explain behaviour, whether distress is viewed as understandable strain or instability, and whether challenges to professional judgement are interpreted as advocacy or risk. Repeated disqualification of parental knowledge can erode confidence, encourage self-censorship and reinforce compliance strategies. Parents may feel that speaking openly is dangerous if disagreement is likely to be interpreted as resistance. Epistemic injustice must therefore be understood as one mechanism through which child protection is experienced as fearful and coercive.

Two counterpoints are important. First, what parents experience as disbelief may sometimes reflect necessary evidential caution rather than a deeper credibility hierarchy. Child protection cannot rely on self-report alone, especially where harm may be minimised or denied. However, the issue is whether some groups face a disproportionate burden in proving credibility and whether their accounts are more readily cast as problematic when they diverge from institutional expectations (Bernard & Harris, 2019; Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2025). Second, documentation can protect parents and support accountability. Accurate records can provide consistency,

transparency and evidence of professional error. The concern is not documentation itself, but the imbalance that determines whose interpretation becomes authoritative and how open the record remains to revision (White et al., 2009).

Overall, credibility in safeguarding is not merely an objective judgement of truthfulness, but a socially organised and institutionally mediated process. Parents' accounts show that voice was often available only on conditional terms, while social workers' accounts show how professional authority, recording practices and organisational pressures shape which forms of knowledge are treated as valid. Through CRT and epistemic injustice, this section has argued that safeguarding encounters are structured by credibility hierarchies in which parental testimony may be discounted, reframed or subordinated, especially for racialised migrant families. The issue is therefore not only communicative inequality but a deeper form of institutional power in which knowledge itself becomes a means of regulation.

8.6 Mental Health, Immigration and Structural Harm

The findings of this study indicate that parental mental health within child protection cannot be adequately understood through narrow or purely clinical accounts of vulnerability. When parents' counter-narratives are read alongside social workers' institutional accounts, a more complex picture emerges in which emotional distress is not merely brought into safeguarding, but is often produced, intensified, and circulated within it. Anxiety, hypervigilance, shame, dread, and chronic uncertainty were not described simply as pre-existing parental difficulties. Rather, they were frequently experienced as consequences of prolonged monitoring, opaque decision-making, escalating scrutiny, and

the ever-present possibility of child removal. In this sense, parental distress is better understood not as a background variable in safeguarding, but as part of the lived reality of safeguarding governance (Research in Practice, 2023; Burrow et al., 2024; McGovern et al., 2025).

This argument matters because dominant child protection discourse often frames parental mental health primarily as a risk factor to be assessed, monitored, and managed. There are, of course, situations in which severe mental health difficulties affect parenting capacity, threaten safety, or justify statutory intervention. A balanced analysis must therefore avoid implying that professional concern about mental health is inherently oppressive or always misplaced. Social workers have a legitimate duty to consider whether a parent's emotional condition affects their capacity to provide safe and stable care. However, the findings of this study show that the relationship between mental health and safeguarding is often treated as one-directional. Distress is frequently understood as something parents bring into the system, whereas participants' accounts suggest that distress may also be generated by the system's own practices. The issue, therefore, is not whether mental health is relevant to safeguarding, but whether it is interpreted with sufficient structural, relational, and racial sensitivity (Lopes, Leal and Sani, 2021; Research in Practice, 2023; McGovern et al., 2025).

Parents' accounts suggested that involvement with child protection was often experienced as an anticipatory threat. Even where children were not removed, the possibility of removal shaped everyday life. In the findings chapter, parents described panic before meetings, dread of professional contact, disturbed sleep, emotional exhaustion, and

constant vigilance about what might happen next. Isaac's (PB02) reflection that the process left parents "powerless" and "voiceless," together with his sense that separation made him feel like "a loser," points to the way safeguarding could destabilise both emotional well-being and social identity. Rehema's (PB03) insistence that once a child is taken "that family is not gonna be the same ever as it was before" similarly indicates that distress was rooted not only in procedure, but in the threat of irreversible rupture. These accounts support a growing body of research suggesting that child protection involvement can generate fear, shame, anxiety, and trauma-like responses, particularly where processes are prolonged and relationally distant (Broadhurst et al., 2010; Morris et al., 2018; Featherstone et al., 2018; Burrow et al., 2024).

The present study contributes to this literature by showing that such distress unfolded within a distinctly racialised and migratory context. Emotional reactions were not simply responses to bureaucracy in the abstract; they were responses to a system perceived as already mistrustful of Black African parenting and as institutionally capable of transforming vulnerability into concern. Mercy's (PB13) account is especially important here. She did not describe her distress as separate from safeguarding, but as produced through the experience of not being believed, of seeing her daughter deteriorate, and of having family care recoded as danger. Her statement that the process "totally made me hate myself" and "could even push you to mental illness" reveals the extent to which distress was experienced as an effect of prolonged intervention rather than merely as a pre-existing parental trait. In this sense, safeguarding did not simply discover vulnerability; it could intensify and reorganise it.

CRT is particularly useful here because it challenges the supposed neutrality of institutional interpretations of distress. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) argue that racial inequality is often reproduced through ordinary procedures that appear neutral yet operate within historically unequal social conditions. In safeguarding, this means that parents' emotional responses cannot be interpreted outside the racialised field in which they are assessed. For first-generation African parents, expressions of fear, frustration, or exhaustion may be filtered through wider assumptions about Black parenting, emotional control, and family competence. Bernard and Harris (2019), Okpokiri (2017, 2021), and the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (2025) suggest that racialised parents may be especially vulnerable to being read as aggressive, resistant, or lacking insight when they challenge professional narratives or respond visibly to perceived injustice. The findings of the present study support that concern. Parents described consciously moderating tone, facial expression, and language because they understood that emotional missteps might reinforce institutional suspicion. The burden of emotional discipline, therefore, did not fall evenly across all parents; it was especially heavy for those already subject to racialised scrutiny.

This becomes even more significant when viewed through the lens of Fricker's (2007) concept of epistemic injustice. Parents in this study did not merely report distress; they also described how their accounts of that distress were often displaced by professional interpretation. When parents explained fear as a response to surveillance, uncertainty, poverty, the threat of separation, or the conditions of immigration precarity, such emotions could be reinterpreted in assessments as evidence of instability, poor resilience, or reduced parenting capacity. In this way, institutional knowledge displaced experiential knowledge. Emotional suffering generated within safeguarding was transformed into

evidence about the parent rather than about the system. Distress, therefore, became self-reinforcing: the more anxious or overwhelmed a parent felt under scrutiny, the more likely that distress was to justify further scrutiny.

The practitioner data help explain how this interpretive shift occurs. Social workers described working within systems that prioritised documentation, early risk detection, and defensible decision-making, particularly in organisational cultures shaped by blame, threshold anxiety, and accountability pressures (Munro, 2011; Parton, 2014). In such settings, visible emotional stability may serve as an informal marker of parental competence. Tearfulness, agitation, anger, or inconsistency may become professionally salient when recorded as signs of concern. This does not necessarily arise from malicious intent. Many practitioners worked under genuine uncertainty and pressure to demonstrate vigilance. Yet the organisational demand to prove thoroughness may narrow interpretive flexibility. Emotional responses are then read primarily through the lens of risk rather than through wider relational or structural analysis. As a result, the institutional production of distress becomes difficult to recognise, because the system is oriented towards detecting parental vulnerability rather than vulnerability generated by intervention itself (Research in Practice, 2023; McGovern et al., 2025).

Immigration precarity sharpens this analysis considerably. For migrant parents, emotional distress is not separate from broader conditions of insecurity. It is often intensified by precarious legal status, NRPF restrictions, inadequate housing, unstable employment, limited access to material support, and uncertainty about how involvement in social care may intersect with immigration governance. This matters because it shows that mental

health in safeguarding cannot be detached from the political economy of migration control. Emotional distress is often linked not only to parenting scrutiny but also to layered anxieties about settlement, survival, and the wider consequences of institutional contact. As recent work suggests, hostile policy environments can profoundly undermine wellbeing by denying security, continuity, and access to support, while earlier child welfare research similarly indicates that non-citizen families often approach child protection with fear, distrust, and concern about deportation or family separation (Križ et al., 2012; Lindsay, 2025).

Intersectionality is crucial here. As Crenshaw (1991) argues, race, gender, class, and immigration status do not operate separately, but intersect to shape how power is lived and enforced. For some participants, especially mothers parenting under conditions of immigration insecurity, safeguarding meetings appeared to be spaces in which multiple forms of judgement converged simultaneously: parenting capacity, legal status, financial stability, emotional control, communicative competence, and moral worth. Distress in such settings cannot be reduced to private psychological weakness. It is structurally produced and politically mediated. Mercy (PB13), for example, described not just emotional pain, but legal costs, racial humiliation, fear for her daughter's health, and the pressure of trying to defend her family while under institutional suspicion. Rehema (PB03) and Gladys (PB14), in different ways, also located parenting anxiety within a wider field of cultural translation, insecurity, and unequal scrutiny. This aligns with more recent evidence linking migration-related precarity and postmigration stressors to parental and family wellbeing (Lindsay, 2025).

A further implication of the findings is that the support offered in response to distress was not always experienced as purely supportive. Some parents described referrals to counselling, therapeutic services, parenting programmes, or mental health support as parts of child protection plans that felt more evaluative than voluntary. Attendance could function not only as support, but also as another measure of cooperation and compliance. This is not to deny that therapeutic intervention can be beneficial. For many parents, emotional support is necessary and potentially transformative. However, the study suggests that the meaning of such support shifts when embedded in unequal safeguarding relationships. Under these conditions, therapy may be experienced less as a confidential space of relief and more as an extension of institutional observation. This concern is echoed in recent English evaluation work suggesting that more mother-centred and empathic approaches produce more accurate assessment and better support than surveillance-heavy models, and that supportive functions should be more clearly distinguished from safeguarding functions within intervention plans (Gupta et al., 2018; McGovern et al., 2025).

At the same time, the analysis must remain measured. It would be too sweeping to argue that all professional concern about mental health is deficit-based or that all referrals for emotional support covertly function as discipline. Some practitioners in this study were clearly motivated by welfare rather than punishment and recognised that distress could be exacerbated by the system itself. Mercy's (PB13) earlier positive experience with a social worker who was "really supportive" shows that intervention was not uniformly harmful and that practical, humane help could matter greatly. Likewise, some parents may have had pre-existing mental health needs that required attention independently of child protection involvement. The argument here is not that institutional concern about mental

health is always misplaced, but that it is often decontextualised. Distress is too often assessed as if it originates entirely within the parent, when in fact it may be closely linked to racialised surveillance, migration precarity, economic exclusion, disability, and the coercive environment of safeguarding.

This has significant implications for how parental capability is judged. When emotional wellbeing is assessed without adequate structural context, the boundary between vulnerability and risk narrows. A frightened parent may become “unstable,” an exhausted parent may become “inconsistent,” and a guarded parent may become “uncooperative.” The emotional effects of state intervention can thus be woven into the case narrative as evidence of parental inadequacy. The system does not simply respond to distress; it can also create conditions later used to justify further concern. This recursive dynamic is one of the clearest examples of institutional harm emerging from the study. It shows that the safeguarding authority is not only externally regulatory but also internally productive: it shapes parents’ emotional lives and then reuses those emotional effects as interpretive evidence.

The racialised dimension of this process is especially important. Existing research suggests that Black parents’ emotional expression is often judged through stereotypes of volatility, aggression, or excessive control, whereas White parental distress may be more readily interpreted as understandable strain requiring support (Bernard & Thomas, 2016; Bernard and Harris, 2019). Recent English safeguarding work continues to highlight the role of racial bias and assumptions in shaping how families are interpreted in practice (Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2025; Cornish, 2025). While this study does

not claim that such distinctions operate mechanically in every case, participants' accounts strongly suggest that African parents were acutely aware of being judged not only on what they said but also on how they felt and how they displayed those feelings. That awareness generated burdensome forms of emotional self-regulation. Parents described having to remain calm, measured, and deferential under acute stress simply to avoid confirming anticipated stereotypes. The demand to appear emotionally controlled while living under institutional threat constitutes a form of racialised labour that safeguarding systems rarely acknowledge.

A counterargument might be that all parents involved in child protection, irrespective of race or migration status, experience fear, shame, and emotional destabilisation, and that the distress described here is therefore insufficiently specific to support a racialised analysis. There is some truth in the first part of that claim. Child protection is often intrusive and distressing for families generally. However, that does not weaken the argument advanced here. The issue is not whether distress is universal, but whether its causes, interpretation, and consequences are socially differentiated. The findings suggest that they are. For first-generation African parents, distress was often intensified by structurally specific pressures and interpreted through racialised frameworks of parenting, credibility, compliance, and belonging. The same institutional process may therefore be experienced very differently because families enter it from unequal social positions (Burrow et al., 2024; Lindsay, 2025; Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2025).

Overall, the findings show that mental health in child protection should be understood not only as an individual variable but also as a site where structural harm becomes embodied

and then reinterpreted. Parents' accounts reveal that anxiety, hypervigilance, shame, and emotional exhaustion were often produced by safeguarding processes and intensified by immigration precarity, poverty, housing insecurity, disability, and racialised mistrust. Social workers' accounts demonstrate how organisational pressure, risk frameworks, and accountability cultures encourage interpreting that distress as professionally relevant evidence of parental capacity. Through a CRT and intersectional lens, this section has argued that the issue is not simply parental vulnerability but the institutional conversion of structurally produced distress into deficit-based knowledge. This supports the broader thesis that child protection too often governs inequality by transforming social suffering into parental risk.

8.7 Survival Strategies: Compliance, Silence and Performance

One of the most significant findings of this study is that parents' responses to child protection involvement cannot be captured by the simple binary of cooperation versus resistance. Instead, parents' accounts reveal a more complex repertoire of navigation strategies shaped by fear, institutional mistrust, and acute awareness of unequal power. These strategies include compliance, self-silencing, emotional restraint, selective disclosure, careful self-presentation, and the performance of the "appropriate" parent. Interpreted through CRT, such responses should not be dismissed as passive acquiescence or straightforward engagement. They are better understood as forms of constrained agency: practical strategies for surviving within a system in which misunderstanding, misrecognition, or open challenge may carry serious consequences (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Gillborn, 2015; Bernard & Harris, 2019; Donnelly, 2023).

This argument requires careful qualification. Compliance in child protection is not inherently problematic. In many cases, willingness to attend meetings, engage with professionals, participate in plans, or accept support may constitute constructive cooperation that benefits children. Social workers must be able to distinguish between openness, avoidance, and refusal, particularly where genuine safety concerns exist. A balanced analysis, therefore, cannot romanticise resistance or treat all non-compliance as justified mistrust. Nor should it assume that every act of cooperation is coerced. However, the findings of this study suggest that the language of compliance often conceals more than it reveals. Parents were not participating from positions of equal power. They were engaging within a statutory system in which professionals had authority to record, interpret, and escalate concerns. In such conditions, outward cooperation may reflect a rational response to institutional asymmetry rather than genuine trust (Munro, 2011; Parton, 2014; Donnelly, 2023).

Parents' narratives repeatedly suggested that silence and careful self-management were not accidental absences of voice but deliberate tactics shaped by experience. In the findings chapter, parents described learning that speaking too openly could be dangerous if frustration was read as hostility, disagreement as denial, or emotional distress as instability. Aisha (PB09), for example, suggested that "explaining too much makes it worse," while Gladys (PB14) implied that some parents learned to say less because stress itself could become evidence. Grace (PB19) similarly suggested that one had to remain calm because visible emotion might be "written down." These findings are analytically significant because they show that silence in safeguarding is not always evidence of passivity, disengagement, or lack of insight. It may instead be an adaptive response to an environment perceived as punitive, mistrustful, or interpretively unsafe. In this sense,

silence becomes communicative in its own right: a sign that participation has become risky (Broadhurst et al., 2010; Morris et al., 2018; Mason et al., 2020).

The literature on parental participation helps illuminate this process. Research consistently shows that parents are often invited into procedural spaces of involvement yet remain limited in their ability to influence the meaning of events or to challenge professional interpretations (Broadhurst et al., 2010; Featherstone et al., 2014; Morris et al., 2018). This study extends that insight by showing that participation may become strategic. Parents may attend, respond, comply, and appear cooperative not because they feel genuinely heard, but because visible compliance may seem one of the few available protections. This is especially important for racialised migrant parents, for whom child protection may not feel like an isolated welfare process but part of a broader field of state power linked to schools, housing systems, immigration control, and local authority oversight. In such contexts, the risks of “getting it wrong” in professional encounters may seem especially high (Mason et al., 2020; Donnelly, 2023)

A CRT-informed interpretation deepens this analysis by situating compliance within racialised relations of surveillance and credibility. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) emphasise that racial power often operates through ordinary institutional norms that define what is reasonable, cooperative, and intelligible. In safeguarding, these norms shape not only professional judgement but also the forms of self-presentation that parents learn to adopt. For first-generation African parents in this study, compliance often entailed more than attending appointments or accepting advice. It also required performing calmness, moderation, gratitude, and emotional control in anticipation of how Black

parenting might otherwise be interpreted. This constitutes a form of racialised labour. Parents were not merely managing the content of what they said; they were also managing the style, tone, and emotional texture of their presentation before professional authority (Gillborn, 2015; Bernard & Harris, 2019; Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2025).

This performative element is central to understanding the findings. Performance here does not necessarily imply dishonesty or manipulation. Rather, it refers to the need to appear intelligible within an institutional environment structured by dominant norms. Parents described feeling required to appear calm even when distressed, compliant even when unconvinced, and grateful even when unsupported. They were, in effect, expected to stage parental adequacy in recognisable forms. Susan (PB18), for example, challenged this directly, stating that “strength does not always look soft,” suggesting that some parents recognised the pressure to present care in institutionally legible ways, even when those forms did not fit their own emotional style.

This aligns with broader scholarship on respectability, surveillance, and racialised scrutiny, in which minoritised subjects are often required to demonstrate legitimacy more intensely than those already aligned with dominant expectations (Roberts, 2002; Bernard & Harris, 2019; Cornish, 2025). In child protection, such performance is particularly consequential because appearance, tone, and demeanour are not peripheral to decision-making; they become part of the evidential field.

The findings also suggest that compliance and silence were closely linked to fear of ongoing institutional repercussions. Parents were aware that professional records could be shared and that a single interaction might shape future interpretation. This awareness made open disagreement costly. A parent who challenges a social worker's conclusion is not simply expressing dissent; they may risk being recorded as resistant, evasive, or lacking insight. Such labels can become durable features of the case file. Under these conditions, compliance serves as a defence against reputational harm in documentation. The issue is therefore not only interpersonal but also archival. Parents behave cautiously because they understand that the record may outlast the moment and that authority may be exercised beyond their control (White et al., 2009; Parton, 2014; Donnelly, 2023).

At the same time, it would be overly simplistic to view all compliance as false performance or all silence as coercion. Some parents may genuinely choose cooperation as the most constructive route to support or resolution. Others may avoid challenging professionals because they share some concerns, wish to reduce conflict for their children's sake, or value privacy. A nuanced analysis must allow for such variation. The point here is not that every cooperative act is strategic or that every silent parent is being silenced. Rather, in this study, many forms of compliance were described by parents themselves as adaptive responses to institutional mistrust. Their significance lies precisely in that self-understanding. When participants explain that they modulated their conduct out of fear rather than confidence, that explanation warrants serious analytical attention.

The practitioner data provide an important counterpoint. Social workers described engagement and compliance as key indicators of parental willingness to work with services, and in some cases, this may be entirely appropriate. Practitioners often need to assess whether families will follow safety plans, accept support, and respond to concerns in ways that protect children. Yet the practitioner accounts also suggest an awareness that compliance can be ambiguous. A parent may attend meetings while remaining fearful or appear cooperative while privately disengaged. This ambiguity is analytically important because it reveals a limitation in treating compliance as a straightforward measure of parental motivation. Compliance is often interpreted as a transparent reflection of willingness, yet it may conceal fear, confusion, resignation, mistrust, or tactical adaptation (Donnelly, 2023; Mason et al., 2020).

This is where the concept of constrained agency becomes especially useful. Parents in this study were neither wholly powerless victims nor fully autonomous actors. They acted, but under unequal and limited conditions. They made choices, yet within a field of coercive possibilities not of their own making. Compliance, silence, and performance can therefore be understood as forms of agency shaped by structural constraints. This avoids two equally unhelpful extremes: portraying parents as passive subjects of the system, or portraying adaptive behaviour as proof of the system's fairness. Instead, it recognises that families develop practical strategies to reduce harm when interacting with institutions that possess greater interpretive and coercive authority. This aligns with critical social work scholarship, which shows that people subject to welfare and family regulation often respond through tactical adaptation rather than open resistance, especially where the latter carries high risk (Featherstone et al., 2018; Gupta, 2017; Mason et al., 2020).

The racialised dimensions of these strategies remain especially important. For Black and migrant parents, the risk of misunderstanding may be heightened because challenge, emotion, or hesitation can already be filtered through stereotypes of aggression, defensiveness, or lack of insight. Bernard and Thomas (2016) and Bernard and Harris (2019) show that Black families in social care frequently navigate not only professional scrutiny but also racialised assumptions about family authority, discipline, and emotional expression. More recent work likewise argues that anti-racist child protection practice must confront racism directly rather than treating it as peripheral to safeguarding decision-making (Cornish, 2025; Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2025). The present findings support that argument. Parents described not merely being cautious but being cautious in recognisably racialised ways: remaining calm to avoid seeming angry, avoiding direct confrontation to prevent appearing threatening, and adjusting culturally familiar modes of expression to avoid further concern. Compliance here is not merely cooperation; it is labour performed under racialised conditions of observation.

This analysis also helps explain how institutional mistrust can coexist with visible participation. Parents may continue attending meetings, answering calls, and meeting formal expectations while feeling profoundly disconnected from the system. Such participation should not be mistaken for relational trust. It may instead reflect what might be termed compliant mistrust: a mode of engagement in which families do what is required because they perceive no safe alternative. This is an important insight from the study, suggesting that child protection may create a surface appearance of successful engagement while deepening mistrust beneath. Systems that rely too heavily on visible

compliance as evidence of effectiveness may fail to recognise the extent to which families are participating defensively rather than relationally (Mason et al., 2020; Donnelly, 2023).

A possible counterargument is that framing compliance as a survival strategy risks minimising instances in which parents avoid accountability, withhold information, or act strategically to reduce professional concern. That possibility cannot be dismissed. Child protection practitioners are justified in remaining vigilant, as such behaviour may be self-protective in ways that obscure harm. However, this does not undermine the central argument. The key question is not whether strategic self-presentation occurs, but how it should be interpreted. The findings suggest that, for many African parents in this study, strategic conduct arose not only from a desire to evade responsibility but also from a need to navigate a system perceived as mistrustful, racially charged, and capable of punishing perceived missteps. Without that context, professional interpretation risks reducing all guarded or performative behaviour to parental deficiency (Bernard & Harris, 2019; Donnelly, 2023; Cornish, 2025).

Another implication is that silence and compliance may carry emotional costs. Constant self-monitoring, suppression of frustration, and careful regulation of speech may reduce the immediate risk of escalation, but they may also intensify anxiety, exhaustion, and disconnection. Parents may feel they are no longer engaging authentically and that survival within the system depends on withholding parts of themselves. This matters because it highlights the emotional burden of safeguarding beyond formal intervention alone. Parents are not merely being assessed; they are often compelled to self-regulate in

anticipation of the institutional gaze. Under such conditions, the cost of survival may be a partial loss of self (Mason et al., 2020; Donnelly, 2023).

Overall, the findings show that compliance, silence, and performance are not minor side effects of child protection involvement but key mechanisms through which families navigate unequal institutional power. Parents' accounts reveal that cooperation was often strategic, silence was frequently protective, and performance was often necessary to remain legible within a system structured by racialised scrutiny and unequal credibility. Social workers' accounts, meanwhile, demonstrate that engagement and compliance become professionally meaningful within risk-oriented practice, even though they may conceal rather than reveal parents' actual experience. This section has therefore argued that what appears as cooperation in safeguarding may, in important respects, be a form of survival under constrained conditions. Recognising this does not weaken child protection; it improves analytical precision by distinguishing genuine relational engagement from compliance driven by fear.

8.8 Comparative Insights: England, Canada, the United States and Sweden

The purpose of this section is not to conduct a full comparative policy analysis of four child protection systems. Rather, it offers a focused comparative contextualisation of the study's findings by placing them alongside selected international scholarship on racialised child welfare, family regulation, welfare governance and state intervention in family life. England remains the primary empirical and analytical context of the thesis. The United States, Canada and Sweden are used selectively because each offers a distinct comparative lens through which to clarify the mechanisms identified in the English data:

surveillance, professional judgement, structural hardship, racialised categorisation, family regulation and unequal credibility.

The selection of these contexts is theoretically, historically and practice-based. The United States is included because it has generated one of the most explicit bodies of scholarship conceptualising child welfare as racialised family regulation and surveillance, particularly in relation to Black families (Roberts, 2002; Dettlaff et al., 2020). Canada is included because child welfare scholarship there has strongly connected disproportionality to settler-colonial governance, Indigenous child removal, structural poverty and state power, while also offering relevant insights into racialised and migrant family intervention (Blackstock, 2011; Blackstock et al., 2020; Adjei & Minka, 2018). Sweden is included because it represents a contrasting welfare-state context, often associated with universalism and family support, yet international child welfare scholarship shows that even more universalist systems may reproduce unequal forms of surveillance, professional authority and intervention when families are racialised, migrant or socially marginalised (Pösö et al., 2014).

This comparative contextualisation contributes to the research questions by helping to distinguish what is specific to England from what appears to be part of a wider transnational pattern in child protection and child welfare systems. The English case is shaped by its own legal framework, local authority structure, immigration regime, No Recourse to Public Funds, austerity, managerial defensibility and multi-ethnic administrative categorisation (Munro, 2011; Parton, 2014; Featherstone et al., 2018; Jolly, 2018; Jolly & Gupta, 2024). However, the international literature helps illuminate

recurring mechanisms also visible in this study: the conversion of poverty or migration-related hardship into family risk, the privileging of professional knowledge over family knowledge, and the disproportionate scrutiny of racialised and structurally marginalised communities.

It is important to clarify the population focus of the literature used in this section. The international scholarship discussed here does not always refer specifically to first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents. In the United States, the literature most often refers to Black families, particularly African American families, and to racialised family regulation more broadly. In Canada, much of the most developed critical literature concerns Indigenous children and families, with some relevant work on Black African, migrant and racialised families. In Sweden, the literature is more commonly framed around migrant, minoritised or socially marginalised families within a welfare-state context rather than specifically Sub-Saharan African parents. This literature is therefore not treated as a direct equivalent to the present study. Instead, they are used to sharpen the interpretation of mechanisms that resonate with the English data while maintaining the specificity of first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents' experiences in England.

The United States offers perhaps the most explicit and theoretically developed critique of child welfare as racialised family regulation. Roberts (2002, 2022) argues that what is conventionally described as child welfare operates in practice through surveillance, investigation and family separation, disproportionately targeting Black families while presenting itself as protective. This critique is further developed in scholarship associated with the upEND movement. Dettlaff et al. (2020) argue that the harms of child welfare

intervention are not merely unintended effects of an under-resourced helping system, but are rooted in deeper patterns of over-surveillance, over-intervention and family separation that disproportionately affect Black children and families. The upEND movement scholarship sharpens this argument by reframing child welfare as “family policing”, contending that coercive monitoring, the recoding of poverty-related hardship as neglect, and the disproportionate separation of racially marginalised families are central to how the system operates (Dettlaff et al., 2020).

This United States literature is useful to the present thesis because it provides conceptual language for processes also visible in the English data: racialised visibility, anticipatory risk, institutional mistrust, credibility hierarchy and the conversion of structural hardship into parental deficit. However, it is not used as direct evidence about first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents in England. The United States literature most often concerns Black American families and the specific racial history of the United States. The English case cannot, therefore, be collapsed into the United States case. The statutory framework, welfare history, immigration context and racial formations differ significantly. Nonetheless, the United States literature remains analytically valuable because it demonstrates how child protection may operate not only as support, but also as surveillance, coercion and racialised governance (Roberts, 2002, 2022; Dettlaff et al., 2020).

Canadian scholarship offers a distinct yet equally important comparative perspective. The most influential critical work in Canada has focused on the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in child welfare, linking it directly to settler-colonial governance,

intergenerational dispossession and structurally reproduced poverty (Blackstock, 2011; Blackstock et al., 2020). This literature is significant because it shows that disproportionality cannot always be adequately explained by generic notions of diversity or culture; in some contexts, it is inseparable from the state's historical formation and from enduring systems of racialised governance. Canadian scholarship therefore helps deepen the thesis's argument that child welfare inequality must be understood structurally, historically and institutionally, rather than only through individualised explanations of parental behaviour or professional misunderstanding.

At the same time, the Canadian literature must be used carefully in this thesis. Much of the strongest critical scholarship concerns Indigenous children and families, rather than Sub-Saharan African parents specifically. This difference matters because Indigenous child welfare in Canada is shaped by settler colonialism, forced assimilation and the historical removal of Indigenous children in ways that cannot simply be transferred to the experiences of African migrant parents in England. However, the Canadian literature remains relevant because it demonstrates how child welfare systems can transform structural inequalities, poverty and racialised marginalisation into institutional assessments of family risk. Work on Black African, migrant and racialised families in Canada also provides useful insight into how migration, race, professional judgement and state intervention may interact within child welfare contexts (Adjei & Minka, 2018). The Canadian case therefore supports the thesis by showing how racialised family intervention can be connected to wider histories of state power, while also reminding the reader that different racialised groups are positioned differently within different national histories.

Sweden provides a third comparative lens because it is often understood as a universalist welfare state with a stronger public commitment to family support, social provision and child wellbeing than more residual welfare systems. Its inclusion is therefore useful because it tests the assumption that more universal welfare arrangements automatically prevent unequal or racialised intervention. Scholarship on Nordic child welfare suggests that even welfare-oriented systems may reproduce unequal patterns of scrutiny and professional authority when families are migrant, minoritised or socially marginalised (Pösö et al., 2014). Sweden is therefore included not because it is identical to England, Canada or the United States, but because it offers a contrasting welfare-state context through which to examine whether surveillance, risk interpretation and unequal professional credibility can also appear in systems more strongly associated with universal welfare and family support.

The Swedish literature used in this section is not treated as literature specifically about first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents. It is more commonly concerned with migrant, minoritised or socially marginalised families within a Nordic welfare context. Its relevance lies in showing that universalist welfare language does not necessarily preclude unequal intervention. Families may still become subject to professional judgement, cultural interpretation and institutional authority in ways that reproduce difference. This matters for the present thesis because it shows that racialised safeguarding governance is not limited to explicitly punitive systems. It can also operate in systems that describe themselves primarily through welfare, support and child-centred protection.

Across these contexts, several recurring mechanisms become visible. First, child protection and child welfare systems often translate structural hardship into family risk. Poverty, housing insecurity, immigration-related stress, welfare exclusion, or social marginalisation may be interpreted through safeguarding categories that focus on parental adequacy rather than structural constraints (Featherstone et al., 2018; Jolly, 2018; Roberts, 2022). Second, professional knowledge is often given greater institutional authority than family knowledge. Parents may be invited to speak, but their accounts can be filtered through professional assumptions about risk, cooperation, credibility and insight (Fricker, 2007; White et al., 2009; Broadhurst et al., 2010). Third, racialised and marginalised communities are often made more visible to statutory systems through schools, health services, housing agencies, police, immigration systems and welfare institutions. This increased visibility can lead to cumulative scrutiny, even when no single professional action appears overtly discriminatory.

These commonalities do not imply that all systems operate identically, nor that race functions in the same way across England, the United States, Canada and Sweden. Rather, they suggest that child protection and child welfare are historically variable yet structurally related forms of family governance. The value of comparative contextualisation lies in its ability to sharpen the interpretation of the English data. It shows that the parents' accounts in this study are not isolated individual experiences, but part of wider debates about how child welfare systems produce, interpret and manage racialised family risk.

A balanced comparative argument must also acknowledge the risks of overextension. It would be analytically unsound to import the language of family regulation from the United States without recognising the distinct statutory framework of England, the role of local authorities, or the specific significance of immigration control and No Recourse to Public Funds within the British context (Munro, 2011; Parton, 2014; Jolly, 2018; Jolly & Gupta, 2024; Featherstone et al., 2018). Likewise, the Canadian emphasis on settler colonialism cannot simply be transferred to African migrant experiences in England, and the Swedish case should not be romanticised either as a model of successful welfare universalism or as an identical form of racialised intervention (Blackstock, 2011; Pösö et al., 2014). Comparative insight is most persuasive when it sharpens, rather than replaces, contextual interpretation.

The comparative literature, therefore, has a bounded function in this thesis. It does not provide direct evidence about the specific experiences of Sub-Saharan African parents in England; that evidence comes from the empirical data generated in this study. Rather, the international literature helps situate those findings within wider debates about racialised family regulation, welfare governance and the institutional production of risk. This distinction is important because the thesis does not claim that Black American families, Indigenous Canadian families, migrant families in Sweden and Sub-Saharan African parents in England experience child protection in identical ways. Instead, it argues that different systems may reproduce related mechanisms of surveillance, professional judgement and structural misrecognition through nationally specific histories and policy arrangements.

The specific contribution of this study to that comparative landscape lies in locating first-generation Sub-Saharan African families within a British mode of racialised child protection governance that remains under-theorised in the existing literature. Unlike much United States scholarship, which centres Black American family regulation, or Canadian scholarship, which focuses mainly on Indigenous child welfare, this thesis foregrounds the intersection of migration status, legal precarity, language barriers, settlement challenges, parenting norms and professional risk culture within safeguarding practice in England (Roberts, 2002; Blackstock, 2011; Adjei & Minka, 2018). It therefore extends the international literature by showing how racialised governance operates through a specifically English entanglement of social care, immigration regulation, welfare exclusion and professional risk culture. This helps explain why families in the present study often experienced child protection simultaneously as a welfare intervention, a surveillance apparatus and, at times, a bordering practice.

Overall, the comparison with the United States, Canada and Sweden strengthens rather than weakens the thesis's central argument. It shows that the experiences described by first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents in England form part of a broader transnational pattern in which child protection systems may transform structural inequality into administratively legible family risk (Roberts, 2022; Blackstock et al., 2020; Pösö et al., 2014). At the same time, it confirms that these patterns are mediated through nationally specific histories and institutional arrangements. In England, the most salient features are shaped by the interaction of racial disproportionality, immigration precarity, welfare retrenchment, local authority safeguarding, audit culture and epistemic hierarchy (Munro, 2011; Featherstone et al., 2018; Jolly, 2018; Jolly & Gupta, 2024). Comparative contextualisation therefore does not flatten the English case; it clarifies it.

8.9 Implications for Anti-Racist Social Work Practice

The analysis developed in this chapter carries significant implications for anti-racist social work practice in England. If the experiences described by first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents are interpreted only as misunderstandings, communication failures or unfortunate side effects of an otherwise neutral system, then reform remains limited. The findings suggest a deeper problem: racialised inequality in child protection is reproduced not primarily through explicit prejudice, but through everyday institutional processes that shape who becomes visible, how parenting is interpreted, whose knowledge is treated as credible and how structural hardship is converted into individual risk. Anti-racist practice, therefore, cannot be treated as an optional ethical commitment or procedural add-on. It requires a rethinking of how safeguarding knowledge, judgement and intervention are understood and enacted (Gillborn, 2015; Bernard & Harris, 2019; Cane & Tedam, 2023; Ioakimidis et al., 2022).

This argument must be framed carefully. Anti-racist practice does not mean lowering safeguarding thresholds, minimising concern for children or avoiding intervention where harm exists. Child protection remains a legitimate public responsibility, and practitioners must retain authority to act where children are unsafe. Nor does this thesis suggest that every difficult assessment involving a racialised family is reducible to racism. Social work involves judgement under uncertainty, shaped by legal duty, managerial accountability and the possibility of serious harm (Munro, 2011; Parton, 2014). The implication is therefore not less scrutiny, but better scrutiny: scrutiny that is historically

informed, structurally literate, reflexive about power and attentive to the unequal effects of apparently neutral procedures.

A central implication is the need to move beyond colour-blind professionalism towards structurally informed anti-racist judgement. Policy and practice often assume that fairness is achieved when all families are treated equally. Yet CRT shows that equal treatment under unequal conditions can reproduce rather than reduce injustice (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Gillborn, 2015). The findings reinforce this concern. Parents were disadvantaged not only through explicit differential treatment, but because assessment often failed to recognise how race, migration, poverty, language, disability and institutional mistrust shaped their encounters with the system. Anti-racist practice therefore requires practitioners to ask not only whether a parent appears resistant, distressed or inconsistent, but what structural conditions may be producing that presentation; not only whether a home meets normative expectations, but whether those expectations are culturally and materially situated; and not only whether a family has engaged, but under what conditions that engagement has occurred.

This points to the need for stronger structural literacy within assessment. As Featherstone et al. (2018), Rogowski (2020) and Gupta (2016) argue, social work too often individualises social suffering by treating poverty, housing insecurity and welfare exclusion as parental deficits rather than as harms rooted in wider structural arrangements. The present study extends this analysis to include immigration precarity and racialised mistrust. Anti-racist safeguarding should therefore require explicit consideration of whether concerns arise from parental action, state-produced hardship or

a combination of both. Assessment tools, supervision and case discussion need to make structural causation visible rather than leaving it implicit or optional. This does not weaken professional judgement; it sharpens it.

A second implication concerns the interpretation of parental behaviour. Throughout this thesis, guardedness, emotional restraint, compliance, selective silence, and insistence on documentation have emerged as ambiguous forms of conduct. Such behaviours may be read institutionally as non-engagement, defensiveness or lack of insight, but they may also represent rational responses to surveillance and fear. Research on parental participation has shown that behaviour in child protection settings is shaped by coercive context rather than attitude alone (Broadhurst et al., 2010; Morris et al., 2018). The present study suggests that this is especially true for racialised migrant parents, who may be aware that emotional expression, disagreement or culturally unfamiliar communication styles can be interpreted negatively. Anti-racist practice, therefore, requires resistance to rapid behavioural labelling. Behaviour must be interpreted relationally and contextually rather than administratively.

This also foregrounds the importance of epistemic justice. Fricker (2007) offers a powerful framework for understanding why some parents' voices acquire less institutional authority than others. In this study, parents frequently described feeling disbelieved, reframed or reduced to professional labels that diminished the legitimacy of their own accounts. Anti-racist practice, therefore, requires more than polite listening. It demands active scrutiny of how credibility is distributed. Practitioners must reflect not only on which forms of evidence they privilege, but on why some forms of knowledge

appear more authoritative than others. Professional recording, school concerns, and inter-agency information will often remain necessary, but they should not automatically eclipse parents' experiential knowledge, especially where misunderstandings may be shaped by culture, language, migration history, disability, or prior mistrust (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Bernard & Harris, 2019).

The implications for documentation are significant. White et al. (2009) show that child protection recording is not a neutral act of description, but a process of meaning-making. This thesis demonstrates how descriptors such as “hostile,” “non-engaging,” “minimising” or “lacking insight” may become durable and shape later interpretation. Anti-racist practice therefore requires sustained reflexivity about written language. Practitioners should ask whether what is being recorded is an observation, an inference or a judgement shaped by dominant norms. This does not mean avoiding clear documentation where concerns are serious. It means documenting with evidential precision, analytical care and awareness that case files can reproduce racialised assumptions under the appearance of professionalism.

A further implication concerns culture, parenting norms and professional humility. The findings suggest that parenting and discipline were often judged against implicit Eurocentric standards of communication, emotional expression, family authority and child socialisation. Anti-racist practice cannot consist of learning a static list of “African cultural traits,” since that risks essentialism and stereotype. Tedam's (2021) concept of cultural humility is more useful here, especially when read alongside wider anti-racist critiques of cultural misrecognition in UK social work (Bernard & Harris, 2019; Cane &

Tedam, 2023). Cultural humility requires ongoing reflection on how professional and institutional assumptions shape interpretation. Anti-racist practice therefore requires careful differentiation between genuine harm, unfamiliar but non-harmful variation and behaviours intensified by structural strain.

The study also highlights the importance of immigration-aware practice. For many parents, child protection could not be separated from anxieties about legal status, data-sharing, welfare exclusion and the punitive capacities of the state. Erel et al. (2016), Jolly (2018), Williams and Soydan (2005), and Jolly and Gupta (2024) show that migrant families often encounter social institutions through overlapping regimes of welfare and border control. Anti-racist practice must therefore include a developed understanding of immigration precarity, NRPF, settlement stress and the chilling effects such conditions can have on help-seeking. This does not mean social workers must become immigration advisers. It means they must recognise when migration-related insecurity intensifies family stress, shapes disclosure, distorts engagement or heightens fear of services.

The findings also caution against treating anti-racist practice as a matter of individual goodwill alone. Many social workers in this study appeared ethically committed and reflective, yet they also described organisations marked by fear of blame, pressure from inspections, high caseloads, defensive recording and limited early help. This matters because anti-racist intent can be neutralised by risk-averse cultures that reward defensibility over relationality and speed over contextual understanding (Munro, 2011; Parton, 2014; Ioakimidis et al., 2022). For antiracist practice to be sustainable, organisations must create conditions that make it possible, including supervision that

explicitly engages race, migration, power and documentation; leadership that treats disproportionality as a substantive practice issue; and workload conditions that permit contextual assessment rather than hurried categorisation.

This leads directly to accountability. Anti-racist practice cannot rely on self-reflection alone. The findings point to the need for collective mechanisms through which teams can examine patterns of referral, escalation, documentation, and outcomes by race, ethnicity, migration-related vulnerability, and deprivation. Bywaters et al. (2016, 2020) demonstrate that deprivation is a major driver of intervention, but the present study suggests that poverty must be analysed alongside race and migration. Monitoring disparities is necessary, but insufficient. Teams also need structured opportunities to examine how everyday definitions of risk, cooperation, insight and parenting may reproduce those disparities.

Another implication concerns partnership with communities and families as knowledge bearers. Reform should not be designed solely from within statutory systems. Parents suggested clearer guidance on safeguarding, culturally responsive parenting support during settlement, better use of interpreters, clearer separation from immigration enforcement and more relational engagement. Anti-racist practice therefore requires a rethinking of expertise. Families and community organisations should not be treated merely as referral pathways or compliance tools, but as contributors to safeguarding knowledge. This aligns with CRM and counter-storytelling, which treat lived experience as analytically significant knowledge (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Ioakimidis et al., 2022; Jolly & Gupta, 2024).

A balanced reading must nevertheless recognise that representation and partnership are not sufficient on their own. Recruiting a more diverse workforce, involving community actors or offering cultural training will not automatically transform safeguarding if the underlying mode of intervention remains unchanged. Representation can coexist with the reproduction of dominant norms, and community partnership can become tokenistic if statutory agencies retain sole interpretive authority. Meaningful anti-racist transformation therefore requires epistemic, organisational and policy change rather than symbolic inclusion.

Importantly, more humane and relational forms of practice were not absent from parents' accounts. Some participants described social workers who listened, communicated clearly, offered reassurance and connected families to meaningful support. These accounts demonstrate that anti-racist, culturally responsive and contextually informed practice is not an abstract ideal, but something parents can recognise in lived encounter. However, such accounts were often contingent on individual workers rather than embedded in the system's routine character. Supportive and respectful practice should not depend on chance encounters with exceptional practitioners. It needs to be organisationally embedded through supervision, assessment culture, workload conditions and accountability structures.

Ultimately, the central implication is that fairness in safeguarding cannot be achieved through neutrality alone. Anti-racist practice requires more than kindness, cultural sensitivity or good intentions. It requires the capacity to identify how race, migration, poverty, credibility, disability and institutional memory operate within the case and across

the wider system. It demands that practitioners distinguish structural hardship from parental harm, interpret behaviour in context, record with epistemic care and engage families as knowledge-bearing subjects rather than merely as objects of assessment. In this sense, anti-racist safeguarding is not a specialist supplement to mainstream practice. It is what rigorous, just and contextually competent social work should look like in a racially stratified society.

8.10 Chapter Summary

This chapter has argued that the experiences of first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents in England are not adequately explained through isolated practitioner error, cultural misunderstanding, or individual instances of poor communication. Rather, the findings indicate that these experiences are more convincingly understood as outcomes of a child protection system in which racialised inequality is reproduced through routine processes of assessment, interpretation, documentation, and intervention. Drawing together the empirical material from both parents and social workers, the chapter has shown that safeguarding does not operate within a neutral social field. It is shaped by historically sedimented assumptions about parenting, risk, credibility, and professional authority, all of which intersect with race, migration, class, poverty, and immigration precarity (Bernard & Gupta, 2008; Parton, 2014; Featherstone et al., 2018; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

The chapter first demonstrated that parenting and discipline were key sites through which Eurocentric norms became institutional standards. Parents' accounts suggested that culturally situated forms of authority, behavioural correction, and family responsibility

were often assessed against dominant assumptions that appeared universal but were, in fact, socially and historically specific. The issue was not merely that cultural differences existed in safeguarding encounters, but that institutional power determined which forms of parenting were seen as legitimate, which required explanation, and which became grounds for suspicion. Social workers' accounts complicated this picture by showing that such judgements were often made within contexts of uncertainty, time pressure, and organisational defensibility. Nevertheless, the overall analysis suggests that child protection too often failed to adequately distinguish among actual harm, non-dominant parenting norms, and the effects of structural strain (Bernard & Gupta, 2008; Barn, 2007; Gillborn, 2015; Bernard & Harris, 2019).

The chapter then explored how unequal distributions of credibility shaped parental experience. Through the lens of epistemic injustice, it showed that parents were not only subject to assessment but also to unequal recognition as knowers of their own lives. Formal participation in meetings and processes did not necessarily translate into substantive epistemic standing. Parents frequently described being doubted, reframed, or reduced to deficit-based professional labels, while social workers' accounts illustrated how organisational recording practices and risk-oriented cultures could stabilise interpretations over time. The analysis, therefore, suggested that child protection power operates not only through formal intervention, but also through control over what counts as reliable knowledge, whose account is treated as credible, and how documentary narratives acquire authority (Fricker, 2007; Broadhurst et al., 2010; Bernard & Harris, 2019; Gorin et al., 2024).

The chapter further argued that mental health, emotional distress, and parental vulnerability cannot be understood adequately through individualised models alone. Parents' narratives revealed that fear, anxiety, hypervigilance, and exhaustion were often intensified by safeguarding itself and by the wider insecurities of immigration precarity, poverty, unstable housing, and social isolation. Rather than treating such distress purely as a pre-existing parental deficit, the chapter has shown that it should be understood as at least partly produced through structurally unequal and coercive conditions. Social workers, meanwhile, described systems oriented towards risk detection, accountability, and defensible judgment, conditions that could make it difficult to recognise institutional contributions to distress. In this way, the chapter has highlighted how child protection can convert structurally produced suffering into evidence of parental inadequacy (Featherstone et al., 2018; Jolly, 2018; Okpokiri, 2021; Farmer, 2021).

A further major contribution of the chapter has been to show that parental responses to safeguarding are best understood not through a simplistic opposition between cooperation and resistance, but through the concept of constrained agency. Compliance, self-silencing, emotional restraint, and strategic self-presentation emerged as important survival strategies within encounters experienced as unequal, mistrustful, and potentially punitive. These behaviours were not adequately captured by administrative labels such as engagement or nonengagement. Rather, they reflected efforts to navigate a system in which tone, demeanour, and disagreement could all be consequential. Read through CRT, such strategies reveal how racialised governance is lived not only through overt intervention, but also through anticipatory self-regulation under the institutional gaze (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Gillborn, 2015; Okpokiri, 2021).

The comparative discussion strengthened these arguments by showing that the English case forms part of a broader transnational pattern in which child protection and child welfare systems disproportionately intervene in the lives of structurally marginalised families. Comparison with the United States, Canada, and Sweden demonstrated that, despite important differences in legal frameworks, welfare regimes, and racial histories, recurring mechanisms are visible across settings: the translation of structural hardship into family risk, the privileging of professional over familial knowledge, and the disproportionate scrutiny of racialised communities. At the same time, the chapter maintained that the English case has its own specificity, particularly in the way safeguarding is shaped by immigration control, No Recourse to Public Funds, managerial defensibility, and the continuing legacy of racial disproportionality in children's social care (Dettlaff et al., 2020; Roberts, 2002; Blackstock, 2011; Pösö et al., 2014; Jolly et al., 2022; Parton, 2014).

The implications for anti-racist social work practice are therefore substantial. The analysis has suggested that anti-racist practice cannot be reduced to cultural awareness, individual goodwill, or isolated training interventions. It requires a deeper reorientation of safeguarding towards structural literacy, epistemic justice, cultural humility, and critical reflexivity about how race, migration, poverty, and power shape assessment. It also requires organisational conditions that make such practice possible, including better supervision, reduced defensiveness, more careful documentation, and stronger attention to how institutional processes themselves may reproduce inequality. In this sense, the chapter has argued that anti-racist practice is not an optional supplement to mainstream safeguarding, but a necessary condition of fair and contextually competent intervention

in a racially stratified society (Research in Practice, 2022; BASW, 2021; Child Safeguarding Practice (Review Panel, 2025).

Overall, this chapter advances the central thesis that child protection in England can function as a form of racialised governance, not only through dramatic interventions but also through everyday practices that classify, interpret, and regulate family life. The experiences of the parents in this study were shaped not only by interpersonal encounters with individual practitioners, but also by a system that too often rendered African family life hyper-visible as a risk while leaving structural causes of hardship under-acknowledged. Social workers, for their part, were shown to operate within institutional conditions that frequently narrowed interpretive space and encouraged defensible rather than fully contextualised judgment. The significance of this finding lies in its refusal to reduce inequality to either bad practice or cultural difference alone. Instead, it locates racialised injustice within the ordinary operation of safeguarding itself (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Gillborn, 2015; Bernard & Gupta, 2008; Featherstone et al., 2018).

This chapter, therefore, provides the interpretive bridge to the thesis's final chapter. Having analysed the findings through the lenses of CRT, including its intersectional analysis of racialised power, and epistemic injustice, the thesis can now move to its concluding arguments about what this study contributes to knowledge, what its limitations are, and what forms of policy, practice, and future research are necessary if

child protection in England is to move beyond the reproduction of systemic racial inequality.

CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION AND CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

9.0 Introduction

This chapter draws together the thesis's central arguments and clarifies its overall contribution to knowledge. It restates the main argument, identifies the study's conceptual, empirical, theoretical, and methodological contributions, considers implications for policy and practice, acknowledges the study's limitations, and outlines priorities for future research. In doing so, the chapter shows how the thesis moves beyond documenting racial disproportionality in child protection to explaining how it is institutionally produced, lived, interpreted, and sustained within everyday safeguarding practice in England.

The chapter also makes explicit what this study adds to existing scholarship. Rather than treating racial disproportionality as a pattern to be noted, monitored, or statistically described, the thesis has argued that it should be understood as a cumulative institutional process shaped by visibility, surveillance, interpretive judgment, credibility allocation, and documentation. It has further shown that these processes unfold within wider conditions of racialisation, migration, precarity, poverty, and unequal institutional power. The purpose of this concluding chapter is therefore not only to summarise the findings, but also to clarify the originality of the study, its significance for social work knowledge and practice, and the questions it opens for future scholarship.

9.1 Restating the Central Argument

This thesis argues that systemic inequality in UK child protection cannot be understood solely through isolated poor practice, individual prejudice or cultural misunderstanding. Rather, inequality is reproduced through routine safeguarding processes that appear formally neutral but operate within historically and structurally racialised contexts. Drawing on Critical Race Theory, intersectionality and epistemic injustice, and grounded in the lived experiences of first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents alongside social workers' institutional perspectives, the study has shown that racial disproportionality is better understood not only as an outcome to be measured, but as a process to be examined (Crenshaw, 1991; Matsuda et al., 1993; Fricker, 2007; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Gillborn, 2015).

A central claim is that child protection involvement often develops through cumulative pathways of institutional visibility. Families experiencing poverty, housing insecurity, migration precarity, welfare exclusion and limited access to support may become more exposed to schools, health services, housing providers and other statutory systems. That visibility is not neutral. Once concerns are recorded, families may become subject to intensified assessment, surveillance, credibility judgement and documentation, with earlier interpretations shaping later interventions. In this way, safeguarding can operate as a process through which structural hardship is reinterpreted as parental risk and through which some families are governed more intensively than others (Parton, 2014; White et al., 2009; Bywaters et al., 2020; Featherstone et al., 2018).

These processes are not reducible to overt racism or individual bad faith. Social workers in this study often described ethical commitment, structural frustration and a desire for more relational and culturally responsive practice. Yet their accounts also showed how professional judgement is shaped by organisational defensibility, managerial pressure, limited early-help provision and risk-oriented practice. Critical Race Theory is therefore valuable because it helps explain how routine institutional arrangements can reproduce racialised inequality without requiring explicitly racist intent (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Gillborn, 2015; Munro, 2011; Featherstone et al., 2018). The argument advanced here is institutional rather than moralistic: the thesis is concerned less with identifying racist individuals than with analysing how safeguarding systems can normalise unequal outcomes through ordinary professional processes.

A second major argument is that child protection is not only a site of intervention, but also a site of knowledge production and epistemic power. Parents' narratives revealed that they were often able to speak but not always able to shape meaning. Professional accounts, once recorded, frequently carried greater authority than parental testimony, while distress, guardedness, disagreement or attempts at self-protection could be reinterpreted as hostility, denial, noncompliance or lack of insight. Safeguarding, therefore, not only assesses families; it constructs authoritative narratives about them. This helps explain why disproportionality should be understood as the cumulative interaction among visibility, surveillance, interpretation, credibility, and documentation (Fricker, 2007; White et al., 2009; Bernard & Harris, 2019).

The thesis also contends that racialised inequality is relationally and structurally produced. Family-professional encounters are shaped by migration, racism, poverty, disability, insecurity and institutional mistrust, as well as by practitioners' legal duties, recording requirements, threshold anxieties and organisational constraints. Parental behaviour cannot therefore be interpreted adequately in isolation from the contexts in which it emerges. Silence, caution, emotional restraint, compliance, strategic self-presentation or disagreement may all carry meanings different from those assigned within safeguarding systems. Families may therefore be judged not only on what they do, but on how their actions are institutionally read (Crenshaw, 1991; Bernard & Harris, 2019; Okpokiri, 2021; Featherstone et al., 2018).

A related argument is that parenting is not assessed in a culturally neutral way. The study has shown that parental authority, discipline, emotional expression and family responsibility are often interpreted against implicit Eurocentric standards that appear universal but are socially and historically specific. The issue is not simply that cultural differences exist in safeguarding encounters, but that institutional power determines which parenting practices are treated as reasonable, which require explanation and which become grounds for suspicion. In this respect, safeguarding not only regulates harm; it also evaluates the legitimacy of family life within dominant normative frameworks (Gillies, 2013; Gillborn, 2015; Bernard & Harris, 2019; Cornish, 2025).

The thesis therefore understands UK child protection, in important respects, as a form of racialised safeguarding governance. This does not mean that safeguarding is inherently illegitimate, that intervention is never necessary, or that every professional decision involving a racially minoritised family is discriminatory. Rather, it means that systems

designed to protect children may reproduce inequality when they fail to distinguish between structural hardship and parental harm, dominant norms and universal standards, and procedural neutrality and substantive fairness. The study rejects both an overly individualised explanation of disproportionality and an overly simplistic account in which all intervention is treated as equally oppressive. Its argument is more precise: ordinary safeguarding processes may become racialised in their effects because they operate within unequal social and institutional conditions (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Gillborn, 2015; Bernard & Gupta, 2008).

A further element of the central argument concerns constrained agency. Parents did not appear simply as passive victims of institutional power, nor as fully free actors able to engage with services on equal terms. Their accounts demonstrated adaptation, compliance, silence, self-monitoring, and strategic self-presentation, all shaped by fear, uncertainty, and unequal power. These responses show that engagement with safeguarding often involves negotiation under constraint. Cooperation and resistance cannot therefore be treated as simple opposites, and behaviours that appear compliant may still reflect mistrust, vulnerability or anticipatory self-protection (Mason, Taggart & Broadhurst, 2020; Donnelly, 2023).

The thesis also argues that emotional distress in safeguarding should not be understood only as an individual characteristic or pre-existing parental vulnerability. Parents' accounts showed that fear, anxiety, hypervigilance and exhaustion were often intensified by safeguarding processes and by wider conditions of migration precarity, poverty, unstable housing and social insecurity. Child protection does not merely respond to family

distress; it can also contribute to producing and amplifying it. That distress may then be reinterpreted institutionally as further evidence of parental inadequacy. One key argument, therefore, is that structurally produced suffering can be converted into professionally legible forms of risk (Featherstone et al., 2018; Jolly, 2018; Okpokiri, 2021; McGovern et al., 2025).

Taken together, the thesis argues that child protection must be understood not only as a protective welfare function, but also as an institutional arena in which race, migration, class, knowledge and professional power intersect to shape how families are seen, judged and governed. The originality of the study lies in showing that disproportionality is not merely visible at the level of outcomes but produced and reproduced through the ordinary operation of safeguarding itself. In this respect, the thesis moves beyond asking whether inequality exists to addressing how it is made durable in practice.

9.2 Contribution to Knowledge

This thesis contributes to knowledge by advancing understanding of racial disproportionality in UK child protection beyond statistical description and broad causal debate. While existing scholarship has documented the over-representation of Black and minoritised children and families at multiple points in the safeguarding system, this study shows how inequality is produced, experienced, interpreted and sustained in everyday practice. Rather than treating disproportionality only as an outcome, the thesis reconceptualises it as a cumulative institutional process shaped by visibility, surveillance, professional judgement, credibility allocation, documentation and the recoding of structural hardship as parental risk (Bernard & Gupta, 2008; Bywaters et al., 2020; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Gillborn, 2015).

The first contribution is conceptual. The thesis develops the idea of racialised safeguarding governance to explain how child protection operates not only as a welfare intervention, but also as a regulatory framework through which some families become more visible, reportable and governable than others. In doing so, it brings Critical Race Theory into sustained dialogue with child protection scholarship and shows how formally neutral procedures may reproduce racialised inequality through routine administrative and professional practices rather than only through explicit discriminatory intent (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Gillborn, 2015; Parton, 2014). This offers a stronger explanatory account of how ordinary institutional processes can produce unequal outcomes while still appearing administratively legitimate.

The second contribution is processual. The study shows that disproportionality is produced through cumulative sequences of referral, monitoring, interpretation, recording, review and renewed scrutiny. This offers a more dynamic account of child protection inequality than approaches focused only on demographic imbalance or final outcomes. It also explains how earlier concerns can harden into institutional memory and shape later assessments, even where no single event fully explains continued intervention (White et al., 2009; Broadhurst et al., 2010; Bywaters et al., 2020). Disproportionality is therefore not only a pattern, but a trajectory that emerges over time through the accumulation of professional concerns, documentary interpretations and institutional decisions.

The third contribution is empirical. The thesis centres first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents, a group still underrepresented in UK child protection research, where broad categories such as “Black,” “BME” or “minority ethnic” can obscure differences

in migration history, legal status, housing insecurity, language, disability and institutional familiarity. By focusing specifically on this participant group, the study provides a more precise account of how race, migration, poverty, parenting and institutional mistrust are experienced together within safeguarding contexts (Aspinall, 2020; Bernard & Harris, 2019; Okpokiri, 2021). This specificity resists the flattening effects of aggregated ethnic categories and contributes to a more differentiated understanding of racialised family experience in child protection.

The fourth contribution is theoretical. The thesis extends child protection scholarship by showing that epistemic injustice is central to safeguarding practice. Parents were often able to participate formally but not to shape the interpretation of their circumstances. Professional narratives, especially once recorded, tended to carry greater institutional authority than parental explanations. By bringing Fricker's (2007) work on epistemic injustice into dialogue with Critical Race Theory, intersectionality and counter-storytelling, the thesis shows how credibility, knowledge and professional authority operate within safeguarding systems (Crenshaw, 1991; Fricker, 2007; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This shifts attention from whether parents are included in the process to whether they are recognised as credible knowers of their own lives.

A further theoretical contribution lies in the thesis's analysis of parenting, discipline, emotional distress and Eurocentric normativity. The study shows that parenting is not assessed in a culturally neutral way. Parental authority, communication, emotional expression, and behavioural correction were often interpreted in ways that ran counter to

dominant institutional assumptions that appeared universal but were historically and socially specific (Gillies, 2013; Gillborn, 2015; Bernard & Harris, 2019; Cornish, 2025). Similarly, parental anxiety, hypervigilance and exhaustion cannot be understood only as individual vulnerabilities brought into the system. They may also be produced or intensified by safeguarding processes and by wider conditions of poverty, immigration precarity, insecure housing and institutional mistrust (Featherstone et al., 2018; Jolly, 2018; Okpokiri, 2021; McGovern et al., 2025). The thesis therefore contributes a structurally informed account of how cultural difference and distress can be reinterpreted as parental inadequacy.

The fifth contribution is methodological. By using Critical Race Methodology and counter-storytelling in the study of UK child protection, the thesis demonstrates the value of treating parents' narratives not as anecdotal supplements to institutional knowledge but as analytically generative accounts of how inequality is lived and understood. This extends approaches more commonly used in education and legal scholarship into safeguarding research and shows their relevance for examining how everyday professional practices normalise unequal treatment (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Gillborn, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2020). The methodological contribution lies not simply in the use of qualitative interviews, but in the epistemological status granted to parental narratives as sources of critical explanation and conceptual insight.

The sixth contribution is analytical. By integrating parent and practitioner accounts without collapsing one into the other, the thesis shows that racialised outcomes can be produced even where practitioners see themselves as ethical, reflective and well-

intentioned. Practitioners' work is shaped by defensibility, audit cultures, threshold anxiety, limited early-help capacity and organisational pressure (Munro, 2011; Featherstone et al., 2018; Parton, 2014). This moves the analysis beyond simplistic binaries of oppressive workers versus misunderstood families and towards a more institutionally grounded explanation of how inequality is reproduced in practice.

The seventh contribution concerns migration precarity and constrained agency. The findings show that insecure legal status, welfare exclusion, housing instability, fear of state institutions and limited access to support are not merely background conditions, but active forces shaping how families encounter child protection, how they are read by professionals and how they position themselves within safeguarding processes (Erel et al., 2016; 2018; Jolly, 2018; Jolly & Gupta, 2024). The thesis also reframes compliance, self-silencing, emotional restraint, selective disclosure and strategic self-presentation as forms of constrained agency rather than simple markers of engagement or cooperation (Mason, Taggart & Broadhurst, 2020; Donnelly, 2023). This shows that parental responses must be understood in relation to fear, institutional vulnerability and racialised scrutiny.

Finally, the thesis clarifies what anti-racist safeguarding would need to address. Meaningful reform cannot be reduced to cultural awareness, symbolic inclusion or isolated training interventions. It requires structural literacy, immigration-aware practice, epistemic humility, critical attention to how risk, parenting and credibility are constructed, and organisational conditions that enable reflective practice (Tadam, 2021; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Gillborn, 2015; Cane & Tadam, 2023; Ioakimidis et al., 2022). The thesis

therefore contributes not only to critique but also to the conceptual clarification of anti-racist safeguarding as a practice and policy challenge.

Taken together, these contributions are empirical, conceptual, theoretical, methodological and practical. The thesis moves beyond documenting racial inequality to explaining how it is institutionally produced and sustained. Its originality lies not in claiming that disproportionality exists, which is already well established, but in offering a more precise account of how it is made and remade through the ordinary operation of safeguarding itself.

9.2.1 Research Dissemination

During the doctoral process, emerging ideas from this study were presented at academic and community-facing conferences in the UK, USA and the Philippines. These presentations provided opportunities to test the clarity, relevance, and wider resonance of the study's developing arguments, particularly regarding racialised safeguarding, African parenting, institutional misrecognition, and the need for culturally responsive child protection practice. This dissemination strengthened the study's contribution by showing that the issues raised by participants were not only locally significant but also connected to wider debates on race, migration, social work, family regulation and institutional power. However, the conference presentations are not treated as additional data; rather, they form part of the wider scholarly and practice-facing engagement through which the research developed and was refined.

9.3 Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings have important implications for policy and practice in child protection in England. If racial disproportionality is understood only as a statistical pattern or the result of isolated poor decisions, responses will remain limited to monitoring, awareness raising and procedural adjustment. This thesis argues for a broader approach. If inequality is produced through ordinary processes of assessment, recording, credibility judgement, documentation and risk framing, then reform must address the institutional conditions under which those processes operate, not merely their outcomes (Gillborn, 2015; Featherstone et al., 2018; Bernard & Harris, 2019). This means recognising that parenting, distress, silence, compliance and apparent cooperation may all be interpreted through racialised and structurally uneven frameworks rather than through neutral professional judgement alone.

The argument is not that child protection should become less vigilant, nor that concerns involving racialised and migrant families should be treated more lightly. Safeguarding remains a necessary public responsibility, and intervention is justified where children face actual harm or serious risk. The issue is how risk is interpreted, how context is weighed, and how structural hardship is distinguished from parental danger. Reform, therefore, requires more accurate, reflexive, and structurally informed practice rather than weaker intervention (Munro, 2011; Warner, 2015; Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2025).

A first implication is the need to strengthen the treatment of structural inequality within assessment frameworks. The findings indicate that poverty, housing precarity, welfare

exclusion, disability-related strain, language barriers, immigration insecurity and safeguarding-related distress can be too readily absorbed into narratives of parental instability or poor decision-making. Guidance should therefore require clearer differentiation between risks arising from deliberate harm and harms arising from structurally produced hardship (Bywaters et al., 2016; Gupta, 2017; Featherstone et al., 2018). In practical terms, assessment frameworks should explicitly address housing, income, immigration status, disability, access to support and service exclusion, rather than treating these as background variables.

A second implication concerns early support. Some families became highly visible to safeguarding systems before receiving meaningful material or relational help. This points to the need for better access to early, non-stigmatising support in areas such as housing, financial hardship, settlement stress, parenting orientation, disability support and family advocacy. A fairer system would reduce the gap between identifying need and providing help, particularly where family difficulties are tied to deprivation and exclusion rather than intentional harm (Parton, 2014; Featherstone et al., 2018; Research in Practice, 2023). Without stronger early support, safeguarding risks continuing to act as crisis management for social inequality.

A third implication is the need for immigration-aware safeguarding practice. For many parents, child protection could not be separated from anxieties about legal status, No Recourse to Public Funds restrictions, welfare exclusion, data-sharing and the wider power of the state. Practitioners do not need to become immigration specialists, but they need sufficient literacy to understand how immigration precarity can shape trust,

disclosure, stress and help-seeking. Without that understanding, behaviours shaped by legal insecurity may be misread as avoidance, instability or non-engagement (Erel et al., 2016, 2018; Jolly, 2018; Jolly & Gupta, 2024).

A fourth implication is the need for anti-racist professional reflexivity beyond generic cultural awareness. The findings suggest that inequality is often reproduced through ordinary assumptions about parenting, emotion, compliance and credibility. Anti-racist safeguarding therefore requires sustained reflection on how dominant norms shape assessment and how race, migration, class, language and disability influence what becomes interpretable as risk. This is particularly important in relation to parenting and discipline, where culturally unfamiliar practices may be judged too quickly through Eurocentric assumptions rather than careful contextual analysis (Tedam, 2021; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Gillborn, 2015; Cane & Tedam, 2023; Rollock & Gillborn, 2011; Mohammed et al., 2021).

A fifth implication concerns epistemic justice, parental participation and recording. Formal opportunities to speak do not necessarily translate into equal interpretive influence. Practice reform should therefore focus not only on attendance at meetings, but on whether parents can correct inaccuracies, challenge interpretations and understand how professional conclusions have been reached. Descriptors such as “defensive,” “hostile,” “non-engaging,” “lacking insight” or “minimising” should not be treated as neutral administrative language, because they can acquire institutional durability and shape later encounters. Greater care is needed to distinguish observation from inference and to situate behaviour within context before evaluative labels are applied (White et al.,

2009; Morris et al., 2018; Fricker, 2007). Record-making should be treated as a site of responsibility rather than mere administration.

A sixth implication concerns the interpretation of engagement, compliance and distress. Visible cooperation may reflect fear, self-protection or strategic adaptation rather than trust or agreement. Silence, caution, emotional restraint or meticulous documentation should therefore be approached with greater interpretive care, especially where relationships are already marked by power asymmetry, racialised scrutiny and mistrust (Broadhurst et al., 2010; Morris et al., 2018; Mason et al., 2020; Donnelly, 2023). Similarly, fear, anxiety, hypervigilance and exhaustion should not be read only as pre-existing parental vulnerabilities, because they may also be intensified by prolonged surveillance, uncertainty and the threat of separation (Featherstone et al., 2018; Okpokiri, 2021; McGovern et al., 2025). Without such contextualisation, safeguarding risks converting system-produced distress into further evidence of parental inadequacy.

A seventh implication concerns organisational conditions. Practitioner data suggest that antiracist and relational practice is difficult to sustain where professionals work under high caseloads, threshold anxiety, blame cultures, defensive recording expectations and limited early-help capacity. Reform cannot, therefore, rest solely on individual worker commitment. It also requires organisational conditions that allow time for contextual assessment, reflective supervision and critical discussion of race, migration and structural hardship. Without these conditions, anti-racist practice risks remaining rhetorical while everyday systems continue to reward defensibility and procedural compliance (Munro, 2011; Parton, 2014; Ioakimidis et al., 2022).

An eighth implication concerns workforce development and social work education. If inequality is reproduced through routine practices of judgement, interpretation, documentation and behavioural labelling, then anti-racist and structurally literate safeguarding cannot be left to post-qualification goodwill. Professional education should engage more directly with migration, racialisation, epistemic injustice, structural hardship, Eurocentric normativity and the politics of risk. This includes classroom teaching, practice education, supervision and organisational learning cultures (Tedam, 2021; Bernard & Harris, 2019; Cane & Tedam, 2023).

A ninth implication concerns partnership with communities and families as knowledge-bearers. Reform should not be designed solely from within statutory systems. Parents' accounts pointed to the need for clearer information, culturally responsive support, and trusted spaces for guidance before families reach crisis. Community organisations, faith spaces and migrant support networks should not be treated merely as referral pathways or tools for improving compliance, but as contributors to safeguarding knowledge and prevention. This has implications for co-produced guidance, community-informed orientation materials, culturally grounded early-help services and local authority partnerships that take lived experience seriously (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Jolly & Gupta, 2024; Ioakimidis et al., 2022).

Finally, the study highlights the need for stronger institutional accountability. Monitoring outcomes by race and ethnicity remains necessary but is insufficient. Local authorities and safeguarding partnerships should examine how inequality may be produced through referral patterns, escalation decisions, recording language, threshold application,

credibility allocation, behavioural interpretation and differential access to support. Disproportionality should be treated not merely as a downstream outcome but as a live practice issue embedded in routine decision-making (Bywaters et al., 2020; Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2025).

Collectively, these implications suggest that fairer safeguarding does not depend on abandoning child protection, but on rethinking how intervention is organised and justified. A more just system would be better able to distinguish hardship from harm, difference from danger, distress from incapacity and guardedness from non-engagement. The challenge is not simply to make safeguarding more efficient, but to make it more contextually intelligent, epistemically just, anti-racist and accountable to the families it governs.

9.4 Limitations of the Study

This study provides an in-depth account of how first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents experienced involvement with child protection services in England and how those experiences can be interpreted through a Critical Race framework. However, its claims must be read within the limits of its design. Identifying these limits strengthens rather than weakens the thesis, because it clarifies what kinds of claims can and cannot be sustained (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010).

A first limitation concerns sample size and scope. The study draws on qualitative interviews with 19 parents and 5 social workers. This was appropriate for an interpretive project concerned with depth, meaning and institutional process rather than statistical

generalisation. However, the sample does not represent all first-generation Sub-Saharan African families in England or the wider social work profession. The argument is therefore analytical rather than population-wide: it identifies patterns and mechanisms that may extend beyond the sample, while recognising that they cannot be assumed to apply uniformly in all settings (Malterud et al., 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2021). Its value lies in explanatory depth rather than breadth.

A second limitation concerns sample composition. Most parent participants were mothers, meaning African fathers were underrepresented. The thesis, therefore, offers a richer account of maternal experience than paternal experience. This does not invalidate the findings, but it means the gendered dimensions of African parents' encounters with child protection are not explored evenly. Future readers should avoid treating "African parent" as a fully gender-neutral category.

A related limitation concerns the social worker sample. The practitioner group was small; all participants were women, and most were racially minoritised rather than White British. Their accounts illuminate organisational pressures, reflective practice and professional views on culture and inequality, but cannot be treated as representative of the wider workforce. The social worker data are therefore contextual and interpretive rather than comprehensive.

A third limitation concerns the specificity of the participant group. The thesis focuses deliberately on first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents because this population is often obscured within broad categories such as "Black," "BME" or "minority ethnic."

This specificity is a strength, but it narrows transferability. The findings should not be assumed to apply directly to Black Caribbean families, second-generation African families, North African families or other racialised migrant groups. Nor should “Sub-Saharan African” be treated as internally uniform, since participants differed by nationality, ethnicity, religion, language, migration history, legal status and family circumstances.

A fourth limitation lies in the retrospective nature of the data. The analysis is based on participants’ accounts of past experiences rather than direct observation of safeguarding encounters or contemporaneous access to institutional records. This is consistent with Critical Race Methodology and counter-storytelling, where lived experience is treated as a central source of knowledge (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). However, retrospective interviews are shaped by memory, emotion, later reflection and the meanings participants attach to events over time. The study, therefore, does not claim to settle all factual disputes about cases. Its contribution lies in showing how institutional processes were experienced, interpreted and remembered by those involved.

A fifth limitation is the absence of documentary and observational triangulation. The study did not include case files, conference minutes, assessment reports, court documents or direct observation of meetings. It also did not include children, foster carers, teachers, health visitors, legal professionals or family court professionals. These omissions were shaped by ethical, practical and design considerations, as well as the decision to centre parental narratives alongside practitioner reflection. The thesis is therefore strongest on

lived meaning and institutional interpretation, and weaker on documentary process tracing in a strict evidential sense.

A sixth limitation concerns the mode of data collection. All interviews were conducted via Zoom. This supported access across locations and reduced some practical barriers, but remote interviewing may constrain rapport, reduce access to non-verbal communication and disadvantage participants with unstable internet, limited digital confidence or insufficient privacy. For some participants, the online setting may have enabled greater safety and control; for others, it may have limited spontaneity, emotional expression or depth of interaction.

A seventh limitation relates to language. The research took place in an English-speaking academic setting, while some participants navigated child protection systems and interviews through English as an additional language. Participants may therefore have had to translate complex emotional and institutional experiences into language not fully their own. Some nuance may have been lost, simplified or strategically adjusted in the telling. This is especially relevant in a thesis concerned with meaning, credibility and epistemic power.

An eighth limitation concerns recruitment, role boundaries and trust. The study benefited from community knowledge and relational trust, but these conditions also created ethical and methodological complexities. Because I was visible through community advocacy work, including BAME HUB-UK, some participants may have approached the study with

expectations shaped by familiarity, trust or perceived shared purpose. Cases involving prior BAME HUB-UK involvement in child protection matters, especially child removal cases and live or ongoing cases, were excluded to manage conflicts of interest. Even so, community-linked recruitment means the sample was socially and relationally produced rather than neutral.

Shared racial, cultural and migratory reference points sometimes supported openness, but they did not guarantee trust. My university affiliation, professional background and engagement with statutory and multi-agency contexts may have positioned me, for some participants, as close to formal authority. Some may therefore have moderated their narratives, withheld details, or approached the interview cautiously. This does not invalidate the data; rather, it highlights that disclosure was shaped within a field of trust, caution and perceived power (Berger, 2015; Pillow, 2003).

A ninth limitation concerns transferability. The findings may resonate with other racialised and migrant families, but they are not automatically transferable to all populations or local authorities. Transferability depends on the analytic usefulness of the mechanisms identified, such as visibility, documentary authority, constrained agency, structural misrecognition and racialised interpretive judgement, rather than on direct equivalence between groups or settings.

A tenth limitation concerns the interpretive framework. The analysis is explicitly shaped by Critical Race Theory, Critical Race Methodology, intersectionality and epistemic

injustice. This is a strength because it makes visible processes that race-neutral approaches may overlook.

However, it also means the analysis is theory-informed rather than theoretically neutral. Different conceptual frameworks might foreground other dimensions of the same material. The thesis therefore advances a rigorous, theoretically grounded reading rather than the only possible one (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Finally, the thesis was not designed as a comparative study. It does not systematically compare first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents with White British families, Black Caribbean families or other migrant groups. Its contribution lies instead in offering a deep account of one underexplored group and showing how broader institutional mechanisms were lived through that experience. Future comparative work is needed to assess the reach and variation of the mechanisms identified here.

These limitations do not undermine the study's value. Rather, they clarify its contribution. The thesis does not claim breadth, representativeness or documentary completeness. It offers a theoretically informed, empirically grounded and critically reflexive account of how racialised inequality may be lived and reproduced within child protection processes in England.

9.5 Directions for Future Research

This study shows that racialised inequality in child protection is reproduced through everyday processes of visibility, surveillance, interpretive judgement, credibility

allocation, documentation and structural misrecognition. Future research should deepen the empirical base, test the explanatory claims developed here, and explore how inequality is reproduced across different populations, contexts and institutional settings.

A priority is conducting broader qualitative research with a larger, more diverse sample of first-generation African parents. This thesis avoids treating broad categories such as “Black families” or “BME families” as analytically sufficient, but that choice also highlights the need for more work on variation within and between African communities. Future studies should examine how nationality, language, class, religion, settlement history, disability and immigration status shape safeguarding encounters (Bernard & Thomas, 2016; Tedam, 2021). The experiences of African fathers also require specific attention, particularly regarding authority, discipline, emotional expression, professional expectations, credibility, and compliance.

A second direction is more explicitly intersectional research. The findings show that race intersects with migration status, poverty, housing insecurity, language, gender, legal precarity, disability and family composition. Future research should examine how these conditions combine to shape referral, assessment, participation, credibility and outcomes. This would help clarify which families are most vulnerable to institutional misrecognition and under what conditions disparities are intensified (Crenshaw, 1991).

A third priority is methodological expansion through documentary, observational and multiagency research. This thesis argues that child protection is a site of knowledge production in which professional interpretation gains durability through documentation. Future research could analyse case files, assessment reports, conference minutes and

observed meetings to examine how labels such as “non-engaging,” “defensive” or “lacking insight” are generated and repeated. This would test more directly the argument that institutional memory is a key mechanism through which inequality persists (White et al., 2009).

Relatedly, further research is needed on organisational culture and frontline decision-making. Practitioner interviews in this study suggest that defensibility, threshold anxiety, managerial pressure, recording demands and reduced early-help provision shape interpretations of families. Ethnographic and organisational studies could examine how race, migration, hardship, parenting and risk are discussed in supervision, strategy meetings, conferences and recording practices, and how time pressure and audit cultures shape judgement under uncertainty (Munro, 2011; Featherstone et al., 2018).

A fourth direction concerns longitudinal research. This study provides a detailed account of how safeguarding was experienced and remembered, but it cannot track family-state relationships over time. Longitudinal work would help examine whether mistrust, fear, documentary labels, and self-protective strategies persist beyond case closure, how re-referrals are shaped by prior histories, and whether interventions change parental perceptions of the system or reinforce institutional harm.

A fifth area requiring sustained attention is the relationship between immigration governance and child protection. Future research should investigate how No Recourse to Public Funds, asylum processes, insecure status, visa dependence, data sharing, and welfare exclusion affect pathways into child protection and shape help-seeking,

disclosure, trust, and compliance. Comparative studies of families with secure and insecure status would be especially valuable (Erel et al., 2016, 2018; Jolly, 2018; Jolly & Gupta, 2024).

A sixth direction is to broaden the participant pool. Future research should include children and young people, extended family members, foster carers, teachers, health visitors, legal professionals, interpreters, and community organisations. This would allow a fuller account of how safeguarding is experienced across relational and institutional settings, and how authority is distributed across safeguarding systems.

A seventh priority is intervention and evaluation research. Critical scholarship is increasingly able to identify mechanisms of inequality, but there is still less evidence on what interrupts them in practice. Future studies should examine reforms such as immigration-aware practice, revised recording frameworks, community-co-produced safeguarding approaches, anti-racist supervision models, improved interpreter use, culturally responsive parenting orientation, and structurally informed early-help services. The key question is whether such reforms alter decisions, documentation, parental experience and outcomes over time.

An eighth direction concerns comparative research within and beyond the UK. Within the UK, comparisons across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland could examine how race, migration and disproportionality are addressed under different legal and policy frameworks.

Internationally, comparative work could explore how migrant African families experience child protection across welfare states with different immigration regimes, support systems, reporting cultures and models of family intervention.

A ninth direction concerns decolonising and participatory methodologies. One contribution of this thesis has been to treat parents' accounts as sources of theory rather than merely illustrative data. Future research could extend this through participatory, co-produced and community-accountable designs that give families greater influence over research questions, interpretation and definitions of valid knowledge. This would be especially valuable in a field where institutional accounts often dominate practice and research (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

A final direction concerns the research relationship itself. Future qualitative work could examine how trust, caution, role ambiguity and perceived institutional affiliation shape disclosure in research with families who have experienced child protection intervention. Such work would strengthen understanding of how knowledge about safeguarding is produced under conditions of unequal power and mistrust.

Collectively, these directions suggest that future research should move beyond asking whether racial inequality exists in child protection. The more urgent questions are how it is reproduced, how it varies across populations and settings, how it is sustained through professional and documentary practices, and which interventions can meaningfully disrupt it.

9.6 Final Conclusion

This thesis has argued that racial disproportionality in UK child protection should not be understood only as an unequal outcome, but as a cumulative institutional process. Drawing on the lived experiences of first-generation Sub-Saharan African parents, alongside the perspectives of social workers, the study has shown that inequality is often reproduced through ordinary safeguarding practices that appear neutral but operate within historically and structurally racialised conditions. In this context, visibility, surveillance, assessment, credibility judgment, and documentation do not function as separate processes. Rather, they interact in ways that can intensify scrutiny, recast structural hardship as parental risk, and produce unequal experiences of state intervention (Gillborn, 2015; Rollock & Gillborn, 2011; Parton, 2014; Bywaters et al., 2020; Featherstone et al., 2018).

The thesis has also shown that these processes cannot be reduced to individual prejudice or isolated poor practice. While practitioner accounts reflected care, ethical commitment, and a desire for more relational and culturally responsive work, they also revealed the powerful influence of organisational defensibility, risk-oriented practice, threshold anxiety, and limited early-help capacity. By bringing Critical Race Theory, intersectionality, epistemic injustice, and counter-storytelling into dialogue with child protection scholarship, the study has contributed a more precise account of how inequality is institutionally produced and sustained (Crenshaw, 1991; Fricker, 2007; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In doing so, it has extended understanding of

safeguarding beyond statistical disproportionality towards a deeper explanation of how racialised inequality is lived, interpreted, and normalised in practice.

At the centre of the thesis is the argument that safeguarding is not only a protective mechanism but also a site of knowledge production and institutional power. Parents in this study were often able to speak, but not always able to shape the meaning attached to their experiences. Professional accounts, especially when documented, often acquired greater authority and durability than parental testimony. This matters because it helps explain how mistrust, fear, and repeated intervention may persist over time, even when no single encounter appears decisive in isolation. The thesis has therefore shown that racial disproportionality is sustained not only by who enters the system, but also by how families are interpreted once they are inside it (White et al., 2009; Broadhurst et al., 2010; Bernard & Harris, 2019).

The study has further shown that safeguarding is not culturally neutral in the way parenting is judged. Parenting, discipline, emotional expression, and family authority emerged as key sites through which dominant norms became institutional standards. Culturally situated forms of authority and correction were not always interpreted as contextual differences but could become grounds for suspicion when assessed through Eurocentric assumptions about good parenting, communication, and parental affect. In this respect, the thesis has shown that racial disproportionality is reproduced not only by whom is referred to or assessed, but also by the normative frameworks used to decide what counts as concern, competence, and acceptable family life (Gillies, 2013; Bernard & Harris, 2019; Cornish, 2025).

The thesis has also demonstrated that parental responses to safeguarding are best understood through the lens of constrained agency rather than through a simple binary of cooperation and resistance. Compliance, self-silencing, emotional restraint, selective disclosure, and strategic self-presentation emerged not merely as passive responses but as practical strategies developed under conditions of fear, uncertainty, and unequal institutional power. These forms of adaptation matter because they show that participation in safeguarding does not occur on equal terms. Parents may appear cooperative while acting defensively, cautiously, or strategically, anticipating how their behaviour will be read. The study, therefore, contributes to a more critical understanding of how families navigate safeguarding under constraint (Mason et al., 2020; Donnelly, 2023).

A further key contribution of the thesis is its argument that parental distress cannot be understood only as a pre-existing vulnerability brought into the safeguarding process. Anxiety, hypervigilance, shame, exhaustion, and emotional instability were often intensified by the conditions of surveillance, uncertainty, repeated assessment, and threatened separation. These experiences were further shaped by poverty, migration, precarity, insecure housing, and institutional mistrust. The thesis has therefore shown that child protection may not only respond to distress, but also contribute to producing and intensifying it, after which that distress may be re-read as evidence of parental inadequacy. This is one of the clearest ways in which structural harm can be converted into professionally legible risk (Featherstone et al., 2018; Jolly, 2018; Okpokiri, 2021; McGovern et al., 2025).

The study has further shown that a fairer child protection system cannot be achieved through procedural neutrality alone. Formal equality does not guarantee substantive justice in contexts marked by racial stratification, precarious migration, and unequal access to support. Safeguarding, more than just safeguarding, requires structurally informed judgement, anti-racist reflexivity, immigration-aware practice, epistemic humility, and a greater willingness to recognise how professional knowledge and institutional power shape family lives. It also requires a system better able to distinguish hardship from harm, difference from danger, distress from incapacity, and parental voice from professionally authorised misrecognition (Tedam, 2021; Cane & Tedam, 2023; Ioakimidis et al., 2022; Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2025).

A final point of the thesis is that safeguarding inequality should not be treated as a marginal issue confined to exceptional cases. The findings suggest that racialised inequality can be reproduced through the ordinary operation of systems widely regarded as necessary and legitimate. This is what makes the problem both more difficult and more urgent. The challenge is not simply to identify obvious prejudice, but to examine how everyday standards, assumptions, recording practices, and institutional routines may produce unequal consequences while still appearing professionally reasonable. The significance of the study lies in making those routine processes more visible and more open to critique (Gillborn, 2015; Rollock & Gillborn, 2011; Mohammed et al., 2021; Parton, 2014; Bernard & Gupta, 2008).

Ultimately, this thesis concludes that safeguarding remains an essential public responsibility, but that its legitimacy depends not only on its protective intent, but on its

capacity to operate justly. Without deeper structural, epistemic, and organisational change, racial disproportionality will continue to be managed as a surface pattern rather than confronted as a feature of the everyday operation of child protection itself. With such a change, however, there remains the possibility of a child protection system that is not only protective in principle but also more equitable, more accountable, and more just in practice.

9.7 Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that no external funding was received for this study and that there are no financial conflicts of interest in relation to the research. The author is the CEO and Founder of BAME HUB-UK NETWORK C.I.C., a community organisation that provides advocacy and support to individuals and families, including in matters concerning safeguarding and multiagency casework. In recognition of the potential for professional or relational conflicts of interest, all cases in which the author had prior involvement through BAME HUB-UK in child protection matters, particularly child removal cases and any live or ongoing cases involving local authorities, schools, the NHS, the police, or the Home Office, were excluded from participation. Clear role boundaries were maintained throughout the study to ensure that the research process remained distinct from any advisory, advocacy, or casework role.

REFERENCES

1. Adjei, P. B. (2018). The (em) bodiment of blackness in a visceral anti-black racism and ableism context. *Race, Ethnicity, and Education*, 21(3), 275–287.
2. Adjei, P. B., & Minka, E. (2018). Black parents ask for a second look: Parenting under ‘White’ Child Protection rules in Canada. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 94(August), 511–524. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.08.030>.
3. Adonteng-Kissi, O. (2023). Cultural responsiveness in child protection: Stakeholders and parental perceptions of working children and culture-appropriate assessment in Ghana. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 53(1), 118-138.
4. Aldana, A. & Byrd, C.M. (2015). ‘School ethnic–racial socialisation: Learning about race and ethnicity among African American students’, *The Urban Review*, 47(3), pp. 563–576.
5. Aldana, Adriana, and Nicole Vazquez. "From colour-blind racism to critical race theory: The road towards anti-racist social work in the United States." *Anti-racist social work: International perspectives* (2020): 129-148.
6. Alessi, E.J. (2014). ‘A framework for incorporating minority stress theory into treatment with sexual minority clients’, *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health*, 18(1), pp. 47–66.

7. Aspinall, P. J. (2020). Ethnic/racial terminology as a form of representation: A critical review of the lexicon of collective and specific terms in use in Britain. *Genealogy*, 4(3), 87.

8. Aspinall, P.J. (2002) 'Collective terminology to describe the minority ethnic population: the persistence of confusion and ambiguity in usage', *Sociology*, 36(4), pp. 803–816.

9. Barn, R. (2007). 'Race', ethnicity and child welfare: A fine balancing act. *British Journal of Social Work*, 37(8), 1425-1434.

10. Bernard, C., & Gupta, A. (2008). Black African children and the child protection system. *British Journal of Social Work*, 38(3), 476-492.

11. Barn, R. (2010). Care leavers and social capital: Understanding and negotiating racial and ethnic identity. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 33(5), 832-850.

12. BASW UK statement on anti-racism. (2021, July 26). BASW. Accessed 12/04/2026 <https://basw.co.uk/policy-and-practice/resources/basw-uk-statement-anti-racism>

13. Baumrind, D. (1966). Effects of authoritative parental control on child behaviour. *Child development*, 887-907.

14. Baumrind, D. (1971). Current patterns of parental authority. *Developmental Psychology Monographs*, 4(1p2), 1–103.

15. Baumrind, D. (1989). Rearing competent children. In W. Damon (Ed.). *Child development today and tomorrow* (pp. 349–378). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

16. Baumrind, D. (1991). The influence of parenting style on adolescent competence and substance use. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*, 11(1), 56–95.

17. Bell, D.A. (1980). ‘Brown v. Board of Education and the interest-convergence dilemma’, *Harvard Law Review*, 93(3), pp. 518–533.

18. Bell, D.A. (1992). *Faces at the bottom of the well: The permanence of racism*. New York: Basic Books.

19. Bell Jr, D. A. (1980). Brown v. Board of Education and the interest-convergence dilemma. *Harvard Law Review*, 518-533.

20. Bell, D. (2018). *Faces at the bottom of the well: The permanence of racism*. Hachette UK.

21. Bennett, D. L., Mason, K. E., Schlüter, D. K., Wickham, S., Lai, E. T., Alexiou, A., ...

22. & Taylor-Robinson, D. (2020). Trends in inequalities in Children Looked After in England between 2004 and 2019: a local area ecological analysis. *BMJ open*, 10(11), e041774.

23. Bernard, C. and Gupta, A. (2008) 'Black African children and the child protection system', *British Journal of Social Work*, 38(3), 476–492.

24. Bernard, C. (2013). Anti-racism in social work practice.

25. Bernard, C. (2019). Recognising and addressing child neglect in affluent families. *Child & Family Social Work*, 24(2), 340-347.

26. Berger, R. (2015). Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative research*, 15(2), 219-234.

27. Blackstock, C. (2011). The Canadian Human Rights Tribunal on First Nations child welfare: Why if Canada wins, equality and justice lose. *Children and youth services review*, 33(1), 187-194.

28. Blackstock, C., Bamblett, M., & Black, C. (2020). Indigenous ontology, international law and the application of the Convention to the over-representation of Indigenous children in out of home care in Canada and Australia. *Child abuse & neglect*, 110, 104587.

29. Bernard, C. and Harris, P. (2019) 'Serious case reviews: The lived experience of Black children', *Child & Family Social Work*, 24(2), pp. 256–263.

30. Bernard, C., & Harris, P. (2016). *Safeguarding black children: Good practice in child protection*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

31. Bernard, C. (2020). 'Child protection and Black communities: Rethinking risk, vulnerability and resilience', in Featherstone, B., Gupta, A., Morris, K. and White, S. (eds.) *Protecting children: A social model*. Bristol: Policy Press, pp. 95–111.

32. Bernard, C., & Thomas, S. (2016). Risk and safety: a strengths-based perspective in working with black families when there are safeguarding concerns. In *Social Work in a Diverse Society* (pp. 59-74). Policy Press.

33. Bhatti-Sinclair, K. (2011). *Anti-racist practice in social work*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

34. Bhatti-Sinclair, K. (2011). *Anti-racist practice in social work*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

35. Bhopal, K., & Preston, J. (2012). Introduction: Intersectionality and 'Race 'in Education: Theorising Difference. In *Intersectionality and Race in Education* (pp. 110). Routledge.

36. Bignall, T., Jeraj, S., Helsby, E., & Butt, J. (2019). Racial disparities in mental health. London: Race Equity Foundation.
37. Blakey, J. M., Walton, Q., & Jennings, S. (2024). "Black People Are Not My Thing": Microaggressions Experienced by Black Graduate Students in Social Work Programs. *Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping*, 30(1), 81-100.
38. Bonilla-Silva, E. (2021). Racism without racists: Colour-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in America. Bloomsbury Publishing PLC.
39. Bonilla-Silva, E. (2014) Racism without Racists: Colour-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America. 4th edn. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
40. Bostock, L. and Koprowska, J. (2022) "I know how it sounds on paper": Risk talk, the use of documents and epistemic justice in child protection assessment home visits', *Qualitative Social Work*, 21(6).
<https://doi.org/10.1177/14733250221124217>
41. Bowleg, L. (2012). The problem with the phrase women and minorities: intersectionality—an important theoretical framework for public health. *American Journal of Public Health*, 102(7), 1267-1273.
42. Bourdieu, P. (2020). Outline of a Theory of Practice. In *The new social theory reader* (pp. 80-86). Routledge.

43. BPS Code of Human Research Ethics | BPS. (n.d.). BPS. Accessed 15/04/2026
<https://www.bps.org.uk/guideline/bps-code-human-research-ethics>
44. Brah, A. (2005). *Cartographies of diaspora: Contesting identities*. Routledge.
45. Brah, A., & Phoenix, A. (2023). Ain't I a woman? Revisiting intersectionality.
46. Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
47. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*.
48. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative research in sport, exercise and health*, 11(4), 589-597.
49. Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2021) 'One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis?', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 18(3), pp. 328– 352.
50. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). Can I use TA? Should I use TA? Should I not use TA? Comparing reflexive thematic analysis and other pattern-based qualitative analytic approaches. *Counselling and psychotherapy research*, 21(1), 37-47.

51. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*.
52. Brinkmann, S., & Kvale, S. (2015). *InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing*. Sage Publications.
53. Brinkmann, S., & Kvale, S. (2018). *Doing Interviews (Vol. 2)*. SAGE.
54. British Association of Social Workers. (2014). *The code of ethics for social work: Statement of principles*. British Association of Social Workers.
55. Broadhurst, K., Wastell, D., White, S., Hall, C., Peckover, S., Thompson, K., ... & Davey, D. (2010). Performing 'initial assessment': identifying the latent conditions for error at the front-door of local authority children's services. *British journal of social work*, 40(2), 352-370.
56. Broadhurst, K., White, S., Fish, S., Munro, E., Fletcher, K., & Lincoln, H. (2010). Ten pitfalls and how to avoid them: What research tells us.
57. Broadhurst, K., Wastell, D., White, S., Hall, C., Peckover, S., Thompson, K., Pithouse, A. & Davey, D. (2010). 'Performing "initial assessment": Identifying the latent conditions for error at the front-door of local authority children's services', *British Journal of Social Work*, 40(2), pp. 352–370.
58. Broadhurst, K., Hall, C., Wastell, D., White, S., & Pithouse, A. (2010). Risk, instrumentalism and the humane project in social work: Identifying the informal

logics of risk management in children's statutory services. *British journal of social work*, 40(4), 1046-1064.

59. Broadhurst, K. & Mason, C. (2017). 'Birth parents and the collateral consequences of court-ordered child removal: Towards a comprehensive framework', *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family*, 31(1), pp. 41–59.
60. Broadhurst, K., Mason, C., Bedston, S., Alrouh, B., Morriss, L., McQuarrie, T., Palmer, M., Shaw, M., Harwin, J. and Kershaw, S. (2017) *Vulnerable birth mothers and recurrent care proceedings: Final summary report*. Lancaster: Centre for Child and Family Justice Research, Lancaster University.
61. Busher, J., Choudhury, T., Thomas, P., & Harris, G. (2017). *What the Prevent duty means for schools and colleges in England: An analysis of educationalists' experiences*. Durham University, University of Huddersfield and Coventry University.
62. Bywaters, P., Skinner, G., Cooper, A., Kennedy, E., & Malik, A. (2022). *The relationship between poverty and child abuse and neglect: New evidence*. London: Nuffield Foundation.
63. Bywaters, P., Brady, G., Bunting, L., Daniel, B., Davidson, G., Elliott, M., Featherstone, B., Hooper, J., Jones, C., Kwhali, J. and Mason, W., (2020). *The child welfare inequalities project*.

64. Bywaters, P., Brady, G., Bunting, L., Daniel, B., Featherstone, B., Jones, C. & Webb, C. (2018). Inequalities in English child protection practice under austerity: A universal challenge? *Child & Family Social Work*, 23(1), 53-61.
65. Bywaters, P., Brady, G., Sparks, T. and Bos, E. (2016) 'Inequalities in child welfare intervention rates: The intersection of deprivation and identity', *Child & Family Social Work*, 21(4), pp. 452–463. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12161>.
66. Bywaters, P., Brady, G., Sparks, T., Bos, E., Bunting, L., Daniel, B., ... & Scourfield, J. (2015). Exploring inequities in child welfare and child protection services: Explaining the 'inverse intervention law'. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 57, 98-105.
67. Bywaters, P. (2015). Inequalities in child welfare: Towards a new policy, research and action agenda. *British Journal of Social Work*, 45(1), 6-23.
68. Bywaters, P., Brady, G., Sparks, T., & Bos, E. (2016). Child welfare inequalities: New evidence, further questions. *Child & Family Social Work*, 21(3), 369-380.
69. Bywaters, P., Bunting, L., Davidson, G., Hanratty, J., Mason, W. J., McCartan, C., & Steils, N. (2016). The relationship between poverty, child abuse and neglect: A Rapid Evidence Review.

70. Bywaters, P., Kwhali, J., Brady, G., Sparks, T., & Bos, E. (2017). Out of sight, out of mind: Ethnic inequalities in child protection and out-of-home care intervention rates. *British Journal of Social Work*, 47(7), 1884-1902.
71. Bywaters, P., Brady, G., Sparks, T., & Bos, E. (2016). Inequalities in child welfare intervention rates: The intersection of deprivation and identity. *Child & Family Social Work*, 21(4), 452-463.
72. Bywaters, P., Brady, G., Sparks, T., & Bos, E. (2016). Child welfare inequalities: New evidence, further questions. *Child & Family Social Work*, 21(3), 369-380.
73. Bywaters, P., Scourfield, J., Jones, C., Sparks, T., Elliott, M., Hooper, J., ... & Daniel, B. (2020). Child welfare inequalities in the four nations of the UK. *Journal of Social Work*, 20(2), 193-215.
74. Bywaters, P., Scourfield, J., Jones, C., Sparks, T., Elliott, M., Hooper, J., McCartan, C., Shapira, M., Bunting, L., & Daniel, B. (2022). The relationship between poverty and child abuse and neglect: New evidence. Nuffield Foundation.
75. Cane, T. C., & Tedam, P. (2023). 'We didn't learn enough about racism and anti-racist practice': Newly qualified social workers' challenge in wrestling racism. *Social Work Education*, 42(8), 1563-1585.

76. Carey, M. (2016). 'Journey's end? From residual service to newer forms of pathology, risk aversion and abandonment in social work with older people', *Journal of Social Work*, 16(3), pp. 344–361.
77. Casey, L. (2023). Final report: An independent review into the standards of behaviour and internal culture of the Metropolitan Police Service. London: Metropolitan Police Service.
78. Cashmore, J. (2002). 'Promoting the participation of children and young people in care', *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 26(8), pp. 837–847.
79. Chand, A. (2005). Do you speak English? Language barriers in child protection social work with minority ethnic families. *British Journal of Social Work*, 35(6), 807-821.
80. Cheruvallil-Contractor, S., Halford, A., & Anand, K. (2024). Supporting minoritised children's identity: Frontline Briefing.
81. Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel. (2025). "It's silent": Race, racism and safeguarding children. Department for Education. Accessed on 23/01/2026.
"It's Silent": Race, racism and safeguarding children – Panel Briefing 4.
82. Children Act 1989 (c. 41). London: HMSO.
83. Children Act 2004 (c. 31). London: HMSO.

84. Children and Social Work Act 2017 (c. 16). London: HMSO.
85. Children and Young Persons Act 1933 (c. 12). London: HMSO.
86. Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (2022). Child Protection in England: National Review into the murders of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson. London: HM Government.
87. Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (2025) “It’s silent”: Race, racism and safeguarding children. London: Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel.
88. Choonara, E. (2021). Theorising anti-racism in health and social care. *Critical and Radical Social Work*, 9(2), 167-183. Cronin, M. (2026). Working together to support families and safeguard children. In *Integrated Working in Early Childhood* (pp. 2241). Routledge.
89. Coleman, J.S. (1988). ‘Social capital in the creation of human capital’, *American Journal of Sociology*, 94, pp. S95–S120.
90. Collins, P. H. (2000). *Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*.
91. Collins, P. H. (2022). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Routledge.

92. Connelly, R., Gayle, V. & Lambert, P.S. (2016). 'Ethnicity and ethnic group measures in social survey research', *Methodological Innovations*, 9, pp. 1–10.
93. Cooper, C. (2021). *Fat activism: A radical social movement*. Intellect.
94. Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2014). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Sage publications.
95. Cornish, C. (2025) 'Taking a stand against racism: The urgent need for SAWUBONA in child protection and foster care social work', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 170, Article 108140.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2025.108140>.
96. Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities. (2021, April 28). The report of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities. GOV.UK. Accessed 09/01/2026
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-report-of-the-commission-on-raceand-ethnic-disparities>
97. Crenshaw, K. W. (2017). Race, reform, and retrenchment: Transformation and legitimization in antidiscrimination law. In *Law and social movements* (pp. 475-531). Routledge.
98. Crenshaw, K. (2013). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. In *Feminist legal theories* (pp. 23-51). Routledge.

99. Crenshaw, K. W. (2013). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of colour. In *The public nature of private violence* (pp. 93-118). Routledge.
100. Crenshaw, K., Gotanda, N., Peller, G., & Thomas, K. (Eds.). (1995). *Critical race theory: The key writings that formed the movement*. The New Press.
101. Crenshaw, K. (1997). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against. *The legal response to violence against women*, 5, 91.
102. Crenshaw, K. W. (1988). Toward a race-conscious pedagogy in legal education. *Nat'l Black LJ*, 11, 1.
103. Crenshaw, K. W. (2001). The first decade: Critical reflections, or a foot in the closing door. *UCLA. Rev.*, 49, 1343.
104. Crenshaw, K. (1989). 'Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics', *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), pp. 139–167.

105. Crenshaw, K. (1991). 'Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of colour', *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), pp. 1241–1299.
106. Crenshaw, K.W. (2002) 'The first decade: Critical reflections, or "A foot in the closing door"', *UCLA Law Review*, 49(5), pp. 1343–1372.
107. Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage publications.
108. Cross, T.L., Bazron, B.J., Dennis, K.W. & Isaacs, M.R. (1989). *Towards a culturally competent system of care: A monograph on effective services for minority children who are severely emotionally disturbed*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Child Development Centre.
109. Crossley, S. (2018). *Troublemakers: The construction of "troubled families" as a social problem*. Bristol: Policy Press.
110. Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. London: SAGE.
111. Cusworth, L., Hargreaves, C., Alrouh, B., North, L., Cowley, L., Abouelenin, M., ... & Ford, D. Recommended citation Cusworth, L. et al.(2023). *Uncovering private family law: Exploring applications that involve non-parents*

- (‘the other 10%’). Nuffield Family Justice Observatory. <https://www.nuffieldfjo.org.Uk/resource>.
112. Daniel, B. (2015). Why have we made neglect so complicated? Taking a fresh look at noticing and helping the neglected child. *Child abuse review*, 24(2), 82-94.
 113. Davis, J. (2022). *Adultification bias within child protection and safeguarding*. Manchester: HM Inspectorate Probation.
 114. Davis, J. & Marsh, N. (2020). ‘Boys to men: The cost of “adultification” in safeguarding responses to Black boys’, *Critical and Radical Social Work*, 8(2), pp. 255–259.
 115. Davies, P. & Duckett, N. (2016). *Proactive child protection and social work*. London: Learning Matters.
 116. Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2017). Chapter I. Introduction. In *Critical Race Theory (Third Edition)* (pp. 1-18). New York University Press.
 117. Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2017). *Critical Race Theory (Third Edition): An Introduction* (3rd ed., Vol. 20). NYU Press.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1ggjjn3>

118. Delgado, R. (1989). Storytelling for oppositionists and others: A plea for narrative. *Michigan Law Review*, 87(8), 2411–2441.
119. Delgado, R. (1995). *Critical race theory: The cutting edge*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
120. Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2023). *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (Vol. 87). New York University Press.
121. Department for Education. (2026). Children’s social work workforce 2025. Department for Education:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/childrens-socialwork-workforce-2025>. Accessed 19/01/2025.
122. Department for Education (2015) *Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0 to 25 years*. London: Department for Education.
Accessed 01/03/2026: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-code-of-practice-0-to-25>.
123. Department for Education. (2023). *Children’s social care national framework: Statutory guidance on the purpose, principles for practice and expected outcomes of children’s social care*. Department for Education.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/childrens-social-care-national-framework>. Accessed 03/03/2025.

124. Department for Education (2016) Children looked after in England including adoption: 2015 to 2016. London: Department for Education.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-includingadoption-2015-to-2016>. Accessed 13/02/2026
125. Department for Education (2018). Working together to safeguard children: A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. London: Department for Education. Accessed 08/01/2026.<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-safeguard-children--2>
126. Department for Education (2021) Children in need: 2020 to 2021. London: Department for Education. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/findstatistics/children-in-need/2021>. Accessed 12/04/2026
127. Department for Education (2022) Children looked after in England including adoptions: Reporting year 2022. London: Department for Education.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-includingadoption-2022-to-2023>. Accessed 01/05/2025.
128. Department for Education (2023a) Children in need: Reporting year 2023. London: Department for Education. <https://explore-educationstatistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-in-need/2023>. Accessed 19/02/2025. 128.

129. Department for Education (2023b) Working together to safeguard children 2023: A guide to multi-agency working to help, protect and promote the welfare of children. London: Department for Education.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-safeguard-children--2>.
130. Department for Education (2024) Children in need: Reporting year 2024. London: Department for Education. <https://explore-educationstatistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-in-need/2024>. Accessed 10/04/2026.
131. Department for Education (2025). Children's social care statistics: Workforce and children in need. London: Department for Education. Accessed 17/09/2025. <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-childrens-social-care-workforce>. 131.
132. Department for Education (2026). Working Together To Safeguard Children 2026: Statutory Guidance On Multi-agency Working To Help, Support And Protect Children. London: Accessed on 07/06/2025.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-safeguard-children--2>.
133. Department of Health and Social Care (2022) People at the heart of care: Adult social care reform white paper. London: Department of Health and Social

Care. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/people-at-the-heart-of-care-adult-socialcare-reform-white-paper>. Accessed 02/07/2025

134. Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2011). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*. Sage.

135. Dettlaff, A.J. & Boyd, R. (2020). 'Racial disproportionality and disparities in the child welfare system: Why do they exist, and what can be done to address them?',

136. The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 692(1), pp. 253–274.

137. Dettlaff, A. J., Weber, K., Pendleton, M., Boyd, R., Bettencourt, B., & Burton, L. (2020). It is not a broken system, it is a system that needs to be broken: The upEND movement to abolish the child welfare system. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 14(5), 500-517.

138. De Maynard, V.A. (2007). 'An ethnographic study of Black men within an inner London area to elicit relatedness between Black human condition and the onset of severe mental illness: What about the Black human condition?', *International Journal of Mental Health*, 36(4), pp. 26–45.

139. Dingwall, R., Eekelaar, J., & Murray, T. (2014). *The protection of children: State intervention and family life* (Vol. 16). Quid Pro Books.

140. Dominelli, L. (2017). *Anti-racist social work*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
141. Donnelly, M. (2023). The relationship between compliance and compulsion, and dynamics of diversion, in child welfare decision-making. *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family*, 37(1), ebac035.
142. Edmiston, D., Begum, S., & Kataria, M. (2022). Falling faster amidst a cost-of-living crisis: Poverty, inequality and ethnicity in the UK.
143. Edney, C., Alrouh, B., Abouelenin, M., Broadhurst, K. & Cusworth, L. (2023). *Ethnicity of children in care and supervision proceedings in England*. London: Nuffield Family Justice Observatory.
144. Elmer, S. (2016). Safeguarding, child protection and children in need in the early years. In *The complete companion for teaching and leading practice in the early years* (pp. 76-98). David Fulton.
145. Equality Act 2010, c.15. London: The Stationery Office.
146. Erel, U., Murji, K., & Nahaboo, Z. (2016). Understanding the contemporary race–migration nexus. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 39(8), 1339-1360.

147. Erel, U., Reynolds, T., & Kaptani, E. (2018). Migrant mothers' creative interventions into racialized citizenship. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 41(1), 55-72.
148. Featherstone, B., Broadhurst, K., & Holt, K. (2012). Thinking systemically thinking politically: Building strong partnerships with children and families in the context of rising inequality. *British Journal of Social Work*, 42(4), 618-633.
149. Featherstone, B., & Gupta, A. (2018). *Protecting children: A social model*. Policy Press.
150. Featherstone, B., Morris, K., & White, S. (2014). *Re-imagining child protection: Towards humane social work with families*. Policy Press.
151. Ferguson, H. (2017). 'How children become invisible in child protection work: Findings from research into day-to-day social work practice', *British Journal of Social Work*, 47(4), pp. 1007–1023.
152. Ferrera, M. (2005). *The boundaries of welfare: European integration and the new spatial politics of social protection*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
153. Finlay, L. (2002). "'Outing" the researcher: The provenance, process, and practice of reflexivity', *Qualitative Health Research*, 12(4), pp. 531–545.

154. Fraser, N. (2009). *Scales of justice: Reimagining political space in a globalising world*. New York: Columbia University Press.

155. Fricker, M. (2007) *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford University Press.

156. Gee, G.C., Ro, A., Shariff-Marco, S. & Chae, D. (2009). 'Racial discrimination and health among Asian Americans: Evidence, assessment, and directions for future research', *Epidemiologic Reviews*, 31(1), pp. 130–151.

157. Gillborn, D. (2008). *Racism and education: Coincidence or conspiracy?* London: Routledge.

158. Gillborn, D. (2005). Education policy as an act of white supremacy: Whiteness, critical race theory and education reform. *Journal of education policy*, 20(4), 485-505.

159. Gillborn, D. (2015) 'Intersectionality, critical race theory, and the primacy of racism: Race, class, gender and disability in education', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 21(3), pp. 277–287.

160. Goldacre, A., & Hood, R. (2022). Factors affecting the social gradient in children's social care. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 52(6), 3599-3617.

161. Gupta, A. (2017). Poverty and child neglect—the elephant in the room?. *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 6(1), 21-36.
162. 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), 247-259.
163. 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), 247-259.
164. Gupta, A. (2016). *Troubling Child Protection in England: Developing Critical Social Work Practice* (Doctoral dissertation, Royal Holloway, University of London).
165. Harris, M. S., & Hackett, W. (2008). Decision points in child welfare: An action research model to address disproportionality. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 30(2), 199-215.
166. Harris, M. S., & Hackett, W. (2008). Decision points in child welfare: An action research model to address disproportionality. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 30(2), 199-215.
167. Harris, C. I. (1993). Whiteness as property. *Harvard Law Review*, 1707-1791.

168. Hartlep, N. D. (2009). Critical Race Theory An Examination of its Past, Present, and Future Implications. Online Submission.
169. Helm, D. (2011). Judgements or assumptions? The role of analysis in assessing children and young people's needs. *British Journal of Social Work*, 41(5), 894-911.
170. Hendrick, H. (2003). *Child Welfare: England 1872-1989*. Routledge.
171. HM Government (2023). *Stable homes, built on love: Implementation strategy and consultation*. London: HM Government. Accessed on 12/05/2024:https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/642460653d885d000fdade73/Children_s_social_care_stable_homes_consultation_February_2023.pdf
172. HM Government (2026) *Working Together to Safeguard Children 2026: Statutory guidance on multi-agency working to help, protect and promote the welfare of children*. London: HM Government. Accessed on 12/05/2024 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/69c2c4ce380a2a73a7cf9df4/Working_together_to_safeguard_children_2026.pdf.
173. Holmes, P., Fay, R., Andrews, J., & Attia, M. (2013). Researching multilingually: New theoretical and methodological directions. *International journal of applied linguistics*, 23(3), 285-299.

174. Hood, R., Goldacre, A., Gorin, S., Bywaters, P., & Webb, C. (2020). Identifying and understanding the link between system conditions and welfare inequalities in children's social care services. London, The Nuffield Foundation and Kingston University.
175. Immigration Act 2016, c.19. London: The Stationery Office. Accessed on 01/08/2024:https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2016/19/pdfs/ukpga_20160019_en.pdf. 175.
176. Independent Office for Police Conduct (2024). IOPC race discrimination report. London: Independent Office for Police Conduct. Accessed on 15/08/2024:<https://www.policeconduct.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/iopc-racediscrimination-report-Nov24.pdf>.
177. Institute of Health Equity (2024). Structural racism, ethnicity and health inequalities. London: Institute of Health Equity. Accessed on 01/09/2025:<https://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/resources-reports/structural-racismethnicity-and-health-inequalities>.
178. Jing, Y., Bailey, G. A., Cheung, S. Y., Griffiths, L. J., & Scourfield, J. (2024). Ethnic disproportionality in the child welfare system: A Welsh linked administrative data study for 2011–2020. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 54(8), 3568-3589.

179. Johns, R., & Harry, J. (2022). Using the law in social work.
180. Jolly, A., & Gupta, A. (2024). Children and families with no recourse to public funds: Learning from case reviews. *Children & Society*, 38(1), 16-31.
181. Jolly, A. (2022). Children and families with no recourse to public funds: Learning from case. *Children and families*, 2022, 10-12.
182. Jolly, A. (2018). No recourse to social work? Statutory neglect, social exclusion and undocumented migrant families in the UK. *Social Inclusion*, 6(3), 190200.
183. Joseph Rowntree Foundation. (2026). UK poverty 2026: The essential guide to understanding poverty in the UK. Joseph Rowntree Foundation.<https://www.jrf.org.uk/uk-poverty-2026-the-essential-guide-to-understanding-poverty-in-the-uk>.
184. Katz, I., Corlyon, J., La Placa, V., & Hunter, S. (2007). The relationship between parenting and poverty. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 10.
185. Keddeh, E., & Hyslop, I. (2019). Ethnic inequalities in child welfare: The role of practitioner risk perceptions. *Child & Family Social Work*, 24(4), 409-420.

186. Keddell, E. (2023). Recognising the embedded child in child protection: Children's participation, inequalities and cultural capital. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 147, 106815.
187. Keddell, E., Davie, G., & Barson, D. (2019). Child protection inequalities in Aotearoa New Zealand: Social gradient and the 'inverse intervention law'. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 104, 104383.
188. King, N. & Horrocks, C. (2010). *Interviews in qualitative research*. London: SAGE.
189. Kline, R. (2014). The "snowy white peaks" of the NHS: A survey of discrimination in governance and leadership and the potential impact on patient care in London and England. London: Middlesex University. Accessed on 06/04/2026. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/edc7-0514.pdf>.
190. Krase, K. S. (2013). Differences in racially disproportionate reporting of child maltreatment across report sources. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 7(4), 351-369.
191. Križ, K., & Skivenes, M. (2010). 'Knowing our society' and 'fighting against prejudices': How child welfare workers in Norway and England perceive the challenges of minority parents. *British Journal of Social Work*, 40(8), 2634-2651.

192. Kriz, K. & Skivenes, M. (2011). 'Child welfare workers' perceptions of children's participation: A comparative study of England, Norway and the USA', *Child & Family Social Work*, 16(2), pp. 179–187. Accessed on 22/03/2023.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/273523565_Child_welfare_workers'_perceptions_of_children's_participation_A_comparative_study_of_England_Norway_and_the_USA_California.
193. Kriz, K., & Skivenes, M. (2010). Lost in translation: How child welfare workers in Norway and England experience language difficulties when working with minority ethnic families. *British Journal of Social Work*, 40(5), 1353-1367.
194. Ladson-Billings, G. (2020). Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education?. In *Critical race theory in education* (pp. 9-26). Routledge.
195. Landor, A., & Barr, A. (2018). Politics of respectability, colourism, and the terms of social exchange in family research. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 10(2), 330-347.
196. Liamputtong, P. (2010). Cross-cultural research and qualitative inquiry. *Turkish Online Journal of Qualitative Inquiry*, 1(1), 16-29.
197. Lareau, A. (2011). *Unequal childhoods: Class, race, and family life*. 2nd edn. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

198. Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1988). *Criteria for Assessing Naturalistic Inquiries as Reports*.
199. Liamputtong, P. (2007). *Researching the vulnerable: A guide to sensitive research methods*. London: SAGE.
200. Listen Up. (2025). *Pushing Forward: Testing learning on Adultification in Child Safeguarding Practices in England*. Accessed 10/12/2025
https://listenupresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Pushing-Forward_Short-Guide.pdf
201. Lister, R. (2004). *Poverty*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
202. Ioakimidis, V., & Maglajlić, R. A. (2022). Social work responses to armed and political conflict. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 52(4), 1801-1804.
203. Local Government Association (2024) *Placements for children in care: Resource pack*. London: Local Government Association. Accessed on 27/11/2024. <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/placements-children-care-resource-pack>.
204. Looks, B. (1984). *Feminist theory: From margin to centre*. Boston: South
End P.

205. Macpherson, W., Cook, T., Sentamu, J., & Stone, R. (1999). The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry: Report of an Inquiry by Sir William Macpherson of Cluny, CM 4262-I. Stationery Office.
206. Mason, C., Taggart, D., & Broadhurst, K. (2020). Parental non-engagement within child protection services—how can understandings of complex trauma and epistemic trust help?. *Societies*, 10(4), 93.
207. Maiter, S. (2009). ‘Using an anti-racist framework for assessment and intervention in clinical practice with families from diverse ethno-racial backgrounds’, *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 37(4), pp. 267–276.
208. Maiter, S., Stalker, C.A. & Alaggia, R. (2009). ‘The experiences of minority immigrant families receiving child welfare services: Seeking to understand how to reduce risk and increase protective factors’, *Families in Society*, 90(1), pp. 28–36.
209. Malterud, K., Siersma, V. D., & Guassora, A. D. (2016). Sample size in qualitative interview studies: guided by information power. *Qualitative health research*, 26(13), 1753-1760.
210. Marovatsanga, W., & Garrett, P. M. (2022). *Social Work with the Black African Diaspora*. Policy Press.

211. Marcenko, M.O., Lyons, S.J. & Courtney, M. (2011). 'Mothers' experiences, resources and needs: The context for reunification', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33(3), pp. 431–438.
212. Mason, C., Taggart, D. & Broadhurst, K. (2020). 'Parental non-engagement within child protection services: A qualitative synthesis of the literature', *Societies*, 10(4), article 93.
213. Massey, D.S. (2007). *Categorically unequal: The American stratification system*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
214. Matsuda, M.J., Lawrence, C.R., Delgado, R. and Crenshaw, K.W. (1993) *Words that Wound: Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech, and the First Amendment*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
215. Matsuda, M.J., Lawrence, C.R., Delgado, R. and Crenshaw, K.W. (2018) *Words that Wound: Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech, and the First Amendment*. New York: Routledge.
216. McGoldrick, M., Giordano, J. & Garcia-Preto, N. (eds.) (2005). *Ethnicity and family therapy*. 3rd edn. New York: Guilford Press.
217. Meissner, F. and Vertovec, S. (2015). 'Comparing super-diversity', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 38(4), pp. 541–555.

218. Mercer, K. (1994). *Welcome to the jungle: New positions in Black cultural studies*. New York: Routledge.
219. Ministry of Justice (2022) Family court statistics quarterly: October to December 2021. London: Ministry of Justice. Accessed on 19/05/2024: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/family-court-statistics-quarterly-october-to-december-2021>.
220. Mistry, J. and Sood, K. (2012). 'Challenges of early years leadership preparation: A comparison between early and experienced early years practitioners in England', *Management in Education*, 26(1), pp. 28–37.
221. Modiri, J. M. (2012). The colour of law, power, and knowledge: Introducing critical race theory in (post-) apartheid South Africa. *South African Journal on Human Rights*, 28(3), 405-436.
222. Mohammed, K., Ramadan, I. and Riaz, N. (2021). A brief introduction to Critical Race Theory (CRT). *Call It Racism*. Developed by and for Scottish tertiary institutions as a sector-led and co-produced resource. Accessed on 21/12/2024. <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-03/3%20Introduction%20to%20Critical%20Race%20Theory.pdf>.
223. Morgan, D.L. (1997) *Focus groups as qualitative research*. 2nd edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

224. Morris, K., Archard, P. J., Laird, S. E., & Clawson, R. (2018). Family experiences of children's social care involvement following a social work change programme. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 32(3), 237-250.
225. Morris, K., Mason, W., Bywaters, P., Featherstone, B., Daniel, B., Brady, G., ... & Webb, C. (2018). Social work, poverty, and child welfare interventions. *Child & Family Social Work*, 23(3), 364-372.
226. Munro, E. (2011). The Parton review of child protection: Final report, a child-centred system (Vol. 8062). The Stationery Office.
227. Munro, E. (2011) The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report: A Child-Centred System. London: Department for Education.
228. Murphy, C. (2023). How learning from the lived experiences of child protection social workers can help us understand the factors underpinning workforce instability within the English child protection system. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 37(2), 263-276.
229. Murray, T., Dingwall, R., & Eekelaar, J. (1983). Professionals in bureaucracies: solicitors in private practice and local government. *The sociology of the professions*, 195-220.
230. Narey, M. (2014). Making the education of social workers consistently effective. London: Department for Education.

231. Nakaoka, S., & Ortiz, L. (2018). Examining racial microaggressions as a tool for transforming social work education: The case for critical race pedagogy. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work*, 27(1), 72–85.
<https://doi.org/10.1>.
232. National Audit Office (2019) Pressures on children's social care. London: National Audit Office.
233. National Audit Office (2025) Children's social care: Improving outcomes through system reform. London: National Audit Office.
234. National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (2022). Safeguarding children who come from Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic communities. London: NSPCC.
235. National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (2025). Race, racism and safeguarding children: Summary of Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel briefing. London: NSPCC. Accessed on 11/01/2026.
<https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/2025/summary-child-safeguardingpractice-review-panel-briefing-race-racism>.
236. Nationality and Borders Act (2022). [legislation.gov.uk](https://www.legislation.gov.uk). Accessed 10/9/2025. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2022/36/contents>.

237. Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International journal of qualitative methods*, 16(1), 1609406917733847.
238. NRPF Network. (2017). Assessing and supporting children and families who have no recourse to public funds (NRPF): Practice guidance for local authorities. Islington London Borough Council. Retrieved from guidance.nrpfnetwork.org.uk/reader/practice-guidance-families.
239. NSPCC. (2025). History of child protection in the UK. NSPCC Learning. <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/child-protection-system/history-of-child-protection-inthe-uk>. Accessed 10/09/2024.
240. NSPCC. (2024). Children's services spending 2024. NSPCC. <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/childrens-services-spendingreports>.
241. Office for National Statistics (2022) Ethnic group, England and Wales: Census 2021. Newport: Office for National Statistics. Accessed on 13/12/2025. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/ethnicity/bulletins/ethnicgroupenglandandwales/census2021>.
242. Office for National Statistics (2023) Ethnic group differences in health, employment, education and housing shown in England and Wales's Census 2021. Newport: Office for National Statistics. Accessed on 01/11/2023.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/ethnicity/articles/ethnicgroupdifferencesinhealthemploymenteducationandhousingshowninenglandandwalescensus2021/2023-03-15>.

243. Ofsted (2011) *The voice of the child: Learning lessons from serious case reviews*. Manchester: Ofsted.

244. Ofsted (2015) *Early help: Whose responsibility?* Manchester: Ofsted.

245. Ofsted (2018) *The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of*

246. *Education, Children's Services and Skills 2017/18*. Manchester: Ofsted.

Accessed on 08/05/2024: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-annual-report-201718-education-childrens-services-and-skills>.

247. Ofsted (2022) *Children's social care questionnaires 2022: What children and young people told Ofsted*. Manchester: Ofsted. Accessed on 01/05/2026:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/childrens-social-care-questionnaires-2022-what-children-and-young-people-told-ofsted>.

248. Ofsted (2023) *The Annual Report of His Majesty's Chief Inspector of*

249. *Education, Children's Services and Skills 2022/23*. Manchester: Ofsted.

Accessed on 14/02/2026: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-annual-report202223-education-childrens-services-and-skills>.

250. Ofsted (2025) Children's social care in England 2025. Manchester: Ofsted. Accessed on 01/05/2026:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/childrens-socialcare-in-england-2025>.
251. Ogden, K., & Phillips, D. (2024). How have English councils' funding and spending changed? 2010 to. The Institute for Fiscal Studies.
252. Okpokiri, C. (2021). Parenting in fear: Child welfare micro strategies of Nigerian parents in Britain. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 51(2), 427-444.
253. Ortega, R. M., & Faller, K. C. (2011). Training child welfare workers from an intersectional, cultural-humility perspective. *Child welfare*, 90(5), 27-49.
254. Owen, C., & Statham, J. (2009). Disproportionality in child welfare: The prevalence of black and minority ethnic children within the 'looked after' and 'children in need' populations and on child protection registers in England. London: Department for Children, Schools and Families.
255. Parliament UK (2025). Children's social care: Fourth report of session 2024-25. London: House of Commons Education Committee. Accessed on 21/01/2026:<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5901/cmselect/cmeduc/430/report.html>.

256. Parry, O. & Mauthner, N.S. (2004). Whose data are they anyway? Practical, legal and ethical issues in archiving qualitative research data', *Sociology*, 38(1), pp. 139–152.
257. Parton, N. (2005). *Safeguarding childhood: Early intervention and surveillance in a late modern society*. Red Globe Press.
258. Parton, N. (2014). *The Politics of Child Protection: Contemporary Developments and Future Directions*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
259. Parton, N. (2011). Child protection and safeguarding in England: Changing and competing conceptions of risk and their implications for social work. *British Journal of Social Work*, 41(5), 854-875.
260. Pelton, L. H. (2015). The continuing role of material factors in child maltreatment and placement. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 41, 30.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2014.10.021>.
261. Phoenix, A. and Pattynama, P. (2006) 'Intersectionality', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 13(3), pp. 187–192.
262. Pinter, I. and Leon, L. (2025) *Poverty among children affected by UK government asylum and immigration policy: Evidence briefing*. London/Oxford: CASE and COMPAS. Accessed on 14/12/2026:

<https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/publication/poverty-among-children-affected-by-ukgovernment-asylum-and-immigration-policy>.

263. Platt, D. (2012). 'Understanding parental engagement with child welfare services: An integrated model', *Child & Family Social Work*, 17(2), pp. 138–148.
264. Preston, J., & Bhopal, K. (2012). Conclusion: Intersectional Theories and 'Race': From Toolkit to 'Mash-Up'. In *Intersectionality and race in education* (pp. 213-220). Routledge.
265. Pösö, T., Skivenes, M., & Hestbæk, A. D. (2014). Child protection systems within the Danish, Finnish and Norwegian welfare states—time for a child centric approach?. *European Journal of Social Work*, 17(4), 475-490.
266. Public Law Project (2020). Online immigration appeals: A case study of the First-tier Tribunal. London: Public Law Project. Accessed on 26/05/2023: <https://publiclawproject.org.uk/resources/online-immigration-appeals-a-case-study-ofthe-first-tier-tribunal/>.
267. Reder, P. & Duncan, S. (1999). *Lost innocents: A follow-up study of fatal child abuse*. London: Routledge.
268. Research in Practice (2022) Tedam, P. (2022). Accessed on 12/06/2023. Promoting anti-racism in children and family services | Research in Practice.

269. Research in Practice. (2022). What is early help? Concepts, policy directions and multi-agency perspectives. Research in Practice. Accessed on 13/05/2023. Learning resources & events on early help | Research in Practice.
270. Research in Practice (2023). See Webb, S. (2023). Accessed on 01/08/2024. <https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/news-views/2023/october/makingtrauma-informed-practice-a-reality/>.
271. Research in Practice (2024). See Cheruvallil-Contractor, S., Halford, A. and Anand, K. (2024). Accessed on 19/05/2025: <https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/publications/2024/january/expressions-of-self-supporting-minoritised-children-s-identity-frontline-briefing-2024/>.
272. Richardson, J. G. (1986). Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education.
273. Rittel, H.W.J. & Webber, M.M. (1973). 'Dilemmas in a general theory of planning', Policy Sciences, 4(2), pp. 155–169.
274. Rothbaum, F., Weisz, J., Pott, M., Miyake, K. and Morelli, G. (2000). 'Attachment and culture: Security in the United States and Japan', American Psychologist, 55(10), pp. 1093–1104.

275. Rogowski, J. C. (2014). Electoral choice, ideological conflict, and political participation. *American Journal of Political Science*, 58(2), 479-494.
276. Rogowski, S. (2020). Conclusion: Critical/radical possibilities in ongoing neoliberal times. In *Social Work* (pp. 155-180). Policy Press.
277. Rogowski, S. (2020). *Social work: The rise and fall of a profession?*. Policy Press.
278. Rothwell, D. W., & Jud, A. (2022). On the relationship between economic inequality and child maltreatment: Takeaways from the special issue and future directions. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 130, 105632.
279. Rollock, N. & Gillborn, D. (2011). *Critical Race Theory (CRT)*. London: British Educational Research Association. Accessed on 02/11/2024: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/critical-race-theory-crt>.
280. Roberts, D. E. (2002). *Shattered bonds: The colour of child welfare*. Basic Civitas Books.
281. Roberts, D. (2022). *Torn apart: How the child welfare system destroys Black families--and how abolition can build a safer world*. Basic Books.
282. Runnymede Trust (2020). *Over-exposed and under-protected: The devastating impact of COVID-19 on Black and minority ethnic communities in*

Great Britain. London: Runnymede Trust. Accessed on 15/07/2024:

<https://www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/over-exposed-and-under-protected>.

283. Ryan, L., Sales, R., Tilki, M. & Siara, B. (2008). 'Social networks, social support and social capital: The experiences of recent Polish migrants in London', *Sociology*, 42(4), pp. 672–690.
284. Saar-Heiman, Y., & Gupta, A. (2020). The poverty-aware paradigm for child protection: A critical framework for policy and practice. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 50(4), 1167-1184.
285. Sawrikar, P. (2017). *Working with ethnic minorities and across cultures in Western child protection systems*. London: Routledge.
286. Schofield, G. & Ward, E. (2011). 'Understanding and working with parents of children in long-term foster care', *Child & Family Social Work*, 16(1), pp. 1–9.
287. Selwyn, J., Wijedasa, D. & Meakings, S. (2014). *Beyond the adoption order: Challenges, interventions and adoption disruption*. London: Department for Education.
288. Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for information*, 22(2), 63-75.

289. Sidaway, R. (2013). *Resolving environmental disputes: From conflict to consensus*. London: Routledge.
290. Silverman, D. (2013). *Doing qualitative research*. 4th edn. London: SAGE.
291. Sirriyeh, A. (2018). *The politics of compassion: Immigration and asylum policy*. Bristol: Policy Press.
292. Skinner, L., Primeau, F., Jeltsch-Thömmes, A., Joos, F., Köhler, P., & Bard, E. (2023). Rejuvenating the ocean: mean ocean radiocarbon, CO₂ release, and radiocarbon budget closure across the last deglaciation. *Climate of the Past*, 19(11), 2177-2202.
293. Slayter, E. & Jensen, J. (2019). 'Parents with intellectual disabilities in the child protection system', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 98, pp. 297–304. 285.
294. Slack, K. S., Berger, L. M., DuMont, K., Yang, M. Y., Kim, B., EhrhardDietzel, S., & Holl, J. L. (2011). Risk and protective factors for child neglect during early childhood: A cross-study comparison. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33(8), 1354-1363.

295. Smithson, R & Gibson, M. (2017). 'Less than human: A qualitative study into the experience of parents involved in the child protection system', *Child & Family Social Work*, 22(2), pp. 565–574.
296. Social Work England (2020). Professional standards. Sheffield: Social Standards.
297. Solórzano, D.G. (1997). 'Images and words that wound: Critical race theory, racial stereotyping, and teacher education', *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 24(3), pp. 5–19.
298. Solórzano, D.G. & Yosso, T.J. (2002). 'Critical race methodology: Counter storytelling as an analytical framework for education research', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8(1), pp. 23–44.
299. Solórzano, D. G., & Yosso, T. J. (2016). Critical race methodology. *Foundations of critical race theory in education*, 127-142.
300. Spratt, T., Devaney, J. & Hayes, D. (2015). 'In and out of home care decisions: The influence of confirmation bias in developing decision supportive reasoning', *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 49, pp. 76–85.
301. Stanley, N. & Humphreys, C. (2015). *Domestic violence and protecting children: New thinking and approaches*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
293.

302. Strega, S. (2009). 'Anti-oppressive approaches to assessment, risk assessment and file recording', in Strega, S. and Brown, L. (eds.) *Research as resistance: Critical, Indigenous and anti-oppressive approaches*. 2nd edn. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, pp. 119–138.
303. Sullivan, C.M. (2012). 'Domestic violence shelter services: A review of the empirical evidence', *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 13(4), pp. 201–218.
304. Swift, K.J. (1995). *Manufacturing "bad mothers": A critical perspective on child neglect*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
305. Szyf, M. (2013). 'The genome- and system-wide response of DNA methylation to early life adversity and its implication on mental health', *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, 58(12), pp. 697–704.
306. Taggart, D., Mason, C. & Webb, S. (2020). *Reconceptualising parental nonengagement in child protection: Frontline briefing*. Dartington: Research in Practice.
307. Tate IV, W. F. (1997). Chapter 4: Critical race theory and education: History, theory, and implications. *Review of research in education*, 22(1), 195-247.

308. Taylor, E., Gillborn, D. and Ladson-Billings, G. (eds.) (2009) Foundations of Critical Race Theory in Education. New York: Routledge.
309. Tedam, P. (2021). To shield or not to shield? There should be no question— Black African social workers' experiences during COVID-19 in England. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 51(5), 1720-1738.
310. Temple, B., & Young, A. (2004). Qualitative research and translation dilemmas. *Qualitative research*, 4(2), 161-178.
311. Terrefe, T. A. (2025). Exploring the colonial contours of child welfare services and their implications for immigrant parents' participation and trust. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 1-31.
312. Thoburn, J. (2009). 'Reunification of children in out-of-home care to birth parents or relatives: A synthesis of the evidence on processes, practice and outcomes', Expertise für das Projekt Pflegekinderhilfe in Deutschland. Norwich: University of East Anglia.
313. Threlfall, J.M. & Kohl, P.L. (2015). 'Addressing child support in fatherhood programs: Perspectives of fathers and service providers', *Family Relations*, 64(2), pp. 291–304.

314. Turney, D. (2012). 'A relationship-based approach to engaging involuntary clients: The contribution of recognition theory', *Child & Family Social Work*, 17(2), pp. 149–159.
315. Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight “big tent” criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative inquiry*, 16(10), 837-851.
316. University of Essex (2021) Ethics review procedures for research involving human participants. Colchester: University of Essex.
317. Vagle, M.D. (2018). *Crafting phenomenological research*. 2nd edn. New York: Routledge.
318. Warner, J. (2015) *The Emotional Politics of Social Work and Child Protection*. Bristol: Policy Press.
319. Warner, J. (2018). 'Social work, class politics and risk in the moral panic over baby P', *Health, Risk & Society*, 20(3–4), pp. 127–144.
320. Webb, C., Bywaters, P., Scourfield, J., McCartan, C., Bunting, L., Davidson, G., & Morris, K. (2020). Untangling child welfare inequalities and the 'inverse intervention law' in England. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 111, 104849.

321. Webb, C. J., Bennett, D. L., & Bywaters, P. (2024). Austerity, poverty, and children's services quality in England: Consequences for child welfare and public services. *Social Policy and Society*, 23(2), 278-299. Accessed 25/05/2025: <https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/181694/1/osd-accepted-version.pdf>.
322. Webb, C., & Bywaters, P. (2024). Inequalities in out-of-home care rates in England: Does local party politics matter?. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 149, 106590.
323. Webb, C., Bywaters, P., Scourfield, J., Davidson, G., & Bunting, L. (2020). Cuts both ways: Ethnicity, poverty, and the social gradient in child welfare interventions. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 117, 105299.
324. Webb, C. J., & Bywaters, P. (2018). Austerity, rationing and inequity: trends in children's and young peoples' services expenditure in England between 2010 and 2015. *Local Government Studies*, 44(3), 391-415.
325. Westlake, D., & Jones, R. K. (2018). Breaking down language barriers: A practice-near study of social work using interpreters. *British Journal of Social Work*, 48(5), 1388-1408.
326. White, S., Hall, C., & Peckover, S. (2009). The descriptive tyranny of the common assessment framework: Technologies of categorisation and professional practice in child welfare. *British journal of social work*, 39(7), 1197-1217.

327. Wilson, K., Ruch, G., Cooper, A., & Lymbery, M. (2011). *Social Work: An Introduction to Contemporary Practice* (2nd edition), Harlow: Pearson.
328. Wilson, K. (2008). *Social work: An introduction to contemporary practice*. Pearson Education.
329. Willow, C. (2024). *The Rights of the Child. The Child Protection Handbook E-Book*, 15.
330. Williams, C., & Soydan, H. (2005). When and how does ethnicity matter? A cross-national study of social work responses to ethnicity in child protection cases. *British Journal of Social Work*, 35(6), 901-920.
331. Wolgemuth, J.R., Erdil-Moody, Z., Opsal, T., Cross, J.E., Kaanta, T., Dickmann, E.M. & Colomer, S. (2015). ‘Participants’ experiences of the qualitative interview: Considering the importance of research paradigms’, *Qualitative Research*, 15(3), pp. 351–372.
332. Wound, W. T. (1993). *Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech, and the First Amendment*. Boulder, CO: Westview.
333. Yosso, T.J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth, *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), pp. 69–91.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Ethics Approval Letter

Decision - Ethics ETH2122-1093: Miss Alice Maina

 Summarise

ERAMS

Maina, Alice W



University of Essex ERAMS

19/10/2022

Miss Alice Maina

Health and Social Care

University of Essex

Dear Alice,

Ethics Committee Decision

Application: ETH2122-1093

We are pleased to inform you that the research proposal entitled "Exploring and understanding the factors that contribute to BME families and their children encountering with Child protection System in the UK: A qualitative study" has been reviewed by the **Ethics** Sub **Committee** 2, and, based on the information provided, it has been awarded a favourable opinion.

The application was awarded a favourable opinion subject to the following **conditions**:

Extensions and Amendments:

If you propose to introduce an amendment to the research after approval or extend the duration of the study, an amendment should be submitted in ERAMS for further approval in advance of the expiry date listed in the **ethics** application form. Please note that it is not possible to make any amendments, including extending the duration of the study, once the expiry date has passed.

Covid-19:

Please note that the current Government guidelines in relation to Covid-19 must be adhered to and are subject to change and it is your responsibility to keep yourself informed and bear in mind the possibility of change when planning your research. You will be kept informed if there are any changes in the University guidelines.

Yours sincerely,

REO Research Governance team

Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet — Parent Participants
Exploring and understanding the factors that contribute to BME families and their
children encountering the Child Protection System in the UK: A qualitative study

What is the purpose of the study?

The study aims to examine the extent to which BME communities encounter the child protection system, the issues or contributing factors that bring them into contact with it, specifically within the UK child protection system, and to identify the primary barriers between social workers and BME parents. The study also aims to explore solutions to bridge potential gaps between the Child Protection System and BME families.

Why have I been invited to participate?

You have been invited to participate in this study because you are a parent from a BME community. You may or may not have been involved and gained experience with the Child Protection System in the UK. You have responded to my call for participants, shared on social media/community groups, or I have contacted you directly or approached you through friends or community leaders.

Inclusion criteria: BME parents with a Sub-Saharan African background must be 18 years and above. Must have migrated to the UK in the last 20 years and currently live in England. Must have children and have some experience in engaging with the child protection system in England.

Exclusion criteria: You are not allowed to participate in the study if you are below 18 years, do not have children and are not from the BME group born in one of the Sub-Saharan African countries.

I would appreciate it if you could participate in this study, which is part of my doctoral research. Your contribution to my research will help me explore and identify gaps and potential in the Child Protection System's dealings and processes, and will give you a chance to share your voice. It will also generate new knowledge and skills, which could assist in developing policies within the Child Protection System to address BME needs and help bridge the gap between the Child Protection System and BME families. Consequently, I would be incredibly grateful if you could have a chat with me about your experiences and views when you encountered the Child Protection System. If you do not mind, I

would also like to audio-record all conversations during chats.

Approximately 20-30 BME parents will be invited to participate in this study.

Do I have to take part?

No. It is up to you to decide whether to participate because participation in this study is voluntary, and there is no obligation to participate.

Before you decide whether to participate or not, you need to understand why the research is being done and what participation in the study will involve. Please read the information sheet carefully or discuss it with others. If you have any questions, need some clarification, or need more information, do not hesitate to reach out to me at am20311@essex.ac.uk. If you accept to participate, you will be given this

information sheet and a set of questionnaires to complete, and we ask you to tick a box on these to show you have consented to participate in the study. You are still free to withdraw at any time and for any reason. A decision to withdraw will not affect your rights. After transcription, the researcher will not be able to identify the participants, as the data will be fully anonymised. Therefore, data already collected, deidentified, or anonymised using the Identification Number (ID), such as 01, 02, etc., and pseudonyms to identify participants, such as John, Ibrahim, and Jane, but not their real names, cannot be withdrawn.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

I cannot guarantee that the study will help you personally or help BME communities, as there are no intended benefits associated with participating. However, the knowledge generated by this study may help develop interventions and raise awareness among BME and their families about factors they may encounter when they engage with the Child Protection System in England. The findings can help inform BME communities' issues and tailor early intervention support to enhance BME parenting practices. There are no risks involved in participating; however, you may find some of the discussion content personal, and it could trigger unpleasant memories. If it occurs, I will ask you if you wish to take a break, stop, or proceed with the interview. If you opt to leave, this will not affect you. If you have any concerns or experience any distress during or after participating in the study, do not hesitate to get in touch with the available support resources in Table 1.

Table 5. List of support resources for participants

UK-wide	
Samaritans (24-hour help)	Tel: 116 123 or Email: jo@samaritans.org
SANE Helpline (4.30 pm-10.30 pm help)	Tel: 0300 304 7000
Mind Infoline (9am-6pm)	Tel: 0300 123 3393 , email: info@mind.org.uk or text 86463
NHS Direct (24-hour help) (for urgent need of mental health advice - nonemergency)	Tel: 111
Anxiety UK	www.anxietyuk.org.uk . Helpline: 03444 775 774 Text support: 07537 416 905
MindOut LGBT Mental Health Service	Tel: 01273 234839 , email: info@mindout.org.uk
In case of a mental health emergency crisis, please call 999 or visit their nearest A&E. What are the possible benefits of taking part?	

What information will be collected?

The information will include your experiences and views on the Child Protection System in England and your perspectives on parenting in the UK as a BME parent from Sub-Saharan Africa. Although, there will be some personal questions about your family. For instance, what is your perception about child protection professionals involving your family matter?

Will my information be kept confidential?

Any information you provide will be kept strictly confidential. You do not have to give a name on any questionnaires or information sheets; therefore, the information you provide cannot be identified with your name. I guarantee your privacy and confidentiality will be maintained throughout the research period. This will be done by ensuring that interviews are conducted in a quiet place and that all collected data is not shared with third parties, only with the research supervisors and me. After each interview, all information will be stored anonymously, so no one will know who said what. I will also ensure that no participant names are included on research tools or in audio recordings. Instead, the Identification Number (ID), such as 01, 02, etc. and pseudonyms to identify participants, such as John, Ibrahim, and Jane, but not their real names, will be used to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. The responses you provide will be treated in confidence. No identifying information will appear in any document or in the final thesis. Your rights are protected under the Data Protection Act of 2018, and any information that might identify you will not be shared outside the research team or a third party. However, there is a limit to confidentiality in exceptional circumstances, e.g., where the health, welfare, and safety of the participant or others are compromised by the information the participant might disclose. I have a professional responsibility or

duty to care to pass this information on to an appropriate individual or agency. In this case, the participant will be discussed first.

All data obtained will be stored securely at the University on a university-managed system, in a locked file cabinet, and on password-protected devices. The data will be destroyed two years after the end of the study.

What is the legal basis for using the data, and who is the Data Controller?

Ethical and legal practices will be followed in data collection, analysis, and use. Clearance to conduct the study has been obtained from the University's Ethics Subcommittee 2. The Electronic and collected data will be stored securely on a university-managed system and will be controlled by the University of Essex through the office of the University Information Assurance Manager at dpo@essex.ac.uk. You will have voluntarily given me your permission by signing a participant consent form. As we mentioned in the consent form, the interview will be audio-recorded to help the research team transcribe the data for analysis. Any personal information in audio files and transcripts will be stored in a deidentified way (e.g., using an Identification Number (ID) such as 01, 02, etc., and pseudonyms to identify participants such as John, Ibrahim, and Jane, but not their real names). The audio recording and data collected will be destroyed two years after the end of the study.

What should I do if I want to take part?

Thank you for considering taking part in my study. If you are interested in taking part, I will ask you to complete and sign the consent form and complete a self-administered

demographic questionnaire consisting of 6 questions. Then I will discuss with you about your views and experiences on the Child Protection System and your parenting practices in the UK compared to where you come from (your country of origin). The interview will be audio-recorded, and the researcher will take observational notes for data analysis. The discussion will last 45–60 minutes, and you can choose to be interviewed online via Zoom or Microsoft Teams, or face-to-face at a convenient time and place for you. If you want to learn more about the research before taking part, please do not hesitate to contact me (the researcher). Details of Primary Researcher: am20311@essex.ac.uk. Or my principal supervisor: v.ioakimidis@essex.ac.uk; or my co-supervisor: w.eboh@essex.ac.uk.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The data will be transcribed, analysed, and made available by publishing the findings. So, the data will be available to various people, including yourself (if interested), as well as professionals and researchers, through written reports, presentations, and journal publications. Copies of the dissertation will be submitted to the University of Essex. However, it will not be possible to identify any individual participant in these reports or publications, as they will be anonymised.

Who is organising and funding the research?

This research is part of a Programme of study to fulfil the requirements of a PhD Thesis; therefore, it has no funding attached.

Who has reviewed the study?

The study has received ethical approval by the University's Ethics Sub Committee 2. I will obtain your consent to take part in the study.

Concerns and Complaints

If you have any concerns regarding your involvement or any aspect of this research, please discuss these with me (the researcher). In the first instance, you can email me directly at am20311@essex.ac.uk. If you wish to make a complaint, please email my principal supervisor: v.ioakimidis@essex.ac.uk. If you are still concerned or feel that you cannot approach the principal investigator, please get in touch with the Director of Research & Impact in the School of Health and Social Care, Professor

Camille Cronin, by Email: at camille.cronin@essex.ac.uk. Alternatively, Sarah Manning – Press, Research Governance and Planning Manager, Research and Enterprise Office Email: sarahm@essex.ac.uk. The ethics reference is ETH21221093, which can be found at the foot of this page.

Name of the Researcher/Research Team Members

If you want to know more about the research, please get in touch with the research team. I (ALICE MAINA), the researcher, can be reached at: am20311@essex.ac.uk. You can also get my principal supervisor Professor Vasilios Ioakimidis via email v.ioakimidis@essex.ac.uk. Or co-supervisors Professor Winifred Eboh w.eboh@essex.ac.uk.

Thank you for taking the time to read this participant's information sheet.

Exploring and understanding the factors that contribute to BME families and their children encountering with Child protection System in the UK: A qualitative study



"I have read the information sheet provided, and I am happy to participate. By completing and returning this questionnaire, I understand that I am consenting to be part of this research study and for my data to be used as described in the information sheet provided."

- a. Your current GenderMale/ Female/other/
prefer not to say
 - b. Your age group **Please circle which applies to you:** 20-29, 30-39, 40-49,
50-
59, 60+
2. Why did you come to the UK? **Please circle which applies to you**
- a. To seek asylum/Refugee
 - b. As an economic immigrant
 - c. Student
 - d. To join my family already in the UK
 - e. Other
.....
3. Your current immigration status? **Please circle which applies to you**
- i. Student vis
 - ii. Work permit

- iii. Refugee status/Leave
to remain
- iv. British citizen by
nationalisation
- v. Asylum seeker
- vi. Dependant visa
- vii. Indefinite leave to
remain
- viii. Other.....

4. Which of the following is the best broad category to describe your ethnic origin?

Please circle which applies to you

- i A **White:** White British, Irish, Gypsy or Irish Traveler, Other White
- ii. A **Mixed or multiple ethnic group:** White and Black Caribbean,
White and Black African, White and Asian, Other Mixed
- iii. A **Asian or Asian British:** Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi,
Chinese,
Other Asian
- iv. A **Black or African or Caribbean or Black British:** African,
Caribbean, Other Black
- v. A **Other ethnic group:** Arab, Any other ethnic group

5. Disability:

Sexuality:

Appendix 3: Consent Form — Parent Participants

Exploring and understanding the factors that contribute to BME families and their children coming into contact with the Child Protection System in the UK.

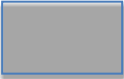
Research Team:

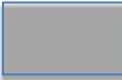
Primary Research: ALICE MAINA (am20311@essex.ac.uk)

Principal Supervisor: Professor Vasilios Ioakimidis (v.ioakimidis@essex.ac.uk)

Co-Supervisor: Professor Winifred Eboh (w.eboh@essex.ac.uk)

Please initial the box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the Information Sheet dated  04/05/2022 for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions, and have these questions answered satisfactorily.

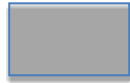
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw  from the project at any time without giving any reason and without penalty. I understand that any data collected up to the point of my withdrawal, e.g., will be destroyed; cannot be withdrawn because it cannot be identified.

3. I understand that due to the nature of this study, some sensitive discussions may trigger traumatic past events. I confirm that if the trigger is too extreme, the researcher can abruptly end the session and signpost me to the relevant support system listed on the PIS. 

4. I understand that the identifiable data provided will be securely stored and accessible only to the members of the research team (myself, Alice Maina, my supervisors Professor Vasilios Ioakimidis and Professor Winifred Eboh) I permit 

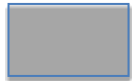
these individuals to have access to my records directly involved in the project, and that confidentiality will be maintained.

5. I understand that my fully anonymised data will be used for research publication,

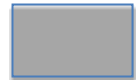


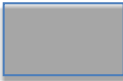
accessible to professionals and researchers, through written reports, presentations and journal publications. Copies of the dissertation will be submitted to the University of Essex.

6. I understand that the data collected about me will be used to support future research and may be shared anonymously with other researchers.



7. I give permission for my data (de-identified- anonymised using the Identification



Number (ID), such as 01, 02, etc. and pseudonyms to identify participants such as John, Ibrahim, and Jane, but not your real name, transcripts and audio recordings), that I provide to be available to different people, including myself (if interested), professionals and researchers, through written reports, presentations, and journal publications  so that they will be available for future research and learning activities by other individuals.

8. I agree to take part in the above study.

Participant Name

Date

Participant Signature

Researcher Name

Date

Researcher Signature

Appendix 4: Participant Information Sheet —Social Worker Participants
Appendix 15 PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET - Social workers

Title

Exploring and understanding the factors that contribute to BME families and their children encountering the Child Protection System in the UK: A qualitative study

What is the purpose of the study?

The study examines the extent to which BME communities encounter the child protection system, and the issues or contributing factors that bring them into contact with it, specifically within the UK child protection system. To identify the primary barriers between social workers and BME parents and explore solutions that can be put in place to bridge the gap within the Child Protection System.

Why have I been invited to participate?

You have been invited to participate in this study because you have responded to my advertisement on social media/professional groups, or local authorities. I contacted you directly or snowballed through friends or community leaders. You are a social worker who has worked with BME families in England, specifically in the Child Protection System. I would appreciate it if you could take part in this study, which is part of my doctoral requirements in social work. Your contribution to my research will help me

explore and identify gaps between the Child Protection System and BME parents. I will give you a chance to share your voice. It will also generate new knowledge and skills that could assist in developing policies within the Child Protection System to address BME needs and offer solutions to bridge the gap between the Child Protection System and BME families. Consequently, I would be very grateful if you could chat with me about your experiences and views on BME parents' experiences with Child Protection. If you do not mind, I would also like to audio-record all conversations during our chat.

Approximately 20-30 BME parents and five social workers will be invited to participate in this study.

Inclusion criteria: A qualified and practising Social Worker working in the Child Protection System in England, must be 18 years and above.

Exclusion criteria: You are not allowed to participate in the study if you are below 18 years, or you are not a qualified and practising social worker in the Child Protection System in England.

Do I have to take part?

No. It is up to you to decide whether to participate because participation in this study is voluntary, and there is no obligation.

Before you decide whether to participate, you need to understand why the research is being done and what participation in the study will involve you. Please read the information sheet carefully. If you have any questions, need clarification, or would like more information, please get in touch with me at am20311@essex.ac.uk. If you agree to participate, you will be given this information sheet and a set of questionnaires to complete, and we ask you to tick a box on these to show that you have consented to participate in the study. You are still free to withdraw at any time and for any reason. A decision to withdraw will not affect your rights. After transcription, the researcher will not be able to identify the participants, as the data will be fully anonymised. Therefore, data already collected, de-identified, or anonymised using the Identification Number (ID), such as 01, 02, etc., and pseudonyms to identify participants, such as John, Ibrahim, and Jane, but not their real names, cannot be withdrawn.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

There are no risks involved in participating; however, you may find some of the discussion content personal, and it could trigger unpleasant memories. If it occurs, I will ask whether you wish to take a break, stop, or proceed with the interview, and if you opt to leave, it will not affect you in any way. If you have any concerns or experience any distress during or after participating in the study, you can contact NHS Mental Health support through www.anxietyuk.org.uk.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

I cannot guarantee that the study will help you personally or help BME communities, as there are no intended benefits associated with participating. However, the knowledge generated by this study may help develop interventions and raise awareness of factors contributing to BME and their families' encounters with the Child Protection System in England. The findings can help inform BME communities' issues and tailor early intervention support to enhance BME parenting practices.

There are no risks involved in participating; however, you may find some of the discussion content personal, and it could trigger unpleasant memories. If it occurs, I will ask you if you wish to take a break, stop, or proceed with the interview. If you opt to leave, this will not affect you. If you have any concerns or experience any distress during or after participating in the study, don't hesitate to get in touch with the available support resources in Table 1.

Table 1. List of support resources for participants

UK-wide	
Samaritans (24-hour help)	Tel: 116 123 or Email: jo@samaritans.org
SANE Helpline (4.30 pm-10.30 pm help)	Tel: 0300 304 7000

Mind Infoline (9am-6pm)	Tel: 0300 123 3393 , email: info@mind.org.uk or text 86463
NHS Direct (24-hour help) (for an urgent need of mental health advice - non-emergency)	Tel: 111
Anxiety UK	www.anxietyuk.org.uk . Helpline: 03444 775 774 Text support: 07537 416 905
MindOut LGBT Mental Health Service	Tel: 01273 234839 , email: info@mindout.org.uk
In case of a mental health emergency crisis, please call 999 or visit their nearest A&E. What are the possible benefits of taking part?	

What information will be collected?

The information to be collected will include your experiences and views on working with BME families and your perspectives on their parenting practices.

Will my information be kept confidential?

Any information you provide will be kept strictly confidential. You do not have to give a name on any questionnaires or information sheets; therefore, the information you provide cannot be identified with your name. I guarantee your privacy and confidentiality will be maintained throughout the research period. This will be done by ensuring that interviews are conducted in a quiet place and that all collected data is not shared with third parties, only with the research supervisors and me. After each interview, all information will be stored anonymously, so no one will know who said what. I will also ensure that no participant names are included on research tools or in audio recordings. Instead, the Identification Number (ID), such as 01, 02, etc. and pseudonyms to identify participants, such as John, Ibrahim, and Jane, but not their real names, will be used to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. The responses you provide will be treated in confidence. No identifying information will appear in any document or in the final thesis. Your rights are protected under the Data Protection Act of 2018, and any information that might identify you will not be shared outside the research team or a third party. However, there is a limit to confidentiality in exceptional circumstances, e.g., where the health, welfare and safety of the participant or others are compromised by information the participant might disclose. I have a professional responsibility or duty to care to pass this information on to an appropriate individual or agency. In this case, the participant will be discussed first.

All data obtained will be stored securely in the University on a Universitymanaged system, in a locked file cabinet, and on password-protected devices. The data will be destroyed two years after the end of the study.

What is the legal basis for using the data, and who is the Data Controller?

Data collection, analysis, and use will follow ethical and legal practices. The study has been approved by the University's Ethics Sub-Committee 2.

The Electronic and collected data will be stored securely on a universitymanaged system and will be controlled by the University of Essex through the office of the University Information Assurance Manager at dpo@essex.ac.uk. You have voluntarily given me your permission by signing the participant consent form, as stated in the form. The interview will be audio-recorded, and the researcher will take observational notes for data analysis. Any personal information in audio files and transcripts will be stored de-identified (e.g., using Identification Numbers (IDs) such as 01, 02, etc., and pseudonyms to identify participants such as John, Ibrahim, and Jane, but not their real names). All data obtained will be stored securely in a safe and locked file cabinet and on password-protected devices. The data will be destroyed two years after the end of the study.

What should I do if I want to take part?

Thank you for considering taking part in my study. If you are interested in participating, I will ask you to complete and sign the consent form and a self-

administered demographic questionnaire consisting of 7 questions. Then I will ask you some semi structured questions about your views and experiences working with BME families. The interview will be audio recorded, and the researcher will take observational notes for data analysis.

The interview will last for 45 – 60 minutes, and you can choose to be interviewed online via Zoom or Microsoft Teams or face to face at a convenient time and place for you. If you would like to learn more about the research before taking part, please do not hesitate to contact me (the researcher) Details of Researcher: am20311@essex.ac.uk. Or my principal supervisor Contact Details of Principal Supervisor: v.ioakimidis@essex.ac.uk or Contact Details of Co-Supervisor: w.eboh@essex.ac.uk, respectively.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The data will be transcribed and analysed thereafter, made available by publishing the findings. So, the data will be available to different people, including yourself (if interested), professionals and researchers, through written reports, presentations, and journal publications. Copies of the dissertation will be submitted to the University of Essex. However, it will not be possible to identify any individual participant from these reports or publications since it will be anonymised.

Who is organising and funding the research?

This research is part of a Programme of study to fulfil the requirements of a PhD Thesis; therefore, it has no funding attached.

Who has reviewed the study?

The study has been approved by the University' Ethics Sub Committee 2.

I will obtain your consent to take part in the study.

Concerns and Complaints

If you have any concerns regarding your involvement or any aspect of this research, please discuss these with me (the researcher). In the first instance, you can send me a direct email at am20311@essex.ac.uk. If you wish to make a complaint, please email my principal supervisor:

v.loakimidis@essex.ac.uk. If you are still concerned or feel you cannot approach the principal investigator, don't hesitate to contact the departmental Director of Research in Health and Social Care, Professor Camille Cronin, by Email: camille.cronin@essex.ac.uk. Alternatively, Sarah Manning – Press,

Research Governance and Planning Manager, Research and Enterprise Office Email: sarahm@essex.ac.uk. Please include the ETH2122-1093, which can also be found at the foot of this page.

Name of the Researcher/Research Team Members

If you want to know more about the research, please get in touch with the research team. I (ALICE MAINA), the researcher, can be reached at: am20311@essex.ac.uk. You can also get my principal supervisor, Professor Vasilios Ioakimidis, via Email at v.ioakimidis@essex.ac.uk. Or cosupervisors Professor Winifred Eboh w.eboh@essex.ac.uk.

Thank you for taking your time to read this participants information sheet.

Appendix 4.1: Social workers -Sociodemographic Questionnaire

Exploring and understanding the factors that contribute to BME families and their children encountering with Child protection System in the UK: A qualitative study



"I have read the information sheet provided, and I am happy to participate. By completing and returning this questionnaire, I understand that I am consenting to be part of this research study and use my data as described in the information sheet provided." I must also be qualified, registered and working as a working social worker in England.

1. Your current Gender
Male/
Female/other/ prefer not to say
2. Your age group: 20-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59, 60+ years ? **Please circle which applies to you**
3. The local authority you are currently working.....
4. How many years of experience?
.....
5. Which of the following is the best broad category to describe your ethnic origin? **Please circle which applies to you**

A **White:** White British, Irish, Gypsy or Irish Traveller, Other White

A **Mixed or multiple ethnic groups:** White and the Black Caribbean,
White and Black African, White and Asian, Other Mixed

A **Asian or Asian British:** Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese, Other Asian

A **Black or African or Caribbean or Black British:** African,
Caribbean, Other Black

A **Other ethnic groups:** Arab, Any other ethnic group
6. Disability:

Appendix 5: Consent Form — Social Worker Participants

Title of the Project: Title of Project: Social Work with Black and Minority Ethnic (BME): Exploring and understanding the factors that contribute to BME families and their children encountering the Child Protection System in the UK.

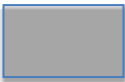
Research Team:

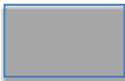
Primary Research: ALICE MAINA (am20311@essex.ac.uk)

Principal Supervisor: Professor Vasilios Ioakimidis (v.Ioakimidis@essex.ac.uk)

Co Supervisor: Professor Winifred Eboh (w.eboh@essex.ac.uk)

Please initial box

1.I confirm that I have read and understand the Information Sheet dated  04/05/2022 for the above study. I have had an opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these questions answered satisfactorily.

2.I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without giving any reason and without  penalty. I understand that any data collected up to the point of my withdrawal e.g., will be destroyed; cannot be withdrawn because it cannot be identified.

3.I understand that due to the nature of this study, some sensitive discussion may trigger traumatic past events, I confirm that, if the trigger is too extreme the research can decide abruptly to end the session and sign post me to the relevant support system listed on the PIS. 

4. I understand that the identifiable data provided will be securely stored and accessible only to the members of the research team (myself Alice Maina, my supervisors Professor Vasilios Ioakimidis and Professor Winifred Eboh) I permit these individuals to have access to my records directly involved in the project, and that confidentiality will be maintained.

5. I understand that my fully anonymised data will be used for research publication, accessible to professionals and researchers, through written reports, presentations and journal publications. Copies of the dissertation will be submitted to the University of Essex.

6. I understand that the data collected about me will be used to support other research in the future and may be shared anonymously with other researchers.

7. I give permission for my data (de-identified- anonymised using the Identification Number (ID) such as 01, 02, etc. and pseudonyms to identify participants such as John, Ibrahim, and Jane but not your real name, transcripts and audio recordings), that I provide to be available to different people, including myself (if interested), professionals and researchers, through written reports, presentations, and journal

publications so that they will be available for future research and learning activities by other individuals.

8. I agree to take part in the above study.



Participant Name

Date

Participant Signature

Researcher Name

Date

Researcher Signature

Appendix 6: Parents Recruitment Poster / Advertisement

SOCIAL WORKERS PARTICIPANTS NEEDED**ENGLAND**

Title of the Project: Social Work with Black and Minority Ethnic (BME): **Over 18yrs**
Exploring and understanding the factors that contribute to BME families and their children encountering with Child protection System in the UK.

This study aims to explore and understand the factors that contribute to black and ethnic minority (BME) families, and their children encountering social services specifically in child protection system

Why Participate?

- You will contribute valuable information to better our understanding of BME parents and their families' involvement and experiences dealing with BME parents and their families during child protection involvement and proceedings.
- You may help to generate new knowledge and skills which could assist in developing policies in child protection system to address BME needs and offer a solution that can be put in place to bridge the gap between child protection system and BME families.



Your experiences working with BME families in the child protection system are vital and valuable to this study

Who can Participate?

- You are a social worker over 18yrs of age
- You have involved or worked with BME families in England, specifically in the child protection system.
- You live in England

Research Method

It will involve a semi-structured interview

Interested?

If you are interested in participating or you would like further information, please feel free to contact:

Alice Maina, PhD Researcher
Health and Social care
am20311@essex.ac.uk



ERAMs number: ETH2122-1093. 21/10/2022

Appendix 6-1: Recruitment Poster / Advertisement

SOCIAL WORK WITH BME RESEARCH

BME Parent Participants Needed

Over 18yrs

ENGLAND

Title of Project: Social Work with Black and Minority Ethnic (BME): Exploring and understanding the factors that contribute to BME families and their children encountering with Child protection System in the UK.

This study aims to explore and understand the factors that contribute to black and ethnic minority (BME) families, and their children encountering social services specifically in child protection system

Why participate?

- You will contribute valuable information to better our understanding of BME parents and their families' involvement and experiences dealing with child protection system in the UK.
- You may help to generate new knowledge and skills which could assist in developing policies in child protection system to address BME needs and offer a solution that can be put in place to bridge the gap between child protection system and BME families

Who can participate?

- You are Black and ethnic minority parent over 18yrs of age
- You may have involved and gained experience dealing with child protection system in the UK.
- You live in England

Research Method

It will involve a semi-structured interview



Your parenting practices and child protection experiences are very important and valuable to this study

Interested?

If you are interested in participating or you would like further information, please feel free to contact:

Alice Maina, PhD Researcher
Health and Social care
am20311@essex.ac.uk

University of Essex

Poster 1 BME Parents participants Version 1. ETH2122-1093 04/05/2022

Appendix 7: Recruitment Messages / Email or WhatsApp Invitation

Appendix 1 – BME Introduction and an invitation to participants

Exploring and understanding the factors that contribute to BME families and their children encountering the Child Protection System in the UK: A qualitative study

Required Participants: BME parents' participants 18 and above.

Dear Participant

I am Alice Maina, a doctoral student of Social Work in the School of Health and Social Care at Essex University, United Kingdom. As part of my Doctorate degree, I am carrying out this study to explore and understand the factors that contribute to BME families and their children encountering with Child protection System in the UK; and to explore solutions on how to support BAME parents so that their children can be empowered, remain safe in the community, stay away from criminality, gang-related activities and achieve maximum potential where entering to care should be the last result. The study has been approved by the University's Ethics Sub-Committee 2. I am writing to inquire whether you would be interested in sharing your views and experiences regarding the UK child protection system. The study will use one-to-one semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face or via Zoom, Teams, Skype, etc., and each interview will last 4560 minutes. The interview will take place at a time and location which is convenient for you. You will be asked for permission to have our talk audio recorded, and our discussion will be kept confidential.

I would be very grateful if you would participate in my study. However, before you decide whether to participate, you need to understand why the research is being done and what it involves. Please read the enclosed participants' information sheet (Appendix 6), then contact me at the contact details above if you are interested. If you do so, you will have the

chance to find out more about the study before coming to any decision. You would be under no obligation to take part.

My study is supervised by Professor Ioakimidis Vasilios and Professor Winifred Eboh.

My Principal Supervisor contact is v.ioakimidis@essex.ac.uk and

Co-Supervisor: w.eboh@essex.ac.uk.

Many thanks in advance for your consideration of this project.

Yours Sincerely

Alice Maina PhD Researcher,



School of Health and Social Care

Email: am20311@essex.ac.uk

Appendix 8: Parent Interview Schedule

Title of Project: Social Work with Black and Minority Ethnic (BME): Exploring and understanding the factors that contribute to BME families and their children encountering the Child Protection System in the UK

Introduction

In the beginning, I will introduce myself and explain why I contacted the participants in the first place. I will explain the purpose of the meeting and check that all COVID-19 measures have been observed (face-to-face applies). Therefore, I will go through the participant's information sheet and consent form with participants, then request them to sign if they agree. I will ask them to complete the demographic form to collect information such as age, religion, education, marital status, and number of children.

For the icebreaker, I will ask whether they have any hobbies or the weather is hot or cold.

1. What does "effective parenting" mean to you?
2. What are the main challenges and concerns of raising children in the UK, and how are they different from your countries of origin?
3. What are the traditional parenting rules and regulations you set for your children, and what actions are frequently taken if the rules are not followed?
4. What are the motivations, consequent strategies, social and systemic conditions that inform and structure your parenting practices?
5. What are your child protection system experiences that inform and structure your parenting?
6. How much do you know about the child protection system and Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH)? How operate?
7. Have you been in a situation where you requested social work intervention support?
If yes, what was your experience? If not, why?
8. How does the Child protection system respond to BAME minority parenting practices?

9. What is your perception about child protection professionals getting involved with your family matter?
10. Is there any additional information you would like to share with me about the child protection system or your parenting experiences?

I will finally thank them for their time and for taking part in the study.

Appendix 9: Social Worker Interview Schedule

Exploring and understanding the factors that contribute to BME families and their children encountering the Child Protection System in the UK: A qualitative study

Introduction

At the beginning, I will introduce myself and explain why I contacted the participants. I will explain the purpose of the meeting and check that all COVID-19 measures have been observed (face-to-face applies). Therefore, I will go through the participant's information sheet and consent form with participants, then request them to sign if they agree. I will ask them to complete the demographic form to collect information such as age, gender, and experience as a qualified social worker.

For the icebreaker, I will ask whether they have any hobbies or if the weather is hot or cold.

1. What does the term BME mean to you?
2. What comes to your mind when you encounter work related to BME families?
3. Have you ever faced difficulties or challenges dealing with BME families due to ethnicity, race, and cultural issues? If any, please explain in more detail.
4. Is there any unique way or different approach between British parents and BME families in social work practice?

5. What are the factors that, in your view, should be considered when working with BME families? For example, family structure, language, including verbal and nonverbal communication, socioeconomic status, religion, belief, understanding of abuse and neglect? Please explain in more detail.
6. Is there any advice you could give to a white British social worker who has never dealt with BME families in the child protection system?
7. Is there any issue or information you would like to add?

I will finally thank them for their time and participation in the study.

Appendix 10: Observational Guide during the interviews

Date.....

Start time..... **Finish**

time.....

Questions to guide the observation

- What is happening in the room or zoom, teams etc.? What is the situation of the participants?
- What is the general condition of the interview room? Is it cold or conducive? Are there any other people who are not part of the study?
- How are the participants responding or interacting with me? Are there factors that are triggering or affecting the discussion?
- What type of behaviours, actions and activities are displayed by the participant?

- What are the verbal and non-verbal cues displayed by the participants in the interview?
- How well the participant engages with an interpreter, and what cues are displayed? Is there any information getting lost or misinformation between interpreters, participants, and researchers?
- What circumstances appear to make the participants comfortable or uncomfortable?
- What else is essential during the interview room/zoom/online?

Observational Guide during the interviews Version 1. ETH2122-1093 04/05/2022

Appendix 11: COVID-19 and Risk Assessment

Risk assessment reference:		ETH2122-1093		Version number:		V_1		
Description of activity/area being assessed	Title of Project: Exploring and understanding the factors that contribute to BME families and their children encountering the Child Protection System	Catastrophic	Medium	High	Very High	Very High	Very High	Very High
		Major	Low	Medium	High	High	Very High	Very High
		Mode of data rate	Very low	Low	Medium	Medium	High	High

Risk assessment

Hazard (H) hazardous event ALICE (HE) consequence (C)	Who might be harmed MAINA	Current controls PH	Current risk LxC=R SOCIAL WORK	Additional controls needed to reduce risk	Residual risk 03/05/2026 LxC=R	Target Date 2026	Date achieved
---	---	---	--	--	--	--------------------------------------	--------------------------------

Distress/Extremely emotional participant due to child protection dealings and/or child removal	BME parents who consider participating in the study	All relevant ethical measures are put in place to ensure participant are aware of the study and given a right to withdraw. I have taken some courses such as research involving human participants human, safeguarding, child protection and health	Distress/Emotional	If participants are not comfortable or distressed the researcher will stop the interview	Medium	October	January
--	---	--	--------------------	--	--------	---------	---------

		and safety I have DBS Thirteen years work experience working with vulnerable groups					
Excessive hours worked due to long interview times and a high number of interviews. Fatigue.	Researcher	I will ensure that research is carried out between 9 am to 5 pm. I will also monitor the interview timing not to go more than the agreed time framework		To ensure not take more than three interviews per day.		October	January

Risk assessment Version 1. ETH2122-1093. 04/05/2022

Hazard (H) hazardous event (HE) consequence (C)	Who might be harmed E MAINA	Current controls	Current risk LxC=R HD SOCIAL	Additional controls needed to reduce risk /ORK	Residual risk 03/05/2026 LxC=R	Target Date	Date achieved
Covid-19	Researcher Participants	I am fully vaccinated and boosted. I have masks/ hand sanitisers Participants must all wear a face mask during the face-to-face interview unless exempted.		I will wear face masks, regular handwashing/use of hand sanitisers		October	January

		All participants must keep a social distance and wash their hands, where the researcher will provide sanitisers and face masks.					
--	--	---	--	--	--	--	--

Limit to Confidentiality	Both BME and Social work Participants Member of the public	If participants are risk to themselves or public	There is a limit to confidentiality in exceptional circumstances e.g., where the health, welfare and safety of the participants health or others are				
---------------------------------	--	--	---	--	--	--	--

			compromised by information the participant might disclose, I have a professional responsibility or				
--	--	--	---	--	--	--	--

Hazard (H) hazardous event (HE) consequence (C)	Who might be harmed ALICE MAI A	Current controls	Current risk PHD S LxC=R	Additional controls needed CIAL WORK to reduce risk	Residual risk LxC=R	Target Date 03/05/2026	Date achieved
			duty to care to pass this information onto an appropriate individual or agency.				

Travel arrangements from home to fieldwork site	researcher	I shall travel by personal car or train to the fieldwork site. The study will avoid unnecessary travel unless participants must travel to their choice		- I will use zoom where travel is not possible. - Those who will be selfisolating must not get in facetoface contact with the		October	January
--	------------	--	--	--	--	---------	---------

		of the interview if they do not want the researcher's choice of room or place for the interview. In a face-toface meeting, the storytelling interview will be conducted in an open space, a wellventilated room and a two-metre distance between the researcher and		researcher but can be offered a chance to get involved in the study via zoom, Microsoft Teams, Skype, etc			
--	--	---	--	--	--	--	--

		participants (Gov. UK 2021)					
Hazard (H) hazardous event (HE) consequence (C)	Who might be harmed	Current controls	Current risk $L \times C = R$	Additional controls needed to reduce risk	Residual risk $L \times C = R$	Target Date	Date achieved

Add more rows if needed **Periodic
Review**

Review date:	January 2023 (if necessary)				
Review by:	Vasilios Ioakimidis				

Signed:	VI				
----------------	----	--	--	--	--

If there are changes, please save the assessment as a new version and archive the previous version.

Appendix 12- Responding to participant distress during online/face-to-face interviews

Title of Project: Social Work with Black and Minority Ethnic (BME): Exploring and understanding the factors that contribute to BME families and their children encountering the Child Protection System in the UK.

Before starting with the interview questions and recording:

- **REMIND:** I will remind the participant that they can stop the interview or withdraw at any time without giving any reason and their legal rights will not be affected.
- explaining why they do so. They can skip or choose not to answer every question, and that there are no right or wrong answers to questions because people have different parenting lived experiences and dealing with child protection (so there is no fear of ‘saying the wrong thing’).
- **COMMUNICATE LIMITATIONS:** I will clearly communicate the limitations of my capacity to intervene online or face to face if the participant becomes distressed and needs additional support. Specifically, I will explain that in the end of our interview I provide the contact details of a list of resources for support, including emergency services, which are also listed in the participant information sheet (see also

Table 6 at the end of this document and indicated on the information sheet appendix 7 & 15).

- **LIMIT TO CONFIDENTIALITY:** I will guarantee their privacy and confidentiality throughout the research period. However, there is a limit to confidentiality in exceptional circumstances e.g., where the health, welfare and safety of the participants health or others are compromised by information the participant might disclose, I have a professional responsibility or duty to care to pass this information onto an appropriate individual or agency.

In this case, I will discuss this with the participant first.

Once the interview begins:

- **AWARENESS:** I will remain aware of any potential indications of the participant experiencing an elevated level of stress or emotional distress or of the participant exhibiting behaviours that suggest that the discussion/interview is too stressful, such as uncontrolled crying, shaking, etc. I will be vigilant throughout the interview.
- If there is an indication that the participants are distressed, the researcher will follow the procedure below (also see Figure 1 below), starting with STAGE 1 response.

STAGE 1 response

1) CHECK- IN

The recording and the interview will be immediately stopped, and I will ask the participant how they are feeling (see Figure 1, for additional questions I might ask to informally assess participant's emotional status). If it seems appropriate, I may provide some reassurance that an emotional response to describing certain events is normal.

2) REVIEW

At this point, I will ask if the participant want to take a break, end the interview, or continue with the interview.

→ If the participant decides to take a break and continue with the interview or continue without taking a break, confirmation will be sought that the participant is comfortable continuing, and they will be reminded there is no penalty for withdrawing and they can still withdraw at a later point if they wish to. If the participant wants

to take a break, I will suggest that we pause our microphone and turn it on for an agreed amount of time, to e.g., get a drink or some fresh air. Then, the interview will be resumed.

→ If the participant wishes to stop, the interview will be terminated. Then, the interviewer will move on to STAGE 2 response.

STAGE 2 response

- I will commit to providing the participant with an opportunity to talk about their discomfort or distress.

- I will encourage the participant to contact their GP, mental health provider (if appropriate) or any support from the participant information sheet (appendix 7 or 15) list of supports which will be emailed as part of the debrief statement.

- The researcher will ask the participant if they are willing for the researcher to use the information they have shared up to the point where they became distressed or whether they would like it to be discarded from the research dataset. The participant will be

advised that they do not have to decide at that moment, and they can think about whether they would like their data to be kept for the research study in their own time and contact the research team via email by **01/09/2022** to request that their data is withdrawn from the study dataset, according to their consent statement.

- Only in case immediate risk to self or others is reported by the participant, I will let the participant know that the information they shared makes them feel concerned about their or others' well-being. I will state that this is one of the cases where I need to break confidentiality and pass this information onto an appropriate individual, police or agency. I will encourage the participant to call the emergency services or go to the nearest A&E.
- **FOLLOW-UP:** At the end of the interview, I will ask for verbal consent from the participant to send them a follow-up email in the hours/days following the interview. If the participant agrees, I will send a follow-up email to check how the participant is doing and remind them of the contact details of available support, if needed.
- Following the interview, I will debrief the interview and remind them again about the list of supports available to them for help.

Figure 1. Flow diagram showing researcher's response to participant distress in the context of the online (Zoom) research interviews (adjusted from Draucker et al., 2009).



Draucker, C. B., Martsolf, D. S., & Poole, C. (2009). Developing Distress Protocols for Research on Sensitive

Topics. *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing*, 23(5), 343–350.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apnu.2008.10.008>

Appendix 13: Debriefing statement

Title of Project: Social Work with Black and Minority Ethnic (BME): Exploring and understanding the factors that contribute to BME families and their children encountering with Child protection System in the UK.

Thank you so much for participating in this study. Your participation was unique to the study. As you may be busy, I appreciate the time you dedicated to participating in this study. The study was to explore and understand the factors that contribute to BME families and their children encountering with Child protection System in the UK. The knowledge generated from this study may help to develop interventions and give an awareness of the factors that contribute to BME and their families' encounter with the child protection system in England. The findings can help inform BME communities' issues and tailor early intervention support to enhance BME parenting practices.

I appreciate your participation and I understand that responding to some questions, particularly regarding child removal or child protection dealings might have been difficult and may cause anxiety or distress. If you are experiencing or facing mental health difficulties do not hesitate to speak to your GP or call NHS 111 about this. There are some additional resources available to you that can offer support as are listed below.

If you have any questions or concerns, don't hesitate to contact me in the first instance via am20311@essex.ac.uk or contact my supervisors: Professor Vasilios

Ioakimidis (v.ioakimidis@essex.ac.uk) and Professor Winifred Eboh (w.eboh@essex.ac.uk) .

Table 6. List of support resources for participants

UK-wide	
Samaritans (24-hour help)	Tel: 116 123 or email: io@samaritans.org
SANE Helpline (4.30pm-10.30pm help)	Tel: 0300 304 7000
Mind Infoline (9am-6pm)	Tel: 0300 123 3393 , email: info@mind.org.uk or text 86463
NHS Direct (24-hour help) (for urgent need of mental health advice - non-emergency)	Tel: 111
Anxiety UK	www.anxietyuk.org.uk . Helpline: 03444 775 774 Text support: 07537 416 905
MindOut LGBT Mental Health Service	Tel: 01273 234839 , email: info@mindout.org.uk

pg. 1

Debriefing statement - ERAMS reference: *ETH2122-1093 version 1.*

27/06/2022

UNIVERSITY OF ESSEX

In case of a mental health emergency crisis then please call 999 or visit their nearest A&E.	

Appendix 14- Email of appreciation and debriefing information

Title of Project: Social Work with Black and Minority Ethnic (BME): Exploring and understanding the factors that contribute to BME families and their children encountering the Child Protection System in the UK.

Dear (Participant's name),

Thank you once again for participating in the interview this morning/afternoon/evening. I am extremely grateful for your time and appreciate you sharing your lived experiences with me.

Please find attached a Debrief Statement that provides signposting to resources you might find useful.

Please don't hesitate to contact the research team or me if you have any additional

questions. **Yours sincerely,**

Alice Maina PhD Researcher,



School of Health and Social Care

Email:

am20311@essex.ac.uk

Appendix 15: Thematic Matrix for Parent Participants (PB01–PB19)

Note: This matrix summarises the main themes, subthemes, codes and theoretical interpretation developed from the parent interview data. It is not a full coding framework and does not reproduce full transcript extracts. Instead, it provides a transparent overview of how selected coded meanings were grouped into themes and interpreted through Critical Race Theory, Critical Race Methodology and intersectionality. Participant IDs are included to show distribution across the dataset while maintaining anonymity. The parent findings were organised into five thematic areas: institutional visibility; surveillance and professional judgement; living through safeguarding; agency and counter-narrative; and reimagining safeguarding through lived experience

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Code	Excerpts / Descriptions	Participant ID	Theoretical Interpretation
Theme 1: Pathways into Child Protection and Institutional Visibility	Visibility, referral and institutional entry	School referral as an entry point	Participants described schools as key sites through which concerns were raised, and family	PB04, PB07, PB09, PB14, PB17, PB19	Institutional visibility; racialised surveillance; professional authority
			life became visible to statutory agencies.		

Theme 1	Visibility, referral and institutional entry	Health and welfare contact as a referral route	Contact with health, welfare, housing or other services sometimes became a pathway into child protection rather than only a route to support.	PB06, PB08, PB12, PB13, PB18	Racialised governance; state visibility; supportsurveillance tension
Theme 1	Visibility, referral and institutional entry	Ordinary family difficulty becoming	Everyday parenting struggles, family conflict or	PB02, PB03, PB07, PB09, PB12	Risk construction; deficit framing;

		safeguarding concern	hardship were sometimes interpreted through riskfocused safeguarding categories.		institutional interpretation
Theme 1	Structural conditions, poverty, immigration and stateproduced risk	Housing insecurity	Housing instability, overcrowding or homelessness increased families' contact with services and shaped how parenting capacity was judged.	PB06, PB09, PB12, PB14, PB18	Intersectionality; structural harm; poverty as institutional risk

Theme 1	Structural conditions,	Immigration precarity and	Immigrationrelated	PB06, PB08,	Intersectionality: racialised
---------	------------------------	---------------------------	--------------------	-------------	-------------------------------

	poverty, immigration and stateproduced risk	welfare restriction	insecurity, lack of support or limited welfare access intensified parental vulnerability and institutional scrutiny.	PB09, PB12	migration governance
--	---	---------------------	--	------------	----------------------

Theme 1	Structural conditions, poverty, immigration and state-produced risk	Poverty recoded as neglect	Material hardship was sometimes experienced as evidence of parental inadequacy rather than of structural disadvantage.	PB06, PB12, PB14, PB18	Structural inequality; racialised poverty; critique of neutral assessment
---------	---	----------------------------	--	------------------------	---

Theme 1	Institutional context as experienced by parents	Support experienced as conditional	Parents recognised the need to safeguard children but often felt that support became available only through investigation, monitoring or risk assessment.	PB02, PB03, PB06, PB12, PB14	Supportsurveillance nexus; institutional governance
---------	---	------------------------------------	---	------------------------------	---

Theme 1	Institutional context as experienced by parents	Multiple agencies are increasing scrutiny	Schools, health services, police, housing and social care were experienced as	PB09, PB12, PB13, PB18, PB19	Cumulative institutional visibility; racialised governance
---------	---	---	---	------------------------------	--

			interconnected systems of observation.		
--	--	--	--	--	--

Theme 2: Surveillance e, Professiona I Judgement and the Constructi on of Risk	Surveillanc e, monitoring and the experience of being watched	Home visits as an inspection	Participants described preparing homes, monitoring children's behaviour and feelin g that ordinary domestic life was being assessed.	PB07, PB12, PB14, PB18	Surveillance; racialised domestic inspection; governance of family life
Theme 2	Surveillanc e, monitoring and the experience of being watched	Feeling watched across settings	Participants described being watched not only by social workers but also through	PB04, PB09, PB12, PB18, PB19	Institutional surveillance; racialised visibility

			schools, health services and other institutions.		
Theme 2	Surveillance, monitoring and the experience of being watched	Selfmonitoring during intervention	Parents adapted their speech, emotions, homes and behaviour to avoid being misread by professionals .	PB02, PB07, PB10, PB12, PB18	Constrained agency; performative compliance; racialised selfsurveillance

Theme 2	Professional judgement, risk construction and credibility	Parental credibility questioned	Parents felt their explanations were doubted, minimised or given less authority	PB03, PB09, PB13, PB16, PB18	Epistemic injustice; unequal credibility; CRM
---------	---	---------------------------------	---	------------------------------	---

			than professional records or institutional narratives.		
--	--	--	--	--	--

Theme 2	Professional judgement, risk construction and credibility	Cultural parenting interpreted as risk	Parenting practices shaped by African cultural, religious or family values were sometimes interpreted as overly strict, neglectful or problematic.	PB07, PB11, PB15, PB17	Eurocentric normativity; cultural misrecognition; CRT
Theme 2	Professional judgement, risk construction	Accent, language and communication judged	Accent, language confidence or communication	PB08, PB10, PB17, PB19	Racialisation of communication; credibility judgement

	n and credibility		on style affected how parents felt they were perceived and understood.		
Theme 2	Professiona l judgement, risk constructio n and credibility	Black fathers positioned as absent or risky	Male participants described being overlooked, excluded or interpreted through racialised assumptions about masculinity and danger.	PB10, PB16	Intersectionali ty; racialised masculinity; gendered safeguarding

Theme 2	Professional judgement,	Professional status did not	Educated or professionally qualified	PB01, PB04, PB13,	Limits of class privilege; racialised
	risk construction and credibility	protect credibility	parents still experienced suspicion and unequal treatment.	PB15, PB18, PB19	credibility; epistemic injustice
Theme 3: Living Through Safeguarding Intervention	Fear, compliance, adaptation and survival strategies	Fear of child removal	Parents described fear, caution and emotional restraint because of the perceived power of child protection intervention.	PB02, PB03, PB06, PB09, PB12	Coercive power; surveillance; racialised family regulation

Theme 3	Fear, compliance, adaptation and survival strategies	Compliance as survival	Compliance was often used strategically to avoid escalation,	PB02, PB07, PB09, PB12, PB16	Constrained agency; performative compliance
---------	--	------------------------	--	------------------------------	---

			even where parents felt misunderstood or unfairly treated.		
Theme 3	Fear, compliance, adaptation and survival strategies	Silence and selective disclosure	Parents sometimes avoided saying too much because they feared being misinterpreted or judged.	PB02, PB03, PB09, PB12, PB18	Epistemic inequality; mistrust; institutional power

Theme 3	Fear, compliance, adaptation and survival strategies	Emotional restraint	Some parents controlled visible distress or anger to avoid being labelled difficult, unstable or	PB04, PB09, PB13, PB15, PB18	Respectability, credibility and racialised emotion
---------	--	---------------------	--	------------------------------	--

			noncompliant.		
Theme 3	Emotional and psychological impact of safeguarding	Anxiety, distress and loss of confidence	Child protection involvement created emotional strain, uncertainty and psychological distress.	PB02, PB03, PB04, PB06, PB07, PB09, PB16	Structural harm; emotional cost of surveillance

Theme 3	Emotional and psychologi cal impact of safeguardin g	Shame and self-blame	Some parents internalised responsibilit y for family difficulties, even where broader institutional or structural factors were involved.	PB07, PB09, PB14	Internalised surveillance; gendered blame; deficit framing
---------	--	-------------------------	--	------------------------	--

Theme 3	Emotional and psychologi cal impact of safeguardin g	Family disruption and relational loss	Participants described damage to family relationships, trust and parental identity during intervention.	PB04, PB09, PB10, PB16	Family regulation; racialised institutional harm
---------	--	---	--	---------------------------------	--

Theme 3	Emotional and psychological impact of safeguarding	Professional encounters as retraumatisin	Participants linked safeguarding involvement to earlier trauma, migration hardship, bereavement or domestic abuse.	PB05, PB06, PB09, PB12, PB17	Traumainformed analysis; intersectionali ty
Theme 4: Agency,	Resistance, agency and	Speaking back to	Participants used the	PB03, PB04,	Counter-storytelling;

Resistance and CounterNarrative	counternarrative	dominant narratives	interview to challenge deficit-based assumptions about African parents and family life.	PB10, PB11, PB18, PB19	CRM; experiential knowledge
--	------------------	---------------------	---	------------------------	-----------------------------

Theme 4	Resistance, agency and counternarrative	Reframing African parenting	Parents explained African parenting values in relation to care, respect, responsibility, faith, education and family belonging.	PB05, PB11, PB15, PB17, PB19	Cultural knowledge; critique of Eurocentric normativity
Theme 4	Resistance, agency and	Strategic navigation of systems	Parents learned how to present	PB02, PB07, PB09,	Constrained agency;

	counternarrative		themselves, gather evidence, communicat e carefully and avoid escalation.	PB12, PB18	survival strategies
Theme 4	Resistance, agency and counternarrative	Challenging institutional misrecogniti on	Participants resisted being positioned as neglectful, aggressive, incapable or culturally deficient.	PB04, PB10, PB13, PB15, PB16, PB18	CRT; racialised misrecognitio n; epistemic resistance

Theme 4	Resistance, agency and counternarrative	Parental advocacy for children	Parents described fighting to protect their children's wellbeing, education,	PB03, PB05, PB09, PB14, PB16, PB19	Counternarrative; parental agency
---------	---	--------------------------------	--	------------------------------------	-----------------------------------

			identity and family relationships		
Theme 4	Resistance, agency and counternarrative	Research participation as voice	Several participants understood the interview as a chance to be heard and to contribute to wider change.	PB02, PB03, PB04, PB13, PB18, PB19	Experiential knowledge; counterstorytelling; praxis

Theme	Reimagining	Need for	Parents	PB07	Anti-racist
5:	g safeguarding	culturally responsive practice	wanted	,	practice; cultural
Reimagining	g; participant informed reform		professional	PB11	humility; CRT
n			s	,	
g			to better	PB15	
Safeguarding			understand	,	
ng			African	PB17	
Through			family	,	
Lived			systems,	PB19	
Experiences			cultural values, faith		

			practices and migration histories.		
--	--	--	------------------------------------	--	--

Theme 5	Reimagining safeguarding; participant informed reform	Distinguishing harm from cultural difference	Participants argued that unfamiliar parenting practices should not automatically be treated as danger or neglect.	PB11, PB15, PB17, PB19	Cultural misrecognition; critique of colourblindness
Theme 5	Reimagining safeguarding; participant informed reform	Structural support before surveillance	Parents emphasised practical help with housing, poverty, childcare, immigration stress and mental health	PB06, PB09, PB12, PB14, PB18	Structural analysis; antioppressive social work
			before escalation.		

Theme 5	Reimagining safeguarding; participant informed reform	Fairer communication and interpretation	Parents wanted professionals to listen carefully, explain processes clearly and avoid assumptions based on accent, emotion or culture.	PB08, PB13, PB16, PB17, PB18	Epistemic justice; voice; recognition
Theme 5	Supportive encounters and relational practice	Positive social work support	Some participants described social workers who listened, supported	PB05, PB07, PB13	Relational practice: complexity and divergence

			them and helped their families.		
Theme 5	Supportive encounters and relational practice	Trustbuilding practice	Parents valued practitioners who were respectful, transparent and willin g to understand context before judging.	PB05, PB11, PB14, PB15, PB17	Anti-racist relational practice; culturally responsive safeguarding

Theme 5	Supportive encounters and relational practice	Parents as knowledge holders	Participants' accounts showed that parents can provide important knowledge about how safeguarding	PB01– PB19	Critical Race Methodology; counterstorytelling; epistemic justice
			is experienced and how practice can improve.		

Theme 5	Supportive encounters and relational practice	Reimagining child protection as support rather than punishment	Participants called for a safeguarding that protects children while also preserving family dignity, cultural recognition and proportionate support.	PB03, PB05, PB12, PB14, PB16, PB18, PB19	Transformative praxis; racial justice; child protection reform
---------	---	--	---	--	--

Appendix 16: Thematic Matrix for Social Worker Participants (PSW01–

PSW05)

Note: This thematic matrix summarises the main themes, subthemes, codes and theoretical interpretations developed from the five social worker interviews. The social worker Data were analysed separately from the parent interview data and is used to illuminate the professional, organisational and institutional contexts in which safeguarding decisions are made. It is not used to validate or override parent narratives. Given the small number of

social worker participants, the matrix should be read as a contextual analytic aid rather than as a representative account of all statutory social work practice. The themes correspond with the four thematic domains developed in Chapter 7: professional language and categorisation; risk, accountability and professional judgement; structural constraints; and culturally responsive reform.

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Code	Excerpts / Descriptions	Participant ID	Theoretical Interpretation
Theme 1: Professional Language, Categorisation and the	Professional language, race and	BME as administrative shorthand	Social workers described “BME” as a common	PSW01, PSW02, PSW05	Racial categorisation ; bureaucratic flattening;

Construction of Difference	the politics of “BME”		institutional label used in forms, policies and professional discussion, but one that often failed to capture the diversity of African families.		governance of difference
-----------------------------------	-----------------------	--	--	--	--------------------------

Theme 1	Professional language, race and the politics of “BME”	Loss of specificity	Practitioners noted that broad ethnic categories could obscure differences of nationality, language, religion, migration history, tribe,	PSW01, PSW05	Social construction of race: critique of homogenising categories
---------	---	---------------------	--	--------------	--

			class and family structure.		
--	--	--	-----------------------------	--	--

Theme 1	Professional language, race and the politics of “BME”	Selfidentification and recognition	Some practitioners reflected on the importance of asking families how they identify and of using more specific descriptors, such as African, Ghanaian, Nigerian, Kenyan, or other self-defined identities.	PSW04, PSW05	Recognition; relational legitimacy; culturally responsive practice
---------	---	------------------------------------	--	--------------	--

Theme 1	Profession al language, race and the politics of “BME”	Race is avoided in professional language	Social workers described discomfort or caution when naming race directly, especially in formal documentatio n, because of fear of appearing discriminator y or inappropriate .	PSW01, PSW03, PSW04	Colourblindness; institutional discomfort with race; racial silence
---------	---	---	--	---------------------------	---

Theme 1	Profession al language, race and the politics of “BME”	Culture used as safer language	Practitioners explained that “culture”, “background ” or “communicat	PSW01, PSW03, PSW05	Displacement of race into culture; colour- blind professionalis m
---------	---	--------------------------------------	---	---------------------------	--

			ion style” were often easier to name than race, even where racialised dynamics may also have been present.		
--	--	--	--	--	--

Theme 1	Professional language, race and the politics of “BME”	Language shaping records	Participants recognised that terms used in case records could shape how later professionals interpreted families before	PSW02, PSW03, PSW05	Documentation as institutional power; narrative continuity; epistemic framing
			meeting them.		

Theme 1	Cultural interpretation and parenting norms	Uncertainty about cultural parenting	Social workers described difficulty distinguishing between culturally embedded parenting practices and behaviours that may meet safeguarding thresholds.	PSW01, PSW03, PSW04, PSW05	Cultural misrecognition; interpretive uncertainty; Eurocentric normativity
Theme 1	Cultural interpretation and parenting norms	Physical discipline as cultural tension	Practitioners identified physical discipline as a recurring area of tension, especially	PSW01, PSW02, PSW04, PSW05	Legal normativity; cultural translation; safeguarding threshold interpretation

			where parents understood discipline through childhood experiences in countr ies of origin.		
--	--	--	---	--	--

Theme 1	Cultural interpretati on and parenting norms	Authority and obedience	Social workers reflected that some African parents emphasised obedience, respect for elders and adult authority, which could be misunderstood within UK	PSW02, PSW03, PSW04	Parenting normativity; cultural interpretation; intergeneratio nal difference
			safeguarding contexts.		

Theme 1	Cultural interpretation and parenting norms	Communication of UK expectations	Practitioners described trying to explain UK safeguarding expectations without immediately framing parents as harmful or deficient.	PSW04, PSW05	Relational practice; cultural humility; antioppressive communication
Theme 1	Cultural interpretation and parenting norms	Limited preparation for cultural complexity	Social workers noted generic equality diversity training not prepare them that or did says	PSW01, PSW03, PSW05	Limits of generic diversity training; antiracist practice gap

			for complex assessment involving African family systems, migration and parenting norms.		
Theme 2: Risk, Accountability and Professional Judgement	Risk culture and fear of blame	Anticipating future harm	Participants described safeguarding practice as shaped by concern about what might happen later, even when immediate circumstances were not clear-cut.	PSW02, PSW04	Risk governance; defensive practice; anticipatory accountability

Theme 2	Risk of culture and fear blame	Retrospective scrutiny	Social workers reflected that their decisions may later be reviewed by managers, courts, inspectors or serious case review processes.	PSW02, PSW04	Audit culture; managerial accountability; defensibility decisionmaking
Theme 2	Risk culture and fear of blame	Doing more easier to justify	Practitioners noted that escalation or continued involvement could be easier to defend than closing a case	PSW01, PSW03	Risk aversion; institutional defensibility; escalation logic

			or stepping back.		
Theme 2	Risk of culture and fear blame	Cumulative case narratives	Participants described how earlier concerns recorded in files can continue to carry weight and influence later assessments.	PSW03, PSW05	Documentatio n, memory and institutional suspicion

Theme 2	Risk culture and fear of blame	Structural hardship becoming risk	Social workers acknowledge d that multiple stressors such as poverty, housing insecurity and immigration	PSW01, PSW03, PSW05	Structural inequality recoded as risk; racialised vulnerability
---------	---	--	---	---------------------------	---

			precarity can increase professional anxiety and make cases feel harder to close.		
--	--	--	--	--	--

Theme 2	Engagement, compliance and professional judgement	Engagement as assessment evidence	Practitioners described parental engagement, responsiveness and attendance as important to assessment, but also recognised that these behaviours are interpreted within	PSW01, PSW02, PSW04, PSW05	Compliance as institutional signal; power and credibility
			unequal power relations.		

Theme 2	Engagement, compliance and professional judgement	Nonengagement as concern	Social workers recognised that missed appointments , guarded communication or disagreement could be read as concerning, even where families may be fearful or mistrustful.	PSW02, PSW03, PSW04	Misrecognition of fear; unequal interpretation; institutional authority
Theme 2	Engagement, compliance and	Professional interpretation of tone and emotion	Participants noted that tone, body language,	PSW01, PSW03, PSW04	Racialised interpretation of emotion;

	profession al judgement		challenge or visible distress may influence professional judgement.		epistemic injustice
Theme 2	Engagement, compliance and professional judgement	Power imbalance in partnership	Some practitioners acknowledged that partnership is limited by statutory authority because families know social workers hold decisionmaking power.	PSW04, PSW05	Coercive partnership; statutory power; governance of family life

Theme 2	Engagement,	Visible cooperation	Social workers	PSW01, PSW02,	Performative compliance;
---------	-------------	---------------------	----------------	---------------	--------------------------

	compliance and professional judgement	reducing anxiety	described cooperation as reassuring within a risk-focused system, while challenge or resistance could increase uncertainty.	PSW03, PSW05	institutional anxiety; risk management
--	---------------------------------------	------------------	---	--------------	--

Theme 3: Structural Constraints in Safeguarding Practice	Structural constraints and limits of support	Reduced early help	Practitioners described the decline or limited availability of preventative and early help services, meaning families often reached statutory	PSW02, PSW05	Austerity; welfare retrenchment; support-to-surveillance shift
			services after difficulties had escalated.		

Theme 3	Structural constraints and limits of support	Gap between recognising need and meeting need	Social workers reported that they could identify housing, poverty, mental health or financial need but lacked power or resources to resolve them.	PSW01, PSW03, PSW05	Structural harm; limits of statutory intervention
Theme 3	Structural constraints and limits of support	Housing instability	Practitioners described overcrowding , temporary accommodati on and	PSW01, PSW05	Poverty governance; structural disadvantage; racialised visibility

			housing insecurity as sources of family stress that may become part of safeguarding assessment narratives.		
--	--	--	---	--	--

Theme 3	Structural constraints and limits of support	Immigration uncertainty	Social workers recognised that insecure immigration status, fear and welfare exclusion shaped family stress and engagement but were often outside	PSW03, PSW05	Migration governance; intersectionality; institutional limitation
			the direct control of safeguarding teams.		

Theme 3	Structural constraints and limits of support	Monitoring replacing material support	Participants reflected that, where practical support was unavailable, keeping a case open could become a way of monitoring the child even when underlying issues were structural.	PSW01, PSW05	Surveillance as substitute for support; risk-focused welfare
Theme 3	Structural constraints	Time pressure and	Social workers described	PSW02, PSW04, PSW05	Managerialism; audit culture;

	and limits of support	high caseloads	limited time for trust- building, contextual understandin g and relational practice because of caseload complexity and statutory timescales.		constrained relational practice
--	--------------------------	-------------------	--	--	------------------------------------

Theme 3	Structural constraints and limits of support	Paperwork and documentation demands	Participants described documentation as essential for accountability and defensibility, but also as reducing time	PSW02, PSW04	Bureaucratic accountability ; proceduralism ; displacement of relationshipbased work
---------	--	-------------------------------------	---	--------------	--

			for direct work with families.		
--	--	--	--------------------------------	--	--

Theme 3	Structural constraints and limits of support	Structural constraints not socially neutral	Practitioners acknowledged that resource limits often affect racialised and migrant families more heavily because these families may face multiple intersecting pressures.	PSW03, PSW05	Intersectionality; structural racism; unequal burden
Theme 4: Reframing Practice Through Culturally	Practitioner reflections on reform and	Generic diversity training insufficient	Social workers argued that broad equality	PSW01, PSW03, PSW05	Limits of procedural multiculturalism; anti-racist

Responsive Reform	culturally responsive practice		training was not enough to support practice with African families and that more specific learning was needed.		practice development
Theme 4	Practitioner reflections on reform and culturally responsive practice	Understanding African family systems	Practitioners identified the need to learn more about African parenting norms, authority structures, faith, migration histories and	PSW03, PSW05	Cultural humility; contextual assessment; anti-racist knowledge

			family networks.		
Theme 4	Practitioner reflections on reform and culturally responsive practice	Reforming assessment practice	Social workers argued that culturally responsive practice must change how assessments are conducted, not only the words used in policy or documentation.	PSW05	Transformative practice; institutional reflexivity

Theme 4	Practitioner reflections on reform and culturally	More reflective supervision on race	Participants suggested that supervision should create safer spaces	PSW01, PSW03, PSW04	Critical reflexivity; anti-racist supervision; colour-
---------	---	-------------------------------------	--	---------------------	--

	responsive practice		to discuss race, racism, culture, migration and professional uncertainty.		conscious practice
--	---------------------	--	---	--	--------------------

Theme 4	Practitioner reflections on reform and culturally responsive practice	Communityinformed practice	Social workers supported better engagement with community organisations, cultural mediators and local networks to improve understanding and trust.	PSW01, PSW04, PSW05	Relational accountability ; community knowledge; bridging institutional distance
---------	---	----------------------------	--	---------------------	--

Theme 4	Practitioners' reflections on reform and culturally responsive practice	Distinguishing harm from difference	Practitioners emphasised that safeguarding should protect children while also avoiding automatic pathologisation of unfamiliar cultural practices.	PSW03, PSW04, PSW05	Cultural misrecognition; proportionality; epistemic justice
---------	---	-------------------------------------	--	---------------------	---

Theme 4	Practitioner reflections on reform and culturally responsive practice	Structural support before escalation	Social workers recognised the need for earlier practical support around	PSW01, PSW02, PSW03, PSW05	Antioppressive practice; structural safeguarding; prevention
---------	---	--------------------------------------	---	----------------------------	--

			housing, poverty, immigration advice, childcare and mental health before risk escalates.		
--	--	--	--	--	--

Theme 4	Practitioner reflections on reform and culturally responsive practice	Building trust through transparency	Participants described the importance of explaining processes clearly, naming concerns honestly and reducing fear through respectful communication.	PSW02, PSW04, PSW05	Relational practice; trustbuilding; procedural justice
---------	---	-------------------------------------	---	---------------------	--

Theme 4	Practitioner reflections on reform and culturally responsive practice	Anti-racist safeguarding as precision, not leniency	Practitioners' reflections suggested that culturally responsive practice does not lower safeguarding standards; it improves the accuracy of assessment by distinguishing actual harm from cultural unfamiliarity or structural strain.	PSW01–PSW05	Anti-racist child protection; proportionality; CRT-informed practice
---------	---	---	--	-------------	--

Appendix 17: Reflexive Fieldwork Notes from Semi-Structured Parent**Interviews**

Note: All identifying details, personal circumstances and location information have been anonymised to protect participant confidentiality. These reflections are drawn from my fieldwork journal and are included to demonstrate reflexive engagement with the research process. They should not be read as verbatim interview data or as a substitute for participants' own accounts. Rather, they record my reflections on recruitment, rapport, emotional tone, role boundaries, ethical decision-making and the interview context. Throughout the research process, I remained attentive to informed consent, voluntariness, confidentiality, emotional well-being, and the distinction between my role as researcher and any wider community or advocacy roles.

PB01 Karen

PB01 responded to a research poster that I circulated through my personal network. As my first parent participant after the pilot study, I found the interview to be significant in shaping my early awareness of the study's emotional and methodological demands. PB01 had some familiarity with social work, and I initially wondered whether this might affect the type of data generated, particularly because she appeared confident, formal, and professionally composed.

During the interview, however, PB01 shared more personal and sensitive experiences than I had expected. This reminded me not to make assumptions about what participants may or may not disclose based on their educational or professional background. I also became aware that, because this was my first interview, I was cautious in my questioning and may

have avoided probing too deeply into more painful or negative experiences. This early interview helped me reflect on the need to balance sensitivity with analytic depth. It also contributed to my later decision to avoid recruiting parent participants whose professional backgrounds might overlap too closely with those of the social worker participants, to reduce potential role confusion and maintain clarity between parent and practitioner perspectives.

PB02 Isaac

PB02 was recruited through a personal and community-based connection with BAME HUB-UK. Because we already knew each other, I was particularly alert to the possibility that familiarity could influence the interview dynamics. At the beginning of the interview, PB02 appeared nervous and concerned about whether his responses would meet the study's expectations. I therefore took additional time to explain that there were no right or wrong answers, that participation was voluntary, and that his own experience was valuable whether positive, negative or mixed.

Despite this reassurance, PB02 remained emotionally unsettled. I offered to reschedule the interview, but he chose to continue. As the conversation progressed, it became clear that he had more to share than the planned interview time allowed. He repeatedly asked for additional time and described the interview as feeling like a therapeutic space. This raised important ethical and methodological questions for me as a novice researcher. Despite having a background in Psychology and counselling, I recognised the need to respect his voice while also maintaining boundaries between research and counselling.

The interview lasted longer than anticipated. Afterwards, I discussed the experience in supervision and reflected on how to manage time, emotional intensity and participant distress more effectively in later interviews. PB02's interview became an important learning moment, helping me strengthen my approach to pacing, boundaries, debriefing and signposting.

PB03 Rehema

PB03 was recruited through a community network connected to BAME HUB-UK. She responded positively and expressed a clear willingness to participate. I had initially assumed her likely level of engagement based on previous social interactions, but these assumptions were quickly challenged. PB03 was open, reflective and motivated to share her experience.

During the interview, PB03 became emotional when discussing painful encounters with child protection and wider systems. I was personally affected by her distress, but I consciously focused on maintaining empathy, emotional containment and professional boundaries. PB03 also referred to other families known to her who had experienced child removal and who had declined to participate because of the emotional pain associated with revisiting child protection involvement. I reminded her that participation had to remain voluntary, that no one should feel pressured to take part, and that she should not feel frustrated if others declined.

This interview deepened my understanding of the ethical importance of autonomy in recruitment, especially when participants are passionate about the research's political and social significance. It also reinforced the value of counter-storytelling, because PB03

viewed participation not only as personal disclosure but as a way of contributing to wider recognition of Black African parents' experiences. She believed her voice would help shape future child protection policies, ensuring children remain safely with their families.

PB04 Yusuf

PB04 responded to a research advertisement posted on an African Diaspora community forum where I was an active administrator. From early communication, he came across as highly organised, articulate and professional. This encouraged me to prepare carefully and remain focused during the interview, as he was attentive to detail and clear about the issues he wanted to discuss.

PB04's interview challenged some of my assumptions about socioeconomic status and child protection involvement. His educational, professional and economic position did not protect him from feeling racialised, misrecognised or powerless within statutory systems. His account made visible the limits of class privilege when Black African parents encounter institutions that may still interpret them through racialised assumptions.

The interview also had moments of emotional intensity. PB04 described the psychological, relational and financial consequences of child protection involvement and expressed a strong belief that racism and discrimination were embedded across multiple systems, including education, policing and children's services. His interview deepened my awareness that child protection experiences cannot be understood through poverty or class alone. Race, institutional power, and credibility remained central even among participants with high levels of education or social capital.

PB05 Faith

PB05 was recruited through a personal contact after receiving the research poster and participant information. She was willing to discuss both positive and negative experiences of parenting and child protection. At the beginning of the interview, her warmth and frequent smiling made me wonder whether she might be presenting her account in a way she thought would please me, particularly given our shared cultural and national familiarity.

However, it became clear that PB05 genuinely wanted to discuss both the positive aspects of her contact with services and the difficulties. This was important because earlier interviews had been more strongly focused on negative experiences. PB05's account reminded me to remain open to variation in the data and not to expect all participants to confirm the same narrative.

PB05 shared a positive experience with social workers who supported her and her four children. PB05 also spoke about domestic abuse and later asked about volunteering with survivors. I provided general signposting rather than allowing the research interview to become an advice or support session. This interview highlighted the possibility that participation may prompt broader reflections on community contribution, healing, and support, while also requiring clear boundaries for researchers.

PB06 Molina

PB06 was recruited through an organisational/community network connected to my wider work. This route required careful ethical reflection, given my role in BAME HUB-UK and the potential for pre-existing trust or role confusion. She was not a live or ongoing child

protection case, and I had no prior BAME HUB-UK involvement in her child protection matter. In line with the study's ethical boundaries, I confirmed that her participation was voluntary and separate from any ongoing organisational support, advice or child protection casework.

Although I was not directly involved in her work, in line with the study's boundaries, it was important that participation be voluntary and that the interview not be connected to any ongoing support, advice, or child protection casework to avoid a conflict of interest.

At the beginning of the interview, PB06 appeared emotionally subdued. I considered whether it might be too soon for her to participate because her account involved bereavement, migration, housing insecurity and previous distressing encounters with mainstream services. I offered to reschedule, but she explained that she wanted to continue and that her emotion stemmed from remembering past experiences rather than from being unready to participate.

PB06's account highlighted how vulnerability can be intensified when bereavement, migration, parenting, housing instability and limited support intersect. Her narrative also raised important questions about children in need, family support and the uneven distinction between support and surveillance. For me, this interview required careful attention to emotional safety, role clarity, and analytic distance, particularly because some contextual familiarity existed prior to the interview.

PB07 Milkah

PB07 was recruited through a personal contact after I shared the research advertisement on various WhatsApp groups for ethnic minority networks. She initially appeared calm and

engaged. However, during the interview, she became visibly distressed when reflecting on her relationship with her adopted daughter and her belief that she had not been able to meet all her daughter's emotional and psychological needs.

I suggested a break and offered to pause the recording. PB07 chose to continue, explaining that speaking about experiences she had rarely shared might bring some relief. We paused briefly, allowing silence and breathing space before continuing. This moment reminded me of the importance of trauma-informed interviewing and the need to attend to the participant's emotional state rather than simply follow the interview schedule.

PB07's reflections raised important issues about adoption, migration, intergenerational adjustment and differing experiences of childhood between children raised in the UK and children who migrated later. Her interview highlighted how social work intervention may become complicated when family members and professionals interpret emotional need, discipline, attachment and cultural transition differently.

PB08 Fatuma

PB08 was recruited through a personal contact. At the start of the interview, she expressed concern about her English because French was her first language. I reassured her that her contribution was valuable and that support could be arranged if language became a barrier. This reassurance appeared to increase her confidence.

During the interview, PB08 reflected on experiences of exclusion in education, particularly being judged through language ability. Although this was not directly about child protection, it was relevant because it showed how institutional judgment can affect

confidence, belonging and self-presentation. I therefore allowed space for this account while gently guiding the conversation back to parenting, race, migration and safeguarding.

PB08's interview reminded me that language is not only a communication issue. It is also tied to dignity, credibility and institutional recognition. Her account contributed to my later analysis of how accent, language and perceived competence shape the way Black African parents are heard or doubted by professionals.

PB09 Aisha

PB09 responded to an advertisement on social media. At the time of the interview, she was experiencing multiple pressures, including family breakdown, legal processes, distress relating to her children and wider worries about social services. She appeared overwhelmed but also determined to explain her perspective clearly.

Her account focused strongly on divorce, children's removal, immigration concerns and her belief that the system had failed to recognise manipulation and unequal power within her family circumstances. I was aware that her distress and the complexity of her situation required careful listening without becoming drawn into assessing the truth of legal or family disputes. My role was to understand her experience and interpretation, not to verify competing claims.

PB09's interview highlighted the difficulty of conducting research where child protection, immigration status, domestic conflict and parental credibility intersect. Her account was important because it showed how parents may experience the system as partial, disbelieving or inaccessible, particularly when they feel that their own explanations are not given equal weight.

PB10 John

PB10 was recruited through a social media advertisement and contacted me through WhatsApp. From the outset, he spoke confidently about racism, discrimination and the difficulties faced by Black men in the UK. His confidence challenged some of my assumptions about accent, time in the UK and vulnerability to institutional harm.

PB10 was articulate, educated and clear in his analysis, yet he described significant hardship and family disruption. This reminded me that confidence and education do not necessarily protect Black African parents from racialised judgment. His account also resonated with PB04, in which socioeconomic status did not remove experiences of suspicion, exclusion, or institutional powerlessness.

PB10's interview encouraged me to reflect more carefully on Black fatherhood, masculinity and racialisation. It showed that men's experiences of child protection may be shaped not only by parenting concerns but also by assumptions about danger, absence, aggression or lack of care. This became important in considering gendered dimensions of racialised safeguarding.

PB11 Janet

PB11 was recruited through a community forum where I held a leadership role. She was enthusiastic and wanted to discuss issues she felt were often ignored. Her account focused on differences between parenting expectations in the UK and those in her country of origin, including respect, cleanliness, manners, authority and family roles.

PB11 spoke with confidence and resilience rather than visible sadness. She was able to compare cultural expectations without presenting African parenting as fixed or uniform.

Her account helped me think more carefully about how cultural practices are interpreted, translated or misunderstood within child protection settings.

This interview was valuable because it moved beyond a simple negative account of the system. PB11 showed how parents may possess sophisticated cultural and institutional knowledge while still struggling to have that knowledge recognised by professionals. Her reflections contributed to my analysis of cultural misrecognition, parenting normativity and the limits of professional assumptions.

PB12 Akanke

PB12 was recruited through a connection linked to the organisation where I work, which means this route required careful management of role boundaries. She appeared cheerful and eager at the start, but as the interview progressed, her distress and frustration became more visible. She remained articulate throughout, but her account carried a strong sense of disappointment with statutory systems.

PB12 described the system as one that often gives families limited choices while expecting compliance with decisions already made. She spoke about experiences involving schools, police, health services and child protection, suggesting that safeguarding encounters cannot be understood in isolation from wider institutional experiences.

This interview prompted me to reflect on how Black African parents may experience statutory systems as cumulative rather than separate. PB12's narrative showed that

repeated encounters with different institutions can produce distrust, fatigue and a sense of being managed rather than supported. I had no prior involvement in her child protection case because my relationship with her was a general organisational community contact.

PB13 Mercy

Mercy (PB13) was referred by a colleague who circulated the research information and participant sheet. She appeared prepared and willing to share her story. Because of her healthcare background, I initially assumed that she might have a more positive or system-informed view of social work and safeguarding. This assumption was quickly challenged.

During the interview, PB13 expressed frustration and disappointment when describing her experiences of child protection. Her emotional tone reminded me that professional knowledge or proximity to care systems does not necessarily protect parents from feeling misrecognised, silenced or harmed when they become service users themselves.

PB13's interview was significant because it forced me to think more critically about my own expectations. I had to remain open to the possibility that participants with professional backgrounds might still experience the system as racialised, punitive or dismissive. Her account deepened my understanding of the difference between knowing a system professionally and being subject to it as a parent or user of its services. She narrated how she was ignored by even her health professional colleagues despite being a registered nurse and midwife in the UK. Her account to the social services did not count, and she felt treated less humanely.

PB14 Gladys

PB14 was recruited through a faith-based women's group. She engaged openly and initially presented as light-hearted, but it became clear that humour and cheerfulness also functioned as ways of managing painful experiences. Her reflections focused on being judged as neglectful because of work patterns, childcare pressures and the demands placed on migrant parents.

PB14's account highlighted the relationship between labour, poverty, childcare, and the interpretation of safeguarding. She described feeling that professionals did not understand the practical realities of migrant parenting, especially when parents work irregular or late hours to provide for their children.

This interview was moving because PB14 did not want to be pitied; she wanted to be understood. Her pride in her children and her commitment to their education challenged deficit-based assumptions about African mothers. Her account contributed to my analysis of how structural hardship and work-related pressures can be misread as parental failure.

PB15 Jamila

PB15 was recruited through a professional contact in healthcare. She was composed, articulate and careful in her speech. Her account brought together professional identity, faith, motherhood and cultural values. She was particularly concerned with how spiritual parenting, modesty, discipline and structured routines could be misunderstood by professionals unfamiliar with her religious and cultural background.

Although PB15 remained calm, I sensed deep frustration beneath her composure. She described feeling respected in her professional role but being treated with suspicion regarding her parenting. This contrast was analytically important because it showed how credibility can shift depending on institutional context.

PB15's interview highlighted the silencing of faith-based African parenting within mainstream safeguarding frameworks. Her account helped me think more deeply about how religion, gender, race and professional status intersect in child protection encounters, and how parents may feel erased even when they are confident and professionally knowledgeable.

PB16 Alan

PB16 was referred by a community leader who supported single fathers. He was one of the few male participants who volunteered to speak about fatherhood and child protection. He was direct, reflective and emotionally open. His account focused on the marginalisation of fathers, especially Black fathers, within assessments and communication.

PB16 described feeling overlooked, with professionals often directing communication towards the mother by default. He spoke about the emotional consequences of this exclusion, including self-doubt, depression and helplessness. His phrase of feeling like a "ghost parent" captured the experience of being present but institutionally invisible.

This interview was important because it highlighted the gendered and racialised dimensions of safeguarding. PB16's account showed how Black fathers may be read through assumptions of absence, danger or irrelevance. It strengthened my analysis of how professional judgement may reproduce narrow ideas of parenting, responsibility and

credibility.

PB17 Edna

PB17 was recruited through a church-based women's group. She was nervous at the beginning of the interview and expressed concern that her accent might make it difficult for her to participate. I reassured her that her voice mattered and that the interview was not an assessment of language ability. As she became more comfortable, she spoke with increasing confidence.

PB17's reflections focused on faith, gender and misinterpretation. She described how religious practices had been misunderstood by professionals, leaving her feeling judged and traumatised. At times, she moved between English and her first language to express concepts that did not translate easily.

This interview reminded me that translation is not only linguistic but cultural and spiritual. PB17 was trying to make herself understood across systems that did not always recognise the meaning of her faith practices. Her account contributed to my analysis of cultural misrecognition, religious difference and the emotional labour of explaining oneself to professionals.

PB18 Susan

PB18 responded to a WhatsApp advertisement. She was educated, organised and composed. Her account focused on feeling "policed" across multiple institutional settings, including schools, health services and housing. She described a contradiction in how she

was perceived: at times, too capable to need support; at other times, not competent enough to be trusted.

PB18's interview was analytically rich because she used concepts from Black feminist thought to interpret her own experiences. While I was impressed by her theoretical language, I also remained attentive to the everyday frustrations beneath it: being doubted, questioned, dismissed and repeatedly required to prove herself.

Her account contributed strongly to my thinking about double consciousness, credibility and epistemic injustice. PB18 showed how education and articulate speech may not remove suspicion; instead, they may produce further disbelief when professionals' expectations of vulnerability, competence and Black motherhood do not align.

PB19 Grace

PB19 was recruited through snowball sampling after a previous participant shared information about the study. Her participation felt significant because she was the final parent interviewed. She was confident, expressive and reflective, with a strong professional and spiritual identity.

PB19 discussed how middle-class African women may still experience racial surveillance despite educational and financial stability. She described being misrecognised in everyday institutional encounters and reflected on how accent, appearance and assumptions about class shaped how professionals perceived her. Although she sometimes used humour, it was clear that these experiences carried emotional weight.

Her account brought together many of the themes that had appeared across the study: race, class, gender, parenting, credibility, surveillance and the emotional burden of raising children under scrutiny. Ending the parent interviews with PB19 gave me a strong sense of the cumulative weight of the narratives shared across the study. Her interview reinforced the central argument that class position may reshape racialised experience, but it does not remove it.