Children left at home alone: the construction of a social problem

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Abstract

The question of when a child is old enough to be left at home alone, and under what circumstances, is a dilemma faced by many parents and professionals. Adopting a social constructionist perspective of social problems, this thesis explores professional perceptions and policy responses to the issue of children left at home alone since the passing of the Children Act in 1989. The law in England and Wales does not specify an age at which it is deemed safe to leave a child unsupervised at home, a practice sometimes referred to as 'self-care'. Professionals respond to the issue through non-legalistic, more persuasive interventions. The media also plays a role in regulating parenting practices, as demonstrated in the early 1990s, when the British press covered a number of stories involving parents who left their children at 'home alone'. The issue continues to bubble up from time to time, but calls for more specific law to manage the problem have gone unheeded.

Drawing on interviews with child welfare professionals and campaigners who work at national level, and on an analysis of policy, campaigning and educational documents, I explore how the issue is constructed, responded to and resisted as a social problem. I conclude that this is an example of an 'unconstructed' social problem because, despite continued public and professional concern, there has been no clear legislative response. Understanding how and why some social problems 'fail' is a key contribution to the literature on the social construction of social problems, which has focused mainly on 'successful' social problems to date.

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Glossary of abbreviations used in thesis

CAPT	Child Accident Prevention Trust
DfEE	Department for Education and Employment
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
DoH	Department of Health
DTI	Department of Trade and Industry
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
NCOPF	National Council for One Parent Families
NFPI	National Family and Parenting Institute
NSPCC	National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education
RoSPA	Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents

1 Introduction

This is a thesis about a 'failed' social problem. It is a sociological examination of how the issue of children left at home alone has been constructed as a contemporary social problem in the UK. Drawing on interviews with child welfare professionals and campaigners who work at national level, and on an analysis of policy, campaigning and educational documents, I discuss how the issue is constructed, responded to and resisted as a social problem. I conclude that this is an example of an 'unconstructed' social problem because, despite continued public and professional concern, there has been no clear policy response. Social constructionist studies to date have focused on issues that have become successfully categorised as a social problem. Academic research on the issue of children left at home alone has mainly been concerned to establish the prevalence of the 'problem' and to measure negative outcomes for children who are put in this situation.

This introductory chapter defines the terms and boundaries of the thesis. I introduce the issue and explain how I became interested in studying the topic. I examine how the home alone problem has been treated in academic research to date and present the aims of the thesis. I conclude this chapter by giving an overview of the thesis, with a brief summary of each chapter.

1.1 Defining terms and setting parameters

For the purposes of this thesis a *child* is aged between 0 and 16 years. Children who spend time at home without the presence of an adult can be described as being in *self-care* or are labelled *latchkey children*. This phenomenon has been subject to bouts of public and professional concern since the 1940s, if not earlier. *Supervision* is a term used in social work, criminology and health promotion literature and, in some circumstances, lack of supervision can constitute child neglect or abandonment. Children left without parental or adult supervision may also be described as *unattended*. Since the early 1990s, a new term or label has entered the public discourse, that of *'home alone'* children. All of these terms cover a range of different circumstances and are often used interchangeably, by both lay people and 'experts'.

Indeed, defining the issue has itself been identified as part of the 'problem' (Kraizer et al. 1990; Lamorey et al. 1999; Rodman 1990).

1.2 The 'home alone' problem in the UK

In the early 1990s the media reported a number of incidents where parents had allegedly left their children unattended (Garrett 2001). The phrase 'home alone' was popularised by a US film (1990) and first used by the news media to refer to a family in the US in 1992, with the first 'home alone' story appearing in the British media two months later. In February 1993, twelve-year-old Gemma Gibson was found living alone while her mother went on holiday. The girl was temporarily placed in local authority care while the mother was tracked down in Spain by Interpol, but no charges were brought against her. Later that year, Heidi Colwell received a 6-month prison sentence for leaving her 2-year-old child unattended on a daily basis while she worked in a travel agency. This was reduced to a probation order on appeal. Coverage of 'home alone' stories reached a peak over the Christmas period in 1993 ('A tale of two Christmases: spending boom in the shops … as children left "home alone"', *Sunday Times*, 29 December 1993, cited in Garrett 2001, p.649). Calls for legislation to be tightened were ruled out by Virginia Bottomley, Secretary of State for Health at the time (Ward 1993). Reporting on children left at 'home alone' declined after 1994, but the issue still appears from time to time, both in the news and on the comments pages, and the 'home alone' tag is still used (e.g. ''Home alone' mother guilty', BBC 2003b; 'Home alone children at risk', Community Care 2002).

Discussion of this troublesome issue was not confined to the news media. Articles appeared in the social care 'trade press' (Ogden 1993; Siddall 1993; Hirst 1997), acknowledging that childcare professionals regularly deal with situations where children are left unattended. In response to public concern, the children's charity NSPCC produced a leaflet with the title *Home Alone: Advice for Parents* (1993). Having gone through several reprints, this publication is still in use (NSPCC 2000). Another national organisation used the issue of children left at home alone to highlight the need for better out of school childcare provision (Kids' Clubs Network 1997). The topic was discussed in women's magazines (e.g. Bidder 1994) and in the

parenting pages of newspapers (Hill and Saunders 1999), revealing that leaving children unsupervised is an everyday dilemma for many parents, especially those in employment.

Meanwhile, the 'home alone' issue was harnessed by the political Right as part of a wider disquiet about moral standards and family life (Thompson 1998). Murray (1996 [first published 1994], p.32) cited the issue to illustrate his arguments about a growing British 'underclass', linking it explicitly to lone motherhood, absent fathers and welfare dependency. Many of the 'home alone' cases reported in the press in 1993 and 1994 featured lone parents, often living in poverty. Often the mothers' personal lives, especially their sexuality, were opened up to public scrutiny (Calcutt 1993; Davies 1995; Forna 1999). Garrett (2001, p.648) notes that fathers who allegedly left their children escaped such questioning of their moral character. As part of its 'Back to Basics' moral crusade, the Conservative party also expressed concern about lack of parental supervision at home and on the streets (HC Hansard 1993, 1994). A Home Office research report (Graham and Bowling 1995) associated 'low parental supervision' with youth crime, reinforcing the findings of Wilson (1980), who advocated 'parental supervision as a protective measure against delinquency' (p.204). Foreshadowing New Labour's criminal justice policy, 'strengthening families' was recommended as a way of preventing offending behaviour.

In 1994 another film, *Ladybird Ladybird* (directed by Ken Loach), highlighted the issue[1], but this film was a far cry from the comedy romp of *Home Alone* (1990). Early in the film a flashback sequence shows how Maggie, having fled a violent partner and gone to a women's refuge, left her four children unattended to sing karaoke in a local pub. In her absence, a fire broke out – the children were removed and placed in care. Despite the film's title (referring to a nursery rhyme[2]), I am not suggesting that Loach intended to make a statement about leaving children at home

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[1] In Germany a recent short film, *Schlüsselkinder* (2002) (translated as 'latchkey children') features the incestuous relationship between a brother and sister whose parents are rarely at home.
[2] Ladybird ladybird fly away home,
Your house is on fire and your children all gone.
All except one whose name is Anne,
Who hid herself under the frying pan.
(Nursery rhyme, origin unknown)

alone, but it coincided with contemporary concerns. Described as a 'domestic morality tale' (McKnight 1997), the film (allegedly based on real events) is a poignant critique of British society, touching upon domestic violence, class, 'race' and immigration, and the normative power of social workers. Loach is renowned for focusing on moral ambiguities in his films. His central (working class) characters come into direct conflict with dominant social institutions, but the outcome of such confrontations is usually predetermined: the structures in place are preserved at the cost of those who challenge them (McKnight 1997).

1.3 How I became interested in the issue

It was during my social work training from 1993 to 1995 that I first became interested in the issue of children left at home alone, both academically and as a practitioner. Recalling my own experience as a 'latchkey child' in a rural area, I noted media interest in the phenomenon and questioned whether this constituted a 'moral panic'. I considered researching the issue for my MSc thesis and had some fruitful initial discussions with practitioners, but was hampered by the lack of specific social work literature on the topic (or so I thought at the time).

However, I maintained a spark of interest and continued to encounter the issue in practice, first working with refugees and asylum seekers in Germany and then as a childcare social worker in London. The first child protection case conference I attended involved a lone mother who had left her toddler alone while she went to a local shop, and the child cut himself breaking a window. His name was placed on the child protection register for neglect. A few months later two young children were discovered alone in a flat while the parents, who were asylum seekers, were out for the day. The response of social services to remove the children and place them with foster carers was severely criticised by the family's health visitor and GP, demonstrating the lack of consensus on the issue, even among professionals.

1.4 Previous research on 'home alone'

This section maps previous research on the issue of children left at home alone, but it is not intended to be a full literature review. Rather, it emphasises how this current project adopts a different approach. Popular books on parenting in the UK, often

written by journalists, have covered the 'home alone' issue and society's response to it (e.g. Forna 1999, pp110-118; Freely 2000, pp120-121; Morrison 1997, pp145-146). However, with the notable exception of Garrett's (2001) analysis of media representations of the issue, the topic has received only brief mention by UK academics (e.g. Fox Harding 1991, p.171; Lentell 1998, pp254-256; Taylor et al. 1996, p.265). There has been limited coverage of the topic in the literature on child abuse and neglect. A large-scale study of child maltreatment by the NSPCC (Cawson et al. 2000, p.52) concluded that 'serious absence of supervision' was experienced by 5% of the sample. Thoburn et al. (2001) investigated child protection referrals for emotional maltreatment or neglect, finding that parents leaving their child alone was the most common reason for referral in this category, but many of these cases were quickly filtered out of the child protection system (often leaving parents dissatisfied and angry with the process).

The issues of parental supervision and latchkey children have received much more scholarly attention and research in the USA over several decades. Much of this research has been concerned with problematising the issue. Consider the bleak opening paragraph to the book, *Latchkey Kids* (1999):

> Increasing numbers of working parents are struggling with the challenges of the latchkey issue. Neighbors seem to have become transient and anonymous, and neighborhoods seem to have lost the sense of support and interdependence that once contributed to the safety of children. Some communities in urban environments have grown downright toxic for children in terms of the violence and decay that characterize many city streets. Parents often report feeling trapped making latchkey decisions for their children, decisions that may reflect not the children's best interests, but rather the paucity of community alternatives. Similarly, teachers and school administrators report their concerns and frustration regarding children who leave the school campus and head to empty houses, malls, libraries, and parks – unsupervised. (Lamorey et al. 1999, p.ix)

Jones (1987) argues that 'parental lack of supervision' is a major child neglect problem. The difficulties of gathering reliable data on how many children are at home alone is acknowledged by Kraizer et al., who note that

> Guilt, social stigma, and awareness on the part of parents that leaving their children unattended may appear irresponsible and is considered a form of

neglect in most states, have prevented parents from reporting their child care methods accurately. (1990, p.572)

Much research carried out on 'the latchkey experience' has strived either to measure the prevalence of the 'problem' (Cain and Hofferth 1989) or to evaluate the impact of the experience on children. It has looked at factors such as risk-taking and school performance (Dwyer et al. 1990), substance use (Richardson et al. 1989) and delinquency (Vander Ven et al. 2001). Much of this quantitative research is carried out within the disciplines of medicine or psychology and the findings are mixed. Reviewing the research on 'latchkey children', Lamorey et al. (1999) conclude that 'being a latchkey child does not necessarily lead to serious negative consequences' (p.29) and 'It is not the presence or absence of a parent in the home that determines child outcomes' (p.30). However, such research has been seized upon by commentators to support their concerns about the social change in the USA, from communitarian Etzioni (1995) to Eberstadt (2001), writing in the self-proclaimed conservative *Policy Review*.

This thesis does not claim to be a comparative study and I do not offer a full review of the US literature here. However, I believe that it is possible to draw conclusions from the differences in how the issue of children left at home alone has emerged and is perceived and researched in the two countries. I will discuss this further in the final chapter of this thesis.

Research has also been carried out on the issue in other parts of the world, although this thesis is confined to those studies published in English. Tam (1998) undertook a qualitative study to examine mothers' decision-making on the use of self-care in Hong Kong. She concludes:

> For families with limited financial and social resources, leaving children unattended at home is one way in which resources are mobilised to deal with the demands of everyday family living as well as meeting the developmental needs of children. (Tam 1998, p.133)

Tam also discusses the social policies in relation to unattended children, noting government-sponsored publicity campaigns (including posters and television adverts) and public calls for reform of legislation on child neglect. In Australia, De Vaus and

Millward (1998) analysed survey data on use of self or sibling care for primary school age children. Contrary to prevailing stereotypes, they found that the use of self-care was *not* linked to minority groups, poverty or lone-parent households. They suggest that the 'home alone' phenomenon in Australia is relatively uncommon and that the bulk of self or sibling care is for older children and for relatively short periods. The two articles cited above are critical of public concern and the stigmatisation of parents who leave children unattended, almost 'playing down' the issue. However, the authors of both articles conclude by recommending community-based childcare solutions.

1.5 Aim of this thesis

This thesis takes a different approach to the issue of children left at home alone. It is not the aim of this research to establish how many children are at home alone in the UK, nor to evaluate the pros and cons of leaving children in self-care, and I do not hope to come up with a 'magic age' at which it is deemed safe and acceptable to leave a child at home alone (an impossible task, according to Lamorey et al. 1999, p.9). My 'intellectual puzzle', as Mason (1996) puts it, is how and why this has become a contemporary social issue in the UK. To answer this I adopt a 'social construction of social problems' approach.

1.6 Overview of thesis

Six chapters will follow this introductory chapter.

Chapter 2, *Literature review*, attempts to answer the questions: how does something become a social problem and how can this be studied? It charts the development of the sociology of deviance, the concept of moral panics and the social constructionist perspective of social problems. It identifies the key theoretical concepts that are used in the rest of the thesis and sets out my research questions.

Chapter 3, *Methodology and methods*, explains how I carried out my research. It outlines the principles of qualitative research and justifies the methods used and the sample selected. It gives details on how the data was analysed and considers ethical and practical dilemmas that arose during the research process.

Chapter 4, *Framing the problem*, is the first 'data chapter' of the thesis. It looks at different ways in which the issue of children left at home alone has been framed, focusing on the alleged 'conflict' between parenting and paid work and on the social construction of childhood.

Chapter 5, *Constructing responses and solutions*, examines the organisational responses the issue of unsupervised children in the home. It details the legal and policy framework within which professionals and parents act, and goes on to consider alternative ways of addressing the issue of 'home alone' children, including childcare provision, safety promotion messages and parenting education and support.

Chapter 6, *Resisting the problem*, explores how professionals working with families express ambivalence about the issue of children left at home alone. It demonstrates how they resist or neutralise the issue through utilising a range of justifications and excuses, both for their own behaviour and on behalf of the parents that they work with.

Chapter 7, *Conclusion*, discusses the key findings of this thesis. The main conclusion is that the issue of 'home alone' remains an 'unconstructed' social problem and some possible explanations for this are offered. Understanding how and why some social problems 'fail' is a key contribution to the literature on the social construction of social problems, which has focused mainly on 'successful' social problems to date. Following a reflection on the limitations of this research, there is a discussion of potential areas for future work.

The *Appendices* that follow contain copies of the contact letter and project summary sent to potential respondents, the interview schedules and vignettes used in interviews and a number of documents referred to in the data chapters of the thesis.

1.7 Summary and conclusion

This introductory chapter has set out the main findings of the thesis. It has defined the key terms and introduced the topic of children left at home alone in the UK

context. It has briefly reviewed scholarly treatment of the issue to date and clarified that this thesis adopts a different approach to the issue. The aims of the thesis have been stated. Finally, an overview of the rest of the thesis has been given, with a summary of what each chapter contains.

2 Literature review

2.1 Introduction

This literature review chapter outlines the social constructionist perspective on social problems and seeks to justify it as an appropriate theoretical and practical approach to the research topic. It charts the emergence of such an approach, setting it in the context of developments in sociological theory and research. The social constructionist approach has been successfully applied in a number of case studies of social problems. Key concepts from the theoretical and empirical literature are identified and are proposed as a way of framing my analysis of the issue of children left alone at home. Some of the current debates within social constructionism are explored and I state my position in relation to these debates.

This thesis will also draw on other areas of literature, including the sociology of parenting (predominantly mothering) and of childhood, the debates around family and childcare policy, social work literature on child abuse and neglect, and health promotion literature. These will be used selectively and critically throughout the thesis in the light of this chapter, for their contribution to the 'moral enterprise' of constructing social problems.

2.2 Approaching social problems

What is a social problem? How should it be studied? What can we do about it? These questions uncover an abundance of contested issues. An exploration of how social problems have been conceptualised reveals many broader trends within twentieth century sociology (Rubington and Weinberg 1995). Social constructionism[3] has its philosophical roots in phenomenology (e.g. Schutz 1973; Berger and Luckmann 1966; Douglas 1970), ethnomethodology (e.g. Garfinkel 1973), and symbolic interactionism (e.g. Goffman 1959 and the works of Mead and Blumer). Together they call into question the taken-for-granted nature of reality and see the social world as a product of human subjectivity: people define, interpret and give meaning to the world through their everyday actions and interactions. Schutz expresses it this way:

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[3] The term social *constructivism* tends to be used more in psychological literature.

> All our knowledge of the world, in common-sense as well as in scientific thinking, involves constructs, i.e., a set of abstractions, generalizations, formalizations, idealizations specific to the respective level of thought organization. Strictly speaking, there are no such things as facts, pure and simple. All facts are from the outset facts selected from a universal context by the activities of our mind. (1973, p.5)

To this combination Miller and Holstein (1989, cited in Loseke 1999, p.197) add the Durkheimian concept of 'collective representations' as relevant to a social constructionist approach.

A social constructionist perspective on social problems was first articulated fully in the early 1970s by Spector and Kitsuse (1977). This approach focuses on the social processes through which social problems are defined, responded to and maintained. What makes something a social problem is not inherent in the condition itself – rather it lies in the activities of individuals or groups who make claims that something is a social problem. Early groundwork was laid by the value conflict school (Waller 1936; Fuller and Myers 1941a, 1941b), which recognised the subjective element of social problems, and theories of deviance that began to focus on the interactional process of labelling from the 1950s onwards (Lemert 1951; Becker 1963). Although US sociologists have dominated the study of social problems, a distinctly British contribution came in the form of an approach that attempted to synthesise symbolic interactionism with a Marxist perspective on deviance (e.g. Cohen 1971; Taylor, Walton and Young 1973). It was this school that gave us the concept of 'moral panic' (Young 1971; Cohen 1972), which was taken up by Hall et al (1978) and continues to be developed (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994; Thompson 1998; Critcher 2003).

This narrative presentation may give the impression of a clear line of ancestry and steady progress from the 1930s to the present day. Social constructionism was neither inevitable nor is it the only way of thinking about social problems, although it has been highly influential in the sociological study of social problems in the last 25 years (Schneider 1985; Conrad 1997). It is not without its challenges, from both outside and within. This chapter starts with a chronological approach, then frames the key concepts around the work of Loseke (1999, 2003) and concludes with an examination of some of the current debates in this field.

2.2.1 Value conflict school

Waller (1936) opens his article with the statement:

> The term *social problem* indicates not merely an observed phenomenon but
> the state of mind of the observer as well. (1936, p.922)

He recognises that to conclude that a particular issue or condition is a social problem involves a *value judgement.* Value judgements are the cause of social problems, not the objective conditions themselves. Waller criticises sociological attempts to present objective, 'scientific' accounts of social problems; by excluding value judgements from the analysis one excludes 'the essential criterion by which social problems may be identified' (Waller 1936, p.923). These value judgements must be subjected to analysis as well as the objective conditions themselves. Waller proposes that social problems result when *humanitarian mores* come into conflict with *organisational mores*.

Waller identifies an important link between what is labelled as a social problem and the solutions that are offered to address the problem. This will be picked up again later when I consider Loseke's key concepts. Not only does a conflict of mores (or values) 'produce' a social problem, it also slows down the process of dealing with it. For example, while humanitarian mores may motivate efforts to address the social problem of poverty, the organisational mores of private property rule out a radical redistribution of wealth. Similarly, action to address child abuse and neglect is motivated by humanitarian mores, but other mores, both organisational and libertarian, restrict the degree of state intervention in 'private' family life. While social constructionists have highlighted Waller's emphasis on the subjective processes of social problems, it appears to me that in many instances the word 'mores' could be replaced by the word 'interests' and thus be utilised by other theoretical approaches. Waller is critical of sociologists who, while claiming to be scientific and value free, in fact adopt the values of humanitarian reformers without questioning their origin and how they function. My interest in this research project is the motives and actions of such reformers.

Fuller and Myers (1941a) are also critical of sociology up to that date for failing to offer a coherent theory of social problems. They call for attention to be paid to the subjective element of defining social problems: 'Social problems are what people think they are' (Fuller and Myers 1941a, p.25). Fuller and Myers observe that there must be some *awareness* of a condition as a problem in order for it to be a social problem, and that the condition could be real or imagined (1941a, p.25). The perspectives of lay people are just as valid as subjects of sociological study as those of experts. A social problem involves the transgression of values or norms and, like Waller (1936), Fuller and Myers recognise that social values play a role in obstructing solutions to social problems (1941a, p.26).

In a second article of the same year, Fuller and Myers restate and expand upon their definition of social problems:

> A social problem is a condition which is defined by a considerable number of persons as a deviation from some social norm which they cherish. Every social problem thus consists of an objective condition and a subjective definition. (Fuller and Myers 1941b, p.320)

Fuller and Myers do not specify what they regard as a 'considerable number' or define 'cherish', nor are they not willing to let go of the notion of objective conditions of a social problem as relevant ('The objective condition is necessary but not in itself sufficient to constitute a social problem' 1941b, p.320) and for this they come under criticism from Spector and Kitsuse (1977, p.45). Fuller and Myers offer a *natural history model* with which to understand the way that social problems follow a common sequence of development from their initial emergence to a state of maturation. The three broad stages are awareness, policy determination and reform; these are applied to the 'residence trailer problem' in Detroit in the 1920s and 1930s. Awareness of the issue grew slowly over time, with complaints transforming from 'something ought to be done' through 'what ought to be done' to proposals of 'this and that should be done'. Fuller and Myers' model is useful in illustrating the *dynamic* nature of the definitional process and in demonstrating what sociologists can use as evidence of this process. Their exhortation to look at how social problems are dealt with on a *local* level (1941b, p.327) is one that guides the empirical research for this thesis.

In a postscript to Fuller and Myers (1941b), Bossard refines their natural history model into twelve stages and advocates doing historical research on social problems with an 'older vintage'. The natural history model was adopted and encouraged by Spector and Kitsuse as a 'major positive tool for the development of empirical research' (1977, p.130) but it was not taken up subsequently (Loseke 1999, p.210). While some writers have emphasised a sequential process to the emergence of social problems and deviance (see below), more recent theorists have preferred to conceptualise the process as a *drama* (e.g. Gusfield 1963; Hunt and Benford 1997) or a *game* (e.g. Loseke 1999; Gubrium 1993).

2.2.2 Societal reaction or the labelling approach

Lemert (1951) and Becker (1963) made 'important advances towards a full social theory of deviance' (Taylor, Walton and Young 1973, p.139) by focusing on the interactional process between the individual or group who commit an act labelled as deviant, and the reaction of society to that behaviour and to the deviants themselves. This is sometimes known as the *labelling* school or approach to deviance, although Lindesmith et al. (1975, p.534) believe that to call this an approach or school is to overstate their influence. Rubington and Weinberg's (1995, p.179) preferred term for this is an *interactionist* perspective, since it fits into the broader tradition of symbolic interactionism, cited earlier.

In chronicling earlier sociological approaches to 'social pathology', Lemert notes a newer interest in problem-defining behaviour (1951, p.4). While he maintains a functionalist or systemic perspective on social problems and takes for granted the existence of objective, universally accepted social norms (e.g. his assertion that people with physical disabilities are 'born deviant', 1951, p.73), Lemert emphasises the need for deviance to be *visible* in order to provoke societal reaction. He observes that low income and minority group members are more likely to have their behaviour come under scrutiny and thus become labelled as deviant (1951, p.52).

Lemert cites Van Vechten's concept of *tolerance quotient* (1951, p.57) and this links to what Hilgartner and Bosk later call the *carrying capacity* of public arenas for social problems (1988, p.58), namely that the emergence of social problems is a

selective process. Lemert's analysis of how societal reaction to a perceived social problem can be *amplified* (particularly by media response), and how deviance or social problems can be *exploited*, were concepts later taken up by writers such as Young (1971) and Cohen (1972), whose work is considered in more detail below.

Lemert's main contribution to a sociological understanding of social problems is his concept of primary and secondary deviance. Lemert asserts that societal reaction to an initial act of deviance (*primary deviation*) is crucial to the subsequent self-definition and behaviour of the deviant and can lead to *secondary deviation*:

> When a person begins to employ his deviant behaviour or a role based upon it as a means of defense, attack, or adjustment to the overt and covert problems created by the consequent societal reaction to him, his deviation is secondary. (Lemert 1951, p.76)

Thus the stigmatisation that results from the initial societal reaction sustains a deviant identity. This approach appears to underlie Schur's (1981) critique of the response to youth delinquency in the US and his argument for a policy of 'radical nonintervention'.

A sequential model of deviance is developed by Becker, who offers the term *deviant career* in his classic sociological text *Outsiders* (1963, p.25). Becker (1963) stresses that deviance lies not in an act itself, but in the process by which society labels certain acts as deviant. More specifically, he defines deviance as the *interaction* between the person who commits an act and those who respond to it. Becker recognises that social rules, stemming from values, vary across social groups and in different settings (1963, p.14). He questions who gets to set and enforce the rules, pointing out the power issues involved, i.e. certain groups are able to set and enforce rules upon other groups.

Becker's concept of *moral entrepreneurs* is particularly helpful in understanding the vagaries of the labelling process and the vested interests of the actors involved. A distinction is made between *rule creators*, such as the crusading reformers who called for the prohibition of alcohol in the US (Gusfield 1963), and the *rule enforcers*, usually professionals or staff of agencies and institutions whose task is to

address the social problem or deviance. Becker points out the double-bind facing rule enforcers (1963, p157) – in order to justify the agency's existence and their employment, they must demonstrate to others that a problem exists, but also show that their attempts at enforcement are effective and worthwhile. I take up the role of moral entrepreneurs, or *claims-makers* as Loseke (1999, p.28) calls them, in a later section in this chapter.

Becker and other symbolic interactionists of this era are distinctive by their use of ethnographic methods in bounded social situations, such as schools, gangs and bars, and they were called by some the 'second Chicago School' (Downes and Rock 2003 p.177).

2.2.3 The 'New' Criminology and moral panics

As stated in the introduction to this chapter, at the end of the 1960s and early 1970s a group of British sociologists were developing their own distinctive approach to deviance and social problems. Taylor, Walton and Young (1973) attempt to integrate phenomenology (of Matza in particular) and symbolic interactionism, which look at meaning and practical actions, with a Marxist conflict theory that took into account social structures. Social reaction theory (outlined above) failed to explain the political economy of crime and deviance. The missing element was *ideology*. They conclude:

> Crime is ever and always that behaviour seen to be problematic within the framework of those social arrangements: for crime to be abolished, then, those social arrangements themselves must also be subject to fundamental social change. (Taylor, Walton and Young 1973, p.282)

These authors had participated at the National Deviancy Conference in York, from which seven papers were later published in a volume edited by Cohen (1971), all reflecting a sceptical, anti-authoritarian approach to social problems and deviance – deviance is regarded, almost celebrated, as a form of resistance. The ethnographic case studies of Young on drug-use in the Notting Hill area of London (1971) and Cohen on the phenomenon of Mods and Rockers (1972) are particularly significant in building a sociological understanding of deviance and social problems. Both writers emphasise the role the media plays in *deviancy amplification*, as do control

agencies (Becker's 'rule enforcers') such as the police and the courts. However, while they highlighted the interactional process between social reaction and behaviour, their approach is in some respects very different from that which leads to social constructionism.

It was Young (1971, p.182) who first coined the term *moral panic*, although it is often attributed to Cohen (1972). The concept has been taken up widely and has entered the language of lay people as well as sociologists (Thompson 1998, p.11). Mass media reaction to a perceived social problem can stir up considerable public anxiety and thus prompt a policy response. Cohen defines a moral panic in this way:

> A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. (1972, p.9)

Cohen and others emphasise the symbolic nature of deviance – a person or group can be seen as a 'sign of the times', a symptom or manifestation of a deeper social malaise. He developed the concept of *folk devils*, a 'gallery of types that society erects to show its members which roles should be avoided and which should be emulated … visible reminders of what we should not be' (Cohen 1972, p.10).

Hall et al. (1978) used the concept of moral panic in their analysis of street crime in Britain in the early 1970s. Hall et al. note that the term 'mugging' was imported from the US and they argue that its broad application by British police and media was used to amplify fear and to justify tougher social control. While superficially comparable to Cohen's study of the 'mods and rockers' phenomenon, Hall et al. were diametrically opposed to Cohen in their emphasis on class interest (Aldridge 1994, p.38). Marxist studies contributed a crucial reminder that the news media are not neutral vessels for conveying information, but reflect and reinforce interests and power. However, they are criticised by Fairclough for their monolithic view of the role of media in ideological reproduction; the extent of diversity and change in media practices and discourse is understated (1995, p.28).

In an attempt to synthesise academic writings on moral panics, Critcher (2003) contrasts the UK *processual model* (based on the work of Cohen) with the *attributional model* that emerged in the US, as formulated by Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994). The latter authors claim that the concept of moral panic offers an analytical tool that classifies and captures a wide range of phenomena, and claim that there is no intrinsic leftish slant to writings on moral panics (1994, p.50). Their account of moral panics draws upon theories of collective behaviour (including disaster studies) and social movements, in addition to the theories of deviance and social problems detailed here.

2.2.4 The emergence of social constructionism

Social constructionism offered a fundamental change in the conceptualisation of social problems. In 1971, Blumer produced a paper that called for a redefinition of social problems as 'products of a process of collective definition' (cited in Schneider 1985, p.210). Building on an earlier article (Kitsuse and Spector 1973), in 1977 Spector and Kitsuse published *Constructing Social Problems*. This is now regarded as a key text, although Loseke (1999, p.195) attributes its acceptance into 'mainstream sociology' to Schneider's 1985 article in the *Annual Review of Sociology*. While acknowledging the contribution of the value conflict and labelling approaches to social problems, Spector and Kitsuse criticise the theoretical inconsistencies in such approaches. They call for a subjective approach to social problems and dismiss the need for any sociological attention to be paid to the objective conditions of social problems:

> The sociologist's role is not to identify which social problems exist in the society, but to monitor what "the consensus" indicates them to be … What the sociologist should observe is not the condition, but how people act in relation to it. (Spector and Kitsuse 1977, p.34)

They assert that 'even the existence of the condition itself is irrelevant to and outside of our analysis' (Spector and Kitsuse 1977, p.76). Thus they reject Merton's distinction between what society, or a group in society, regards as a social problem and what sociologists conclude 'really' is a problem (*spurious* and *latent* social problems respectively, Spector and Kitsuse 1977, p.36).

Social problems are conceptualised as an *activity*, created through the making of claims, a form of interaction. This activity is fundamentally *political*, as groups vie to define the nature and causes of a condition. Social problems are not seen as caused by a conflict in values; rather values are regarded as 'linguistic devices that participants use to articulate their claims' (Spector and Kitsuse 1977, p.74). Social problems claims are 'a common-sense category, understood by members of a society and often associated with such terms as demands, complaints, gripes, and requests' (Spector and Kitsuse 1977, p.79). The activities listed include filling out forms, lodging complaints, filing lawsuits and calling press conferences. It is these activities and the vocabulary and categories of claims-making that can be empirically studied to account for the emergence, nature and maintenance of social problems.

2.3 Key concepts

> The student of social problems should discover the nature of social problem activities and develop concepts that will most clearly and succinctly account for their special character. (Spector and Kitsuse 1977, p.75)

Rather than maintain a chronological approach for the remainder of this chapter, I now examine some of the theoretical concepts utilised by social constructionists in discussing social problems, structuring my discussion around Loseke's book, *Thinking About Social Problems* (1999, 2003) and inserting contributions from other contemporary writers where appropriate. These key concepts provide the analytical tools for this thesis and, where appropriate, I indicate some of the findings that will be presented in subsequent chapters.

Loseke's work is written in an accessible (by her own admission 'breezy') style, rich with examples of contemporary social problems in the US, but it also pulls together the conceptual underpinnings of social constructionism. She writes, 'I do not see constructionism as an alternative to other theoretical frameworks: I see it as an important addition' (1999, p.x) and argues that 'social constructionism encourages a way of thinking that is distinctly sociological and … empowering to those who use it' (1999, p.x). The second edition (2003) expands some areas and is accompanied by a reader of empirical studies (Loseke and Best 2003).

2.3.1 Defining social problems

Extending the definitional work of Spector and Kitsuse (1977), Loseke defines a *social problem* as a condition that is perceived as wrong (or troublesome) and widespread, but changeable (1999, p.6). Clarke and Cochrane (1998) address the question of what is 'social' about a social problem, suggesting that 'such problems have gained a hold on the attention of a particular society at a particular time' (p.4). This emphasises the fact that social problems vary across different societies and over time. Sheer numbers alone are not enough to explain how, in Mills' words, 'personal troubles' become 'public issues' (1959, p.14). As I will explore below, it depends upon who is involved and who claims *ownership* of the problem.

A social problem *claim* is any statement that tries to convince an audience to take a condition seriously. Such a claim is successful when it convinces audiences that a condition exists and that something must be done about it. Constructionist perspectives are concerned with how people make sense of the world, constructing and organising a world of meaning using words and phrases as *categories*. Social problem claims use and create categories, constructing them into *frames*. Snow and Benford (1992 cited in Williams and Williams 1995, p.191) define a frame as a device that 'simplifies and condenses the "world out there" by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions within one's present or past environment'. Drawing on Spector and Kitsuse (1977), social problems can be understood as common-sense categories, 'what everybody knows' as Clarke and Cochrane (1998, pp10-15) put it. Social problem claims are infinite in number but only *some* claims are successful and conditions accorded the status of social problem. One of the main concerns of this thesis is whether claims about 'home alone' children can be accorded the status of a social problem and, if not, why not?

2.3.2 Social problem games

Loseke gives an account of the *social problems games*, in which there are various players, including *claims-makers, audiences, victims,* and *villains. Strategies* are adopted in order to get social problems *claims* heard and responded to with *solutions*.

Social problems can also be understood as a drama. Conceptualising social problems claims-making as a dramaturgical process is a useful approach. Goffman (1959) utilised a theatrical metaphor to understand social interaction, applying it in a number of settings, ranging from a community of Shetland crofters to hospitals for the mentally ill. The concept of *impression management* is central to Goffman's work, and is relevant not only to this discussion of the social construction of social problems but also in later considerations of interviews as a method for collecting data. The metaphor of a drama offers notions of performance, with off-stage, front-stage and back-stage settings, actors, scripts, staging etc. and it can be used at different levels of analysis. Hunt and Benford (1997) demonstrate how dramaturgy as a methodology was used in their social movement research and Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) use a dramatic metaphor to frame their book on moral panics. Looking at a social problem in its historical and cultural context, one could call this the *backdrop* or *theatre* in which the drama or game takes place.

2.3.3 Claims

Claims are statements about a social problem. From a social constructionist perspective, calling it a claim is not to discredit it (Best 1995, p.347). In a society where documents and texts are plentiful, social problems claims are probably most often thought about as being language-based – expressed in politicians' speeches, health promotion leaflets, journal articles on academic research, news programmes, verdicts handed down by judges, women's magazines, parenting manuals and training packages for professionals. All of these formats have been used to make claims about children being left at home alone. Social problem claims can also be visual or behavioural (Loseke 1999, p.26), such as groups of people who formed naked sculptures in protest against war in Iraq in 2003 ('Naked anti-war demos sweep world', CNN 2003). Fundraising can also be seen as a form of claims-making. Donors need to be persuaded that a problem exists in order for organisations to attract financial support.

What all of these phenomena have in common as claims is that they seek to *persuade* audiences to recognise that something is a social problem and that something must be done about it. Loseke asserts that getting audiences to *feel* something about an issue

is as important as getting audiences to *think* about it (1999, p.27). The role of emotions in constructing social problems claims is an issue that Loseke expands on in her second edition: 'We can be motivated to evaluate a condition as a social problem by our feelings of sympathy, compassion, or pity for victims', but also they 'can appeal to our human capacity to hate and seek revenge' (Loseke 2003, p.77). Claims-making is an act of communication (Best 1995, p.13); the strategies used in this communication will be explored below.

2.3.4 Claims-makers

Claims-makers are the people who say that something is a social problem, about which something must be done. Claims are made by individuals, groups and organisations, by experts and laypersons: for example, journalists, politicians, professionals, civil servants, business people and members of social change groups. Academics also participate in the social problems game, or 'industry' as Loseke also calls it (1999, p.29), a term which emphasises that social problems are a form of interpretive *work*. The social problems game is characterised by competition, but 'often … social problems construction features alliances among different types of claimsmakers' (Best 1995, p.104). For example, in the UK a number of the major children's charities compete to gain the attention (and money) of audiences, but they also work together in coalitions on some issues, like the campaign to abolish the physical punishment of children.

Primary and secondary claims-makers

Best (1997) makes the distinction between *primary claims-makers* (in a later work he calls them 'problem promoters', 2001, p.16), those who call attention to social problems; and *secondary claims-makers*, who spread the claims through news media or popular culture, translating, transforming and packaging the primary claims to fit the media's requirements. Best says that primary claims-makers are typically victims, activists or experts on a social problem (1997, p.74); that is people who often have direct experience, or at least considerable knowledge, of the condition they are making claims about. Their claims in a 'raw' form are unlikely to attract public awareness, official recognition or financial contributions in an environment where competition for these scarce resources is great. The sheer 'moral weight' of a

social problem claim is insufficient to guarantee its success. For example, the sexual abuse of people with learning disabilities is an issue that society would accept as 'wrong' but it has rarely been acknowledged as a social problem and policy has only recently been implemented in this area (Calcraft and Kitson 2003; Department of Health 2000).

The media and social problems

> Professional definitions are only one source of problem designations but they often serve to legitimise and frame what constitute the character and nature of the problem. As professional definitions move into the public eye – typically through the media – they are often accepted, sometimes challenged, occasionally modified, and not infrequently misread by various individuals or groups who encounter them. (Conrad 1997, pp13-14)

Media attention can be crucial to the success of a social problem claim; merely mentioning an issue in the media can validate it as a public concern and perhaps put it on policymakers' agenda. Campaigners in voluntary sector organizations, themselves often secondary claims makers, have become wise to this and utilise the media as a key resource (Deacon 1999). However, as Best (1997, p.74) and Conrad (1997) point out, the news media does not merely restate the claims made by others. News stories are constructed according to the conventions, constraints and agendas of the media and these factors vary across time and setting (Cottle 1995). How a news story is packaged reflects journalistic conventions, but is also subject to commercial, organizational, bureaucratic, professional and cultural constraints. Often social problems claims are as much about *entertainment* as about presenting facts (Loseke 1999, p.30). Lowney (1997) explores the construction of 'Satanism' through the medium of TV talk shows in the US. In some situations journalists themselves are the primary claims-makers (e.g. Campbell 1988).

Spector and Kitsuse (1977) came under criticism for underestimating the importance of the mass media (e.g. Manning 1985, p.13). There are now a number of empirical case studies about the media construction of specific social problems in the US (e.g. in the edited volumes by Best 1995; Miller and Holstein 1997). Nevertheless, the practices of news media production have a heavily *embedded* and *layered* character (Fairclough 1995, p.48), and there are significant differences in the media production and consumption in those two countries.

In *Making Social Work News,* Aldridge (1994) notes the distinctive character of the British local and regional press. She observes that the contrast between local and national media is under-explored and under-theorised and sets out to address this shortfall in her own work (1994, p.21). There is a relational aspect to this comparison too, since local press offices are important sources of stories for national newspapers. With an increasing emphasis on 'soft' stories with a human interest, this is significant for the types of stories analysed in this research project.

Motives and moralities of claims-makers
It is here that I return to Becker's (1963) concept of 'moral entrepreneurs'. Those who create rules (or at least *attempt* to create them), calling for 'something to be done', and those who enforce the rules are not only prompted by what Waller (1936) labelled humanitarian mores. In considering why people make social problems claims, Loseke distinguishes between subjective values or moral beliefs and objective interests (1999, p.32), but says that it is impossible to separate these out in practice.

'Moral decisions are not, and cannot be, taken for granted, but rather must be purposefully constructed by the individuals for the purposes at hand' (Douglas 1970, p.27). We cannot assume what goes on inside people's heads, nor can we access this reliably in social research, but as Mills (1940) points out, we *can* analyse what people say about a social problem and how they say it. This emphasis on linguistic devices is particularly relevant in chapter 6 (*Resisting the problem*).

Gusfield's (1963) analysis of the Temperance movement in the US demonstrates how problems claims serve as symbols of social status. Calls for abstinence and prohibition symbolised the struggle between 'American' Protestants and newer immigrants of Irish Catholic and German Lutheran origin – a volatile cocktail of class, religion and ethnic identity. Issues of class and power pervade the social problems claims-making process. Mauss (1989, 1992, cited in Miller and Holstein 1993b, p.8) conceptualises social problems as *social movements*, and does not see social problems claims-making as a distinct field of academic study.

'Not all actors who market social problems can be considered "activists." For some, social problems are just another day at the office' write Hilgartner and Bosk (1988, p.57). The role of experts and professionals in defining as well as responding to social problems has been highlighted in a number of studies and is a major focus of this thesis. For now, I focus on what their motives might be for engaging in the claims-making process.

Scott (1981) documents the interactional process that takes place between agencies working with blind people and blind people themselves. He concludes that organised intervention programmes determine the 'attitudes, behavior patterns, and qualities of character that have long been assumed to be given to blind people by their condition' (Scott 1981, p.3). In other words, blindness is *constructed* by organisations and professionals who work with the blind (although Scott uses the word *socialisation* rather than construction). Scott points out that agencies and those working in them have a deeply vested interest in maintaining the contemporary formulation of blindness as a 'problem'.

Scott's work (first published in 1969), which predates the development of the 'social model' understanding of disability, contributes to understanding how professionals contribute to the process of defining social problems through the type of services delivered and their everyday practice. Both voluntary and statutory organisations have vested interests in participating in the social problems game and in defining social problems in a particular way. Charities that deal with children's welfare, such as the NSPCC, campaign both to maintain public awareness of child abuse and neglect, but also to expand definitions to ensure organisational survival (Sherrington 1984; Critcher 2003). Further consideration is given to responses to social problems, in the form of policies and interventions, in the section on solutions below.

Hierarchies of credibility
When it comes to making successful (i.e. persuasive) claims, Loseke (1999, pp34-37) refers to a 'hierarchy of credibility' of claims-makers, a phrase first used by Becker (1963). She places scientists and those with academic credentials at the top in terms of this hierarchy. Professionals are ranked in the middle, and 'regular folks' are at the bottom of the hierarchy.

Loseke asserts that 'social problems involving children are constructed by adults (typically professionals and scientists) speaking on behalf of children' (1999, p.36). She also says that claims by regular folks are often dismissed a 'mere commonsense' (1999, p.36). However, I suggest that in some issues that concern parenting and children, and in certain contexts, claims by parents may be treated with more credibility and authority than experts, such as in recent concerns about the MMR (measles mumps rubella) vaccine for young children.

Where do sociologists rank in this hierarchy? It depends very much upon how sociology is regarded and what particular social problem is being considered. Here is not the place to discuss in depth the status of sociology. However, I propose that sociologists engage in important interpretive work, describing but also *explaining* the social world. There are parallels here with Cain's (1983) account of the work done by lawyers. The practice of the lawyer is that of translating everyday discourses into legal discourse and back into everyday language for clients. 'Discursive translation is a lawyer's defining skill' (Cain 1983, p.116). Sociologists, like lawyers, social workers and health professionals, engage in conceptual interpretive work.

Should sociologists engage in the claims-making process at all? I have shown how Waller (1936) criticises sociologists for unquestioningly adopting the values of humanitarian reformers. Spector and Kitsuse (1977) warn sociologists against imposing their norms on society (which they accuse Merton of doing) and advocate concentrating on monitoring the claims-making process. They acknowledge that sociologists are members of 'ordinary' society, and that as members of a profession they interact and compete with other disciplines and professions. But they wholeheartedly reject participation in the social problems game *as sociologists*.

> When persons, professions or organizations press for public recognition of their theory or explanation of some condition, they cease to analyze the social problem and become part of it. (Spector and Kitsuse 1977, p.69)

Yet social scientists are increasingly required to demonstrate their relevance to policy and practice, and research funding may depend on this. In 2000 the current Home Secretary, David Blunkett, said:

> Social science should be at the heart of policy making … we need social scientists to help to determine what works and why, and what types of policy initiatives are likely to be most effective. (cited in Nutley and Webb 2000, p.13)

Strong regrets that 'we [are] often critics from the side-lines rather than players in the main debates' (1997, p.185), reminding us that sociology started out as a branch of the 'moral sciences'.

2.3.5 Audiences

'Audiences are critical because a social problem is created only when audience members evaluate claims as believable and important' (Loseke 2003, p.27). Social problem claims-makers usually need to convince *several* different groups if they wish their claim to be successful. The message needs to be tailored for presentation to each audience. Loseke outlines the different strategies used for presenting claims in the mass media (1999, p.91) and in the policy making process (1999, p.113). Who needs to be convinced will depend on what solution is proposed to the problem in question. Just as there are hierarchies of credibility for claims-makers, there is also a *hierarchy of audience significance* (Loseke 2003, p.28).

Audiences draw upon practical experience and popular wisdom to evaluate social problem claims. Their attention, time and money, as individuals and as agencies, are limited and are subject to competition from other social problem claims and other matters. Interest in or care about an issue may fade over time – hence the need for effective strategies to sustain interest. Claims-makers need to present a case calculated to persuade, with a rhetoric that shifts according to the intended audience.

Who are the audiences for claims about children left alone at home? I suggest that it is social policy makers (bureaucrats, legislators and judges), policy implementers (professionals and practitioners) and individual parents who are the main targets of such social problem claims. Yet I have already identified some of these as claims-makers, so how can they also be audiences? Conceptualising the social problems process as a game rather than a sequence helps us to recognise that by interpreting

and responding to social problems claims, policy makers and practitioners shape how the problem is defined.

2.3.6 Victims

Victims in social problems claims are a category of people who deserve sympathy because they are constructed as morally good people who are harmed through no fault of their own (Loseke 2003, pp78-79). In this research project the victims are usually the children who are left on their own. They are not held responsible for the situation or harm they have been exposed to and, as children, they are more likely to receive sympathy (Clark 1987, p.298). However, depending on how the problem is presented, and by whom, parents too (especially mothers) may be constructed as victims. Faced with dilemmas of how to fulfil the competing demands of being a parent, including paid employment, shopping, cleaning and caring for other family members, mothers may struggle to provide adequate supervision (Roberts 1996, p.57; Tam 1998, p.128). Parents may also be presented as victims of over-intrusive state surveillance by social workers, as occurred in media reporting of child sexual abuse cases in Cleveland in 1987 (Critcher 2003, p.86).

Etzioni claims that 'the community – that is, all of us – suffers the ill effects of absentee parenting' (1995, p.69). Society as a whole can be presented as a victim of the potential consequences if children are not supervised adequately, becoming what Donzelot terms 'dangerous children' (1979, pp80-82). Dingwall et al. (1984) note that English childcare legislation is designed as much to protect society *from* such children as to deal with children who are the victims of adult cruelty.

In some social problems claims, groups of victims can become claims-makers in their own right. This happened in the Cleveland events referred to above, when parents whose children had been removed formed an action group and got their local MP to take up their concerns (Critcher 2003, p.85). It is harder for child victims to organise themselves, but sometimes adult 'survivors' form self-help groups. An example of this is a network for adults who were abandoned as babies who were not reclaimed by their natural families (Philpot 2004, p.33). The construction of the issue of abandoned babies (or 'foundlings') is one that is closely related to the 'home

alone' problem, since it is the same legislation that covers it (Children and Young Persons Act 1933). However, to my knowledge there is no 'survivors' group' for adults who were left at home alone as children.

2.3.7 Villains

Villains are the people who are constructed as responsible for the social problem condition. This links to Cohen's (1972) concept of 'folk devil', although the latter emphasises the symbolic nature of the construction. Loseke (1999, p.116) reminds us that *power* is an important factor in the social problems game, affecting who are portrayed as the victims and villains. Villains can be individuals, groups, institutions or social structures. As I will discuss in this thesis, all of these have been constructed as villains in different constructions of the 'home alone' issue.

Ladd-Taylor and Umansky (1998) note that 'mother blaming' has taken place in different forms in different eras of American history, with significant dimensions of class and race. They chart how ideas of what is 'good mothering' in one era can then be labelled as 'bad mothering' in the next. This dynamic of ever-changing norms was also observed by Becker, who notes that moral crusaders, such as Prohibitionists, who set the rules at one time can become outsiders themselves, labelled as 'queer' by others (1963, p.153). My analysis of the 'home alone' issue in the UK suggests that this does not just happen in a historical context. While closer supervision of children in the home is called for by some claims-makers, too much surveillance can be framed as a problem in itself, for example, by Furedi (2001), who laments the lack of freedom and autonomy in contemporary children's lives. This is discussed further in chapter 5, *Constructing responses and solutions*.

Social workers can be constructed as villains or folk devils, either for intervening too rigorously, as in the Cleveland events referred to above, or for failing to act to remove children in danger of neglect or abuse (Critcher 2003). A number of child death inquiries in the UK have asked questions as to why social workers did not identify risk factors in families before the abuse was severe enough to result in death, and the media response has been well-documented (Parton 1985; Birchall 1989; Aldridge 1994; Critcher 2003). While one-off incidents of leaving children

unsupervised may not be equated with sustained physical abuse and neglect, social workers risk public criticism both when they intervene in families and when they do not.

2.3.8 Strategies

Social problems claims-makers adopt strategies in *form* and *content* in order to communicate and persuade. Framing the claim around the categories of victims and villains may not be made explicit by the claims-makers, but can be identified through a social constructionist analysis of the claims. Other strategies that are used include: use of the 'difference within sameness' principle; use of rhetoric; emphasis on the objective conditions, including the use of official statistics; and use of dramatic and personal examples. These strategies are explored below.

'Difference within sameness'

While novelty is an important factor in making social problems claims (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988, p.62), entirely new claims may be unsuccessful if people do not have the conceptual categories with which to understand them. In order to attract attention to a claim, a popular framing strategy is to present an issue as something that is new, but not totally new (the 'difference within sameness principle', Loseke 1999, p.81). This principle can be put into practice in two ways. The first is by what Loseke calls *piggybacking*, where a new problem is constructed as a different instance of an already existing problem. Within media studies, Galtung and Ruge (1965 cited in Aldridge 1994, p.20) provide a list of characteristics of what makes something newsworthy, and this includes the factor of 'consonance', i.e. the issue or event fits within an existing frame, but at the same time brings a new angle. Thus, 'home alone' children can be constructed as a new facet of general concerns about standards of parenting or a new formulation of the 'latchkey children' phenomenon.

The second strategy utilising the 'difference within sameness' principle is that of *domain expansion*. A clear example of this is the continual broadening of the category of 'child abuse' since the 1960s. Hacking concludes, 'The idea of child abuse was not fixed in the beginning because standards of normalcy did not exist and are increasingly brought into being' (1991, p.287). Similarly, the definition of

domestic violence has expanded over time. However, Loseke points out that social problem categories are not infinitely expandable – if a social problem category is made too broad then audiences may cease to take it seriously (1999, p.83).

An example of expansion of the 'home alone' issue occurred in the summer of 1999. The Adams, a British couple, left their children of one and five years unattended in their Florida hotel room and were arrested by the US police for child abuse. This caused great outcry in the British press and the parents quickly became known in the British media as the 'hotel alone' couple ('Hotel alone couple arrested', BBC 1999) – an example of how the category of 'home alone' was expanded to fit this new instance. On a more trivial note, Internet searches reveal that the 'home alone' problem category has been extended to encompass leaving *pets* alone at home (e.g. 'Christmas misery for 'home alone' pets', Australian Veterinary Association 1997). More recently, the heat wave of summer 2003 caused 15,000 extra deaths of older people in France. This led to accusations from politicians and the media that families had 'abandoned' elderly relatives, leaving them at 'home alone' over the summer – a claim that was later dropped. However, the crisis prompted deeper questions about the role of the state in providing care for the elderly and the changing status of women ('Corpses prompt French soul searching', BBC 2003a).

Use of rhetoric
Rhetoric is the art of persuasion, which entails winning the sympathy of the audience in the social problems game. Johnson's (1995) analysis of child abuse horror stories in newspapers reveals that they contain properties that evoke *negative emotionality*; that is they elicit a strong emotional response.

The journalistic convention of *ironic contrast* fits the category of 'home alone': home is a cultural concept that evokes images of safety, order, a place where needs are met (Douglas 1991), while 'alone' has negative connotations, is 'not good', especially for children. Feminists have long been critical of women's assignation to the sphere of the home (e.g. Davidoff et al. 1976). Miller (1997) demonstrates how the dualism of the home as 'safe' and the street as 'dangerous' is a relatively recent construction and is one that is perpetuated through myths and other discourses.

A case study by Williams and Williams (1995) illustrates how the rhetorical frame of equal rights and liberal feminism has been adopted and adapted by the fathers' rights movement. The irony here is that the fathers' rights movement arose to undo the changes effected by the women's movement by adopting the strategies of the movement they seek to counter (Williams and Williams 1995, p.208).

Emphasis on objective conditions

Claims-makers often stress the objective conditions of a social problem; it must be shown to be prevalent and close at hand, a condition of emergency even, which must be addressed immediately. The hierarchy of credibility of claims-makers has already been referred to, and experts may be called upon to comment on an issue to give authority to the claim. Best (2001) notes how statistics may be deployed both to persuade people that a problem of some magnitude exists, or that, contrary to the claims of others, there is no problem. He argues that statistics have a 'magical power' to persuade, mainly because of the innumeracy of the general public, which discourages critical thinking. Best calls for a more cautious and critical approach to the interpretation of statistics in social problems claims.

There have been many claims about the numbers of children left at home alone, but these numbers vary hugely. Referring to the US context Rodman notes: 'The wide discrepant variation reflects methodological, ideological, and definitional differences on the part of the estimators' (1990, p.169). Each measure takes a different age group, a different definition of what 'counts' as home alone, and then there is the issue of how that is accurately measured, given the privatised nature of childcare practices, as noted in the introductory chapter to this thesis.

Use of dramatic and personalised examples

'Individual stories of people can be worth countless logic-based claims', writes Loseke (1999, p.87). Using personal stories to illustrate a social problem claim can contribute to a claim's success. Dramatic examples, even if rare and not 'typical' of a social problem category, serve to shape our sense of what the problem is. For example, the bulk of mundane child protection work deals with ambiguous cases of low-level abuse or neglect (Dingwall et al. 1995), but it is stories of horrific injuries that grab the headlines and lead audiences to demand that something be done.

Johnson notes that *decontextualisation* is a rhetorical strategy employed by journalists in reporting child abuse horror stories: 'News reports rip child abuse situations out of their social context' (Johnson 1995, p.24). Best (1997) also notes that TV news stories about dangers to children fail to address questions of social forces, preferring to individualise the problem. This allows stories to be presented in a simplified way, often with clear victims (the child) and villains (the abuser). Giving a fuller picture, in all its complexity, will only serve to dilute the impact of the story as a social problem claim.

The timing of when social problems claims are made is also important. It is perhaps significant that many 'home alone' stories of the mid-1990s appeared in the media at Christmas, when people's capacity for sympathy is heightened, or in the summer, when there may be a shortage of other 'news'. Whether or not secondary claims-makers take up an issue is also contingent upon what other issues are current, as Cohen found in his study of 'mods and rockers' (1972). Aldridge (1994) notes the selectivity exercised by newspapers in deciding which stories to cover; stories of a very similar content may receive very different attention and outcomes, not just because of timing but also because of the features of the people (victims and villains) involved. Stories of clergy sexual abuse of children offer a rich array of symbolic messages (Jenkins 1995). Celebrities can, sometimes unwittingly, become caught up in contested social problems claims. Davis (1994) observes that when Princess Diana admitted to 'spanking' Prince William in 1990 it reopened debates about physical punishment of children.

2.3.9 Responses and solutions: policies and professionals

Social problems claims are, by definition, prescriptive about social change. Claims-makers rarely make claims about social problems without offering solutions, ways to address the 'problem'. Loseke (2003, p.115) distinguishes between social problems claims-makers who focus on *changing policy* and those who focus on *changing culture* (i.e. the way audience members think). The solutions to a social problem will be determined by how the conditions of the problem are constructed. To acknowledge the part played by social structures and social forces in causing a social problem is to assume some responsibility for changing them. As Loseke points out

(1999, p.109), claims which offer relatively easy and low cost solutions are more likely to be successful than ones which call for major social engineering, especially in a field as sensitive as 'the family'.

As demonstrated earlier, organisations and people working in the 'troubled persons industry' continue the dynamic process of defining social problems. Loseke's own research on shelters for battered women shows how the work carried out with women who are identified as clients (which is in itself a definitional process) is one of 'resocialisation': the process of transforming a 'battered woman' into a 'strong woman' (Loseke 1992, p.37). Young writes critically of the 'missionary nature of therapy' (1971, pp73-76) for people with drug and mental health problems, reminding us that people in the 'caring professions' possess the power to control and coerce those who society defines as 'deviant'. 'How something (or someone) is named, identified and placed within a map of the social order has profound consequences for how we act towards it (or them)' writes Clarke (2001, p.6).

2.3.10 Successful and failed social problem claims

Social problems claims are constantly being made and contested, but many of them do not succeed. What constitutes success for a social problem claim? Success in this context does not mean that the problem is addressed and then disappears in an objective sense. Success is measured in terms of whether or not the claims-makers achieve or maintain *ownership* of a problem and have the ability to create and influence the public definition of a problem (Gusfield 1981 cited in Best 1994, p.12). For example, the NSPCC (most recently in their 'Full Stop' campaign) attempts to define the problem of child abuse and thus set (or at least influence) the public agenda.

A successful claim could be said to provoke some kind of response that goes beyond media interest. Hilgartner and Bosk write:

> The construction of social problems occurs within the public arenas. The success (or size, or scope) of a social problem is measured by the amount of attention devoted to it in these arenas. (1988, p.70)

The success of a social problem claim may be attributable the strategies that claims-makers employ and the resources they have to mobilise. Claims may founder on deeply entrenched rival factions never being able to agree on a single problem formulation, as with the case of 'creationists' and 'evolutionists' in US educational policy (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988, p.68). Some problem claims may fail to advance due to active opposition by elites to some problem definitions (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988, p.64).

Reflecting on their study of popular claims (urban legends) about Halloween sadists in the USA, Best and Horiuchi (1985) draw attention to a gap in the social problems literature:

> Theories of social problems construction need to address the processes by which topics become the focus of claims-making activities. Most existing case studies describe relatively successful claims-making efforts, taking for granted the appropriateness of those efforts. But a complete theory of social problems construction would also examine the earliest stages in the process, asking why some social conditions fail to become the focus for claims-making … To define social problems in terms of claims-making without identifying the roots of that process begs the question of why some phenomena become social problems. (Best and Horiuchi 1985, p.497)

It is in the realm of responses and solutions that we see that the claim that social problem claims about 'home alone children' have had only limited success. The solutions offered are as varied as the formulations of the problem itself. It is the ambiguous nature of the 'home alone' issue that means it bubbles up into the public arena from time to time, never fully 'making it' as a social problem, but also never being completely off the agenda. A social constructionist approach enables us to capture this dynamic process. In this thesis I align myself with the constructionist tradition of ethnographic research of a 'troublesome' issue, but contribute something different by looking at an issue that has not quite 'made it' as a social problem.

2.4 Contemporary debates

In this final section of the chapter, I briefly consider how social constructionist perspectives have been taken up in the UK in recent decades and cover some of the

current debates that exist around the validity of social constructionism as an approach to social problems.

2.4.1 Social constructionist approaches in the UK

Much of the explicitly social constructionist literature reviewed thus far has come from the US. Downes and Rock's (2003) overview of criminological theory outlines symbolic interactionist, labelling and phenomenological approaches, but social constructionism is scarcely mentioned, except in a rather scathing tone as a 'reinvention' of phenomenology (p.224). However, this perspective on social problems *has* been taken up in the UK, but only with limited success, and more so among social policy academics than in other disciplines. This may be attributable to the different boundaries between social science disciplines in the two countries. The case study approach appears to be less typical than in US writings. Social constructionist writings in the UK (e.g. Clarke and Cochrane 1998; Clarke 2001; Parton 1985) have a distinctly European flavour, integrating questions of ideology and discourse into analyses of how social problems are constructed.

2.4.2 Recent challenges to social constructionism

Some of the challenges identified by Miller and Holstein (1993a, p.13) come from feminism, Marxism and other perspectives concerned with social critique and change. As stated above, social constructionist perspectives on social problems have been criticised for focusing typically on 'successful' claims. In doing this they neglect powerless or oppressed groups, whose claims never make it to the public scene. The second criticism from these quarters is that theory cannot and should not be value neutral, as advocated by Spector and Kitsuse (1977). While it could be argued that these approaches are incompatible, Loseke believes that these differences can be breached, in that social constructionism can *inform* social criticism in showing how knowledge is socially constructed and reflects the processes of power. She also suggests that social constructionism could expand its domain to consider the talk of powerless groups, even if they are not heard as claims (1999, p.202), but I question how such claims could be *identified* if they do not appear in the public arena. Best denies that the claims of disadvantaged groups are overlooked (1995, p.340).

Manning (1985, pvii) criticises the social constructionist perspective for its 'suffocating blandness', saying that it does not sufficiently take into account the role of the state or economic structures. The discipline of sociology in the US in general could be said to be relentlessly pluralist in outlook, and social constructionism is no exception. However, Clarke and Cochrane (1998) assert that the perspective can be used to analyse contested ideologies, and that its political agnosticism can be seen as a strength:

> Social constructionism as a perspective is not equivalent to any particular form of politics. As a perspective, it is politically agnostic – it makes no direct political claims of its own – except about claims that the social order is natural, eternal, immutable or otherwise fixed. Social constructionism presents an inherent challenge to such claims because of the insistence on social orders being socially constructed. (1998, p.40)

The other major external challenge to social constructionism comes from postmodernism. Loseke (1999) characterises this as a loss of faith in institutions, abandonment of all quests for the 'truth' and a fragmentation of knowledge. In other words, there is no one right way to analyse or understand the world. This might be criticised for being a relativist position. Loseke asserts that in some respects, social constructionism is a *precursor* to postmodernism, since it brackets (questions) all assumptions about objective reality. Like Clarke and Cochrane (1998) cited above, Loseke rejects claims that constructionist approaches are too cynical, insisting that the perspective is empowering and optimistic about social change.

Another charge, related to the one above, is that social constructionism is 'mere debunking'. Best denies that the discipline is simply concerned with exposing mistaken or distorted claims (1995, p.340). To say that an issue or condition is socially constructed is not the same as saying that it does not exist, since this theoretical position asserts that all human knowledge is socially constructed and the product of social interaction (Best 1995, p.341). This leads me to consider the internal debates within social constructionism.

2.4.3 Challenges from within social constructionism

Social constructionism is by no means a unified body of thought. It is rife with
theoretical controversies, particularly around questions of ontology and
epistemology. The axis upon which these debates turn is the status that *objective
conditions* of a putative social problem should play in a social constructionist
analysis. There are actually two questions here – whether objective social conditions
are relevant and whether we can actually study (i.e. know) them at all.

Spector and Kitsuse assert that 'what the sociologist should observe is not the
condition, but how people act in relation to it' (1977, p.34). However, a number of
case studies that claim to adopt a social constructionist approach make selective
reference to objective conditions of social problems, for example in assuming that a
social condition is unchanging and that only the definitions of it change. Woolgar
and Pawluch (1985) accuse such constructionists of 'ontological gerrymandering'
and 'selective relativism', pointing out the inconsistencies in portraying statements
about conditions and behaviours as objective, while relativizing the definitions and
claims made about them (p.216). They demonstrate their argument through a detailed
analysis of Pfohl's constructionist study of child abuse. However, they conclude that
'ontological gerrymandering' is perhaps inevitable, a way of practically managing
the theoretical tension of continual play between objective facts and representations
of those facts (Woolgar and Pawluch 1985, p.224).

In a highly theoretical paper, Ibarra and Kitsuse (1993) reformulate the original
statement made in *Constructing Social Problems* (Spector and Kitsuse 1977). They
deny charges of theoretical inconsistency, squarely laying the blame at the door of
others who have misinterpreted the original formulation and misappropriated the
name of social constructionism. Ibarra and Kitsuse call for a refocusing on the
language and rhetoric in social problems discourse, arguing that we should
concentrate on vernacular claims, *not* the claims of sociologists.

Best (1995) has termed this approach *strict constructionism,* as opposed to the
contextual constructionist position that he favours. Contextual constructionism seeks
to locate claims-making in its social and historical context, acknowledging
assumptions about objective conditions but remaining focused on claims-making as a

process. He states that an assumption-free sociology is an illusion, since assumptions are built into the language (Best 1995, pp343-347). It is with contextual constructionism that I align myself in this research project, keeping in mind Loseke's advice:

> Contextual constructionism allows analysts to make some references or illusions [sic] to the objective world *as long as it is done carefully and as long as the questions remain tightly focused on the process of creating human meaning.* (2003, p.198, original emphasis)

2.5 Research questions

In the light of the above literature review, this thesis sets out to address the following research questions:

- How and why has the issue of children left at home alone been constructed as problematic?
- How do professionals and campaigners respond to and shape the issue through their everyday practice?
- To what extent has it been a 'successful' social problem claim? If not, why not?

2.6 Summary and conclusion

In this chapter I have mapped out the theoretical approach and identified the main analytical tools to be used in this thesis. Such an approach enables me to look, in a theoretically and methodologically coherent way, at the societal reaction to social problems and explore the way that professionals respond to the issue in their everyday practice. The current research project builds on the tradition of qualitative studies from a social constructionist perspective, but takes into account the role of the state and strives to offer something additional in its analysis of a 'not-quite-successful' social problem.

3 Methodology and methods

3.1 Introduction

This study gathered qualitative data from interviews and texts to analyse social problem claims made about children left at home alone. Having set out my research questions at the end of the previous chapter, this chapter spells out the theoretical underpinnings of my research (the methodology), outlines the overall strategy I adopted and details the research techniques used (the methods). I consider the ethical issues and practical dilemmas that arose during the research process and I identify alternative approaches that could have been taken for this research.

3.2 The nature of qualitative research

In this section I look at the philosophical basis for this research project and what characterises qualitative research. The literature review chapter has foreshadowed some of the methodological issues discussed in this chapter. Whereas theories of social problems within the realist perspective share the view that social problems are objectively describable phenomena, 'the constructionist perspective insists on the need to take a step back from this view and ask instead: who says this is a social problem – and what sort of social problem do they say it is?' (Clarke 2001, p.6). In common with the constructionist studies of social problems cited in the last chapter, I adopt a qualitative approach to this research project.

Qualitative research gives us a 'deeper' understanding of social phenomena (Silverman 2000, p.8), and there are lively debates about its underlying philosophical assumptions, its relationship to quantitative social research, the application of its methods and the interpretation and status of its findings. Qualitative research has its roots in the ethnographic methods of anthropology and also in the work of Chicago School of sociology in 1920s and 1930s. There was a surge of renewed interest in the 1960s, as indicated in the previous chapter. Bryman's definition of qualitative research is: 'an approach to the study of the social world which seeks to describe and analyse the culture and behaviour of humans and their groups from the point of view of those being studied' (1988, p.46). Qualitative research studies participants' actions and seeks to reveal the process through which meanings are constructed and

construct (or reproduce) the social world. Qualitative research involves more than describing social phenomena – it goes beyond description, via analysis, to explanation and understanding.

To state that qualitative research assumes an idealist philosophical position and rejects realism would be an oversimplification. A realist position is based on the assumption that there are objective truths about the world, and that these truths can be known and accessed through research. Strict constructionism or idealism asserts that reality is 'mind created' and no single, objective truth can be uncovered. Social constructionism as a philosophical position lies somewhere between the two. Murphy et al. (1998, p.4) distinguish it from the position of subtle or modified realism. My ontological position is that there are multiple layers or versions of social reality, that truth is a discursive concept, but that these versions or discourses *can* be known and studied and generalisations can be made (my epistemological position). I recognise that the process of gathering such evidence or data is situated (i.e. context-specific) and is subject to limitations.

Hammersley acknowledges that 'social research is itself part of the social world' (1992, p.164). While social constructionists, like all sociologists, strive to step back from the subjects of research, calling the taken-for-granted world into question (Best 1995, pp343-4), we cannot step back so far as remove ourselves completely from the picture, and nor should we aspire to (we probably would not be able to see anything from such a place). Rather, we should seek to make our position and assumptions explicit. Such an approach makes for richer and more ethical research. In the final part of this section, I consider two other features of qualitative research that are essential for this current research project – sensitivity and reflexivity.

The qualitative researcher needs to be sensitive to historical, cultural, political, and contextual aspects of the research topic (Silverman 1993, pp6-8). This links to contextualism or holism, a feature of qualitative research identified by Bryman (1988), which entails a commitment to understanding events, values, behaviours etc. in their context. He writes, 'we can understand events only when they are situated in the wider social and historical context' (Bryman 1988, p.65). Such an approach resonates with the contextual constructionism of Best (1995), cited in the previous

chapter, and is pertinent to the study of social problems. Although this thesis is not a historical or cultural studies analysis of the 'home alone' issue, I draw on historical and cultural texts to give a fuller understanding of the issue. Sensitivity also applies to the research tools chosen – they need to be sensitive to the task required to them, to detect nuances and differences (if they indeed exist).

Reflexivity has two dimensions: endogenous and referential (May 1998). Endogenous reflexivity requires an awareness of how my actions and interpretations as a researcher contribute to the constitution of the social reality I am seeking to understand. Put more simply, this involves critical self-scrutiny by the researcher (Mason 1996, p.5). Referential reflexivity is relevant too. As demonstrated in the literature review chapter, the role and position of social scientists in the social problems claims-making process is a contested one. I recognise that in engaging in this research I participate in the construction process, contributing to the definition of the phenomenon as a social issue (in some senses 'firming it up' as a problem category), worthy of attention and resources. In effect, I 'muddy the waters' as soon as I start to look. Reflexivity requires awareness that I am not just a neutral observer but also an actor in the process.

3.3 Research strategy and design

For this study I adopted an emergent design, meaning that my research strategy changed as the project developed. There were contingent factors that led me to make certain decisions about selecting and working with my data. For example, I had initially planned to interview parents as well as professionals, and had intended to make analysis of newspaper coverage a much bigger part of the project. I dropped the former idea once I decided to adopt a social construction of social problems approach to the research topic. Bearing in mind Silverman's (2000, p.42) warning against becoming overloaded with data and his advice to aim to 'say a lot about a little' (p.41), the newspaper analysis element became less crucial as my sample of interview respondents grew and revealed rich data in its own right. Remaining flexible is a feature of qualitative research and this should be seen as a strength rather than a weakness.

Mason (1996, p.141) writes eloquently about how, in qualitative research, theory development and empirical data collection are interwoven in a dialectical relationship. I certainly experienced the research as an iterative process, not a sequential application of methods – as I learned more about the topic of children left at home alone (including the background literature on social problems), my ideas and research strategy changed, and ideas continued to develop throughout the writing-up process. Such an approach is neither purely deductive nor inductive (in the former theory comes first, in the latter theory comes last). It draws upon ideas from grounded theory, first formulated by Glaser and Strauss (1967 cited in Mason 1996, p.142), which refers to the process of generating theory from the data gathered using a 'constant comparative method'. However, my research project more accurately reflects a 'foreshadowed problems approach' (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995), in that I approached the data collection and analysis with orienting ideas and research questions, but remained open to new questions, other data and additional potential avenues for research.

The data for this research project was gathered by 'asking questions' and 'reading the papers', rather than 'hanging around' (Dingwall 1997, p.53). I explored how the issue of children left alone at home has been constructed as a social problem through semi-structured interviews with professionals and campaigners, and through documentary analysis. Yin (1994) would argue that this is a case study approach, in that it addresses how and why research questions to examine a contemporary phenomenon in its 'real-life' context, where the relevant behaviours cannot be manipulated. Mason (1996) cautions against the integration of methods, as their epistemologies are not always compatible. It is perhaps worth making explicit that I did not use multiple methods as a form of triangulation. To do so would assume that I was exploring a single social phenomenon in a number of different ways, and would contradict the ontological and epistemological positions I set out above. In the sections below I explain how I implemented this strategy in practice, dealing first with interviews and then with documentary research.

3.4 Interviews

This section begins with a consideration of the status of interview data and justifies its choice as the main method of this study. I then account for the process of selection and sampling, and describe how I gained access to interview respondents, carried out the interviews and recorded the data.

3.4.1 The status of interview data

Types of interviews range across a continuum of standardisation, from highly standardised questions with a closed range of possible responses through to non-standardised 'depth' interviews. Standardised interviews tend to be based on a positivist or realist assumption that reality is 'out there' and can be accessed with the correct methods and procedures. Feminist researchers (e.g. Oakley 1981) have criticised standardised interviews for the tendency for the researcher to impose preconceived ideas on respondents and for failing to make explicit the hierarchical power relationship between interviewer and respondent. Qualitative interviews (i.e. semi-structured or non-standardised interviews) offer the benefits of flexibility and depth. Interviews are appropriate when the researcher wants to find out something that cannot be directly observed. They are attributed with having the capacity for accessing respondents' definitions and interpretations of the social world, the 'insider's perspective' (Jensen 1989 cited in Murphy et al. 1998, p.8), the very phenomena that characterise the subject matter of much qualitative research.

However, the status of interview data is highly contested. What can interview data actually tell us about the social world? Kvale (1996) and Gudmundsdottir (1996) liken qualitative interviews to a *conversation*. Dingwall rejects this analogy: 'an interview is not a conversation. It is a deliberately created opportunity to talk about something that the interviewer is interested in' (1997, p.59). Kvale and Gudmundsdottir would not disagree with Dingwall that an interview is a socially situated activity, and that meaning and narrative are constructed (both by respondent *and* interviewer) via the interview process. Where they differ is in their view of the usefulness of such socially constructed narratives. Dingwall asserts that interviews, whether standardised or non-standardised, are a form of role-playing or impression management (Goffman 1959), which produces *accounts* (Scott and Lyman 1968).

Respondents strive to present themselves as rational, competent actors. While these accounts may be of interest to researchers, we cannot know their relationship to 'reality', i.e. we cannot assume whether or not they accurately reflect respondents' experiences. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995), however, insist that people who participate in any setting acquire important knowledge that can be an important resource for the researcher (Murphy et al. 1998). The lesson to be learned from this heated debate, particularly from the radical critique offered by Dingwall and others, is that while interviews can be helpful in revealing multiple perspectives of social phenomena, we should treat such findings with caution and never assume that they can uncover authentic human experience (Murphy et al. 1998).

3.4.2 Selection and sampling for interviews

Linking back to the theoretical concepts outlined towards the end of chapter 2, the major piece of fieldwork for this study was interviews with social problems claims-makers – both those who Becker (1963) calls 'moral entrepreneurs', who participate in the claims-making process at a national level, and professionals those who implement policy in practice on a local level, Becker's 'moral enforcers'. The sampling strategy was guided by my research questions but also by pragmatism. I adopted a *theoretical* or *purposive* sampling strategy. The sample was drawn from key organisations and professional groups that are involved in some way with the issue of children left alone at home. This involved at national level selecting child welfare and safety charities that were identified as having expressed some view on the 'home alone' issue since 1990, and at local level selecting health, social, police, education and fire services and voluntary sector organisations that work with children and families and may encounter the issue of children left at home alone on a day-to-day basis.

This sampling strategy allowed me to review decisions about sampling during the research process: for example, in the light of early interviews and documentary research, I later approached individuals or agencies not recognised in my preliminary plan. There was an element of *snowball* sampling too, as some respondents suggested or introduced other people to talk to as part of my research. A purposive sampling strategy also allowed me to stop sampling when I felt I had gathered

sufficient data. I deal with each set of interviews in the order in which they were carried out, starting with the local level sample.

3.4.3 Local sample characteristics

Between February 2001 and April 2002 I carried out semi-structured interviews with 29 professionals working in a variety of settings all based in one city. The city has a population of about 300,000 and is located in central England. A unitary city authority provides local government services. Data from the 2001 census show that the ethnic diversity of the population reflects averages for England and Wales and that the economy is generally strong, but there are several pockets of severe social deprivation in the city. The sample characteristics are listed in table 1.

Table 1 Sample of local level respondents

Health services	Voluntary sector	Social services	Police and fire services	Education welfare services	Sample total
9	8	7	3	2	29

Twenty-one of the local respondents were women and eight were men. Some respondents were frontline workers (health visitors, social workers etc); some were managers (at team or senior level). However, it was the *setting* that was the unit of sampling, rather than the precise job role. I refer to all of these respondents in this thesis collectively as 'professionals' or 'practitioners', although when quoting from the interview data, I distinguish between social workers and managers to contextualise the data extract. I have grouped two research settings as voluntary organisations, even though their role is quasi-statutory, or has some statutory elements. This is mainly to reduce the chances of identification, and because their organisational structures resemble the voluntary sector more than statutory services. Some respondents or organisations covered an area wider than the city boundary (e.g. covering the county or the region), but as their work was based in the city, they were eligible for participation in the research.

3.4.4 National sample characteristics

I interviewed ten people working in voluntary organisations at a national level between October 2001 and January 2002, after the majority of the local level interviews had been completed. While there is considerable overlap between organisations concerned with child welfare, for the purposes of this thesis I have categorised the organisations as being focused on: a) children; b) childcare; c) parenting support; and d) safety promotion and accident prevention. A breakdown of the sample is shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2 Sample of national level respondents

Children's charities	Childcare charity	Parenting support charities	Safety charities	Other	Sample total
4	1	2	2	1	10

Two of these respondents were men and eight were women. Six of the respondents worked at senior management level, and three at director level of voluntary organisations. In addition I interviewed a barrister in child law who is not linked to a particular charity. In presenting the data, I have not distinguished national level respondents by role to reduce the chance of recognition, although this is sometimes difficult to avoid in such a small field. As with the local sample above, the unit of sampling was the setting or organisation, not the job role within it. The organisations varied enormously in size and structure, from a handful of people operating out of a private home through to large organisations, with regional as well as national offices. However, the scale of an organisation was not an important factor in selecting them for interview, nor did it necessarily reflect their influence in the claims-making process.

3.4.5 Access and recruitment

Access to both samples of settings was made via letter, accompanied by a summary of the research project (copies of these are available in *Appendix A* and *Appendix B* respectively). I made direct contact with organisations or respondents in some cases and negotiated via 'gatekeepers' in others. The presentation of myself as researcher and the framing of my research project needed careful consideration. My social work

qualification may have assisted in gaining access to some settings and it certainly gave me an understanding of the constraints under which professionals work. However, I am aware of the potential this may have for limiting or 'filtering' my access to individuals or particular data. For example, the antipathy between social workers and health visitors is noted by Dingwall et al. (1995). In addition, if respondents treated me primarily as a fellow professional rather than a researcher, they may have assumed that I had certain tacit knowledge and not made some things explicit in their interview accounts.

For many research projects, negotiating access to the research setting is an important task, but once in, the researcher can quickly get on with gathering data. I recognised at the outset that gaining access to a number of settings for my research project was going to be a challenge. However, I did not anticipate fully just how much time and effort it would entail. This was particularly true of negotiating access to local level statutory organisations (health, social services, police), where hierarchy and bureaucracy prevailed. In some settings it took up to six months between sending an initial letter to a senior figure and arranging an interview with a practitioner. Initial letters were followed up with telephone calls and, in a few cases, second letters were sent, as my first letter had been 'passed on to the relevant person or team', never to be seen again. It was difficult to achieve the fine balance between being assertive about negotiating access while respecting the workload and timescale of the people I was trying to contact. High turnover of staff, departmental reorganisation and long-term sickness, features of many public services, also played their part in making access a challenging process. Pressure within social services in particular meant that my sample was biased towards managers than frontline social workers, mainly because staff in some children and families teams were unable or unwilling to respond.

Nor were small-scale voluntary organisations necessarily easier to reach. As major providers of services I felt it was important to include voluntary sector organisations in my research, especially given the current Labour government's emphasis on voluntary sector support for parents as part of its family policy (Home Office 1998). However, several voluntary organisations at local level declined to participate in the

project and it is not clear whether this was because of lack of resources or because they felt that the research project was not relevant to their work.

I gave presentations at staff meetings of health visitors in two areas of the city to outline my research and to recruit respondents. I circulated leaflets and a sign-up list, which was an efficient way of recruiting health visitor respondents. I later learned that health visitors in the chosen city are a frequently researched, perhaps 'over-researched', group, making me feel guilty to have taken yet more of their time, but many of them appeared enthusiastic about participating in the research project. There may be issues about whether this group is actually representative of health visitors generally if they are very practised at participating in research. The fact that the respondents in this setting had an opportunity to question me and (very briefly) discuss the issue as a group might also have a bearing on data gathered in subsequent interviews. However, without this group approach, I do not think I would have been successful in recruiting sufficient respondents from this profession.

Gaining access to respondents in national organisations was more straightforward, somewhat to my surprise. Perhaps this was because respondents at this level were accustomed to talking to researchers and journalists – it is part of their daily work to explain to others their policies and campaigns. By contrast, frontline professionals had to take time out of busy agendas to talk about and reflect on their experience and practice, in a way that was not part of their daily work.

Through conducting the local level interviews in the city, I built up a fairly comprehensive picture of services to children and families. I noted early on during the research project that there was no obvious umbrella body encompassing family and childcare services in the city, which could have helped me in gaining access. The nearest I came was by attending a one-off conference held by a voluntary family centre in September 2000, just as my project entered the fieldwork stage. Children and families' services continue to be in state of flux, and the publication of the green paper *Every Child Matters* in November 2003 (Department for Education and Skills) proposes major reform of child welfare services. The constantly changing context in which I conducted my fieldwork has implications not only for the way in which I went about my research, but also for the relevance and application of the findings.

3.4.6 Interview format and process

Interviews were semi-structured and took place at the respondent's workplace, lasting between 30 minutes and 1 hour 30 minutes in length. On some occasions there was difficulty in finding a private space to talk, so one interview was carried out in a shared office space and another was held in a file store room. One interview was with two education welfare officers, due to one respondent inviting a colleague from another school to attend the interview. This gave the interview a different dynamic, and it was written up as a single transcript. Thus I carried out 38 interviews in total with 39 respondents.

The interview schedules in their final form are included in *Appendix C* and *Appendix D*. The questions were developed in the light of my review of the social problems literature and from previous research on professionals' definitions of child abuse and neglect. I revised my interview schedule slightly as my research progressed, partly to reduce the length of time needed for professionals who were hard-pressed, but also as some questions emerged as unnecessary, or when new questions arose. For example, I initially included a question asking whether the respondent was a parent. However, I realised that, as a non-parent, I felt very defensive about such a question myself (indeed I was asked it in a couple of interviews), and so I changed it to a general invitation to the respondent to draw upon their own parenting experience if they wished. Many respondents readily referred to their own parenting experience as a way of framing their responses, perhaps because the issue of children left at home alone is so undeveloped in their professional setting. Interviews with the national level sample were more diverse because of wider variation between the different organisations sampled.

I did not stick rigidly to the interview schedule; rather it served as a guide for a structured conversation. In many interviews, the information flowed readily and explicit questions did not need to be asked. I also added questions on an ad hoc basis in response to the individual interview situation. Rather than talk about the issue of children left at home alone in general terms, I encouraged respondents to recall specific incidents that they had been involved in that were relevant to this issue. This

is similar to Ayre's (1998) adaptation of 'critical incident technique', through which child protection decisions were explored.

> Experience of using this technique suggests that considerations of what was actually done in specific individual incidents is likely to produce more useful, specific, task-related descriptions of successful performance than the more generalized statements of values and principles often produced using more unstructured interview techniques. (Ayre 1998, p.332)

Another way of exploring practice and values in context is by using vignettes, and I used these in interviews with the local level sample. Vignettes are 'short stories about hypothetical characters in specified circumstances, to whose situation the interviewee is invited to respond' (Finch 1987, p.105). Justifications for the use of vignettes as a research technique are outlined in Finch (1987) and Barter and Renold (1999). Studies in the field of child abuse and neglect that have used vignettes include Giovannoni and Becerra (1979), Fox and Dingwall (1985) and Stone (1998). Vignettes can be used in surveys as well as qualitative interviews, and responses can be closed (such as choosing from a fixed set of responses or ranking on a numerical scale) or open, prompting less structured responses. They were used in the latter way in this research project.

I developed a range of vignettes that covered different factors that I anticipated would be significant, such as age of child, time of day and length of absence. The full range of five vignettes is presented in *Appendix E*. I drew examples from my own practice experience as a social worker, previous research and stories from the media. The vignettes were piloted in a graduate student workshop in the School of Sociology and Social Policy in 1999. During the fieldwork stage I added one vignette, covering a situation involving a child caring for other children in a 'babysitting' role, as this was a concern that many professionals raised during interviews.

Towards the end of each local level interview, I selected two vignettes that reflected the age range of the children that the respondent focused on (e.g. health visitors work with families with children up to the age of 5). The vignettes were presented, one at a time, on a strip of card. I asked the respondent how they would respond if they came

across this incident, and what (if anything) would worry them about the situation described. In many cases, the scenarios presented were remarkably similar to a situation already described to me during the interview, although on one occasion the respondent commented that she did not 'like' my vignettes at all. I thought she was implying that they were unrealistic, so sought to assure her that they were drawn from 'real life' situations. However, what she meant was that she judged all of the examples given unacceptable and inappropriate, even though she acknowledged that they happened.

Immediately after most interviews, I wrote fieldnotes about my impressions of how the interview went or observations of the setting. These were then typed up at the end of the relevant interview transcript. I had one opportunity for ethnographic observation when I attended a fire safety information session for school children, which preceded an interview with an officer based at the fire station. This gave me insight into how fire safety messages are put across and I talked informally with a range of professionals, including a health promotion officer, a nurse working in a hospital burns unit and several fire officers, as well as with some of the children present. Although I did not include these observations in my formal analysis, the experience still contributed to my thinking about the research process.

3.4.7 Recording and transcribing the interview data

In all but two of the interviews, respondents gave their consent to be tape-recorded. Two of the local interviews were not tape-recorded, but notes were taken at the time, and written up afterwards. One tape-recorded interview (with a fire officer) proved impossible to transcribe, due to the acoustics of the room where it had taken place. All the remaining interviews with local practitioners were fully transcribed. Some of the national level interviews were transcribed in full, while the rest were selectively transcribed. This was due to time restraints on transcribing and also because interviews at this level were generally more wide-ranging and not all the content was relevant to the current study. Therefore the analysis was carried out on 35 transcripts. The initials of each respondent were changed on both the cassette tapes and the transcripts. I carried out much of the transcribing myself and some were transcribed

by another person who signed a confidentiality agreement not to disclose the contents of the transcripts nor to discuss them with anyone but myself.

3.5 Documents

Documentary research was carried out as part of the background, orienting work for this thesis. I did this primarily in order to refine the research questions and to identify the sample for interviews, but I also draw on these documents as data in their own right. This section, mirroring the previous section on interviews, discusses the status of documentary data in qualitative research. I then describe how and why I selected the documents, and how these documents were accessed.

3.5.1 The status of documentary data

There are different genres of document, ranging from informal to formal or official, each with distinctive styles and conventions. Written texts are not the only potential source – photographs, advertisements and posters also provide rich data, and these are particularly relevant in researching problem claims concerning children, due to their powerful visual imagery (Holland 1992). Textual sources have been relatively neglected within qualitative research. 'Qualitative sociologists make too little of the potentialities of texts as rich data' (Silverman 1993, p.89). A number of reasons for this are suggested by Murphy et al. (1998, p.123), who point out that documents are a major feature of contemporary society and an important source of data. Documents are a means of social groups representing themselves collectively to themselves and to others, but their position in sociological research is not unproblematic. In addition to questions of authenticity and accuracy, there is the question of how to treat the data. Atkinson and Coffey (1997, p.47) call for documents to be treated as 'social facts', significant in their own right and not second best to other data (e.g. used to validate, support, or cross-check data from other sources). However, documents do not offer transparent representations of reality or 'windows onto social phenomena' (Watson 1997, p.84); rather they construct particular kinds of representations and they provide a unique version of reality. Like interview data, documents are products of the context in which they were generated. This position is congruent with a social constructionist approach.

3.5.2 Selection and sampling of texts

The texts I draw on for this research fall into three categories:

- news media;
- policy and legal documents; and
- educational and campaign literature

I adopted a purposive sampling strategy for the documentary element of this research, which served to provide background information, focus the research questions and suggest potential settings for interviews.

Newspaper articles covering 'home alone' stories from the 1990s were located using Internet searches, CD ROMs and references in secondary material. I gained access to articles available electronically or in local archives, so carried out a full search for articles referring to children left at home alone in the *Guardian*, *Independent* and *Times*. In addition, the news archives of the BBC and Ananova were searched online for 'home alone' stories. As stated earlier in this chapter, I had originally envisaged that this would form a larger part of the study. Due to the wealth of data gained through interviews and the time and resource implications of travelling to national archives, I decided against doing a more comprehensive analysis of media coverage. Reflecting on her own research experience, Aldridge writes, 'Reading old newspapers is great fun, but alarmingly slow' (1994, p.3).

Policy documents were located using literature searches and secondary sources. It was harder to identify relevant policy documents because few dealt explicitly with the topic, and certainly did not use the tag 'home alone'. However, the issues of parental supervision and childcare are implicit across a wide range of policy discussions about parenting skills, pre-school and out of school provision, anti-social behaviour, social exclusion and the relationship between paid employment and parenting. Searches of several law databases (Current Legal Information, Lawtel and Westlaw) under the terms 'home alone', 'parental supervision' and 'child abandonment and neglect' produced case law involving criminal charges of neglect under the Children and Young Persons Act 1933 in England and Wales and the Children and Young Persons (Scotland) Act 1937. These searches also threw up a

handful of legal practitioner articles commenting on the legal complexities around the 'home alone' issue (e.g. Practitioners' Child Law Bulletin 1993; Mays 1996).

Campaign literature and educational materials produced by voluntary organisations concerned with child welfare and safety were identified using the above techniques and by contacting organisations which I knew or suspected to have contributed to the 'home alone' debate in the 1990s. I also drew on parenting handbooks (e.g. Johnson 1996; Elliott 1996) and a literature search of the term 'home alone' carried out by the National Children's Bureau in 1994, when I first became interested in the topic (see Chapter 1, *Introduction*). Examples of this kind of literature include: *Home Alone*, a brochure published by the NSPCC for parents in 1993, and subsequently reprinted, most recently in 2000; *Home Safe* (Suzy Lamplugh Trust 1996), an educational video for children and accompanying materials for parents and teachers, produced by a national safety charity; and *Home Alone Too?* (Kids' Clubs Network 1997), a summary of research carried out by a charity concerned with out of school childcare. These documents were analysed for their content, but also gave valuable pointers to whom to interview and where else to look for documents. Some of the documents were actually given or suggested to me during interviews, so formed the basis of some discussion in the interview, including how and why the materials were produced and how they had been received.

3.5.3 Internet 'texts'

Recent research has explored how parents use the Internet as a source of information and how it might be used to learn parenting skills (O'Connor and Madge 2001). I observed a massive increase in the amount and type of information on the 'home alone' issue available on the Internet since first commencing this research in 1999. At that time, practically all web-based sources referring to the topic were from the US or Canada, with few, if any, UK references. In just the last year or so, a number of UK organisations, including NSPCC, BUPA, Child Accident Prevention Trust, local authorities and police forces, have issued web-based guidance to parents and children on being at 'home alone'. In addition, the issue has been discussed online on parenting and other networks (e.g. 'Home alone', UK-learning.net 2004). Clearly, like other texts, Internet information varies widely in genre, content and purpose and

its status as data cannot be taken for granted. While I cannot claim to have sampled web-based information in a systematic way, regular searches have helped me to keep track of the 'home alone' issue in the public arena and I do make use of Internet texts that I have found as evidence of social constructions of the issue. The role of the Internet in shaping and spreading social problems claims is an area for future academic work.

3.6 Data analysis

This section covers how I analysed the data. I have been inspired by Ewick and Silbey's (1998, pp251-261) clear account of their methods, in particular their methods of analysis and their concept of 'secrets and wizardry' in research. Presenting this after my account of how I gathered the data may suggest that data collection and data analysis are discrete and linear, but this is rarely the case in qualitative research. Qualitative data analysis can be described in everyday language as a process of 'noticing, collecting and thinking' (Seidel 1998). Mason (1996) asserts that data can be 'read' literally, interpretively and reflexively, and although my overall perspective is an interpretive one, I used all three approaches to some extent. Proper analysis goes beyond a list, says Silverman (2000, p.43). He also warns that 'if you treat social reality as constructed in different ways in different contexts, then you cannot appeal to a single 'phenomenon' which all your data apparently represent' (2000, p.50).

In many ways, all qualitative analysis is concerned with text. Data gathering by methods such as observation and interviews produces documents in the forms of fieldnotes and transcripts, and the process by which the data becomes transformed into text is an important one (Mason 1996, p.72). A similar process of transformation takes place when gathering data from documentary sources, since it is rarely possible nor desirable for such data to be recorded literally. The chosen analytical approach influences how data is selected and recorded. It also influences how data is sorted and ordered, since no cataloguing or indexing system is analytically neutral (Mason 1996, p.108).

My analysis involved looking for themes, common threads, contrasts and differences, as well as silences. It was guided by my reading of other research, particularly the social problems literature reviewed in the previous chapter, but also writing on parenting, childhood and on the work of welfare professionals. Loseke's (1999) key analytical concepts (claims, claims-makers, victims, villains, solutions etc.) were particularly useful as a guide. When I began the analysis, I started by looking for evidence of blame, responsibility and selfishness in the data. However, early on I noticed that more often, in both interviews and texts (excepting some newspaper media), there was a reluctance to blame parents. They presented children left alone at home as only being a problem in *certain* circumstances, when certain parents and/or children were involved. More often, it appeared that the problem was being actively resisted rather than actively constructed.

My analytical approach was also informed by discourse analysis, drawing on Foucault's ideas about knowledge and power: 'Dominant discourses give shape to what is seen as right and wrong in society and shape the solutions which are preferred' (Murphy et al. 1998, p.128). As Silverman points out (2000, p.42), Foucault himself provides no clear methodology, but others have used his ideas to develop a methodological approach (e.g. Kendall and Wickham 1998).

Transcribing, reading and re-reading the interview data helped me to familiarise myself with it. During the interview process I attempted to keep track of ideas, patterns, themes and connections as they emerged in a research journal. When most of the interviews at local level had been carried out, I devised a coding framework to apply to the transcribed data. This was formulated first on the basis of a handful of transcripts, and was revised and added to as coding progressed. I had planned to make use of Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) to assist in the organisation and retrieval of data, and indeed undertook training and started to use The Ethnograph. However, after encountering several computer errors and difficulties with formatting, I took a pragmatic decision to abandon this route and code my data manually. This was done using a variety of coloured highlighter pens and sticky-backed notes. This was manageable for the number of interviews in this study, although I realise that such a process could become unwieldy with larger datasets. I created an index so that I could quickly locate all the data marked under

each code, and over time I pulled extracts into computer files so that I could read and compare coded extracts next to each other. Coffey et al. remind us that

> CAQDAS offers a variety of useful ways of organizing data in order to search them, but coding data for use with computer programs is not *analysis*. It is important to avoid the misapprehension that coding and computing lend a scientific gloss to qualitative research. (1996, para 7.6)

Like most qualitative data analysis, my codes fell somewhere in between objectivist and heuristic coding and I treated codes as 'flags or signposts that point to things in the data' (Seidel 1998, p.14). My codes were broadly categorised into the following:

- descriptive features of the 'home alone' issue [FEA]
- concerns and risks [RIS]
- children and childhood [CHI]
- parents and parenting [PAR]
- agency structures and policies [AGE]
- law [LAW]
- state policies [STA]
- professional responses [PRO]
- solutions [SOL]

Under each category a number of sub-categories were listed. For example, I used the code word 'PRO PAREX' to mark all the occasions when respondents refer to their own parenting experience. The code 'CHI VULN' was used to indicate data where the vulnerability of children was mentioned. Responses to vignettes were separately coded, as well as under the categories listed above, to enable a comparison of responses.

With hindsight, I recognise that much of the substantive data analysis occurred *after* the coding had been done, and many of my codes were not used later on. Deciding on a coding frame requires making a commitment at a particular stage in the research, but the process of noticing, collecting and thinking continues. Were I to code my data again, I would probably choose more analytical categories, such as Scott and Lyman's (1968) justifications and excuses (which are discussed in relation

to the data in chapter 6). However, this is not to say that the coding process was irrelevant, as it required me to immerse myself in the data and start to make sense of the wealth of information gathered. Hunt and Benford write, 'interpreting is a continuous monitoring process that takes place before, during and after a research performance' (1997, p.116). This highlights the fact that qualitative data analysis is itself a process of construction.

In the case of the documentary element to this research, analysis involved looking at the content of the document, but also the context in which it was produced; its intended purpose, process of production, mode of circulation and use to which it is put. My theoretical approach led me to have a particular interest in the 'mechanics of persuasion' – the use of language, especially rhetoric, as a strategy to persuade audiences of the validity of certain social problems claims. Atkinson and Coffey (1997) encourage the researcher to ask questions about authorship and readership, both actual and implied. They observe that official documents often do not identify the author(s): 'The absence of an implied personal author is one rhetorical device that is available for the construction of 'authoritative', 'official' or 'factual' accounts' (Atkinson and Coffey 1997, p.59).

3.7 Reporting and disseminating the findings

The process of writing up involves imposing a narrative structure, i.e. a logical order, on what has been an iterative (and sometimes messy) process, a weaving back and forth of theory and method. I kept a research journal throughout, enabling me to trace the development of concepts and categories, record false leads and dead ends, frustrations and breakthroughs, and, importantly, it contributed to an attitude of reflexivity.

As with other textual documents, social science is written in a context, with specific academic conventions and implied audiences. As well as forming the basis for this PhD thesis, it is hoped that the research findings will be reproduced, at least in part, in journals or other publications. Becker writes, 'Your research project isn't done until you have written it up and launched it into the conversation by publishing it' (1986, p.124), and I found this useful in motivating me to complete the sometimes

difficult task of writing this thesis. However, the conversation on this research has already commenced. Elements of this project have been presented at conferences and seminars throughout the research process, giving valuable opportunities for reflection and feedback that have fed into this final product.

Just as social problems claims-makers use mechanics of persuasion, researchers also utilise rhetoric – to persuade the reader that the research findings are valid, reliable and that the author or researcher can be trusted (Seale 1999). Bryman (1998, p.155) notes that qualitative and quantitative research use different rhetoric of persuasion. Coffey et al. (1996) write of a 'rediscovery of rhetoric': 'Rhetoric is no longer consigned to the margins of legitimate scholarship. It has more recently been recognized as central to scholarly work and production' (para 3.1).

3.8 Ethical issues

My research design did not involve direct contact with vulnerable groups or a particularly sensitive topic (although it *is* one that is contested), but this did not make me complacent about ethical issues. Respondents can be at their most vulnerable at the point of dissemination of data (Murphy et al. 1998, p.10). My research did not require names and details of individual clients, but case details recounted in interviews were sometimes distinctive and may be recognisable. Where this is a possibility, I have been careful not to present large chunks of data at once. The initials of respondents on cassettes and transcripts were changed (in a systematic way known only to me) before transcription began, and both cassettes and transcripts were stored securely in a locked filing cabinet.

A potential ethical issue that I had identified beforehand was: what if I encountered professional malpractice or learned that children may currently be at risk? My professional ethics, both as a researcher and a social worker, would have required me to take the matter to a line manager or, if necessary, make a direct child protection referral myself. Although, thankfully, I did not come across with dilemma in practice, with hindsight I realise that I did not make this clear to individual respondents, even though they were aware of my professional background. Were I to carry out this research again, I would make this explicit in the contact letter and in

the opening of the interview, as it has an impact on respondents giving their informed consent.

As noted earlier, some respondents related details about their own parenting practices which might, if presented in a certain way, expose them to criticism. For this reason, I have been careful in what I reveal about respondents' parenting experiences in the way I present the interview data.

A particular dilemma that arose relating to confidentiality was the interviewing of a number of colleagues within the same team. Clearly, some respondents knew that I had also interviewed other members of the team. In several interviews, respondents expressed an interest in knowing what colleagues had said and some went on to speculate on how others answered. While I insisted that I was unable to disclose the contents of other interviews, it made me wonder whether colleagues 'compared notes' afterwards, and how this might have influenced interviews that I later carried out in the same team. The only way to avoid this would have been to interview everyone on the same day, and not to have permitted contact between colleagues for that day. This would have been impractical and intrusive, and perhaps overestimates the significance of my research as a topic of conversation among colleagues! However, the potential for research to impact on professional practice through feedback (a form of reflexivity) has been identified by Bloor (1997).

Ethical issues in research using documents and visual data were less immediate but still need to be considered (Mason 1996, p.78). On some occasions, during interviews, I was given 'grey' material, such as internal memos, unpublished research reports and policy guidance, which if cited in the bibliography, could possibly reveal the site of my research. In accessing 'public' documents such as newspapers and policy literature, no crucial ethical issues arose.

3.9 Alternative approaches

Had I adopted a different approach to this research topic, I could have asked questions such as how many children are left alone on a daily basis, what means of childcare do parents use, what are the rates of accidents that befall children left at

home alone, or how many referrals to do with 'home alone' children are received by police and social services departments? However, such an approach assumes a realist position. Such quantitative research may be usefully studied *as part of the claims-making process*. As already mentioned, reference to statistics from official or academic sources can be used a strategy to persuade audiences that a social problem exists (Best 2001), but their 'truth' or accuracy is irrelevant; they are of interest only as constructions.

Another approach would have been to explore definitions of and responses to child neglect. Giovannoni and Becerra (1979) used vignettes to elicit and compare professional and lay definitions of child maltreatment in the USA. Respondents were asked to rate each vignette according to the seriousness from the standpoint of the welfare of the child. This research included questions on the issue children left unsupervised at home.

Ribbens laments that 'much research on family lives is rooted in the concerns of professionals, or publicly defined social policy issues, rather than the concerns of family members themselves' (1994, p.13). This research could be criticised on such grounds. An alternative qualitative approach would have been to study the experience of parenting, in particular decisions around childcare, such as the interpretive approach adopted by Ribbens (1994) and Tam (1998) in their interview studies with mothers. I am aware that children's voices are missing from this thesis, yet the thesis is, at least in part, about children. What are children's views and experiences of being left at home alone? Research in burgeoning field of childhood studies suggests that children value highly the time when they are not under adult supervision (ESRC 2000; Solberg 1990).

Since observation is argued by some to be the qualitative method of choice (e.g. Dingwall 1997), would observation have been possible in this study? Murphy et al. (1998, p.119) note that family life is not easily open to prolonged direct observation. Observation in a social services duty team would have been fascinating and lively, but would be subject to a number of practical and ethical constraints. Being only interested in particular kinds of cases, I may have spent a lot of time waiting for a 'home alone' referral to come in. 'The research community is perhaps too populated

by researchers who overestimated their ability simply to 'hang around' in a setting or location and to 'soak up' relevant data,' writes Mason (1996, p.68).

3.10 Presentation of the interview data

A brief note is necessary on how I present the interview data in subsequent chapters. In order to distinguish it from extracts from documents and quotes from the literature, interview data extracts are presented in a different font, and are followed by a 'label' for the respondent who said it (for local level interviews this refers to the job title of the respondent, for national level interviews this refers to the organisation). In all but one case I have preserved the gender of the respondent in pronouns (in that case I changed the gender to lessen the possibility of recognition). When I quote a dialogue between the respondent and myself as interviewer, the respondent's talk is preceded by 'RESP:' and my own by my initials, 'RC:'. A pause in the respondent's talk, or where they simply trail off, is indicated by '…'. Square brackets indicate that the interview extract has been edited, with '[…]' indicating that I have cut part of the text. I have done such editing carefully, so as to attempt to preserve the respondent's meaning as much as possible. For the purposes of clarity and readability, I have also done some limited 'cleaning up' of the text. Following the criteria of Ewick and Silbey (1998, pp258-261), I attempt to preserve the original meaning and integrity of the account, but phrases such as 'you know', 'um', and repetitions have been removed in some places.

3.11 Summary and conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to account for methodology and methods of the thesis. A social constructionist approach requires a particular ontological and epistemological position and the chosen qualitative methods of interviews and documentary analysis are congruent with these positions. Silverman suggests the metaphor of a 'toolbox' (2000, p.51) to talk about a set of concepts and methods which are used to select data and illuminate analysis. Applying this metaphor to my own project, in this chapter I have taken out each tool, examined it and explained how I put them to use in carrying out the research. The results of the analysis will be borne out in the next three chapters of this thesis.

4 Framing the problem

4.1 Introduction

Social problems have both moral and organisational aspects (Loseke 1999). The current case study is no exception and this first analysis chapter is concerned with moral aspects of the issue of leaving children alone at home. After introducing the concepts of typifications and frames with reference to social problems, I look at different ways in which the issue is framed. The analysis is organised around two problem frames, each with their own 'cast' of claims-makers, victims, villains, strategies, audiences and solutions. Focusing on categorical statements that the lack of supervision of children in the home is a social problem, I examine the different types of knowledge drawn upon by claims-makers to support or justify their view that the issue *is* a problem and what kind of problem it is. Firstly, the issue can be framed in terms of parenting and paid work. This is hardly a new debate but it is one which continues to be problematised in certain ways. Secondly, the issue is framed in terms of children's needs. Evidence of different constructions of childhood is presented, and claims of a 'crisis' in childhood are considered.

I wish to emphasise that these frames are not necessarily mutually exclusive, nor are they the only problem frames for this issue. They do not necessarily exist in the data in 'pure' forms and multiple constructions of the problem may be expressed within one claim. Indeed, in the conclusion to this thesis, I consider the implications that these multiple constructions have for the apparent lack of success of this social problem claim.

4.2 Typifying the 'problem'

Claims-makers do not just draw our attention to particular social conditions; they also shape our sense of just what the problem is (Best 1995, p.8). Loseke writes that while it may be difficult to define a social problem in abstract terms, 'we have little trouble knowing a social problem when we see one' (1999, p.5). In response to the heterogeneity of social life, we organise our experience and knowledge of the social world into *categories*. The process of grouping together apparently diverse conditions into categories and emphasising certain common features is called

typification. Typifications are social resources that help us to make sense of the world (Loseke 1999, p.17). These are different from *ideal types* in the Weberian sense (Fulcher and Scott 1999, p.42). Typical cases or examples are frequently given in social problem claims to account for the particular perspective that a claims-maker has on the 'problem'.

4.2.1 Constructing social problem frames

A frame is an organising device (Loseke 2003, p.16). Problem frames go a step further than typifications, constructing types of conditions as types of problems, and such frames 'are critical because they construct the *causes* of conditions' (Loseke 1999, p.73). So what type of problem is that of 'home alone children'? In this chapter the social problem claims about children left unattended at home are organised around two different frames: parents and paid work, and a 'crisis' in childhood.

There are other ways of framing this issue, such as 'problem families' and youth justice. However, the frames focused on in this chapter are the ones that emerge most strongly from the data gathered. In broad terms, each frame concentrates on a different aspect of the 'problem' – broadly the parent and the child. The social and historical context within which the issue of 'home alone' is played out is also considered. I will deal with each frame for constructing the problem in turn, but as stated in the introduction to this chapter, these frames are not necessarily mutually exclusive and they rarely exist in the data in 'pure' forms. Most claims and claims-makers draw upon different typifications at different times, and in relation to different issues and settings.

4.3 Parents and paid work frame

> The way in which a problem is formulated is sometimes part of the problem itself, and that is particularly true when social problems are formulated in terms of individual solutions. The question "What do we want for this society's children?" becomes reduced to an issue of affordable child care. (Garey 1999, p.198)

In this section I examine how the issue of 'home alone children' can be understood as an aspect of debates about the relationship between home and work (what some

call the 'work/life dilemma', e.g. Freely 2000, p.76). This has been a contested area for much of the twentieth century and is one rich in social problems claims (e.g. Loseke and Cahill 1994), but the way the problem has been framed has changed over time. What has not changed is that the contestation focuses almost exclusively on *mothers* rather than parents in general. Although there is a growing body of literature on fatherhood (e.g. Hobson 2002), it is the socially constructed identities of worker and mother that conflict and are difficult to balance (Edwards and Duncan 1996, p.120). Feminists (e.g. Gieve 1987) argue that all mothers are 'working mothers', and many working class women have always done paid work, even after marriage (Roberts 1984). The 'stay-at-home mother' has always been a white, middle class ideal.

The 'original' problem focused on the morality of mothers undertaking paid work outside the home. It could be said that the focus of concern has shifted from the children of married women workers to those of lone mothers. For some, particularly policy makers, the 'problem' is now about non-engagement in paid work (Edwards and Duncan 1996) rather than the alleged negative effects of employment. I do not aim to cover the entire literature that considers the experience of combining motherhood with paid work, nor can I analyse comprehensively the social policies relating to parents and paid work. Rather, I focus on how one strand of this debate, the 'latchkey child' phenomenon, can be linked to contemporary ambivalence about mothers working outside the home.

4.3.1 A historical note on latchkey children

> The house key tied around the neck is the symbol of cold meals, of a child neglected and shorn of the security of a mother's love and affection. (Zucker 1944 cited in Lamorey et al. 1999, pp2-3)

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) traces the origin of the term 'latchkey child' to 1944, used first in the USA (see Zucker above) and then in Australia in 1945, to refer to 'children left at home on their own by mothers engaged in war industry' (OED 1989). It would be an exaggeration to assume that all UK women were in paid work during the second world war. As Braybon and Summerfield (1987) show in their historical analysis of women's experiences in the two world wars, women's

wartime participation in the labour market was complex and conditional. Policies gave conflicting messages and many were reluctant to join the workforce. Pay and conditions in many jobs were poor and childcare for mothers was scarce. However, 1943 saw a huge change, with 7,750,000 women in paid work (Braybon and Summerfield 1987, p.168). A policy conflict between the Ministry of Labour (which wanted more women to work) and the Ministry of Health (which saw mothers' place as in the home, albeit it a bombed-out one) contributed to the shortage of nursery places. By 1944 there were almost 72,000 places for young children in 1,500 day nurseries, with capital costs met by the Treasury and running costs met by the Ministry of Health, local authorities and mothers themselves (Braybon and Summerfield 1987, pp236-238). But what happened to children of school age? They relied on informal 'minding' by relatives and landladies, or looked after themselves (and each other), letting themselves in at the end of the school day with a latchkey (the key of a spring door-lock, OED 1989). This became a new focus for concern and stigmatisation.

Writing about the history of the second world war, Titmuss remarks:

> The circumstances of the war involved a reduction in the amount of care and supervision given to children; there were fewer people – mothers, fathers, older brothers and sisters, aunts, grandmothers and neighbours – in and around the home to spend time on children. … This great withdrawal from the home was not good for children. It meant less order and less stability, for the old routine of life with its accepted and regular cycle of discipline was knocked awry. It meant that consistent treatment – the golden rule in the upbringing of children – was less practised, for the war spelt inconsistency in parent-child relationships. (1950, p.412)

After 1945 many of the wartime nurseries closed (Silva 1996), coinciding with (but not necessarily caused by) the popularisation of Bowlby's ideas on maternal deprivation. Wartime day nurseries were seen primarily as an aid to war production, not as services in themselves (Riley 1983). Although some groups, such as the Co-operative Women's Guild, lobbied for nurseries to be established on a more permanent footing and for the childcare workforce to be professionalised, the post-war government was more concerned with pronatalist policies. Women's participation in the labour market did not return to pre-war levels, but by the 1950s there were attacks in the popular press on 'heartless' mothers who left their children

(Riley 1983). The mother who worked outside the home was a symbolic threat to the male breadwinner model that underpinned both social and economic policies (Lewis 2002).

> Today, though the mother who knocks her child about is almost extinct, less obvious forms of ill-treatment are said to be increasing. A case in point is the 'latchkey child'. Blamed on the mother who works, he seems to be the current equivalent of the Victorian waif outside the pub, and still to be pitied even if his mother's motive is not gin but a job. (Jephcott 1962, p.136)

Jephcott could not have foreseen how child abuse would soon (re-)emerge as a significant social problem (Nelson 1984). However, for the moment I am not interested in how the issue of children being left unsupervised in the home might be categorised as abuse or neglect, but in how 'working mothers' were problematised through the latchkey child phenomenon. Countering these allegations of negative outcomes for children of working mothers, Jephcott's study of women working at the Peek Frean factory in Bermondsey concluded that such children were *not* disadvantaged in terms of health or education, and they had undisputed material advantages. She discerned that while the local community in Bermondsey did not approve of a mother working if her child was under school age, after this age, paid work was acceptable, even approved of. The need for a child to be 'minded' was held to decrease markedly when the child moved to secondary school (at 11 years old), but Jephcott noted that the local provision for leisure-time facilities, such as play centres and youth organisations, was unusually generous. 'The mothers … were emphatic that they worked largely for the children's sake' (Jephcott 1962, p.162) and the long local tradition of mothers going out to work meant that the practice was regarded as part of being a 'good mother'. Jephcott's findings have resonance with contemporary research, both Duncan and Edward's (1999) concept of 'gendered moral rationalities' and Ribbens McCarthy et al.'s (2000) evidence of a non-negotiable moral obligation for adults to put the needs of children first.

4.3.2 Contemporary research on mothers and paid work

Much of the literature on women's relations to employment has highlighted women's persistent experience of economic disadvantage and vulnerability (e.g. Beechey 1987; Irwin 1999). As Arber and Ginn (1995 cited in Irwin 1999, p.40) point out,

women's gains in the labour market have not translated into gains in the household. Competing demands on time are felt most keenly by women (Gershuny 2000; Hochschild 1989, 1997). Women now spend less of their lifetime engaged in full-time childcare, but in dual earner households women continue to be positioned as secondary earners.

Duncan and Edwards (1999; also Edwards and Duncan 1996) note that the 'social threat' view of lone motherhood by the political Right and the popular media in the early 1990s has been replaced by a 'social problem' view of lone mothers, promulgated by liberal left professionals, academics and voluntary organisations: 'Lone mothers were posed as 'normal' women, doing their best in externally constrained and unfavourable circumstances, and in need of professional help' (Duncan and Edwards 1999). Duncan and Edwards offer a critique of welfare-to-work policies, such as the New Deal for Lone Parents, which assume a 'rational economic man [sic] model'. They explain why take up of paid work by British lone mothers varies widely by ethnicity, social class and neighbourhood by offering the concept of 'gendered moral rationalities'. These are deep-seated cultural attitudes about gender and parenting roles, shaped by locality and social class, and they are more likely to have an influence on decisions about taking up paid work and the choice of childcare arrangements than economic factors. Edwards and Duncan write,

> Webs of social ties and relationship can give mothers access to resources both materially, in terms of informal child-care support, and as systems of beliefs or moralities and shared social identities. (1996, p.121)

I suggest that these 'gendered moral rationalities' apply not only to women's own decisions about work and family, but can also be used to explain how professionals working with parents (usually mothers) make judgements about the appropriateness of parents' arrangements for paid work and childcare. The analysis below draws upon interviews with local-level respondents.

4.3.3 Framing an individual problem

What was striking in the interview data was the almost universal acceptance that paid work was a necessary activity for parents of either gender. The locus of the problem

lay not with the fact that a parent was working *per se*, but in what arrangements parents made for their children, as the following interview extract illustrates:

> I was at [locality] health centre where there was a single mother and I can't remember exactly how many but about 4 or 5 children going from 11 years down to 2 years of age and this mum was, I think, out on a part time job, and the eldest one was having to make tea for everyone and ended up setting the house on fire, cooking fish fingers. And that went to a child protection case conference and the children were actually put on the child protection register, but it wasn't very long. It was only for about 3 months until they reviewed it again and decided that the mother was able to offer appropriate care for her kids, once she realised the implications of leaving them alone. […] Afterwards [I was involved] in supporting the mother helping her realise what was appropriate and what wasn't. She was doing this out of necessity partly, trying to earn some money, partly out of ignorance, not realising the inappropriateness of leaving an 11 year old caring for younger siblings for I think it was 4 hours every evening. She didn't see it as a problem and it probably wouldn't have come to my attention had the house not have caught fire. (health visitor 5)

This health visitor explains the mother's actions as 'part necessity, part ignorance', and sees her role as to address the latter issue. The phrase 'she didn't see it as a problem' deserves remark. Other evidence in the data suggests that parents who do not express appropriate remorse or share others' view of a situation as 'wrong' are likely to be treated more harshly by professionals. However, this health visitor's account is presented in relatively neutral language. Perhaps this was because the mother was compliant, open to being 'supported' and educated by the health visitor into realising the implications of leaving her children unsupervised.

The view that paid work is a *necessity* for parents of is also evident in the interview carried out with the manager of a voluntary organisation that supports parents. She reflects back on her response to the various vignettes I showed her (see *Appendix E*), recognises her different reactions, based on the assumed reason for parental absence, and acknowledges that the outcome for the child who is left may be the same, regardless of the reason for absence:

> This one here [indicating vignette C], his parents are at work and so it's an element of maybe necessity comes in there. And then that makes me ask that question, why does it make a difference, whether they're … because the end result is that they're leaving a child alone? But it is an interesting, you know, if I think that, then I'm sure there are parents who may be feeling that as well. (voluntary sector manager 2)

A theme that emerged in the data was that the problem of *balance*, a familiar term in considerations of women and paid work. The balance that mothers are expected to 'achieve' or negotiate is between meeting the economic needs of a family and meeting the needs of children for appropriate care.

> I think economic needs within a family are quite significant and I think if that's the only arrangement, if parents need money that badly, then you have to address that. But do they need that money that badly that they're may be putting their child's life at risk and is there a different way around it which we could help them find a solution to? That would be my response to that but if it carries on happening then what do you do? And I think that's where the day-time people [in social services] then have to talk to the schools, maybe have an inter-agency meeting, decide whether or not it will come under child protection procedures, whether or not there's a conference, child protection plan or whatever, it's stuff for the day-time people. (social services social worker 6)

This social worker attempts to reconcile his professional norms or standards on the care and protection that children need with what he knows to be 'reality' for many families. Rather than find a resolution to the conflict, he ultimately passes responsibility for the dilemma to colleagues and other professionals.

A similar puzzle was expressed by an education welfare officer, who talked about 'home alone' in relation to young carers (explored further below in the section on childhood). What is of interest here is the respondent's focus on whether financial needs of the family should take priority over the emotional and educational needs of the children:

> Some of the children that are left in charge of siblings have been doing this since they were very very young. And they are able to do it, whether we agree or not, they are able to do it. And sometimes for the family to keep together, and to be able to exist financially the need is there. But sometimes you do get into the dilemma as to what you report and what you don't report. You look at ethically what you should do, morally, I mean it's just so difficult. (education welfare officer 1)

Several respondents reflected on the personal choices and constraints faced by parents with competing demands on their resources. The social work manager quoted below framed the issue specifically in terms of lone mothers and paid work:

> You get a few [referrals] where it's a regular arrangement and the parent goes out to work. Single parent going out to work and they leave their children with child minders, or they leave them alone for 2 or 3 hours. It's usually, most single parents are women aren't they? It's usually it's a woman going out and doing some cleaning, a cleaning job between 5 and 8; the kids get home from the school, she gives them a meal and goes out. That's quite, I wouldn't say it often comes in but that's one that I've seen quite a few times. And that one is where, if it could be called positive, because you can go out and [...] the department can usually offer some sort of help with that, whether it's locating a childminder or giving advice about childminding facilities or crèche facilities. We've negotiated with the employer sometimes. But then you get into a minefield because often the employment isn't declared. There's lots of, it's never clear. That's one that's quite positive, because you can see yourself doing almost! (social services manager 3)

This respondent presents this typical situation as one that is 'positive' and there is evidence of sympathy, not least in the fact that he admits that it is something that he could (almost) see himself doing, suggesting there is an element of 'normality' to it. However, he goes on to express a much harsher attitude towards parents who leave children late at night and on a regular basis:

> The other one is, you get, then you get calls, those calls [as mentioned in the previous quote] come in at 5, 7 o'clock at night. Then you get calls, the time of day, you know, nobody goes out except in emergency at midnight do they, unless they're socialising, right? On a regular basis, right? And if that's the case then we would take quite a dim view about, as a department, take a dim view of it. You don't go out socialising and leave your kids uncared for. And we'd expect them to change their habits or get an appropriate childminder. (social services manager 3)

In this extract, both the time of day and the reason for absence have moral significance in how the situation is perceived. And yet many parents do work late evenings and overnight shifts, precisely because of childcare problems. Silva (1996) comments that the lack of public provision of childcare for employed parents means that 'many women work evening or night shifts when child care can be taken over by partners or relatives' (p.29).

4.3.4 Framing a structural problem

There are two main aspects of state policy that come in for criticism from respondents under this heading. These are welfare-to-work policies, which broadly encompass eligibility to and levels of state benefits, and the state's role in providing

or facilitating childcare for working parents. The latter is explored mainly in the next chapter. Clearly, these two areas of policy are linked, if not directly under one government department, but in the UK government's overall strategy of 'making work pay'.

In discussing the relationship between parenting and paid work, some respondents made reference to government policies which encourage parents who were previously dependent on benefits, particularly lone mothers, to take up paid work. Under the New Labour government that came to power in 1997, welfare-to-work policies have been paired with an explicit agenda to associate paid employment with 'responsible' parenting. However, Gray (2001) questions how effectively New Labour's objectives can be achieved by New Deal policies. She notes:

> New Labour's twin track policy of expanding in-work benefits and formal childcare provision, subsidised through the WFTC [Working Families Tax Credit], is shown to be a way of 'making work pay' which scores rather low on its contribution to three other professed government objectives. These are: upskilling the labour force, equal opportunities and quality of parenting (2001, p.204)

Welfare-to-work policies came in for criticism from some respondents as intensifying difficulties for parents, not relieving them. It is perhaps not surprising that the most vociferous criticism for social policies came from social workers in the voluntary sector:

> It [i.e. home alone] is an issue for social policy. On the one hand encouraging Dads and Mums to go out to work, but on the other hand not being able to support with adequate child care back-up. (voluntary sector social worker 6)

This social worker also recognises that paid work does not necessarily guard against poverty, and that parents who are working but on a low income are perhaps caught in a poverty trap. She links parents' childcare decisions to this:

> I think it is partly to do with poverty, a fair bit of poverty, on the lowest level of poverty. [...] You know there are those parents that are just above the poverty levels but have to work like mad to keep themselves at that level. (voluntary sector social worker 6)

Benefit levels and tax credits came under criticism as another element of the state causing difficulties for parents who are trying to meet the economic needs of their family. The following account from a voluntary sector social worker makes clear the amount of 'weighing up and shuffling around' that parents do in making decisions about paid work and childcare:

> And I think a lot of mothers, particularly those on income support, you can't survive on income support, you know it isn't adequate enough. So they need to go to do the additional bits. They have really no options I think, because sometimes there's … childcare, they have to pay for it. Even people who are working, at the end of the day it can still be expensive. Even if you're on the family working tax [Working Family Tax Credit] you're given 75% towards it, but it's equal anyway if you actually look and work it out, because mum's going to have to pay the rent and all the other things on top, but they only [cover] 75% of the childcare costs. And obviously if you've got more than one child, how do you find a childminder who's prepared to take 3 children and perhaps even unsociable hours, because some mothers maybe want to stay at home with the children during the day and try to get an evening job where it might not affect the child so much. But then it's getting someone to actually watch the children if it's unsociable hours. You know, or having to bring your child back late at night and things like that, where it can be totally disruptive, the consequence of that. So it's a lot of weighing up and shuffling around for the parents. You know they are very reluctant, with lone parents who really wouldn't like to leave the children behind but … (voluntary sector social worker 7)

This lengthy extract illustrates the complexity of the dilemmas facing parents, where social policies intersect with personal circumstances in several different ways.

Interviews with professionals at a local level had little to say about the role that employers take in the parents and paid work scenario. This may have been due to the bias in my interview schedule, or it could be attributed to the fact that this is an area over which they have little control, although many respondents made reference to their own experience of balancing paid work and parenting.

To conclude this section, in general the issue of parents and paid work is presented as either a problem for individual parents or for the state. As I shall show in the next chapter on responses and solutions to the problem, despite the social structural aspects of paid employment, the main responsibility is seen as lying with the parent to make adequate arrangements for childcare while they are at work.

4.4 The 'crisis in childhood' frame

What do claims about 'home alone children' tell us about contemporary constructions of children and childhood? Scholarship in the field of childhood studies sets the context for this analysis. My main argument here is that childhood itself is a problematic concept, and that social problems claims involving children reflect this ambivalence. Through looking at how unsupervised children are problematised, I attempt to identify what is understood by parental supervision, and link this to discourses about surveillance and social control.

The field of childhood studies is an area of academic study that has emerged in recent decades, drawing upon the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, history and psychology. Influenced by social constructionism, childhood studies writers (e.g. James and Prout 1990; Hutchby and Moran-Ellis 1998) argue that ideas of childhood, children's needs, competence and appropriate levels of responsibility vary across time and culture. Constructions of childhood can be discerned in social policies, news stories, and children's literature, as well as through interviews with adults and children themselves.

Brannen (1999) identifies three different paradigms for the study of childhood. One dominant assumption of contemporary childhood is as 'a state of becoming', i.e. a developmental paradigm. In such a paradigm, adults are framed as the experts on children's cognitive and emotional development. Another paradigm is to focus on children's social interaction in other settings and between contexts, an approach that goes some way to according children agency, although children's autonomy is normatively prescribed. In the third paradigm, children are regarded as sociological agents, a social group in their own right, with their own constructions of the social world, not necessarily in relation to adult structures.

These paradigms can also be applied to social problem frames about children left at home alone. In this current study, both the first and second paradigms of childhood are in evidence. Claims about children left at home alone focus on children's physical and emotional needs for 'normal' development. Children's competence and capacity for autonomy and responsibility is recognised and at times encouraged, but also problematised, almost feared in some claims. Children without adult supervision

are seen as both vulnerable and dangerous. It is hardly surprising that the third paradigm is not strongly present in this study, given that I have not sought the views and experience of children first hand – I could be criticised for perpetuating an adult-centric view, a 'downward stance' (Hutchby and Moran-Ellis 1998, p.16) on the issue. Were time and resources to allow, it would be a fruitful addition to this study to seek children's perspective on being alone at home. Those studies that have focused on children as research participants (e.g. Christensen et al. 2000; Solberg 1990) have revealed that children value time on their own, free from adult supervision:

> Me Mam sometimes go out, she goes to the shop and leaves me on my own … she doesn't shout at me … you can do whatever you want and there's no one to tell you not to do that. (Sally, quoted in Christensen et al. 2000, p.151)

Another view is that the problem is to do with *childhood*, not children *per se*.

> Childhood is the most intensively governed sector of personal existence … The modern child has become the focus of innumerable projects that purport to safeguard it from physical, sexual, or moral danger. (Rose 1999, p.123)

The problem lies with the way we view childhood, with an increased awareness of risk in general, a fear of and for children, and a tendency to hold parents responsible for any negative outcomes for children. As Riddell (2002) writes in the *Observer* newspaper, in contemporary society we both value children more than in the past, idolise them almost, yet also neglect and demonise them. But such apparently contradictory views about children are not necessarily new. Dingwall et al. (1984), reviewing the history of legal regulation of children, demonstrate that childhood has been constructed as a social problem since at least the nineteenth century. At this time, it was unsupervised children on the streets that were a major concern, providing impetus to early childcare legislation as well as compulsory education. The current Labour government's preoccupation with truancy indicates that children who are not seen as being in their allocated place in schools and are on the streets, with or without their parents, continue to cause policy concern. However, unsupervised children in the *home* are treated with much greater ambivalence by the state.

As a society, Riddell (2002) writes, we lurch from negligence to excessive caution where children are concerned. Ambivalence about the issue of leaving children alone at home perhaps illustrates this well. Many claims about the 'problem' of children alone at home demonstrate taken-for-granted assumptions about children. In some contexts, children are constructed as passive, vulnerable victims who are in need of care and protection. The 'problem' lies with their parents' actions, or with social structures that fail to provide adequate, safe childcare. However, there is another strand to social problem claims about children, which focus on children as a danger or threat, both to themselves and others, and thus in need of control and boundaries. Donzelot (1979) distinguishes between 'children in danger' and 'dangerous children', and both these concepts are in evidence in the interview data. According to the latter concept, the 'problem' with parental absence is essentially that children cannot be trusted to be left on their own; they are likely to engage in deviant behaviour. Thus the deviance (or *potential* for deviance) lies with the child, not necessarily the parent.

In addition, there is evidence in the interview data of an idealized view of childhood as a carefree, precious time of life. Children who are left alone are often left with responsibility; for themselves, for property and sometimes for younger siblings. While many professionals acknowledge that a degree of responsibility is positive for children, such children are sometimes seen as having their childhood threatened, deprived of their 'right' to enjoy a time free from responsibility. This section reveals some of the tensions and contradictions in the ways that we think and talk about children and childhood.

4.4.1 Constructing children as victims

Here I explore how the concept of victimhood infuses some claims about the 'problem' of home alone children. I focus on how children are presented as vulnerable, passive and lacking in competence. In Donzelot's (1979) terms, these are 'children in danger'. They are in need of protection from a variety of risks, some of which are clearly named, but some risks are less well defined, and appear to cause all the more concern. This fits with the first paradigm of childhood identified above, in which children are conceptualised in terms of their future potential as adults, and

their current incompetence and vulnerability as children. Adult supervision is assumed to meet both children's physical and emotional needs, at the least ensuring that a competent person can intervene or respond in times of crisis or emergency.

Loseke wonders 'if the era of the child victim might be ending' (1999, p.67), referring to mass shootings by young teens in the US. Writing in the UK after the conviction of two 10 year olds for the murder of 3 year old James Bulger, Scraton suggests:

> Perhaps more than any other decade, the 1990s has been characterized, by open displays of adult indignation, as the decade that marks the end of childhood innocence (1997, p.viii).

However, child victims still have a lot of moral sway when it comes to persuading audiences to take a claim seriously (Critcher 2003). Loseke (1999) encourages us to examine what moralities are appealed to in social problem claims. In the claims that typify children as victims, sympathy is the overwhelming moral response: children who are left at home without adult supervision are constructed as vulnerable, at risk and in need of protection.

> I think that in any household there's a risk of accidents occurring. I mean they are quite dangerous places. [...] There always seems to be an ambivalence about the need for young people to grow up and become independent and "It didn't do me any harm when I was 14 and I was out on the streets", alongside the fact that the world is probably more dangerous now than it used to be 30, 40 years ago. [...] The bit that gets you sometimes is when you hear their isolation, their sense of not being looked after. (voluntary sector manager 1)

The extract cited above is from an interview with a manager in a voluntary organisation mainly concerned with providing support for children. This organisation regularly had contact with children who were alone at home. Although he acknowledges how things have changed over time (a common trope in interview accounts), his account illustrates how both the home and outside world are seen as dangerous places full of risks. He also refers to the emotional risks to children left alone – their isolation and the 'sense of not being looked after'. His model of parental supervision appears to be one of 'being there' for one's children. Adult care, either by a parent or a substitute adult, meets both the physical and emotional needs

of children and there is a risk of danger and long-term damage if these needs are not met. This links in with contemporary understandings of child neglect. Poor parental supervision is consistently cited as an indicator in models of child neglect (e.g. Stevenson 1998; Thoburn et al. 2001; Giovannoni and Becerra 1979; Stone 1998), although it is not feasible to explore the substantial body of social work literature on child neglect here.

What kind of harm might befall children left unsupervised at home? The types of risk appealed to in interviews can be categorised into *internal* and *external* risks. Internal risks include the emotional harm that may stem from loneliness or fear, or the long-term impact of being regularly left to cope without an adult around. One social worker cited a young woman who had been left alone a lot as a child who, as an adult, found it difficult to establish trusting relationships.

> I remember a young girl that I've worked with in the past that basically had been left alone. Her mum worked shifts, she used to come home from school, I'm talking from the age of 8, let herself in, lock[ed] the door. Her food was prepared for her, but she was in that house on her own and spent a lot of time on her own working things out for herself on her own. And she's actually grown up a very lonely, isolated young person, who in herself cannot have a proper, full-time relationship because she's used to having that much time on her own. She doesn't know if she can share that time with somebody else now. And she's what, she's 24 now. (voluntary sector social worker 7)

This respondent acknowledged that although the child's physical needs were met, her difficulty in developing relationships in adulthood could be attributed to her childhood experience of being left alone frequently. The following social work manager also emphasised the long-term emotional impact that lack of parental supervision can have on children:

> Well, there's the immediate danger of accidents or illness, sudden illness, or sudden accidents in the home. Long term I'd be looking at the child's worth, the child's development, the child's self confidence and the child feeling part of the family or feeling valued or loved, or just being dumped off on other people all the time or just left. [...] but you're talking about boundaries for children. If there's no boundaries set there's a recipe for problems, isn't it. There's a host of other things. And it's basic, you've got to provide basic primary care. I wouldn't talk about it in those terms but children do need adults and role models and parents around. They do need their primary care needs met, don't they? And you're not going to

get that if the children are habitually left alone, or farmed off onto other people all the time without good cause. (social services manager 3)

External risks refer to factors in the physical environment, both in the home and the neighbourhood, that may endanger children who are home alone more immediately, as the previous extract indicates. These risks include fire, accidents, illness and intruders (both coming into the home and, increasingly, fears of predators on the Internet, see Valentine et al. 2000). The previous respondent's emphasis on the *suddenness* of accidents or illness is marked, and is reflected in other accounts that highlight the unpredictability of adverse events and the short time in which such events can happen.

No, you shouldn't leave children on their own. You see how quick they are! How quick children are, they could do anything in a few seconds, that's all it takes. (voluntary sector manager 4)

The most commonly cited fear was of a fire breaking out in the home, as in the nursery rhyme 'Ladybird ladybird', quoted in the introductory chapter. Home safety and accident prevention is a particular concern to health visitors, who encourage parents of young children to use fireguards, playpens and stairgates to minimise accidents in the home (Combes 1991), but they were not the only professionals to be concerned about the risks of fire. The following extract from an interview with a social worker is especially striking:

RC: So what kind of things would you worry about with children left alone?
RESP: Dying! [laughs]
RC: Accidents do you mean?
RESP: No, I mean dying, fire. The ultimate scenario is fire, emergencies that the children can't handle; children might have been left a mobile phone but can't phone up. You know, humans panic when they're under stress. It's fairly obvious what, the potential of what can happen when children are left. Again it depends on the age of the children, whatever, but generally speaking it's a great danger. (social services social worker 7)

It was recognised by respondents that such incidents happen very rarely, and that fires can happen in the home even when an adult *is* present, but the potential for such a dramatic and life threatening event clearly stood out in respondents' minds. Many respondents made reference to some incident in the local area or in the history of

their professional practice when a house fire had taken place and children were discovered to be left alone, sometimes tragically too late. The account below was passed on within a family:

> [A relative] spent a short while at, I think it's some kind of psychiatric hospital at any rate, and she told me that there was a young mother in there who just sat in a chair and just stared into a corner of the wall all the time. And the reason this woman did that is because she had left her two young children in the house just for a very short period while she, one of them was asleep, baby asleep, the other one was a toddler, and she just nipped across the road to get a loaf of bread from the shop, and when she came back the house was in flames and both children were dead. And that mother could never get over that guilt, she wouldn't speak to anybody and that's how she spent her life, just facing a corner of the room. And I suppose that shocked me that much that I almost had the worst case scenario of leaving your children alone, even just for a tiny period of time, so with all of these the first thing … things that probably don't happen that often, but like the house getting set alight. (voluntary sector manager 2)

Some of these incidents may have been apocryphal, part of the oral history that gets passed on in within a family, community or organisation, but such folk memories or urban myths may shape both personal and professional behaviour (Dingwall 2001; Best and Horiuchi 1985). At the very least, they serve to reinforce concern that leaving children at home alone is a worrying and troublesome practice, a potential social problem.

4.4.2 Constructing children as villains

In this sub-section, an alternative discourse is examined. Rather than being in need of care, 'home alone' children are typified as being in need of control. Children are typified as being untrustworthy and therefore it is unwise to leave them without adult surveillance. Once more there is an emphasis on risk, as in the previous section, but different types of risks are cited. These concerns differ according to the age of children. Whereas in the previous section, children tend to be conceptualised as lacking in competence, here it is precisely their agency and competence that places them (and society) in danger. I explore the tenuous links that have been made between parental supervision and offending or anti-social behaviour.

Earlier I listed some of the risks that were identified for children left at home alone. In addition to risks of things happening *to* children, either from dangerous others (e.g. intruders) or in the environment (e.g. accidents), there are also hazards that children can bring upon themselves as a result of their actions. The risks vary according to the age and level of development of the child, but it is by no means the case that leaving older children (11 years and older) is less troubling. Among older children there is greater concern about what children *get up to* than about what might *happen to them*. In accordance with the second paradigm of childhood studies, here children's agency is acknowledged but seen as problematic. Some actions may cause high levels of concern – in particular, lack of parental supervision of older children was associated with the risk of involvement in offending behaviour and/or experimentation with drugs and alcohol.

The developmental paradigm of childhood is also in evidence here, such as in the following extract from a health visitor, who starts to specify an age, but then pulls back from committing herself:

> The biggest concern is safety, it's safety because you cannot trust a child of …, depending on the age of the child particularly and the younger, you can't say the younger the child because the potential for mischief as they get older. You know the age of the child has its own safety risks […] I mean the older they get the more potential there is one sense for them to get up to all sorts of, well you know, matches, taps, turning on gas. (health visitor 8)

Boredom is identified as a risk for unsupervised older children, which might lead to them experimenting or getting involved in offending behaviour. Closely linked to the assumed boredom factor is the fear that loneliness may lead to them seeking out company of 'inappropriate' companions or coming under undue influence of peers, leading to inappropriate behaviour.

> I think a lot of it is, there's an element of boredom, and children not getting sufficient stimulation, not getting supervision, you know, that maybe, I mean it may be that the mum just feels that they will entertain themselves, and they *do* entertain themselves, but it tends to be anti-social unfortunately. (health visitor 3, original emphasis)

The following respondent, a police officer, makes a moral assessment based on the time of day at which a child is left, something which was highlighted earlier in an

extract from social services manager 3. Most respondents were in agreement that leaving children unsupervised at night was worse than doing so during the daytime.

> You're making a risk assessment aren't you? Is it right for an 8 year old to be left at home? Four o'clock, not bad. Certainly 8, 9 o'clock at night, not so good. Now why is there the difference in the hours? I suppose the child's getting tired, should be going to bed. At 4 o'clock, children's TV's on and he's perhaps quite happy sitting there, watching TV. So there's a lot to be said for that. At 9 o'clock there's not so much on for 8 year olds on TV, they'll get bored, they get tired, they get restless, they get lonely, that's when they get into trouble. (police officer 1)

A common thread here is that children and young people need an adult around, not necessarily to provide protection, but to ensure that children are occupied in some benign behaviour. Providers of out of school care, explored in the next chapter as a potential 'solution' to the 'home alone problem', advocate that they do not just keep children safe, but they also keep children usefully occupied and provide additional learning opportunities to boost educational attainment (Smith and Barker 2000).

However, another element of this typification is that adult supervision of children in the home is to exercise authority. In the extract below, a voluntary sector social worker talks about parental presence in the home as a sign of both care and control:

> Well my view on it, I mean I'm a mother, I've raised 7 children and I've got 10 grandchildren. And I was raised in a way where I would have a mother at home. My daddy worked but my mother was always there, so I've always come home to that. And I suppose I have strong views on that because young people are vulnerable, they can be easily influenced and when parents aren't there they can bring people in, I've seen people trying the drink and they'll have drugs. Or if the mother's working overnight, they have people staying over, getting into all kinds of mischief. […] For a young person coming home, obviously you have to make your own dinner, the loneliness and isolation and also, as I stated before, it's quite a risk to bring other people into the home while mum's not there, because of boredom or they don't want to be on their own. Other young children might want to go out on the street, there's nobody even monitoring where they are. They can get in the wrong company. I think young people need guidance really, I do, you know, watched, guided and encouraged, things like that. (voluntary sector social worker 7)

This social worker draws on her own experience, both as a child and as a parent, as well as experience in her work as a social worker. She admits that she has strong views on the matter, but it is not clear how much these views would influence her

work with parents, children and young people in a professional setting. Recalling social services manager 3, who said, 'If there's no boundaries set there's a recipe for problems, isn't it', we are reminded that the social work tasks of care and control are also expected of parents in relation to their children.

4.4.3 Childhood as a 'precious' or special time

As well as highlighting how childhood is problematised, this research reveals distinct accounts of what constitutes a 'good' childhood, and therefore what is missing or 'wrong' for children who are left at home alone. A theme that emerged from the local-level interview data was that contemporary childhood should be free of responsibilities for oneself and for others. Leaving children at home alone threatens this ideal. Ribbens (1994) describes the maternal balancing act that mothers perform in meeting their children's needs while preparing them for independence. While parents may take pride in their children being competent in certain arenas, for some parents in Ribbens' study, childhood was construed as a time of 'freedom from responsibility and from the realities of a harsh world' (1994, p.186).

In this study there was ambiguity in professionals' talk about giving responsibility to children, such as caring for oneself, for the home, perhaps for younger siblings, and for taking on some of the tasks usually carried out by adults. On the one hand responsibility is recognised as a good thing, helping children develop their skills of independence and developing trusting relationships between child and parent. But there was also recognition that giving children responsibility helped adults too, allowing them more freedom perhaps, and that too much responsibility could potentially be harmful to, even exploitative of children.

I consider first a positive comment about responsibility and children, which links back to the first half of this chapter.

> There's a lot of occasions where both people [parents] are working. My wife works full time, my children go home on their own, and have done for the past 2 years. But they're only home for 20 minutes before my wife gets there. Now they're 15 and 13. I don't think I'm a particularly bad parent, or we're bad parents. *It gives them a bit of responsibility* [...] They've got to learn. (police officer 1, emphasis added)

In this account of his own parenting, this respondent is clear that giving his children responsibility for themselves and the home is no cause for concern and sets this in the wider context of there being many families where both parents are in paid work. However, he also stresses that it is 'only 20 minutes' later that his wife returns home from work. The impression one gains is that he is keen to 'normalise' this arrangement.

In response to a vignette, one respondent expressed clearly her view that childhood should be a time free of responsibility:

> [reading vignette] Each weekday an eight year old boy comes home from school alone and he fixes himself a snack and watches TV until his parents return from work two hours later. […] There's another element that creeps into that I think, which is that *children should be allowed to be children*. And again, this is now personal opinion, but I think it's a lot of responsibility at that age, and the thing of being alone in the house again. (voluntary sector manager 2, emphasis added)

As she appeals directly to the child's age, she may have answered differently if the vignette had featured a child older than 8. However, given the caution of this respondent in other areas of the interview, I believe that it was the level of responsibility that she found more inappropriate than the age of the child.

One of the ways that the 'home alone' issue was most clearly problematised in interviews was in relation to children being left to care for other children, usually younger siblings. The term 'babysitting' may appear out of place in an academic piece of work, but in everyday language this is what professionals clearly categorised as a problem. In the extract below, the health visitor presents this as a problem because the child with responsibility has a different experience from other children, and is bound by the secret of her parents' absence.

> RC: If the parent is not around, does that have an impact, do you think, on the children emotionally?
> RESP: Yes, it does. Firstly it makes them grow up and take responsibility for the younger ones always, because they tend to look out for each other. *So they're not getting their childhood so to speak.* It says I suppose that the parent doesn't value them, it makes them different from other kids. When they're at school they can't say, because they know they're not allowed, [to] their teacher, not allowed to tell others. (health visitor 2, emphasis added)

Another concern about children in this caring position was that their education was likely to suffer, through being kept off school by parents because the parent is unable to access suitable childcare.

> I mean the children are just kept off school to look after the other ones because that's the easiest babysitter. So their schooling's being affected, *they're not being allowed to develop as a child, they're not getting access, they're not being treated as children should be treated*, they're having to take on the adult role. [...] I talked about that 14 year old who I know, so when she was 7 or 8 she was taking on a lot of childcare, *I feel she's had her childhood robbed from her*. And her education as well because she's not at school nearly as much as she should be. (health visitor 3, emphasis added)

As well as emphasising children's educational needs, interview accounts also place a high value on play and interaction with peers. There is a sense that being left at home alone or to care for younger siblings is not 'normal', that this experience for children sets them apart from their peers.

> So you could have a parent who thinks their 8 year old is fine on their own. I might just be leaving him for 3 hours and I'll be home, possibly coming home at 9pm, "You'll be all right because I'm telling you, you lock up and don't let nobody in." *But it's restricting the child's growth and their childhood basically*, because they can't go out and play with others because their mothers won't let them, you know, oh terrible! (voluntary sector social worker 7, emphasis added)

This section has moved from focusing on the victimhood of children who are left at home alone to concerns about the harm that unsupervised children in the home may cause. It has explored constructions of childhood as a precious time, an ideal that is troubled by leaving children unattended or giving them responsibility for other children when they are children themselves.

4.5 Summary and conclusion

In this chapter I have looked at how the issue of child left at home alone is constructed as a problem, focusing on the way the problem has been framed in relation to parents and paid work, and social constructions of the childhood. I am not suggesting that the factors identified above are a checklist, and that if a certain number are checked then the issue becomes classified or categorised as a problem.

Rather, they are *resources* that professionals and other claims-makers draw upon in their categorisation of social conditions.

Loseke (1999, p.61) observes that by constructing several answers to the question of why a condition is troublesome social problems claims can be more successful. Appealing to several moralities (as long as they are not incompatible) may widen the audience that claims-makers wish to convince. However, I suggest that, equally, multiple framing of the same issue might contribute to the lack of success of the social problem claim of children left at home alone. Perhaps it is because there are so many ways of looking at the issue and factors to focus on that it has never fully taken off as a social problem claim.

5 Constructing responses and solutions

5.1 Introduction

A defining element of any social problem claim is the demand that 'something must be done' (Loseke 1999). Implicit in this is the assumption that something can be done to address the problem, i.e. a solution is not only desirable; it is *possible*. An analysis of claims about the issue of leaving children alone at home identifies a range of solutions to the problem, ranging from innovative childcare solutions to tougher legislation. This chapter considers the organisational context within which professionals and campaigners work. I draw on documents and interviews carried out with claims-makers working at the national, policy formation level, although implementation and responses at 'street level' are also explored. The chapter is structured around four different responses and solutions to the home alone child problem. Firstly I consider how child welfare and criminal law deals with the issue and how professionals interpret this. The dominant view is that the legislation is adequate as it stands, so the 'problem' has to be dealt with in other ways. Calls for improvements in childcare provision and flexible working patterns are explored in the light of debates about leaving children alone at home. Reflecting the constructions of childhood explored in the previous chapter, some campaigners and professionals argue that the solution is to advise parents and teach children 'protective behaviours' and skills for independence, so that they are better equipped to cope at home without an adult. In the final section, I look at the contemporary policies and practices to support and educate parents as a way of promoting 'responsible' or 'good enough' parenting. I conclude by suggesting that a possible explanation for the failure of 'home alone' as a social problem is the reluctance of most policy-makers and campaigners to articulate the issue head on, because to do so would be to acknowledge that substantial social and economic changes are required.

5.2 Legislative change

In this section I explore the legal context of the 'home alone' issue. Initially the current legal framework within which childcare professionals operate is considered. There is no clear legislation addressing the issue, although state intervention can be justified under either civil or criminal law or both. Moving from the theory to

practice, I demonstrate how the law is interpreted widely to accommodate the fact that children mature at different rates, have different needs, and the home context varies. What this amounts to is a high degree of discretion exercised by practitioners. Extracts from interview data and from legal guidance for parents demonstrate how professionals use the legal ambiguity to 'manage' the problem of home alone. While many respondents acknowledge that clearer local agency policy or national legislation might make their jobs easier, they also claim that it would be impossible to reach consensus about where the line should be drawn and how it could be enforced. Most respondents strongly defend the use of 'professional judgement' as the best solution and resist any change in the law. I argue that the ambivalence and ambiguity surrounding the issue of parental supervision of children serve to give professionals maximum flexibility in managing their workload, sustaining autonomy from superiors and maintaining relationships with their clients, as they tread the delicate line of state control of family life.

5.2.1 'Law on the books'

There is no legal age in England and Wales at which children can be left at home unsupervised. The US states of Illinois[4] and Maryland[5] specify an age in legislation (Kerrebrock and Lewit 1999, p.151), as does New Zealand[6] (Scott 2002), but most states and countries do not. Contrary to the 'law on the books', there are powerful lay perceptions on this issue in England and Wales[7]. The Child Accident Prevention Trust (CAPT) notes that 'it is commonly thought to be illegal to leave children unattended by an adult' (1991, p.45). Another 'myth' is that there is a minimum age for 'babysitters' (Keep with Hamilton 2000, p.5). These mythical legal age thresholds vary considerably and it is not clear where such myths originate, but they contribute to the confusion surrounding the issue of parental supervision and to the

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[4] Illinois state law prohibits leaving a child under age 13 unsupervised for 24 hours or more.
[5] In Maryland 'a person who is charged with the care of a child under the age of 8 years may not allow the child to be locked or confined in a dwelling, building, enclosure, or motor vehicle out of sight of the person charged unless the person charged provides a reliable person of at least 13 years old to remain with the child to protect the child' (Kerrebrock and Lewit 1999, p.152).
[6] In New Zealand 'every person is liable to a fine not exceeding $1000 who, being a parent or guardian or person for the time being having care of a child under the age of 14 years, leaves that child without making reasonable provision for the supervision and care of that child, for a time that is unreasonable or under circumstances that are unreasonable having regard to all the circumstances' (Scott 2002, p.35).
[7] Contrary to popular belief, Scotland has similar legislation to England and Wales.

fact that parents are often reluctant to acknowledge that they leave their children unattended.

The Children Act 1989 attempted to bring together public and private law concerning the care, protection and upbringing of children and the provision of services in one single act. Aldgate et al. (1998, cited in Tunstill 1999, p.123) identify three overarching themes to the Act:

- The welfare of the child is paramount (s1), with a strong child development perspective;
- The key concept of *parental responsibility* is defined as 'all the rights, duties, powers, responsibilities and authority which by law a parent of a child has in relation to the child and his property' (s3(1));
- A framework of legal and organisational responses is laid out to achieve decisions in court cases and in the provision of services, including a duty for agencies to work together, particularly to protect children.

The child protection element of services is guided by concept of *significant harm*. It is the duty of a local authority social services department to investigate when there is 'reasonable cause to suspect that a child who lives, or is found, in their area is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm' (Children Act 1989, s47(1)(b)). There is also a duty to investigate if a child is the subject of an emergency protection order (s47(1)(a)(i)) or is in police protection (s47(1)(a)(ii)); a power that the police have to remove a child from the parental home for up to 72 hours. Child protection investigations are usually carried out in the first instance by local authority social workers, sometimes jointly with the police, but other professionals who work with children and families, such as those in health and education and in the voluntary sector, are also required to work within the legal framework and local child protection procedures, referring concerns on to the local authority social services where necessary. Further guidance on interagency co-operation and communication has been issued under the title *Working Together* (Department of Health 1991; DoH et al. 1999).

Yet despite attempts to clarify and codify a vast amount of fragmented legislation under the Children Act 1989 (Fox Harding 1991, p.225), it is under a much earlier statute that neglect and supervision are more clearly spelled out. The Children and Young Persons Act 1933 makes it a criminal offence if:

> any person who has attained the age of 16 years and has the custody, charge, or care of any children or young person under that age, wilfully assaults, ill-treats, neglects, abandons, or exposes … in a manner likely to cause him unnecessary suffering or injury to health. (Children and Young Persons Act 1933, s1(1))

It was under this law that Heidi Colwell was imprisoned for six months (but later released on appeal) in 1993 for leaving her 2 year old daughter alone, 5 days a week for almost a year while she worked in a travel agency. The judge remarked, 'It is a thing you would not do even to a dog' (Practitioners' Child Law Bulletin 1993, p.107), although the mother had left the child with food and drink, locked the bathroom and kitchen doors, and the child was discovered happy and unharmed.

The concept of *reasonableness* is frequently used to determine whether a parent's action of leaving a child alone warrants legal intervention. In response to regular inquiries about the issue to its confidential telephone advice line, the Children's Legal Centre (1999) advises parents to 'ask whether or not it was reasonable to leave that child at home or not', and suggests how parents may best prepare the child and arrange for backup support. But the advice then goes on to emphasise the liability of the parent if the child might be caused unnecessary suffering or injury:

> The 'home alone' cases where parents went on holiday leaving young children behind to fend for themselves are an example where a child would be exposed to unnecessary suffering or injury to health, and it is likely that a prosecution would take place. (Children's Legal Centre 1999)

Criminal prosecution for child neglect and abandonment under the 1933 Act is relatively rare, although professionals responding to situations where children are left unattended may refer to the *potential* for prosecution in getting their message across to parents. It is perhaps the possibility of prosecution that contributes to the perpetuation of a myth that it is 'illegal' to leave children unattended *per se*. In his polemical work, *Paranoid Parenting*, Furedi writes:

> Parents are not just advised to supervise their children. In Britain, such advice contains the implicit threat of legal sanction … the general view taken by child protection professionals is that a parent should not leave children under 12 alone for more than 20-30 minutes. (2001, pp7-8)

Furedi claims that the implicit threat of legal sanction may serve to make parents anxious about *ever* leaving their child unsupervised. He cites no source for his 'general view of child protection professionals'. A study of social work practitioners' perspectives of child neglect in the UK found a lack of consensus around issues of supervision, a finding that surprised the author (Stone 1998). This lack of consensus is reflected in a publication from the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents:

> The law is flexible and allows for individual decisions in both these matters [home alone and babysitting] and no organisations will be drawn to give definite guidelines. Clearly setting a firm age would be ridiculous in certain cases. Age does not guarantee the ability to prevent accidents or cope in the event of one. (Wright 1993, p.14)

The author here highlights the flexibility of the law, within which individual decisions are made by parents and may be judged by professionals. My research confirms that the practice of professionals and guidance given on parental supervision of children is not as clear and consistent as Furedi suggests, and that many perceive this flexibility as a strength.

5.2.2 'Law in action'

> It's very much a judgement call, isn't it? And as you say, there's nothing really written down. I've never seen anything written down. (police officer 1)

In this section I convey the variety of responses, including some lack of clarity about agency policy and legal provisions on this matter. Some professionals were unclear whether the agency they worked within had any specific policy about children left at home alone, and none had experienced any training on the matter.

> I'm sure there is a policy. It's a *safety* thing. […] I'm sure that, I see it as a policy issue. I thought there was a policy, I don't know whether it's actually written down […] I'm absolutely sure it is. But where I've got that from, I don't know. (health visitor 2, original emphasis)

This health visitor, with many years of experience, demonstrates her reliance on tacit knowledge. In her interview she is convinced both of the moral 'wrongness' of leaving children alone unsupervised, and of the existence of a policy, although she is unable to specify where this comes from. She emphasises her concerns about safety, effectively categorising the problem as a safety issue. Other health visitors commented that although the issue was encountered regularly, there was no specific agency guidance on parental supervision, other than general local child protection procedures.

A similar absence of clear policy was noted in relation to children caring for other children:

> We had a case a few weeks ago where there were 3 children left at home alone in the care of a 15 year old. […] The police wanted clarification from us if they could leave the 15 year old there, was it safe? […] In the end we said, "Yes", but our dilemma was that there is not a legal age at which people can be left in charge. (social services manager 3)

5.2.3 Advocating legislative change

Respondents in local level interviews who were in favour of clarifying the current legislation felt that this would help parents in reaching decisions.

> I think there should be some guidance somewhere because people do make their own, set their own barriers, limits and things in terms of age. […] I don't like the idea of a criminal offence necessarily, but there should be some sort of guidance. Yes, it will depend on the child and their abilities. Children of different ages have different abilities, but *there should be something somewhere to say that it ain't really on leaving kids younger than this on their own.* (voluntary sector manager 1, emphasis added)

The above respondent is somewhat reluctant for a change in the law, but expresses a wish for a threshold. Many respondents were more interested in clarification on the law relating to older children caring for younger children, as this is the area where there is least consensus and most concern:

> I think the babysitting is an issue, that there isn't real clear guidelines […] I think to protect children, there has to be some sort of legislation that's

actually saying that leaving a child in charge of children [is not acceptable]. (voluntary sector manager 3)

A health visitor puts it more bluntly:

> I suppose that legally perhaps we ought to have a real guideline that says, "The law is you are not allowed to leave your child with anybody under the age of …" That way there would be a clear cut, parents would know, and would know that anybody discovering it would be going to do something about it. It's a bit like you must tax you car, if you do not tax your car is what is going to happen. […] We need to come down on some sensible sort of cut off point, that everybody agrees and then leave it at that. We need to say what age and what the sanctions are. (health visitor 2)

What these extracts demonstrate is a desire for some clarification of an absolute boundary, below which it is unambiguously 'wrong' to leave a child unattended, but none of them would go so far as to specify an age.

The following quotes illustrate how some professionals felt clearer guidelines would help *them* in their work, particularly in advising parents:

> I suppose if there was legislation it would make our jobs and social workers' jobs easier, to say the law says that you cannot leave your children with anyone under the age of 14 … I'm sure that would be easier […] because quite often [parents] say, "Well I didn't know, and where does it say that you can't have somebody?" (health visitor 4)

Evidence from the interview data suggests that for these professionals, the crux of the 'problem' with the 'home alone' issue was the legal ambiguity, and that if this was addressed, the problem would be resolved because both parents and professionals would be clearer about society's expectations and standards.

5.2.4 Resistance to legislative change

In contrast, many respondents at local level were resistant to any change in the legislation and defended the status quo. For some it was because the complexity of the issue would make it impossible to legislate:

> I don't think that sort of laws and policies are immediately the answer to these kinds of issues, because if you make a law you straightaway get some people who are breaking it don't you? And so I'm not sure that

that's the answer, I not sure if the answers are so patterned, so simple as that really. (health visitor 1)

This health visitor observes that as soon as you create a rule, you then have people breaking it, creating a category of rule-breakers, who need some sort of response. The following extract also suggests that one reason for not having tighter legislation would be the number of factors that need to be taken into consideration in any case:

As far as I'm concerned I think, yes, we've got good enough guidelines and we are expected to use our professional judgement within that, and if we started to get specific then we'd go into a minefield, you know there's so many variables, so many 'what ifs?' (health visitor 5)

Another reason for resisting legislative change was reluctance to extend state involvement in parenting. The response below is from the manager of voluntary agency aimed at supporting parents, who acknowledged that parents frequently contacted the service for guidance on leaving children at home alone:

Personally [...] I think it's [the law is] sufficient, because it is a difficult area, but if for example there was some laws laid down that said, you know, you can't leave a child under 14 or whatever age it turned out to be, then in effect that lets parents off the hook [...] Whereas at the moment, I think, because there aren't guidelines it helps parents to think about what's best for them and their situation, which is going to be different for each family. Rather than just having the safety net of thinking, "Oh there's a law that decides that". (voluntary sector manager 2)

Her response perhaps reflects the fact that the organisation's role is one of family support, with a strong emphasis on parental responsibility and parental autonomy and no explicit child protection duties. Thus, it could be argued, she can 'afford' to argue for maintaining the current ambiguous legal situation.

However, those professionals working in agencies that regularly received referrals about 'home alone' children were the most resistant to a change in the law. For some this might be because they realised that their own parenting would then fall into the category of 'deviant':

You've got to be very careful about changing legislation because, as I said earlier, I've left my child at 13 and I would be very upset if someone said

> it should be 14. You know, or should it be 12? […] So I think you've got to be very careful about giving a specific age. (police officer 1)

In chapter 6 I look further at the use of 'self accounts' on parenting behaviour as a way of resisting categorisation of the issue of home alone as a social problem.

At least one worker recognised that a tightening of the legislation might lead to more work, as his agency might receive even more referrals and there would be a greater obligation to respond to enforce the law:

> In some respects, yes, it would be a lot easier but in other respects it would be harder because you'd wonder where the line's going to be drawn. […] Well, there would be a hell of a lot more work to do, because the guidelines might say, well a 14 can look after a 10 year old, 11 year old. A 16 year old can look after a 5 year old, a 17 year old can look after a 1 year old. Where do you draw the line? (social services manager 3)

Jones and Bell (2000) highlight the contradictions and anomalies in law concerning children and young people. They demonstrate the different age thresholds in different policy areas and point out that 'the fostering of independence and responsibility is at the heart of parent-child relations' (p.3).

I now move on to explore the defence of the use of professional judgement or discretion in responding to the issue of parents leaving children unsupervised at home, suggesting possible motives for maintaining the status quo.

> I think most of us, as professionals, can make that judgement ourselves and if we're wrong, fair enough, we're wrong. But 99 percent of the time we'll be making the correct judgement as to whether that child's in danger or not. (health visitor 5)

While some of the respondents emphasised the need for specialist knowledge to guide their practice (e.g. about child development), others appear to draw upon common-sense notions of what is 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate' childcare practice. One manager spoke about relying on 'gut reaction' to decide whether a child was safe or not, and many made reference to their own experience as parents to justify their professional practice.

Several respondents talked about not wanting to dictate or 'tell people what to do'; this could be because they want to maintain working relationships with clients, but perhaps also expressing a deeper ambivalence about their role as a state agents intervening in family life:

> The fact [is] that we're not there to dictate how people have to run their lives and how to bring up their children. (police officer 1)

> It's difficult for us to say, "This is not acceptable" or not, because it may be that it's so variable in people's competence. [...] I don't think I do go in and say, "This is right and this is wrong". (health visitor 3)

Some of the responses could be interpreted as protecting their professional autonomy; being able to make decisions free from direct supervision. One health visitor admitted that although she was convinced that there was a policy about children not being left alone, she sometimes did not intervene in a situation of children being left unattended if she perceived the situation as safe:

> Yes, I made a judgement which I shouldn't make, if I go by the book, I should have referred it. [...] I wouldn't even take this to supervision because I came down on the side of that is what I will do, and that is what I've done and I've stuck by it. (health visitor 2)

Another health visitor, when asked about whom she would go to for advice if she was concerned about a child being left at home alone, pointed out the autonomy she has to make decisions based on professional judgment. She perceived health visitors as having more autonomy from supervisors than social workers in this respect.

> We'd either come back [to the office] and discuss it with our peers if we're uncertain before making a referral or we'll talk to our supervisor if we feel [unsure]. But we don't have the kind of supervision that social workers have. It's a much, much less hands on affair, much more autonomous affair. (health visitor 3)

For others, professional judgement is defended as the only option, given the limited information available and time pressures:

> All we have to do is make an assessment and it's based on is that child at risk of significant harm? [...] So it's down to the officers on the street who first go to the scene to decide whether or not that child is at risk of significant harm. If that child is, then that officer can 'police protect'. (police officer 1)

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Professional judgment is seen very much as a pragmatic solution. To become embroiled in extra procedures would be time consuming and involve too many people:

> We have to make a very quick assessment, an assessment in the light of the information that we've got, which is usually very limited. [...] I think it's about being pragmatic and realistic. I think we would say that we like to live in a real world and accept that everything isn't perfect. [...] You take each case as it is. (social services manager 3)

This extract sums up many of the dilemmas encountered in work concerning children's welfare and protection. Judgements are made on the basis of limited information and under the pressure of limited resources. Not only do the immediate needs of a child who is left unattended have to be met, but often also a range of longer-term responses and arrangements need to be explored. It is the latter which are most likely to get neglected when agency resources are stretched and legislation does not define responsibilities for ensuring adequate childcare. The responsibility is passed to the parents, but if arrangements are deemed to be inappropriate or inadequate in the eyes of welfare professionals, justifications for state intervention can be found on a number of legal grounds.

5.2.5 Conclusion

In this section I have shown how the current legal context relating to children left at home alone is ambiguous. This leads to confusion on the part of the public, but allows professionals to exercise discretion in how they interpret the legislation and respond to the issue of children left alone at home. While some professionals argue that clarification of the law (for example by specifying an age below which it would be unacceptable to leave a child unattended in the home) would alleviate the problem, a more widely held view is that the law is adequate as it is. Greater clarity or stricter enforcement are resisted on both moral and organisational grounds. Therefore, other solutions have to be resorted to, as will be explored below.

5.3 Childcare places and flexible working practices

'Home alone' – we see them as part of children of 'working parents'.
(childcare charity 1)

If, as was shown in the previous chapter, 'problem' of children being left at home alone is framed, at least in part, in terms of parental employment and lack of appropriate childcare, then the solutions that follow will focus on employment practices and childcare provision. Chapter 4 also demonstrated that professionals take for granted the 'necessity' for parents of both genders to engage in paid work and many respondents see the problem as mainly one of balance and negotiation for individual parents. An alternative solution could be to discourage parents (i.e. mothers) from working, but respondents at local level did not advocate this as a way forward. This section examines claims at a national level, in both interviews with claims-makers and in policy and campaigning documents. Much of the policy debate around parental employment and childcare is silent about the 'home alone' issue, but I suggest that it is implicit in much of the discourse that leaving children unattended at home is not a desirable option. Policy documents and much research literature assume that parents in employment always leave their child(ren) in the care of another adult, either paid or unpaid. It is rarely acknowledged that there is an alternative childcare arrangement, that of self-care. Only one organisation is explicit about the 'home alone' issue, and uses it to promote its agenda of extending out of school care.

After providing some background information on employment patterns, childcare provision and the policies relating to them, I present two different strategies for making claims and advocating solutions. Some frame the issue in terms of personal choice and draw on a morality of freedom and individualism - their emphasis is on what both parents and children say they want. Others present the issue in terms of rights to universal childcare and/or to flexible working, emphasising the social and economic benefits for all in these, although in this section I largely examine childcare. However, as long as both the cause of the problem and the solutions are presented as lying with the state and the economy, the issue of 'home alone' children is destined for only limited success.

5.3.1 Setting the context

As I made clear in the previous chapter, it is not my aim to give a comprehensive picture of maternal employment, a subject worthy of a thesis in its own right. Statistics on employment rates and childcare provision, and a summary of policy context, are given to contextualise the debates examined below. Britain has the third highest female employment rate of all the countries in the European Union (Duffield 2002). In 2003 the employment rate for all women was 70% and 65.4% for women with dependent children, compared with 79% for men. In 1984 58% of women were in employment (Hibbett and Meager 2003). Women's employment rates and hours worked are closely linked to the presence of and age of dependent children in the family. Women's likelihood of working part-time is closely related to the age of their youngest child - 67 % of mothers with a child under 5 worked part-time in 2003 (Hibbett and Meager 2003). Women's labour market participation is also influenced by the presence of a partner in the home: in 2002 70.2% of partnered (either married or cohabiting) women with children were in employment, compared with 50.3% of lone mothers (Duffield 2002, p.610).

Childcare provision varies according to time, type and cost. A consequence of an increasingly service-based economy is that more parents work outside the traditional 'nine-to-five' hours and many work shifts. A recent study by the Thomas Coram Research Unit explored barriers to developing childcare services (childminders and nurseries) to cover atypical hours. The most common barrier was the reluctance of many existing childcare workers to working non-standard hours, mainly because of the impact on their own families (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2003a). Policy-makers talk about the need for 'wrap-around care'; places which provide care for children from early in the morning until the evening, partly to limit the number of care settings that children have to move between within one day (House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee 2003, p.21).

Many parents use a mixture of formal and informal childcare arrangements. Registered childminders are the most popular type of formal care for working mothers, but places in this type of provision are steadily falling (House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee 2003), perhaps because there are more opportunities for childminders to find work in other formal childcare settings. Informal care, from

relatives, friends and neighbours, is a crucial source of childcare for working mothers, especially in low or moderate income families (Kasparova et al. 2003). In 2002 formal childcare places available were as follows:

> 8 day nursery places per 100 children under 5
>
> 7 childminder places per 100 children under 8
>
> 6 out-of-school places per 100 children aged 5 to 7
>
> (Institute of Fiscal Studies 2002)

The typical cost of a nursery place for a child under two is £128 per week and £118 per week for a childminder (House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee 2003, p.10). The cost of a place after school is approximately £35 per week, and for out of school care in school holidays it is £75-80 per week (Kids' Clubs Network 2001a). Informal care also usually involves some form of payment and whether this should be eligible for state help is hotly contested.

Chapter 4 indicated that a key part of Labour government's anti-poverty strategy is getting more adults into paid work, particularly lone parents. The government has set targets to reduce child poverty by a quarter by 2004, and to get 70% of lone parents into paid work by 2010. Childcare is seen as the main barrier to mothers taking up employment (or education or training), although it has already been discussed how research by Duncan and Edwards (1999) challenges the assumptions underlying this policy. In *Meeting the Childcare Challenge* (published May 1998) three key problems were identified:

- the quality of childcare can be variable;
- the cost of care is high and out of the reach of many parents; and
- in some areas there are not enough childcare places and parents' access to them is hampered by poor information.

(Department for Education and Employment 1998, p.6)

To address these problems, the strategy proposed is to raise quality (for example, by bringing the regulation of all early years provision under Ofsted from 1999); make childcare affordable (by introducing Working Families Tax Credit); and improve

accessibility (by providing money to develop the infrastructure of out of school schemes)[8]. However, implicit in this green paper was an assumption that parents would 'choose' to work if the childcare barrier was overcome, despite the fact that many mothers who do not work say that they do not want to spend time away from their children (Kasparova et al. 2003, p.3). Also implicit was the assumption that if parents were working, they would make *some* arrangements for the care of their children, either formal or informal. The option of self-care is not identified as an issue.

In her doctoral thesis, Smith (1996) estimates that more than 15% of 5 to 10 year olds spend some time at home alone after school each day, and more than 20% are unsupervised in school holidays. Smith also carried out the research cited by Kids' Clubs Network (1997, p.3), which gives a 'conservative estimate' that there were 350,000 latchkey children between the ages of 5 and 12 each day (approximately 9% of that age group). Lamplugh and Pagan (2000, p.26) suggest that 750,000 children between the ages of 7 and 14 are at home alone for a period after school. However, as discussed in the introduction to this thesis, finding reliable and comparable data on this issue is extremely difficult and constitutes a problem in its own right. What matters here is not the accuracy of the statistics, but how they are harnessed by campaigners in order to get their message across.

5.3.2 Extending personal choice

For some claims-makers, the childcare problem is presented as a matter of personal choice. For example, in launching the National Childcare Strategy, the message given was, 'It is up to parents to decide what sort of childcare they want for their children. This is not a matter for the Government' (DfEE 1998, p.15). However, this does not acknowledge that for many parents, choice is constrained or non-existent, due to the shortage of childcare places and the lack of means to pay for childcare. A similar message from the National Family and Parenting Institute (NFPI) recognises

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[8] In November 2003, the green paper *Every Child Matters* (DfES 2003) was published, bringing all policy related to children and families under the banner of education, and taking forward proposals for Children's Centres as one-stop shops for services, including childcare, based in and around schools.

the cost element, but appeals to parents' 'natural' wishes and ultimately places the responsibility squarely with individual parents:

> Choosing the right kind of affordable care that will be best for your child and fits in with your working hours is a big decision. Naturally all parents want to make sure that they do the best they can. In the end it is an individual decision. (NFPI 2001, p.17)

This message is borne out in how the information is presented to parents. The booklet *Families and Work* (2001) features a series of personal accounts exclusively by *mothers*, explaining how they reached decisions on combining parenting and paid work. It ends rather unusually, with an account from a journalist who returned to full-time work soon after her children were born, employing a nanny to care for her children. She writes that she 'still hasn't forgiven [herself]' for missing her older daughter's first steps, 15 years earlier (NFPI 2001, p.14). This hardly seems a positive note to reassure women who plan to return to work!

The Kids' Clubs Network[9], a voluntary organisation promoting out of school childcare, is the only organisation to explicitly address the issue of 'home alone' children in relation to debates about childcare. A summary of its research is published under the title *Home Alone Too?* (Kids' Clubs Network 1997), with pictures throughout of sad-looking children alone (see *Appendix F*). Although it is essentially proposing a structural solution to the problem, namely a national network of out of school clubs, the publication uses loaded language and plays on parents' fears of accidents, crime and abduction. It emphasises that parents are worried ('35% of parents worry about their children after school', p.2) and that they only reluctantly to give their children the latchkey, i.e. most parents do this out of necessity, not choice. After school clubs are presented as the ideal solution for addressing the fears of parents and the wants of children for more activities and social contact with friends after school. The authors also point out that expansion of out of school care is in line with government policies, 'Parents are aware that they are not fulfilling their earning potential … Many say that they would extend their hours or indeed return to work if out of school childcare was available' (p.4).

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[9] Kids' Clubs Network was renamed '4children' in March 2004.

More recently, Kids' Clubs Network has campaigned to expand provision for older children, 'The need for child care does not stop when children go to school and for many it does not stop when they turn 11' (Longfield 2003, p.7). Teenagers who go home from school alone are portrayed as being increasingly vulnerable to crime, bullying and drugs.

> Parents want their teenage children to feel comfortable, and want to feel secure in the knowledge that their teenagers are not hanging out in shopping centres or on the streets but in safe and organised environments. (Longfield 2003, p.7)

Again, the focus is on what parents and children want and feel, and some of the fears of leaving children unsupervised are triggered. Linking back to the previous chapter, where constructions of 'children as villains' were explored, there is a recognition that a different type of childcare is needed:

> Ten to 14 year olds are too old for the more traditional forms of childcare yet, in the opinion of many parents, too young to be left alone at home every day after school (despite what they may think themselves!) … Much of the success of provision for older children lies in the subtle blend of supervision and the freedom to 'do their own thing'. (Kids' Clubs Network 2001b, p.8).

This was echoed in an interview at national level, suggesting that children's wishes for autonomy should not always be granted:

> Children are growing up quicker and quicker. We are trying to do work with older kids, because a lot of older kids are home alone, or even choose to be at home alone, or their parents are happy for them to be at home alone. Well, we say they shouldn't be – they need meaningful activity. (childcare charity 1)

Thus major structural changes in how children are cared for can be advocated in such a way that emphasises personal choice and happiness.

5.3.3 Improving chances for all

In contrast to strategies that focus on individual choice for parents and children, other claims promote the general social and economic benefits of childcare:

> Childcare gives children a good start in life and enables their parents to work, study or train. It is a key part of economic and social policy to create a better Britain. (Daycare Trust, no date)

According to the Daycare Trust, British parents pay three-quarters of the costs of childcare, compared with 30% in most other European countries. A problem identified by several childcare charities (as well as local level respondents) is the low take up of financial help from the state towards formal childcare costs, currently the childcare element of Working Tax Credit. The government's current childcare strategy has been criticised for being labour-market driven. For example, Peter Moss, giving evidence to the House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee (2003, p.12), argues that 'childcare is a public good which is the right of all children, regardless of whether their parents work or not'.

Similar rights-talk is used by the National Council for One Parent Families (NCOPF) in arguing for rights for parents to have flexible working practices, such as paid time off to be with children, for example when they are sick or there are childcare problems, and working hours that fit in with the school day:

> The public wants real rights to flexible working and there is no resistance from staff without children … we have argued that employer refusal must be subject to a statutory objective justification or harm test, as in countries such as Germany and the Netherlands. (NCOPF 2001, p.3)

The need for flexible working practices has been linked with the 'home alone' issue less explicitly. The topic featured less in fieldwork interviews, although some local professionals gave personal accounts of how they managed to balance parenting and paid work, usually through working part-time.

5.3.4 Conclusion
Building on the section in the previous chapter, this section has explored further how the issue of 'working mothers' has been problematised. The shortage of appropriate and affordable childcare in the UK is presented as a cause of the 'problem' of lack of work for some parents, particularly lone mothers. The 'home alone' issue has been tentatively associated with these debates, with the suggestion that more childcare

places and more flexible working practices may help to address the issue. The rhetoric of choice is frequently used, but does not fully acknowledge the constraints within which such choices are made. Policy changes in this area are driven by the needs of the labour market and economy. The overarching message remains that childcare is parents' individual responsibility – both to find and to pay for.

5.4 Safety advice for parents and skills training for children

Green lists the main accident prevention strategies as the '3 Es': education, engineering and enforcement (1995, p.121). Enforcement was explored in the first section of this chapter, when I discussed the legislative framework. In this section I explore the role of advice and education, examining messages to parents on leaving their children alone at home, and materials directed at children and young people themselves on how to be safe when at home alone.

> "Let's go down the pub, if they wake up they wake up". Cruelty to children must stop. FULL STOP. (poster from NSPCC, c.1999)

> Parents are being warned not to leave their children at home alone - after child protection professionals have been alerted to a spate of recent cases … "Adults who leave children unsupervised are breaking the law and placing them in unnecessary danger." (London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham 2002)

One solution to the practice of leaving children alone at home would be to simply advise parents never to do this, as in the unusually strong message given out in a local authority press release cited above. However, while such unequivocal advice may be given in relation to very young children (e.g. 'Never leave a baby or toddler alone, even for a few minutes', BUPA 2002), most advice to parents and children on 'home alone' is more pragmatic. This is the domain of accident prevention and health promotion professionals and agencies, although those concerned with child protection also increasingly issue advice. There is a clear tension between ideal and practice and claims-makers position themselves at different points along this spectrum. Precautionary messages tend to place an emphasis on the responsibilities of parents to protect their child from harm and on the need for close parental supervision. Meanwhile pragmatic approaches acknowledge that leaving children

alone at home is a regular practice in many (or even most) families. Rather than condemning the practice universally, such strategies advise parents and prepare children so that the risks are assessed and the worst dangers avoided. So the question is less about *whether* to leave children at home alone but *when* and *how* to leave children in a manner that is safe. Protagonists of this pragmatic approach appear to make one or more of these four key points:

- That dealing with risk is a natural and necessary part of growing up;
- That constant supervision is impractical and undesirable;
- That children can be trusted to be at home alone if equipped with skills and knowledge;
- That we need to acknowledge that children *are* left at home alone and respond to this accordingly.

In this section I analyse interviews with campaigners and professionals concerned with children's safety and some of the educational material currently available. I conclude that different claims-makers advocate different 'solutions', according to their interests or stake in the social problems 'game'. The resulting guidance is somewhat ambiguous and, at times, contradictory. Thus advice and education alone cannot adequately address and resolve the 'home alone' social problem.

5.4.1 Risk is natural and necessary

A key message in much of the advice and information on child safety is that risk is a 'natural' part of growing up, but also that it is parents' responsibility to manage it appropriately. The Child Accident Prevention Trust (1999a) states that 'Children should not be prevented from learning and developing naturally', and 'learning to deal with risk is a skill which will help to keep themselves safe as they grow up'. However, the same author adds, 'they need to grow up in a safe environment protected from unnecessary harm' (one might ask what would count as 'necessary harm'?). Although this publication is not specifically about leaving children at home alone, this advice illustrates the essential tension that exists in debates about appropriate levels of adult supervision of children, balancing independence with

safety. This is particularly prominent in debates about leaving children at home alone.

In the previous chapter I discussed how leaving children at home alone was constructed by some as giving children 'too much' responsibility, thus depriving them of their 'right' to childhood. The following extract from an interview illustrates how responsibility and risk are closely linked, almost used interchangeably:

> I do have mixed feelings about it because my philosophy […] is that children need to take risks, children need to have responsibility, but what they don't need is to be expected to take risks and responsibility that are completely above their developmental level. And what we're asking some children to do is to take on adult responsibilities, for other children, for themselves, and they're not ready for it. (children's charity 2)

This respondent reflects a view of childhood as a precious, protected time, clearly distinguished from adult roles and tasks.

5.4.2 Constant supervision is impractical and undesirable

According to the precautionary approach to child safety, parental supervision is both a duty and an effective way of ensuring child safety. Cohen et al. (1989) identify supervision as a key aspect of child safety (along with experience, education and protection). However, despite offering a graph (p.33) illustrating how levels of supervision decline as a child gets older and as education and experience accumulate, the authors do not define what supervision is, nor do they explicitly address the issue of leaving children unattended at home. Of course, supervision does not simply mean an adult presence in the home – several respondents observed that they had concerns about families where the parents were physically present but not aware of what their children were doing, perhaps due to drug or alcohol use, or mental illness – but this issue is beyond the remit of this thesis.

In discussing how home accidents to children can be prevented, the CAPT (1999b) takes a more pragmatic approach, acknowledging:

> Supervision is … frequently used as a home safety strategy. This may be the only solution in some circumstances e.g. preventing young children from

drowning in the bath. But it may not always be practical on every occasion. (CAPT 1999b)

Indeed, another publication by the CAPT, a report of an action-research project with parents and young children, has the title *You can't watch them twenty-four hours a day* (Combes 1991). Its message does not condone parents who leave young children unsupervised; rather it advocates that accident prevention for young children requires a number of different strategies.

Roberts et al. (1992, p.198) note that much of the current work on accident prevention is exhortatory and is based on the idea that parents can be educated to prevent accidents, but fails to take the social context of accidents into consideration. Theorising on health promotion, Roberts (1996) reminds practitioners of the need to recognise that parenting is a multi-activity task:

> While the exhortation to parents never to leave children alone in the home is self-evidently wise, it fails to address the context in which a number of health promoting childcare tasks, including feeding, cleaning, and earning, compete for priority in the majority of households. (Roberts 1996, p.57)

This also highlights the difficulties faced by parents with more than one child – carrying out a parenting task with one may detract from or conflict with parenting another child. A dilemma presented in several interviews was of a mother with a baby who had just settled to sleep when it was time to collect another child from school. Should she wake the baby up to take it with her, or leave the baby asleep while she quickly went to a local school to collect her older child? Indeed, the respondent of one safety charity used this scenario frequently in accident prevention training sessions (these were with professionals, but they 'immediately go into mum-mode' when talking about practical parenting dilemmas). It usually leads to a 'confession time' (her words) from participants, where parents recount their experiences of times when they left their children, of 'near-misses' and, sometimes, tragic events. She argued:

> One of the best ways of getting messages across is to get parents to talk to parents. Bring your group together [...] get it going by asking the question and wait until somebody comes out with a story. Because if somebody comes up with a story, it's going to have more effect on those

> parents than if you stand there and tell them. Nobody wants to be told anything. (safety charity 1)

This respondent was not advocating leaving children alone, but she acknowledged the practical and moral dilemmas that parents encounter in the day-to-day experience of bringing up children.

Not only is constant supervision of children seen as impractical, it can also be constructed as a form of deviant parenting, because it deprives children of opportunities to learn and take risks. The previous chapter cited evidence from childhood studies research that children value highly time spent away from the adult gaze. The following parenting handbook states:

> Neglecting children is a terrible crime. But standing over them so much that they have no opportunities to explore their own resources turns children into dissatisfied, incompetent adolescents. (Johnson 1996, p.54)

Similarly, one respondent said about the practice of never leaving children at home alone,

> In some ways those children grow up to be absolutely inept as adults. They don't know what the heck to do about anything. (children's charity 2)

Furedi writes, 'Parental supervision is today always interpreted as a positive virtue – so parents can never spend too much time supervising their youngsters' (2001, p.7), but far from condemning parents, he places the blame on 'the state' and its representatives in the form of child welfare professionals. However, the discussion above demonstrates that exhortations that children are constantly supervised are *not* the norm. Furthermore, the state as represented in legislation and via professionals, is ambivalent on this matter and professionals only interfere if they have to.

This section sheds light on the processes of constructing parental deviance. While to leave one's child alone at home can be constructed as a problem, so too can watching over one's child constantly and closely be seen as wrong. Thus practices at either end of the spectrum of supervision can fall into categories of deviance.

5.4.3 Equipping children with skills and knowledge

Another strand of safety advice on 'home alone' is the view that children be trusted to be safe if given the appropriate knowledge and skills. This suggests a more optimistic view of childhood than some other constructions of the 'problem', recognising children's agency and competence. The following guidance is from a national organisation concerned with safety:

> Most parents are acutely concerned for the safety of their children but may be unsure about the best ways to help them … far more effective is to help children to recognise unsafe situations and take steps to stay safe. We need to give them the opportunity for problem solving at home and on outings, so that they can exercise their own judgement as to what is safe and what is not. Attuning their instincts in this way will stand them in good stead for life. (Lamplugh and Pagan 1996, pp7-8)

Here the authors contend that children's own judgement about danger and safety can be trusted if they are given experience and help in 'attuning' this sense of judgement. The text cited above accompanies *Home Safe* (Suzy Lamplugh Trust 1996), a set of educational resources for children aged 8-11 years, parents and teachers (see *Appendix F*). In a video set to cheerful music throughout, children watch 'Darshan' walk home from school on his own and 'Emma' be at home alone after school. Each child shares their 'good ideas' on how to be safe. Emma's list consists of:

> I let someone know I'm home.
> I check at the door and lock up when I'm inside.
> I keep a list of useful numbers by the phone.
> I never give my name or number on the phone.
> I say my mum can't come to the phone.
> I don't answer the door if I'm alone.
> I put the chain on until I'm sure it's safe to answer the door. (Suzy Lamplugh Trust 1996)

This is a very different message from that given by the Kids' Clubs Network on 'home alone'. The philosophy of the Suzy Lamplugh Trust is that children need to learn about personal safety in a positive way, and that children need to 'feel confident, not fearful' (Suzy Lamplugh Trust 1996). In the US, the popular story *The*

Cat in the Hat[10] is now used as an educational resource to explore the issues of being at 'home alone', as well as about 'stranger danger' (Gallager, no date).

Addressing children directly was also a strategy adopted by the Child Accident Prevention Trust for Child Safety Week in 1997. CAPT produced a leaflet with the title *Top ten safety tips for older children*, aimed at children aged 10 years and over:

> As you get older you'll probably be expected to look after yourself from time to time. You'll also be out and about on your own or with friends. You can enjoy yourself and stay safe. Follow these safety tips and help make sure you don't get injured in an accident. (CAPT 1997)

A regular feature of responses to 'home alone' is the importance of parents teaching children routines, rehearsing activities with children (for example, telephoning 999 in an emergency) and arranging back-up support from nearby neighbours or relatives. The *Home Safe* materials (Suzy Lamplugh Trust 1996) are sponsored by British Telecom, reminding parents and children of the importance of keeping in telephone contact with each other. Indeed, the issue of mobile phones was raised several times in fieldwork interviews – if a parent was in contact with a child by mobile phone, this was taken as evidence of the parent's 'care', albeit at a distance. One respondent stressed the need for parents to prepare children, even if leaving them at home alone is not a regular practice, but in case of unexpected events:

> I do think that we must start teaching children from a very early age, what you need to teach your children is, if for some reason no one is home and you come in and the front door seems to have been kicked down you don't go inside to find out if there's a burglar inside. That's one of my 'what if' questions [...] And maybe one day you can't get home. Maybe you're always home at 4 o'clock when your kids get home from school, and maybe one day there is a break down on the tube and you are stuck in the Underground, so your kids don't know. (children's charity 2)

Another interview respondent expressed the view that, far from restricting children, teaching them safety skills is a way of giving children freedom:

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[10] '"I know some good games we could play," said the Cat. "I know some new tricks," said the Cat in the Hat. "A lot of good tricks, I will show them to you. Your mother will not mind at all if I do." Then Sally and I did not know what to say, Our mother was out of the house for the day' (Seuss 1958).

> If you don't get it inside them quite young they even may think to themselves they should be doing something different. Whereas when you're teaching someone automatic behaviour it doesn't seem as if you're making yourself not free to do something. It's freedom you're actually giving them. [...] It enables them not to feel fearful, as well as giving them freedom. (safety charity 2)

A strong developmental strand runs through much of the advice about child safety in general and 'home alone' in particular. I concur with Scott et al. (1998, p.694) that most claims-makers couch their guidance within a developmental, linear model of childhood. Thus advice and decisions are based on the age and maturity of the child. Scott et al. suggest that most guidelines to parents on children and risk 'bureaucratise decisions in relation to children, producing standardised responses without regard to the social context or life experience of individual children' (1998, p.694). However, in the case of 'home alone' there is some recognition of variations in social context and individual development. For example, information from the NSPCC observes:

> There is no set age at which it is OK to leave children home alone. It depends on whether the child is mature enough to cope in an emergency and feels happy about being left. Children mature at different ages, and every child is an individual. (NSPCC 2000)

Age is just one factor among many that are referred to in advice on leaving children at home. As was touched on in chapter 4, the time of day, the reason for parental absence and the preparations made by the parent beforehand have a moral and practical significance on the perception of the actions and the outcome for the child.

5.4.4 Acknowledging that children are 'home alone'

The difference between precautionary and pragmatic approaches is shown up most clearly in the tension between setting ideals for parenting and dealing with the 'reality' of what parents do. This is not to say that advocates of the precautionary approach are unrealistic - it is more that they are constrained in what they can say in response to the 'home alone' issue. Almost all claims-makers acknowledge, albeit reluctantly, that there may be occasions when it is necessary to leave a child alone. Where they set the parameters varies, for example, with child protection organisations coming down on the side of caution in the guidance they give.

It's [home alone has] been a problem for years actually, and [organisation] has quite a firm line [...] Obviously there's a legal aspect to this but I think the view was taken that it was better to err on the side of caution. You know, being [organisation], and knowing perfectly well that in the real world that 14 year olds babysit and so on. But it was just felt that it was better to be cautious. (children's charity 1)

In contrast, some safety charities take a more pragmatic approach to giving advice. This was illustrated in an interview where the respondent explained how a safety leaflet came about:

We knew that during the summer holidays thousands of children are left unattended at home, because parents work. So we tried to say, well instead of going along and say, "Oh you shouldn't." If you pick something to say and you know it's not going to be heeded why bother? So what we do is accept the fact that we know children are left, so let's have a leaflet or some information about how those children can be kept safer while they're left. (safety charity 1)

A respondent from another safety organisation took a similar line:

When I talk to youngsters, I go round saying, "Has anybody here actually found themselves on their own?" The parents and teachers say, "No, absolutely not", the children say, "Yes, of course!" (safety charity 2)

Both organisations found themselves the subject of conflict and controversy when they produced safety advice that acknowledged that children are sometimes at home alone.

I have to say when we brought this [leaflet] out we did get our wrists slapped a bit, but we got our defence ready, we were prepared. We said, basically some people said, "You're encouraging people", but we said, "No, we're trying to acknowledge that we know it's going to happen so let's address the issue." (safety charity 1)

The publication of the *Home Safe* materials by the Suzy Lamplugh Trust (1996) prompted some media coverage, with claims and counter claims. This was one of the few occasions when the 'home alone' issue was discussed explicitly in the public arena, without being in response to a home alone 'scandal' involving a lone mother going on holiday to Spain.

I suggest that those claims-makers who are part of organisations which identify as being concerned with safety have more autonomy in how they respond than charities

that are more closely associated with child protection. This protection-safety dichotomy may go some way to explaining the difference between precautionary and pragmatic advice on leaving children at home alone.

5.4.5 Conclusion

In this section I have explored safety education and guidance for parents and children on 'home alone', and have seen that although most messages tend towards the pragmatic, there are those organisations who err on the side of caution, or precaution. The outcome is a collection of mixed, sometimes contradictory messages. This ambiguity contributes to the lack of success of this issue as a social problem claim, since there is a lack of consensus on appropriate solutions.

5.5 Supporting and educating parents

Moving on from interventions that focus on safety and accident prevention, in this section I explore more general parenting education and support, setting this in the context of recent government policies on families and parenting. State interest in educating parents is not new – as early as 1913, Newman recommended educating mothers as a remedy for infant mortality (Lewis 1980, p.89). However, recent years have seen a plethora of policy initiatives aimed at supporting parents in order to promote a number of outcomes, not just children's well-being. This section outlines the main stakeholders who consider parenting education and support as the most appropriate solution for addressing 'home alone'. The strategies used in order to promote this solution are considered, including both formal and informal sources of parenting education and support. To close this section I conclude that an analysis of this issue highlights some key contradictions in New Labour's family policy.

5.5.1 The policy context

There has always been reluctance on the part of central government to be drawn on the specific issue of 'home alone'. During the height of public concern about children being left at home alone, Health Secretary Virginia Bottomley resisted calls for tougher laws, saying that 'parenthood needed to be shared more within the family and the community' (Ward 1993). During the fieldwork stage of this research, I

contacted a number of government departments to try to elicit an interview on my thesis topic. I was consistently told that it was not the concern of that particular department, and was passed to another department in turn, as the sample of correspondence below shows:

> This is more a matter for the Department of Health under child protection and also for the DTI [Department of Trade and Industry] who deal with work life balance issues. (Email from Home Office, 28.01.02)

> DTI's responsibility is to look at what happens in the workplace not the home. You might therefore try first the Department for Education and Skills who are responsible for the National Childcare Strategy. (Email from Department of Trade and Industry, 28.02.02)

Despite this lack of explicit policy concern with the issue, there are implicit assumptions in several areas of policy that relate to the issue (some of which have been explored in this thesis), including welfare-to-work policies for parents, childcare provision, child protection procedures and criminal justice policies. As Land writes,

> Many assumptions and ideologies underpin family policy which are neither made explicit nor fully examined for their effects. (1999 cited in Fox Harding 2000, p.19)

In their book, *Children and Social Policy*, Daniel and Ivatts assert:

> We are … fully aware that social welfare provision, however important a contribution this may make, is ultimately no substitute for good parenting, and that children have needs well beyond those purely material ones about which the state and other formal organisations can do something. (1998, pp220-221)

However, in contrast to this statement, the state and other 'formal organisations' (including the voluntary sector), *do* believe that they have a role in promoting 'good parenting'. The prevalent view is that parenting is 'taught, not caught' (NFPI 1999), and that initiatives such as parenting groups and classes, befriending schemes and telephone helplines can have a positive impact in supporting parents, serving both to pass on knowledge and to raise confidence and self-esteem.

Government policy has long been concerned with people's attitudes and behaviour with regard to family obligations. However, a clear policy position on the family has often been lacking. New Labour, upon entering government in 1997, rapidly formulated a statement on family policy in its green paper *Supporting Families* (Home Office 1998). In it the government stresses the centrality of the family unit in society. The opening paragraph of first chapter, 'better services and support for parents', reads:

> All parents need support with their children's health, education and welfare, and many also want advice and guidance on how to bring up their children. However, parents do not want lectures from the state, or to be nannied (Home Office 1998, p.6).

However, there is an equally strong emphasis on the *responsibility* of parents, not the state, in particular for the transgressions of children and young people. The link between criminal and antisocial behaviour and the absence of satisfactory parenting experiences is a constant policy theme (Tunstill 1999, pp134-135).

There is an uneasy relationship between selectivist social services departments and other universalist aspects of the welfare system. Tunstill (1999) observes that New Labour is uncertain as to where the boundary between selectivity and universalism should be drawn, and this is illustrated in its family support policies. Fox Harding (2000) comments on conflicting elements in the 1998 green paper: laissez-faire, as evidenced in the repeated mantra of 'not interfering', alongside state support for families (in particular supporting marriage and active fatherhood); incentives alongside enforcement and more authoritarian control. The ambiguities and tensions in contemporary parenting policy are also pointed out by Henricson (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2003b). Lack of clear legislation on leaving children at home alone is cited as an example of ambiguous policy, where government prefers a laissez-faire approach, as opposed to clear expectations of children's behaviour and accountability for parents when it comes to truanting or antisocial behaviour.

5.5.2 Delivering family support at local level

Interviews with practitioners working at local level suggested that leaving children at 'home alone' is precisely the type of issue that could be effectively addressed

through parenting support. While some parents were regarded as leaving their children out of necessity, others were seen as doing so out of 'ignorance':

> You get a spectrum, from parents where it's either the lack of clarity or ignorance, because they really do believe things will be alright or, at the other end of it, where I think where parents are lonely, and difficulties cloud their judgement and get in the way of that judgement. (social services manager 2)

In this extract, the manager expresses her belief that parents who leave children at home alone either lack clear information or exercise poor judgement due to social isolation. In both circumstances, parenting support could help by providing an opportunity to discuss the situation, seek clarification on the law, find out about the norms and practices of other parents, and explore possible alternatives to leaving children unattended. A voluntary sector manager was optimistic that 'home alone' was an issue that could be dealt with through informal, supportive measures:

> I think leaving children inappropriately is something that you can actually work with, and get it stopped, and get the parents looking at other ways of looking after the children. And often it's that they think perhaps an 8 year old is okay [on their own]. (voluntary sector manager 3)

Mentoring or befriending schemes were particularly valued by professionals as an effective means of support for isolated parents. Voluntary projects, such as Homestart, and the government early years initiative Surestart make use of community development methods to strengthen local networks as a way to promote 'good' parenting.

> Sometimes if it's somebody who lives in their area and is known to them, it's like a conversation, rather than a professional going in and saying, "You should not be leaving your children." It's more, "Let's sit down, have a cup of tea or coffee, and then start talking about it, parent to parent really." (voluntary sector manager 5)

This approach to supporting and educating parents was reflected by a respondent with a national safety charity on effective training strategies for local professionals:

> We try to say, "Getting information to parents, not telling parents", because I don't know what you're like but if I think you're telling me to do something, I'm going to resist it like mad, I'm going to think, "Who do you think you are?" Whereas if somebody is sharing information with you,

saying, "Did you know …?" that's much better. If you can get it going as a conversation then it's very strong. (safety charity 1)

5.5.3 Messages of policy makers and campaigners

Parents are the most important educator in any person's life, yet they get most of the blame when things go wrong and little support or training to ensure that every child gets the best possible start in life. (Alexander 1997)

Contemporary parenting is a contested area and there is considerable ambivalence about the public education of parenting. A poll carried out for NFPI in 2001 reported that friends and family are the most important means of getting information about parenting. One of the barriers to parents seeking information or advice was 'a general worry about being stigmatised and labelled a failure' (NFPI 2001, p.7). This reflects findings from an earlier NFPI survey (1999), that the privacy of the family was seen as the greatest disincentive to seeking help with parenting.

The challenge facing organisations providing family support is to de-stigmatise the act of asking for help and support. One interview respondent talked about 'normalising difficulties', suggesting that parents need to be reassured that having difficulties in parenting is normal and that there is nothing wrong with asking for help. In fact, asking for guidance and support is seen as an indicator of good parenting; it is a sign of taking responsibility:

I suppose it's about being open to it as a difficulty, it's something that parents have to struggle with, and there isn't an easy answer. […] They might not have either the experience or the skills to deal with it, but need support to think about it, and to talk about it. (parenting support charity 1)

One way this particular service supported parents was by talking through parenting dilemmas and exploring alternatives. Several respondents use the language of 'choice' and 'options' in talking about the issue of 'home alone', but, as identified in the section above on childcare provision, for many parents choice is severely constrained.

[Volunteers] have to try to understand the family set up in order to ascertain whether what we're being asked is actually safe. Then if it isn't, to help, if they feel that perhaps it isn't, to help the caller look at other

options, you know, to try to find out whether there are other options. What we don't do is give advice. We never tell people what to do, but we do try to explore if they have alternatives. (parenting support charity 1, emphasis added)

What happens when a parent doesn't have *any* options? The above respondent did not explain what would happen then.

The voluntary sector has taken on a key role in delivering family support, and much of its income now comes from the state in the form of service contracts. This strategy seems to make sense when evidence suggests that parents do not 'trust' the government (NFPI 2001). Yet reliance on statutory funding can make charities vulnerable, not just because such income sources are short-term and conditional, but also because such a relationship with the state may compromise their role as innovators and critics of government policy (Rickford 2001; Knight 2003).

5.5.4 Helplines – the social problem solution?

One strategy for providing parenting support is through telephone helplines. At first glance, the 'home alone' issue may be an ideally addressed in this way. My research found that, in addition to referrals to local police and social services, calls on the issue are frequently received by a number of local and national voluntary organisations. These calls can be categorised into 3 types:

- Parents asking for clarification on the law re leaving children alone;
- Third parties reporting concerns about children who are left at home alone;
- Children themselves who are left alone and want help or reassurance

In 1993 the NSPCC reported a 'dramatic rise' to at least 60 calls a month on the matter (Ward 1993). During a 10-month period in 1993, ChildLine received 25 calls from children themselves, and 22 from concerned third parties (Keep 1993). However, calls to this latter organisation on this theme appear to have decreased in recent years (personal communication), perhaps because the public profile of the issue has declined.

So do we need a dedicated 'home alone' helpline? I contend that telephone helplines are becoming a panacea for social problems. Setting up a helpline can be a quick and relatively cheap response to a clamour to 'do something' to address an alleged problem. Writing about the social construction of post-natal depression as an illness, Lee says, 'The usual solution to this alleged problem is a good dose of professional "support", a "helpline", and "counselling" to cope' (Figes and Lee 2004, p.24). I am not questioning the value of telephone services to callers, who may appreciate the anonymity and accessibility that they offer. The traditional staffing of helplines by volunteers can also be an empowering process of self-help. However, such services are becoming increasingly professionalised, with paid staff, and at the same time fragmented, so that there is a separate helpline for each different type of condition. One respondent in a national level children's charity reported that their organisation's helpline, supposedly dedicated to one issue, receives a large number of calls on general parenting questions.

The fact that there is currently no helpline dedicated to the issue of children left at home alone can be cited as further evidence that social problem claims on this matter have failed to become bureaucratised as a firm social problem category. I am not suggesting that one is necessary, but nor would I rule out the prospect of one emerging in the future.

5.5.5 Conclusion
The movement for non-coercive support and education for parents has grown in significance in both voluntary sector provision and government policies towards the family. Both professionals working at local level and campaigners at national level advocate this is a potential 'solution' to the 'home alone' issue, suggesting that parents can be gently guided into making appropriate decisions about their children's care. The language used in this discourse refers to choice and responsibility. However, such an approach does not adequately deal with the demands and constraints placed on parents by policies and employment.

5.6 Summary and conclusion

This chapter has explored a wide range of professional and policy responses to the issue of children being left at home alone. While greater legal clarity on the issue is called for by some, most professionals argue that the current legislative framework works satisfactorily and defend their freedom to exercise professional discretion. Improving childcare provision and employment practices in order to reconcile parenting and paid work, although rarely linked in an explicit way to the 'home alone' issue, is a contemporary policy concern, but proposals only go so far within the current economic and political context. Safety and accident prevention advice often directly addresses the issue of leaving children at home alone, but there is a lack of consensus on what is considered appropriate. Organisations differ on how willing they are to acknowledge the actual practice in families and this influences the guidance given to parents and children. Finally, the provision of support and education for parents has potential for allowing parents to explore practical dilemmas in a non-judgemental context. However, some parents continue to avoid such services for fear of stigmatisation and many services are provided on the assumption that parents have choices and alternative sources of help. The possibility of a helpline to support and advise parents on this issue was considered. While all of these responses have the potential to address some aspects of the 'home alone' social problem, no solutions have been fully developed. Most policy-makers and campaigners are reluctant to articulate the issue head on, because to do so would be to acknowledge that a fundamental shift in social and economic arrangements are needed. In the next chapter I look at how local level professionals resist categorising the issue of children left at home alone as a problem in the first place.

6 Resisting the problem

6.1 Introduction

This chapter explores how professionals working with families express ambivalence about the issue of children left at home alone. It demonstrates how the issue of children left at home alone is neutralised, effectively preventing it from becoming a full blown social problem. In chapter 4, *Constructing the problem*, I demonstrated the different resources that claims makers use in categorising the act of leaving children alone at home as a problem. Yet how do professionals reconcile their view that parents leaving children alone is wrong with the fact that they routinely do not follow up every incident that they know about, and when they sometimes admit to doing it themselves?

In their talk, professionals use a range of techniques to explain both the actions of parents and their own practice as professionals. Building upon the sociological work of Scott and Lyman (1968), a typology of accounts is offered, divided into justifications and excuses. The origins and development of this theory are outlined below and then applied to the data in the present study. In some accounts, respondents accept that the practice of parents leaving children alone at home is wrong, but deny that either they or the parents can be attributed full responsibility for their actions, so can thus be *excused*. In other circumstances, professionals offer *justifications* that deny that parents' actions in leaving their children alone at home are wrong, even though they acknowledge parents' and their own responsibility in such circumstances. I suggest that the interviews for this study generate different kinds of each account: those that account for professionals' own actions ('self accounts'), those offered on behalf of others ('proxy accounts'), and those accounts attributed to others ('reported accounts'). The chapter concludes with a consideration of how these ways of neutralising or 'explaining away' the issue of children left at home alone contribute to the lack of success of this issue as a social problem.

6.2 Vocabularies of motive

Sociologists have long been interested in the motives that human actors impute to themselves and to others. By paying attention to the talk about why people do things

we can shed light on the moral and normative context in which such talk is produced (Murphy forthcoming). In his seminal article, Mills (1940) asserts that, while we cannot plumb behind people's verbalisations and we cannot assume that motives cited are the cause of their actions, we *can* construct typical 'vocabularies of motive' that exist in different types of situations and actions (p.910). We cannot observe people's internal states but such situated vocabularies can be analysed to discern how social order is produced and maintained. This is consistent with an ethnomethodologically-informed approach, with its roots in Durkheimian sociology. In her introduction to Garfinkel's latest work (2002), Rawls explains it thus:

> Social "facts" are … sounds and movements, witnessable actions on the part of participants in social gatherings that must be recognizable to others as actions of a very particular sort, in order for social processes to have any coherence, or intelligibility, for participants. (p.21)

6.3 Accounts

Building upon the work of Mills (1940) and Sykes and Matza (1957), Scott and Lyman (1968, 1970) develop a typology of how social actors explain unanticipated or untoward behaviour. Accounts are a technique for minimising or repairing damage to one's identity as a moral, rational actor. They are linguistic devices 'employed whenever an action is subjected to valuative inquiry' (Scott and Lyman 1968, p.46), serving to explain unanticipated or untoward behaviour, bridging the gap between action and expectation. Scott and Lyman's work complements interactionist studies of deviance of the time, which were introduced in chapter 2 of this thesis (e.g. Becker 1963).

Scott and Lyman argue for a consideration of 'the relation of language and gesture to the phenomena of deviance' (1970, p.90). Rather than looking at how an act or a person comes to be labelled as deviant, they seek to locate and describe ways in which the label of deviant is avoided or resisted, through the use of justifications and excuses. Such a charge of deviance may be spoken or unspoken. Typical vocabularies of motive can be reactive (i.e. employed after the deviance has occurred) or employed in anticipation of a deviant act being performed; what Murphy (forthcoming) calls *anticipatory* accounts, a relatively neglected aspect of

Mills' original work. Murphy explored mothers' attitudes towards infant feeding in a longitudinal study. Following a cohort of mothers from late pregnancy to their babies' second birthdays, Murphy examined women's talk about possible breast feeding 'failure', a potentially untoward action in the context of constructions of breast feeding as part of contemporary ideology of 'good motherhood'.

6.4 Proxy, self and reported accounts

Mills writes about imputing motives to others (1940, p.909), but this too has been rather overlooked by subsequent work in this area. Scott and Lyman acknowledge that actors offer accounts to explain not only the unanticipated or untoward behaviour of themselves, but also that of others (1968, p.46). However, they provide no separate consideration of the latter type of account in their work (1968, 1970). It has been rarely taken up in researchers' use of Scott and Lyman's accounts in a variety of contexts. In Higginson's (1999) study of statutory rape in the USA, teenage mothers' accounts of their underage sexual relationships often refer to their older (ex)boyfriends, either attributing blame mainly to him (excusing their own deviance), or denying that he should be held responsible by taking full blame themselves for their actions (justifying deviance). One strength of Higginson's research lies in her demonstration of how actors' accounts can change over time, but, as with Scott and Lyman, accounting for the behaviour of others is not identified as a separate unit of analysis.

In this study claims makers provide not only accounts of their own views and actions (both as professionals and as parents – what I refer to as *self* accounts), but also offer what I call *proxy* accounts for the behaviour of others, i.e. the parents and families whom they work with. Although respondents vacillate between these accounts within the same interview, such accounts are distinctive from one another in quality. Indeed, professionals may offer accounts for their clients that would be nigh impossible to claim for oneself. In addition, respondents in this research sometimes cite the accounts given by parents for their actions (*reported* accounts). Some of these parents' accounts are honoured or endorsed by respondents, while others are dismissed and alternative explanations are offered. The selective honouring of reported accounts, the offering of proxy accounts, and the accounts offered for

respondents' own actions, are all used as resources with which to resist categorising 'home alone' as a social problem. Strikingly, all the examples of excuses quoted below are proxy accounts – none of the respondents are excusing their own behaviour. By contrast, a number of examples of justifications are of respondents self-justifying.

Table 3 below summarises the two categories of accounts, excuses and justifications, and their respective sub-categories.

Table 3 Typology of excuses and justifications (Scott and Lyman 1968)

Excuses	Justifications
Appeal to accidents	Denial of injury
Appeal to defeasibility	Denial of victim
Appeal to biological drives	Condemnation of condemners
Scapegoating	Appeal to loyalties
	Sad tales and self-fulfilment

6.5 Excuses

An excuse, in the context of this chapter and in the way Scott and Lyman discuss it, refers to an explanation of an act that accepts that it is wrong, but denies responsibility for it. The use of excuses implies acceptance of normative expectations (Higginson 1999, p.26). Excuses are 'socially approved vocabularies for mitigating or relieving responsibility when conduct is questioned' (Scott and Lyman 1968, p.47). In everyday language, in these excuses people are saying, "I [or she or he] couldn't help it". Scott and Lyman identify a number of sub-categories of typical excuses. These are: appeals to accidents; appeals to defeasibility; appeals to biological drives; and scapegoating.

6.5.1 Appeals to accidents

In appealing to accidents, actors mitigate responsibility by pointing to generally recognised hazards in the environment and human incapacity to control all bodily responses. They emphasise the irregularity and unpredictable nature of accidents.

Accidents in the context of this chapter refer to parents' absence from the home, resulting in their children being left at home, not necessarily an accident that befalls a child while at home alone. Green's definition is a helpful one:

> An accident, ideally, is characterised by lack of intention (no one meant it to happen) and by unpredictability (no one knew it was going to happen just then). (1995, p.117)

Scott and Lyman (1968, p.48) note that repeated appeals to accidents that are unobservable or unable to be investigated (as is often the case with 'home alone' incidents) are likely to be discredited.

The extract below from a health visitor suggests that those parents who leave their children unsupervised 'in an emergency' are not subject to as rigorous moral questioning as those who do so regularly:

> I think the reason why [the parent is absent] does have an effect, because [with] some parents it's unlucky that they've been caught and it's a one-off or it's been, it's done in an emergency and you might have happened to just knock on the door at the wrong time and just been involved in something that might never happen again. But on the other hand you may be just, it may be the tip of the iceberg and it might be the first time that anybody has been aware that this is going on and how serious it is. (health visitor 8)

The unpredictability and infrequency of 'home alone' incidents can be employed to excuse the action:

> I think the extreme ones where you found that something quite tragic has happened are, thankfully, quite rare. [...] I think experience shows that things can go tragically wrong when there's a lack of adequate supervision purely by chance of accident rather than by design mainly. (social services social worker 6)

The social worker emphasises that a negative outcome as a result of parental absence is (thankfully) rare (so this would also fall under the justification of 'denial of injury' below). He also points out, in line with Green's (1995) definition above, that children may be left alone unintentionally. Discussing the issue in New Zealand, Scott notes,

It is relatively common for one-off incidents of supervisory neglect to occur in situations where there have been genuine misunderstandings between two adults, each mistakenly assuming that the other was caring for a particular child. (2002, p.36)

While I did not come across such accounts of misunderstandings in the interviews for this research, several 'home alone' cases covered by the news media in the 1990s came to light after a breakdown of care arrangements, notably the first UK media 'home alone' story of Gemma Gibson in February 1993, cited in chapter 1.

6.5.2 Appeals to defeasibility

Appeals to 'defeasibility' are excuses that contain components of knowledge and will. An example cited by Scott and Lyman is the disclaimer, "I did not know that I would make her cry by what I did" (1968, p.48). In making judgements about cases involving children left at home alone professionals frequently assess questions of intention, foresight and choice for the parent(s). Did the parent know what she (or he) was doing and did she have any choice in the matter or could she have made alternative arrangements? Common excuses of this kind attempt to relieve the actor of responsibility because she was not fully informed or her will was not completely free.

In the current study, this type of excuse links to the perceived reason for parental absence. Some respondents acknowledge that many parents who leave their children at home alone do so out of necessity, but what counts as necessity?

> Parents don't do it, I don't think, lightly; if they are leaving the kids at home, they've got no choice or they are completely ignorant of the issues, in which case they wouldn't ask [for advice] anyway. Once you start asking those questions you might be faced with a situation where no, it's not appropriate and then what do you do about keeping that job or going down to the shops? It's easier just to get on with it and if you get found out … and I think often they know they're running a risk of getting found out. (health visitor 5)

The above respondent does not deny that leaving children unattended at home is wrong, but she absolves parents from responsibility by appealing to ignorance or necessity. Often such excuses were offered on behalf of clients on the basis of assumptions rather than evidence.

The following example is from a health visitor who came across a sick baby left in the care of a 6 year old girl in a traveller community. The parents of the baby had gone to a town some distance away and the mother of the 6 year old was nearby to offer extra support. Even though the respondent demonstrated a relatively flexible attitude towards 'home alone' generally, she found this arrangement *almost* unacceptable:

> I thought that was a bit off the edge, that was not good enough really. But I didn't do anything about it, because nobody would ever be there if I rung social services […]. And I don't think, in a way, that child was at much risk. But this family, these parents had seen it as nicer to leave their poorly child at home, with another child, than to take it off to [town]. And from their perception that was the right thing to do. They weren't going to take her out in the cold air, you see. So this is a loving sort of thing. And I think families do this when they've got to nip to the shops; if a child's asleep in bed, they leave it asleep in bed rather than wake it up. (health visitor 6)

In this account the health visitor provides a proxy excuse on behalf of the parents (leaving the child was a 'loving sort of thing'), emphasising that although in the eyes of some, leaving the sick baby behind may be wrong, the intentions of the parents were honourable. She then moves on to discuss parents doing this more generally.

Another potential example of an excuse that invokes appeals to defeasibility is the case of Heidi Colwell, cited earlier in this thesis (a mother who left her 2 year old alone to go to work). Press response to her situation was mostly sympathetic and supportive of her case. She received praise for her attempts at 'self-help' rather than relying on state support, sympathy that she could not afford a child minder and recognition for her struggle and determination to escape 'appalling council bed and breakfast accommodation' (cited in Wallbank 2001, p.127). Commenting on press coverage of the case Wallbank observes that

> Even though she opted to work outside the home, the decision to do so and leave her daughter alone was represented as driven by her desire to provide her child with improved living conditions. Her only pleasure was constructed as deriving from her maternal duties. (2001, pp128-9)

Yet while the media constructed Colwell as a victim, the initial prison sentence given to her suggests that the criminal justice system did not frame her actions in such sympathetic terms.

6.5.3 Appeals to biological drives

Excuses that invoke biological drives are part of a larger category of what Scott and Lyman (1968, p.49) call 'fatalistic forces'. This type of account implies that certain actors or groups are less in control of the forces that shape their lives. Scott and Lyman suggest that appeals to biological drives most commonly refer to sexual needs or drives, but I question whether this kind of excuse would be honoured by society equally for both men and women. Media reports of 'home alone' stories frequently focused on lone mothers and, as Garrett (2001) notes, sometimes their sexuality was exposed to public scrutiny and cited as evidence of their 'poor parenting'.

In this current study I suggest that, in addition to references to sexuality, appeals to biological factors include reference to mental health status, to alcohol or drug misuse, and to physical and intellectual (learning) disabilities. Some respondents appealed to biological issues to explain why some parents were less able to exercise 'appropriate' parental judgement. As one health visitor expressed it:

> And some people, sadly it has to be said, could never exercise good judgement in a hundred years, could they? [laughs] About anything! Or they struggle, they struggle. Whereas other people are very astute aren't they. But that's the nature of human beings isn't it? Some people are more astute than others. (health visitor 1)

There is an element of fatalism to this respondent's exclamation – the implication is that parenting support and advice, such as that explored in chapter 5, may have little or no impact on parents who, for psychological or medical reasons, have impaired judgement.

One respondent provided an account of an incident in which a baby was found left alone in dangerous conditions. While he did not attempt to 'neutralise' this incident (i.e. he perceived it as clearly wrong), the respondent reflects on how the mother who

abandoned the baby could possibly be seen as a victim, but ultimately she 'chose' her way of life and caused her child to suffer:

> There's a history of problems with this girl. She herself, as a young girl, was struggling to cope on her own and was perhaps a victim of society in terms of how she's gone down. But she certainly chose drugs in a very big way [...] So she's gone down a road which she wanted to go down with drink and drugs, which is allied to prostitution, which enabled that child really to suffer quite alarmingly. (police officer 1)

6.5.4 Scapegoating

The final type of excuse invoked is scapegoating, in which one alleges that the actions of another are the 'real' cause of the deviance. An example of this can be found in Higginson's (1999) study, where some teenage mothers blamed their boyfriends for their participation in underage sexual relationships:

> I think Robby's an asshole for going out with me when I was 16. I think that's horrible. Seven years difference! I was 16; he was 23. He was a total adult, I was still in my adolescent years, you know? (Amanda, cited in Higginson 1999, p.34)

Finding examples of scapegoating in the current study is more difficult, as popular and policy discourses place a strong emphasis on parental responsibility, even when parents delegate childcare to another person. However, responsibility is not attributed to mothers and fathers equally. Even when respondents discuss families where there are two parents in the household, the blame is usually attributed to the mother, reflecting the dominant expectation that responsibility for childcare continues to be women's domain. Indeed, in response to vignette A, which features a situation where a *father* leaves a 3 year old for a short time (see *Appendix E*), one informant immediately responded with what she would say to the *mother* – this could have been a genuine mistake in reading the vignette, or could reflect deeper assumptions. In only one interview was lack of support from a male partner cited as a possible contributory factor to the 'home alone' issue:

> It can be very difficult for parents, especially either if they're [mothers are] on their own, if they've got a very uncooperative husband, or he works away, or he works long hours. (voluntary sector manager 3)

More often the scapegoat was not another person but policies and social structural factors, such as the benefits system, employment and childcare provision, as were explored earlier in chapters 4 and 5.

6.6 Justifications

Justifications are statements by actors that accept responsibility for an action but deny that it is wrong. "It's not as bad as you think" would perhaps sum up this type of account in everyday terms. Scott and Lyman write that 'to justify an act is to assert its positive value in face of a claim to the contrary' (1968, p.51). Drawing upon the work of Sykes and Matza (1957) on juvenile delinquency, they suggest the following 'techniques of neutralisation': denial of injury; denial of victim; condemnation of the condemners; appeal to loyalties; and sad tales and self-fulfilment.

6.6.1 Denial of injury

> In *denial of injury* the actor acknowledges that he did a particular act but asserts that it was permissible to do that act since no one was injured by it, or since no one about whom the community need be concerned with was involved, or finally since the act resulted in consequences that were trifling. (Scott and Lyman 1968, p.51).

This accurately describes a large number of accounts articulated by professionals when discussing the topic of children left unsupervised at home. It justifies certain behaviour as long as no person, object or property comes to harm and no one in the community finds out about it, or at least no one reports it to police or social services. This links to two key issues as to how the issue of 'home alone' children is perceived – outcome and visibility. The two issues are often linked, since a negative outcome is more likely to lead to the discovery of the child(ren) left alone. Nagel's (1979) philosophical concept of 'moral luck' is relevant here. He asserts that we cannot always make moral judgements in advance – the moral verdict of an act depends on the results.

> If one negligently leaves the bath running with the baby in it, one will realise, as one bounds up the stairs toward the bathroom, that if the baby has drowned one has done something awful, whereas if it has not one has been merely careless. (Nagel 1979, p.31)

In response to vignette D ('The parents of a 5 year old child go out for an evening, asking neighbours to keep an eye on their child, who is left sleeping in the flat'), a health visitor reflects, in a similar way to Nagel's example, on how the perception of such a situation would vary according to outcome:

> If that child stayed asleep all evening and mum [sic] came back at 11 o'clock and went to bed, no one would ever know would they? So, and is it arguable that does it matter? *Does it matter if nothing happened and the child was perfectly all right?* But then if there was a fire in the flat and the child was found dead the next day, that would be a disaster wouldn't it, and the mother would be wrong. It's very difficult. (health visitor 1, emphasis added)

In this extract, the respondent remains unclear as to whether the absence of injury would therefore neutralise the deviance of the parents' action. In a similarly ambivalent manner, the following response was given to vignette A (see *Appendix E*), in which a child of 3 is left alone briefly while the father goes out to a local shop:

> Three years old, there may be nothing happens at all and I can see why parents might be tempted to do this, because 99 percent of the time nothing untoward would happen, but leaving the house for 20 minutes would probably be a bit too long really for a 3 year old to manage, not on their own. (health visitor 5)

While this health visitor ultimately expresses disapproval for the father's action, she shows understanding of 'why parents might be tempted to do this' by acknowledging that most of the time nothing adverse would happen to the child. Scott and Lyman noted the use of lay statistics in excuses that appeal to accidents (1968, p.48). I was struck by how some respondents cited statistics in very rough, general way in a range of accounts about children being left alone at home, as in the account above.

The clearest example of a specific 'denial of injury' account was given by a social worker, who recounted her very recent experience of a 'home alone' case that she considered borderline:

> The police rang in to say that they'd been to an address and they'd found 5 children alone. The eldest was 11 who was babysitting for little ones down to 2 [years old] [...] the 11 year old was a cousin so they weren't siblings and she had said that the mum of the little ones had gone to get a carpet. She'd gone to buy a carpet and she would be back in half an hour but you know we didn't know how long mum had been gone. In fact

the police went back and she was back very quickly. So it was quite unusual in that sense which I found that quite dilemma because they weren't, well they didn't appear to be known to social services although we didn't have all the details, and you kind of thought this woman has been really quite unlucky because may be she had literally only popped out for a very short time. And although you wouldn't condone an 11 year old looking after little children you know you have to take a pragmatic approach as well. [...] This family had only just moved into that address so I don't think they were anything to do with the reason the police had gone, so it was pure chance which made you kind of think, "Oh she has been very unlucky!" [laughs] You know it's almost there for the grace of God really because I'm sure anyone could have popped out for 10 minutes and said, "I won't be long." But she'd been unlucky and because of that she's now a referral to social services. (social services social worker 5)

I have quoted from this interview at length because the social worker draws on several dimensions to demonstrate her dilemma. Not only was there no apparent injury to the children in this case, but also the situation was discovered by chance. According to the reported account, the mother had gone out for a 'legitimate' reason (to buy a carpet), having made some arrangements for the 11 year old cousin to babysit, and she returned quickly, as promised. The respondent describes the mother as having been 'unlucky' and is reluctant to intervene (and was saved from doing so by the fact that the mother returned). She expresses regret that this family now has a record with social services, thus making it probably more likely that the mother will be categorised as 'deviant' if future concerns are raised. This is an example of secondary deviance arising from the primary deviation (Lemert 1951), where the response to the initial deviance creates a further category of deviance in itself.

6.6.2 Denial of victim

A second mode of justification is denial of victim. In such accounts, there is an insistence that the injury is not wrong in light of the circumstances and the actor implies that the victim deserved the injury. In other studies of deviance, it is clear that certain categories of people are more likely to being perceived as 'deserving' injury, or at least less deserving of sympathy. The example given by Sykes and Matza (1957, p.668) is of rich people, robbed by Robin Hood and his latter day derivatives, who are denied victim status. This type of justification did not feature strongly in the interview data. As I demonstrated earlier in this thesis, social problem claims frequently construct a victim. I found no evidence of children left alone being

denied the status of victim, although the level of sympathy may vary according to age of and outcome for the child.

The absence of this type of justification may reflect the high moral and social value afforded to children in contemporary British society. However, there are tensions and contradictions in contemporary constructions of childhood, as explored in previous chapters. In extreme cases of crime committed by children, such as murder, their status as victims (and indeed as children) may be denied by society, as in the cases of Mary Bell, Robert Thompson and Jon Venables (Asquith and Cutting 1999; Sereny 1998). Such a contradictory view of childhood is highlighted by Riddell, who points out that 'it took … until May 2000 for the Home Office to issue guidance that child prostitutes were victims of abuse, not criminals' (2002, p.26).

Thus denial of victim is *not* a frequent strategy for resisting the problem of home alone, perhaps because it is less likely to be honoured. But its very absence reveals something of how this issue is constructed and the dominant moral scripts of parenting.

6.6.3 Condemnation of the condemners

In justifications that condemn the condemners,

> the actor admits performing an untoward act but asserts its [i.e. the norm or rule] irrelevancy because others commit these and worse acts, and these others are either not caught, not punished, not condemned, unnoticed, or even praised. (Scott and Lyman, 1968, p.51)

The authors provide no illustration for this type of justification, yet it is one that is used in a number of ways to justify the act of leaving one's children alone at home. I examine two particular issues that arose in relation to this in the interview data. The first is the association of 'home alone' allegations with 'malicious' child protection referrals. The second is the assertion that parents leaving children home alone is a widespread practice.

As noted earlier, members of the public concerned about parents leaving children alone at home frequently contact social services departments and sometimes other

agencies, including health visitors and the police. Many respondents expressed the view that some of these referrals were made on spurious grounds, either by ex-partners or neighbours in dispute, as a deliberate attempt to get a parent 'into trouble'.

> Most of our referrals of children being at home alone are either anonymous, sometimes malicious, and sometimes by one partner against another partner, and then we get embroiled in a custody dispute. (social services manager 3)

In this type of account, respondents are condemning the condemners by neutralizing and dismissing some concerns as unfounded or made for the wrong motivations.

Reports of children being left alone made to child welfare professionals after the event (i.e. after the alleged absent parent had returned) were less likely to be responded tothan reports of situations where children were currently left alone. This is partly to do with lack of evidence if one investigates post hoc. A health visitor explained that one of her clients had made allegations about another family living locally. She weighed up such reported concerns carefully:

> It depends on exactly the nature of the allegation and who the person is making the allegations. Because it is a very easy way for parents to maliciously get other parents into trouble. The time that I'm thinking of, where a parent who was totally reliable as far as I was concerned as a reporter was making the comment [about a neighbour leaving her children alone]. She knew that what she had to do herself was the next time she was aware that these children were being left that she needed to pick up the phone and to make a referral. [...] Coming from me third hand was going to be difficult, it needed to be her making the referral and I reminded her that she had more right and responsibility in that scenario to take action when it was actually happening, so that it could be shown to be a fact as opposed to hearsay. [...] Because you have to be very careful to get, when you are not actually confronted with it, not to collude with other parents necessarily. (health visitor 8)

While this respondent believed the allegations being made were genuine, she handed responsibility back to the client making the allegation to pass her concerns on to social services herself at the actual time while the children were alone. The health visitor's use of the language of rights and responsibilities is pertinent here, suggesting that is the client's 'moral duty' to report her neighbour, and yet the health visitor felt no obligation to investigate the allegations herself, perhaps because the

alleged neglectful parent was not on her caseload. In some ways the health visitor was filtering out the concerns even before they reached the stage of a referral to social services, anticipating that there would be no response to a historical allegation (i.e. one made after the event). Or rather, she was *refining* the concerns, by advising her client on how to maximise the chances of her account being taken more seriously.

The following respondent acknowledged that social class had a bearing on the level of scrutiny parents came under, both from professionals and for neighbours. The implication was that those incidents that were 'known about' were not necessarily any worse than those which went unnoticed.

> I'm sure there's lots of parents, like many other child protection type issues, I guess a lot of issues happen in middle class areas but there isn't the same level of scrutiny as there is in other areas. So if you are socially isolated and other sorts of social deprivation factors you are more likely to come to the attention, or any behaviour is more likely to come to the attention of the professional isn't it, or the concern of the neighbour or something. (social services manager 2)

The above quote leads on to the second issue that arose with the interview data in relation to this type of account – the claim that leaving children unattended is a frequent practice among all families, therefore to condemn the practice might be seen to be unreasonable or unfair. It is not the place here to test the accuracy of such assertions, as we have already seen that reliable data on this practice is not available. What is of concern here is that professionals *perceive* it to be a common practice among parents. Higginson developed a similar sub-category of justification for statutory rape, calling it 'Everyone Does It, Nobody Minds' (1999, p.30).

> RESP: I know a lot of mums, I say a lot, I suspect a lot of mums, when their babies are asleep they nip out to the corner shop, you know, while the baby's asleep.
> RC: And what's your view on that?
> RESP: Well, it's dodgy. Very dodgy, doing that. Anything can actually happen. But I think this is what they do. They're a single parent, there's nobody else in the house, the baby's asleep, there's the corner shop, you know, so they nip out. […] I would imagine that there's all sorts of practice going on out there that we're not aware of. (health visitor 7)

A common assertion in local level interviews was that many children are probably left at home alone but that professionals are not told about it because of this generalised expectation of the action being perceived as 'wrong':

> People don't talk about it, [they] keep it to themselves, don't want to discuss it. They know it goes off, and I'm sure it goes off a lot more than we know. (police officer 1)

In this section I have shown that justifications that 'condemn the condemners' exist in two different forms, which could appear to be in conflict. The latter form suggests that the practice of leaving children alone at home is widespread, yet the former suggests that many allegations of the practice are unfounded or unjustifiable. However, these two patterns of belief and practice are not necessarily in conflict. If indeed the practice is one that many parents do, including some professionals themselves, then why should those 'unlucky' (in the words of some respondents) enough to be discovered be subject to censorious intervention from state officials? I suggest that while the local level respondents in this study do not condone the practice of leaving children unattended at home, nor do they universally condemn the practice. Rather they use their professional judgement to discern those situations where they consider children to be at immediate risk, or where there are additional concerns, and focus their efforts on such cases.

6.6.4 Appeals to loyalties

When an actor asserts that their actions were not wrong because they serve the interests of another person or group, they are appealing to loyalties. Just as Loseke (1999, pp49-56) discusses how different types of moralities can be appealed to in constructing a social problem, so too can different moralities and loyalties be appealed to in *resisting* categorising certain behaviour as problematic. For example, one health visitor described a mother who left her children unattended while she cared for her elderly mother and other relatives, demonstrating a conflict of caring loyalties:

> I've got a mum who I know leaves her kids and I've never done anything about it. She's very busy, she looks after her mum, she looks after her sister's child, her sister is in prison. She has 5 kids to look after, 4 of them hers, one of them's her sister's. They're all under 12 but she's got a

very safe house, she always leaves them with a mobile phone, she's got a mobile herself. They are very capable kids, they always know where she is and how long she's going to be, and that she's nipped to her mum's or she's nipped to this or nipped to that. She doesn't leave them a *long* time on their own. (health visitor 2, original emphasis)

We have no evidence that the mother *herself* offered this account, so we can assume that this is a proxy account for the mother. It is also a justification of the health visitor's decision not to challenge or report her. In the eyes of the health visitor, not only is the mother justified in leaving her children at home alone because she is undertaking other caring duties (as opposed to pursuing her own 'selfish' interests), she also emphasises that the children are not left for long, they know where their mother is and they can contact her if necessary. Finally, she makes an assessment of the safety of the house and the capability of the children. All these are seen as mitigating factors. Thus the health visitor is satisfied, on grounds of the parent's actions and assumed intentions, of environmental factors and of the children's perceived maturity, that the situation need not be categorised as deviant.

In a different type of account, but one that also appeals to loyalties, a health visitor reflects on her own parenting experience some years earlier, when her husband asked her to drive some distance to collect him late at night, requiring her to leave their sleeping children alone in the house. Her account suggests that to be a 'good wife' she had to forgo being a 'good mother' for a few hours:

I remember when my husband was working really late one night, he rang me up at about two o'clock in the morning, "I'm in [town], can you get me home?" And I had, I mean, we were living just outside [city], but even so, it's about an hour's drive … both my children absolutely flat out asleep, my neighbour's fast asleep, two o'clock in the morning. I mean if I'd had any sense I'd have said, "Get yourself a bloody taxi", but stupid me, locked up, went and got him. And was very angry with him for putting me in that position, but I did it. And I wonder how many other women would do the same? And I've often thought, that was, it was very unfair of him, he should have got himself a blooming taxi, but he just expected me to fetch him home, and of course at that time of night he was on his last legs as well. He was working […] the stress levels were horrendous. I knew that, so off I went and fetched him. (health visitor 6)

This self account could also fall into the scapegoating category of excuses, as outlined in the section on excuses above; the respondent appears to place some blame

on her husband for 'putting her in that position', although she acknowledges her own responsibility in choosing to fulfil her husband's request.

6.6.5 Sad tales and self-fulfilment

'The *sad tale* is a selected (often distorted) arrangement of facts that highlight an extremely dismal past, and thus "explain" the individual's present state' (Scott and Lyman 1970, p.52). Sad tales certainly feature in much of the interview data, as the semi-structured schedule encouraged the telling of narratives. But it is not the format of the interview accounts that is significant here, but how such accounts are utilised, either to highlight an extremely dismal past or to justify the deviant behaviour by pointing to the actor's need for self-fulfilment. Scott and Lyman refer to their own research with LSD users and homosexuals in San Francisco to give examples of 'a peculiarly modern type of justification, namely, *self-fulfillment* [sic]'(1970, p.52). This type of justifications is particularly contested in discourses about parenting – do parents have a right to self-fulfilment if it jeopardises the welfare of their child(ren)? The dominant morality would appear to suggest that the answer is no, not under any circumstances, particularly not mothers. While parental absence from the home to undertake paid work can be constructed as meeting the needs of children, a parent's absence for apparent pleasure (whether an evening out or a holiday) is harder to explain in terms of children's needs. However, as I demonstrate below, in certain situations, respondents may utilise this type of account to at least *partially* neutralise a deviant act.

The following extract is from an interview with a health visitor who was clearly sympathetic towards a mother, whose children were briefly removed from her and their names were placed on the child protection register for neglect, after she went out to a nightclub one night:

> And it was really hard […] she was actually a very caring mother, she was really, but she was basically very very lonely. She had 2 children and none of her friends had children and the fathers of the children weren't around, she was alone with them. And her friends came round and persuaded her, I guess she was probably too easy to persuade but, persuaded her to go to [nightclub] on a Friday night. And she said to me afterwards, she said, "Every drink I had made it easier to leave them. I felt awful at first, but every drink just made it easier." And she got drunk and went to a friend's house and spent the night there. And then [she]

came home on Saturday afternoon to find the police and social services at the house. […] and they were removed then, into foster care, for the weekend. She did get them back the next week I think, I think she got them back on the Monday. She was distraught, absolutely distraught, and I felt very sad for her because she was just lonely, she was only young and wanted to do what all young people were doing, you know. (health visitor 1)

This extract represents a proxy account, which the health visitor offers on behalf of the mother. As well as being a sad tale, this account also contains excuses, alleviating the mother from (at least some) responsibility. There is an element of scapegoating ("her friends persuaded her"), and an appeal to biological drives – the only excuse reported by the mother ("Every drink made it easier"). However, the dominant technique of neutralisation is self-fulfilment – the health visitor presents the mother as young, lonely and wanting to do what other young people do. In addition, the fact that the mother was so distraught at losing her children is cited as evidence of her not intending any harm (an appeal to defeasibility) and of her being a 'very caring mother'.

6.7 Summary and conclusion

Scott and Lyman's (1968) framework of accounts can assist in understanding how professionals resist categorising 'home alone' as problematic. Using a range of excuses and justifications, they rationalise the actions of parents and their own responses, thus contributing to the process of social construction. They draw upon a theory or vocabulary of motives (Mills 1940) to make sense of their actions and the actions of their clients. In this chapter I have demonstrated how, rather than amplifying and expanding the construction of the 'home alone' issue as a social problem, respondents *contain* the issue. Professionals work hard in their talk to maintain or restore the identity of their clients in the face of allegations of deviance, presenting them in most circumstances as moral and rational actors, namely as caring parents who are doing the best they can.

Building on Scott and Lyman's accounts, the main theoretical contribution of this chapter is the development of the concept of *proxy* accounts, in which an actor offers accounts on behalf of others, in an attempt to neutralise a pejorative categorisation of their behaviour. I suggest that respondents in this study do not offer proxy accounts

purely out of generosity, but do so as a means of explaining their own actions (or inaction) in response to concerns about children being left at home alone.

My interpretation of the data leads me to conclude that a greater range of justifications than excuses are drawn upon by claims-makers at street level in order to explain away the 'home alone' issue. This should not come as a surprise, given that the use of excuses implies acceptance of the normative expectations: therefore if professionals readily accept an act as wrong, they are obliged to do something about it, resulting in increased interventions into families' lives. As we have seen from legal and policy responses in earlier chapters, there is no unequivocal norm regarding the issue of leaving children alone at home; it is fraught with qualifications and competing claims. Through exercising professional discretion and judgement, the influence of professionals' resistance and ambivalence to intervention should not be underestimated in the social problems game.

7 Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

This thesis has explored the issue of children left at home alone from a social construction of social problems perspective. In this final chapter I discuss the key findings of the thesis. My main conclusion is that the issue of 'home alone' remains an 'unconstructed' social problem in the UK context and I offer some possible explanations for this. Understanding how and why some social problems 'fail' is a key contribution to the literature on the social construction of social problems, which has focused mainly on 'successful' social problems to date. Following a reflection on the limitations of this research, I identify potential areas for future work.

7.2 A failed social problem?

It has been identified in social constructionist literature (e.g. Hilgartner and Bosk 1988; Loseke 1999) that many social problem claims never become a full-blown social problem. Social constructionist case studies have tended to focus on 'successful' social problems. Citing Troyer and Markle, Best and Horiuchi argue that

> while these studies demonstrate how some claims-making campaigns succeeded, they do not explain why other social conditions, with the potential to be defined as social problems, never reach this status. Emergent or unconstructed social problems are less often studied. (1985, p.495)

It is here that this thesis makes a contribution to the literature, by concentrating on a social issue that is ambiguous in its status as a social problem. Blumer recognises that the emergence of a social problem is a political process, writing:

> Recognition by a society of its social problems is a highly selective process, with many harmful social conditions and arrangements not even making a bid for attention and with others falling by the wayside in what is frequently a fierce competitive struggle. (1971, p.302 cited in Best and Horiuchi 1985, p.495)

I suggest that the issue of children left at home alone is a social problem that has fallen 'by the wayside'. Has it been subject to a fierce competitive struggle? The evidence presented in this thesis indicates that while some organisations and claims-

makers have actively confronted and promoted the issue, others, notably the state and its employees, resist categorising the issue as a social problem.

The 'home alone' issue is distinctive in being chronic – it has not gone away, nor has it necessarily got better. Although it has not fully 'made it' as a social problem in the UK, it continues to be troubling on a low level and is subject to periodic peaks of public concern. In the sections below I look at what a 'successful' social problem would look like. I then go on to suggest reasons why the particular issue of children left at home alone has 'failed'. What characterises this particular issue so that it fails to 'take off'?

7.2.1 Successful social problems

As discussed in chapter 2, *Literature review* of this thesis, a 'successful' social problem in social constructionist terms is typified as one where there has been a clear shift in public thinking and concern has become institutionalised in some way. Examples of institutionalisation of concern would be legislative measures, a government-sponsored public education campaign, a survivors' organisation, a telephone helpline dedicated to the issue, a training programme for professionals and a body of rigorous academic research. Successful social problems that have emerged in recent decades and meet at least some of these criteria include drink driving, domestic violence, elder abuse, paedophilia, passive smoking and homelessness.

7.2.2 Lack of visibility

An explanation for the lack of success of issue of 'home alone' children may lie in its lack of visibility. The practice of leaving children in self-care takes place in the home, and this arena is protected by the powerful moralities of the privacy and autonomy of family life. This links to Lemert's (1951) observation (cited in chapter 2, *Literature review*) that deviance has to be *visible* in order for society to respond to it. Unlike in the US and Australia, in the UK there are no accurate large-scale survey data on how many children are left unattended at home and under what conditions. Nor is there a body of clinical evidence to draw on, in contrast to other aspects of

child abuse and neglect[11]. Much of our knowledge of the issue is anecdotal. Claims-makers at both local and national level suggest that the practice is more widespread than agencies formally know about, but if we do not have concrete data, it is hard to make clear, unambiguous claims about the scale of the issue.

Best (2001) has highlighted the power of statistical claims, particularly in the media, and my personal experience illustrates this. While preparing to give a paper at an international conference on adolescence, I received several enquiries from journalists about my research. However, media interest soon waned when I was unable to give them statistics on how many children were left at home alone, nor was I willing to confirm that the problem was 'getting worse'. Not only does this illustrate that the media want statistics, but they also like 'bad news' stories. Rodman (1990, p.170) recounts a similar experience with a journalist on the latchkey issue in the 1980s.

7.2.3 Constructing complexity

Another answer to why 'home alone' has not 'made it' as a social problem may lie in the complexity of the issue. As shown in chapter 4, *Framing the problem*, the 'home alone' issue is subject to multiple framing. That chapter examined frames that construct the issue as one of 'working parents' and frames that construct the issue as threatening 'childhood', and there are other frames besides. There is nothing unusual in having multiple constructions of a social issue. However, often when there are competing claims competition one set of claims-makers emerges to take 'ownership' of the issue and gets to set the agenda of how the problem is defined, talked about and addressed. In the case of 'home alone', there is lack of agreement on what exactly the problem is and the underlying causes (structural or individual) of the problem.

Perhaps there is not *one* 'home alone' issue, but several. For example, it is simultaneously framed a problem of safety, child protection, legal ambiguity, lack of childcare and a problem of poverty, each with its own range of expertise and solutions. There is a noticeable absence of a strong medical discourse on the matter

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[11] However, certainty about medical evidence is now in retreat since the overturning of the case of Angela Cannings in 2003, and the discrediting of the paediatrician Roy Meadow as an expert witness (Cobley and Sanders 2004).

in the UK. Thus the issue remains fragmented and does not sit easily under one label of 'home alone', although all claims may draw on the label at times. Alternatively, it could be that the 'home alone' issue is not a problem in its own right, but is a small element of a bigger, more 'successful' social problem. The powerful symbolism of the 'home alone' child has certainly been used as *part* of strategy in other social problem claims, such as claims that emphasise the shortage of affordable, appropriate childcare or threats to unsupervised children using the Internet.

7.2.4 Moral panics and children

The child can be seen as symbolic of social order (Jenks 1996 cited in Critcher 2003, p.159) and concerns about threats to children, along with fear of crime and mistrust of others, are indicative of sources of wider strain in society. Referring to persistent urban myths about razors in apples and poisoned candy in the US, Best and Horiuchi (1985) write:

> Today, the Halloween sadist has become an annual reminder of the fragility of the social bond – an expression of growing doubts about the safety of children, the trustworthiness of strangers, and the strength of the modern urban community. (p.497)

In a similar way, incidents of children left alone at home may represent unease in UK society. The issue has certainly been cited as evidence of the demise of family life and lack of social cohesion. Critcher (2003) notes the shift of focus from young people as folk devils (e.g. Cohen 1972; Hall et al. 1978) to children as the victims of folk devils. He suggests that issues around children are fertile ground for claims-making and moral panics, and that 'moral panics mobilize the need to protect children through increased regulation' (Critcher 2003, p.155). Although there appears to have been a growth in the amount of guidance issued on the subject of 'home alone' children, this hardly amounts to increased regulation. The issue has not been fully successful, either as a social problem or a moral panic. This may be because it is hard to typify the folk devil(s) for such a problem. As Critcher points out: 'The moral panic model does not stand or fall by the existence of folk devils alone but there has to be a clear target for a campaign' (2003, p.84).

In other problem claims about children, such as child abduction, paedophiles or Halloween sadists, the threat is constructed as being outside the (perceived) safety of the home and the people involved are typified as 'sick' in some way (thus medicalising the problem to some extent). In the case of children left at home alone, the folk devils are the parents themselves, and they only make convincing folk devils if they have certain features that appeal to claims-makers (Aldridge 1994). Critcher concludes that neither physical nor sexual abuse of children *in families* became moral panic because of the lack of an appropriate target (2003, p.92). I suggest that a similar explanation can be offered for the issue of 'home alone'.

7.2.5 A universal practice?

Is it possible to categorise a universal practice as a problem? Loseke (1999, pp84-85) discusses the strategy of constructing a very common condition, warning that social problem claims that are so broad as to include *everyone* are unlikely to be convincing. The findings of this research project suggest that leaving children unsupervised at home is something that most parents do at times. This creates a dilemma for professionals working with families – if 'we' all do it, defining and identifying the deviant 'other' becomes a difficult, if not impossible, task. To draw on a social problem in a different context, the anti-camera lobby frame their opposition to speed cameras on roads in terms of civil liberties and draw attention to other types of deviant driving[12]. What the lobbyists imply, but do not explicitly say, is that everyone breaks the speed limit and thus they attempt to normalise the practice. Can one imagine similar arguments being put forward to justify leaving children alone at home?

7.2.6 Ambivalence and resistance

This study has revealed professionals' ambivalence about their role as control agents of the state. They are reluctant to intervene in 'home alone' situations unless they really have to. Giovannoni and Becerra note that, 'in the midst of the ambiguity is the

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[12] 'We are opposed to the reliance on speed cameras because it represents persecution of ordinary hard-working people based on completely unsound dogma. It is an abuse of civil liberties that does nothing to improve road safety. Speed is not the major cause of accidents in this country. Dangerous driving and poor road design contribute more to death and injury' (Gregory, Association of British Drivers cited in Torres 2004).

delicate balance between children's rights to protection and parents' rights to autonomy' (1979, p.244). Practitioners working with families operate a theory of motives to make sense of parents' and their own actions. While a change in legislation may clarify matters for both professionals and parents, it would effectively reduce the amount of discretion and professional autonomy that they currently have. Campaigners and professionals prefer to exercise the 'quiet coercions' (Foucault 1991 cited in Murphy 2003, p.436) of education and persuasion, as Murphy analyses in the context of mothers' infant feeding practices.

7.2.7 Timing and contingency

A possible explanation for the reason why the issue of children left at home alone has remained 'unconstructed' may be simply that the policy agenda has moved on. When the issue emerged under its current label in the 1990s, it was against a backdrop of a moralistic campaign by the political Right in both the press and in politics. New Labour, which entered government in 1997, developed some of the Conservative Party's concerns around 'the family', particularly in the area of criminal justice. Amid the rhetoric of support and choice, there has been an increased emphasis on the responsibility of parents. In particular, parents can be held accountable for their children's behaviour, both at school and on the streets, in the form of parenting orders (e.g. Crime and Disorder Act 1998; Anti-social Behaviour Act 2003). In contrast, the government 'has not tightened definitions of parental responsibility in relation to children's safety, for example in relation to physical punishment and the age at which a child may be left alone' (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2003b). To open up discussion on this matter could reopen the entire debate on 'working mothers', which would run counter to other social policies, such as those that emphasise the necessity for all adults to work, including (perhaps especially) lone parents. If the proposed solutions of a social problem claim require fundamental social or economic changes, this may serve as a barrier even to getting the issue on the public agenda.

7.2.8 US parallels and differences

In their study of the social phenomenon of 'mugging', Hall et al. note

> this slow translation of 'mugging' from its American setting to British ground was shaped and structured by what we might call 'the special relationship' which exists between the media in Britain and the United States. (1978, p.25)

As with mugging, the term 'home alone' was first used in the US and, following a brief time lag, the British press picked it up. The label continues to be used in the media, as indicated in the introductory chapter to this thesis, and also by professionals, as I found when carrying out the fieldwork for this project. In some contexts it has become a noun in its own right (e.g. social worker respondents introduced me to their colleagues with "this is Rebecca – she's doing research on home alones").

However, there are significant differences between the US and the UK in the way the issue has developed. I propose that, in contrast to my findings in the UK, 'home alone' *has* been successful as a social problem claim in the US. Debates among academics and policy makers are much more developed than in the UK. Claims-makers and parents are more open about 'home alone' being a condition that, according to Loseke's definition, is troublesome, widespread and changeable (1999, p.6). The issue is talked about as something that 'everybody knows' (Clarke and Cochrane 1998), rather than the muted, reluctant discussion that has taken place in the UK. As evidence of concern, a wealth of information and advice is available, both online and in parenting handbooks (often quoting guidance issued by the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry 1997). In addition, a variety of organisational responses to the 'home alone' or 'latchkey' issue exist, including training programmes for children and their parents, subscription-only 'home alone' helplines[13], neighbourhood 'block moms' and a wide range of out of school programmes.

On the basis of my limited mapping of the issue, I contend that both concern about and responses to the issue of children being left unattended at home have become institutionalised in the US. Whether this foreshadows what is to come in the UK, I am unsure – there seems little sign of this happening yet. I do not wish to downplay

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[13] 'Hey kids! … If you are sometimes uncomfortable being home alone, please talk to your parents about signing up for the TelaFriend service. We're here to make those hard times, boring times, or emergency times easier for you to handle' (Child care online, no date)

the social, cultural and policy differences between the two countries, not least the role and influence of the state.

7.3 Limitations of this study

Aspects of this thesis are a product of contingency as much as choice. While I remain convinced that a social constructionist approach to the topic has been an appropriate and useful one, it also has limitations. As I pointed out in chapter 2 of this thesis, much of the social problems literature lacks a strong analysis of power and the role of the state. This partly reflects the US bias of the literature and it also reflects a phenomenological epistemology. Although a major part of this study focused on the accounts of local-level professionals, many of them employed by the state, the account here takes less account of issues of power and the state than might be appropriate. Murphy's recent work (2003) has shown how Foucauldian concepts of power and expert knowledge can fit well with an interactionist approach to deviance in the field of families, and this could be applied more rigorously throughout the thesis.

The ambivalence and ambiguity surrounding the issue of leaving children alone at home makes has made it a fascinating topic to study, but a difficult one to write about. It took some time before a coherent argument or story emerged from the plethora of data that I had gathered. At times I felt as if I had 'caught' the ambivalence of my interview respondents. Audiences, such as the journalists cited above, want objective data, either to confirm that a problem exists or to debunk perceptions that there is a problem. I also remain uncertain about what useful feedback I can offer to respondents, other than to confirm that it is a widespread and troubling issue for which there are no unequivocal responses or solutions. It would be difficult to offer any concrete 'facts' or 'recommendations' for policy and practice without contradicting a social constructionist approach to the status of objective conditions.

7.4 Questions raised and future research

The list below points to a number of possible future directions to build on or extend the work carried out in this thesis.

7.4.1 Media constructions of 'home alone'

In doing this research I carried out only limited analysis of claims about children left at home alone in the media. By widening the interview sample of claims-makers to include journalists and by carrying out further analysis of media claims, in texts and other media such as radio and television, this would contribute to a fuller understanding of the social construction process. It would help in explaining the issue's perennial appeal and in identifying possible reasons for the issue's failure to fully take off as a social problem.

7.4.2 Perspectives of parents

I noted in the chapter 3, *Methodology and methods*, that an alternative approach to this topic would be to talk to parents as the key 'stakeholders' in the 'home alone' issue (indeed this was part of my initial research proposal). Individual or group interviews with parents could explore how they manage the competing demands of parenting in everyday practice. A group interview approach may also be valuable to access knowledge about parenting standards and practices, which tend to exist at a localised level (Lupton 1999). However, such a study would need to be carefully planned and might be hampered by the lack of willingness of parents to admit to leaving one's children alone, partly because of a common misconception that to do so is 'illegal'. The social construction of 'good' parenting could be explored further through a more detailed and systematic analysis of advice and guidance given to parents in manuals and handbooks, as well as in newer media such as the Internet.

7.4.3 Perspectives of children

The field of childhood studies has contributed significantly to this thesis. In chapter 4, *Framing the problem*, I examined professionals' constructions of childhood in their talk about the issue of 'home alone'. Building on research studies on children's use of time and space (e.g. Solberg 1990) this project could be extended with an exploration of children's own perspectives on what it is like to be at home alone. What do they do with their time and how do they feel about being left unsupervised? What safety and protection messages are they given by adults and how do they make

sense of these in practice? The topic of children caring for children in a 'babysitting' role was an issue of concern to many respondents in this study and is particularly worthy of further research.

7.4.4 Governing parenthood

A large number of respondents in this current study worked for voluntary sector organisations, either at local or at national level. While I recognise the diversity in such organisations and do not wish to treat them as a homogeneous group, this study raised issues of the role of the voluntary sector in shaping and delivering family policy. Given the state's ambivalence about 'interfering' in certain aspects of family life, it appears that voluntary sector organisations often take on a role as 'intermediary' between families and the state. Further study, drawing on social movements literature and research on the voluntary sector, to examine to what extent voluntary sector organisations act as primary claims-makers and to what extent they simply respond to policy shifts and media reaction, could take these issues further.

7.4.5 Legal myths

Chapter 5, *Constructing responses and solutions*, pointed to the widespread belief that there is a legal age-related threshold for leaving children alone, raising the interesting issue of legal myths. This and other legal myths could be analysed, drawing upon the literature on urban myths, collective behaviour, and the social construction of law, to shed light on the self-regulation of social behaviour.

7.4.6 Unconstructed social problems

Finally, this thesis has pointed to the lack of studies that have researched emergent or 'unconstructed' social problems. This study contributes to filling this gap, but further exploration of persistently 'troublesome' but not fully developed social issues is needed. The 'home alone' issue could be compared other 'troublesome' parenting issues about which there is ambivalence, such as the physical punishment of children. However, definitions of and responses to the 'home alone' issue are constantly shifting, even since I commenced this research, a reminder that the construction of social problems is a dynamic process.

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Statutes

Anti-social Behaviour Act 2003

Children Act 1989

Children and Young Persons Act 1933

Children and Young Persons (Scotland) Act 1937

Crime and Disorder Act 1998

Appendix A   Letter of access[14]

Dear [name],

Children left at home alone: a study of parenting and policy

My name is Rebecca Calcraft and I am writing to request your help in a research project. I am currently studying for a government-funded PhD at the University of Nottingham, supervised by Professor Robert Dingwall and Dr Elizabeth Murphy. Before becoming a research student I worked as a children and families social worker and as a volunteer overseas.

As part of a wider study of parenting and childcare policy I am researching professionals' assessment of the issue of children being left alone at home. I attach an outline of my study to this letter for your information. I would like to interview a small number of [professionals] within your organisation about their views and experience of this issue. I am not seeking access to parents, nor will I evaluate professional practice in any way – I am simply interested in mapping professional views and experience of the issue. My findings will be reported in such a way that neither the location nor individuals will be identifiable and all interview data will be stored securely.

I would be grateful if you would be able to put me in touch with suitable [professionals]. Please feel free to pass on this letter to an appropriate team manager if necessary. I am available at the number or address at the top of this letter. I would be more than happy to provide more details about my background or the study. I hope you will be able to help in this project.

I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Yours sincerely,

Rebecca Calcraft

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[14] As sent to gatekeepers and respondents of local sample

Appendix B   Research project summary[15]

Children left at home alone: a study of parenting and policy

The question of when a child is old enough to be left at home alone, and under what circumstances, is a dilemma faced by many parents as well as professionals working in the field of childcare. Parents juggle conflicting responsibilities and seek to teach their children skills for independence, but knowing what is best for a child and avoiding professional and public criticism as a parent can be difficult. As employment patterns change and state policies actively encourage mothers to take up paid work, childcare remains essentially a private matter. Yet as a society we are increasingly aware of the risks to children's wellbeing and are anxious that parents take steps to minimise those risks. Unlike in Canada and in certain states in the USA, the law in England and Wales does not specify an age at which it is deemed safe to leave a child alone at home, although intervention can be made under the Children and Young Persons Act 1933 (Section 1) or the Children Act 1989 (Section 47).

As part of a wider research project on parenting and childhood, a major part of my study will entail interviews with people who work in local agencies concerned with childcare policy and practice. I am interested in professionals' assessment of the issue, their experience of encountering it in practice, what they consider the risks to be, and what solutions they recommend to address the problem (if they indeed perceive it to be problematic). Another part of this project involves an analysis of newspaper reports, government policy documents and information produced by the major childcare charities on this issue.

The study seeks to discover how and why this issue has emerged as a contemporary social problem. I hope that this study will contribute to an understanding of the changing nature of family life and how parenting interacts with other institutions in society such as employment, the media and the state.

Rebecca Calcraft, School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Nottingham

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[15] As sent to potential gatekeepers and respondents

Appendix C   Interview guide for local-level respondents

Introduction

How much time do you have?

Okay to tape? Your name will not be attached to anything. If uncertain can offer to send transcript for checking.

Introduce self and affiliations.

Reassurance that interview data will be stored securely and findings will be reported anonymously.

Professional background/qualifications?

How long with agency/organisation?

If possible, please say when expressing a personal opinion and when expressing the policy of your agency. Feel free to draw on your own personal experience as a parent too.

Main body

I am interested in the issue of parents' choices and practices around childcare, with a particular focus on leaving children alone at home, unsupervised by an adult.

Is this an issue that ever comes up?

In what way/context?

Can you give me a concrete case example – perhaps most recent or one that stands out? (general facts only, no need for names, addresses etc.)

How was the situation responded to?

Agency policy on the issue?

Any guidance or training on this?

Main concerns/worries about children left alone at home?

Involvement of other professionals or agencies?

View on legal situation – is the law clear enough?

Solutions - What should be done about it? (legislation, education, sanctions)

View of media response?

Vignettes (show on card)

How would you respond if you came across this incident? Anything worrying about this situation? What would you say to child/parent?

Conclusion

Anything else you would like to raise?

Any person/organisation/professional group you recommend I talk to?

Thank you

(last revised 22.06.01)

Appendix D   Interview guide for national-level respondents

Introduction

How much time do you have?

Okay to tape? Your name will not be attached to anything. If uncertain can offer to send transcript for checking.

Reassurance that interview data will be stored securely

Briefly describe project – ESRC funded for 3 years, supervisors, why interested in issue, what done so far

Please could you briefly describe your professional background/qualifications

What is your role/position in this organisation?

How long with agency/organisation?

Feel free to draw on your own personal experience as a parent.

Policy formation

How is policy formed within your organisation? How do you decide whether to take a view on an issue?

Whose views do you represent? Your members, trustees, the public?

Whom are you addressing?

Home alone issue

I am interested in the issue of parents' choices and practices around childcare, with a particular focus on leaving children alone at home, unsupervised by an adult.

Does your organisation have a view/policy/campaigns on this issue?

If so, what is the history of this view – how was it developed?

Do you offer any guidance or training on this at a local level of service delivery?

Main concerns/worries about children left alone at home?

Do you see it as a child protection issue?

Do you work with other organisations/agencies on this (or other) issues?

My research has found a fairly wide range of views and practice among practitioners – most argue that it is best left to professional judgement? Should there be tighter controls and less discretion?

View on legal situation – is the law clear enough?

Solutions - what should be done about it (legislation, education, sanctions)?

View of media response?

Conclusion

Anything else you would like to raise?

Any person/organisation you recommend I talk to?

Thank you

(last revised 11.10.01)

Appendix E   Vignettes used in interviews with local-level respondents

A.   A father leaves his 3 year old child playing quietly at home to go to the shops for 20 minutes to buy some milk and a newspaper.

B.   The mother of a 13 year old girl goes on holiday for a week, having made arrangements for a friend to call in to check on the daughter on a daily basis.

C.   Each weekday an 8 year old boy comes home from school alone. He fixes himself a snack and watches TV until his parents return from work 2 hours later.

D.   The parents go out for an evening, asking neighbours to keep an eye on their 5 year old child who is asleep in the flat.

E.   An 11 year old girl regularly cares for her siblings, aged 2 and 6, while her mother is out.

Appendix F   Examples of campaign and educational material on 'home alone'

The following pages show the covers of three publications referred to in this thesis.

- Kids' Clubs Network (1997) *Home Alone Too?*

- Suzy Lamplugh Trust (1996) *Home Safe*

- NSPCC (2000) *Home alone*

[Copyright has not been obtained for these publications.]