Introduction

Lindy and Louisa are mothers who used UnitingCare Burnside’s family support services during 2003. They described the impact of these services in their lives:

It’s changed my life, like to being positive and being supportive and open me eyes up, y’know, to different ways you can do things. I suppose the easier way if you know what I mean. ‘Stead of doing it the hard way all the time it makes things a little easier and you can talk to people. You don’t have to keep everything inside and try to do everything on your own. (Lindy, mid-north coast)

They helped me come out of domestic violence that I didn’t realise. And also just to get my own personality back, because that made me scared and hiding. But they made me ‘Me’. I feel me again. (Louisa, outer-western Sydney)

This research explores the role of service users like Lindy and Louisa in evaluating the delivery of care services. Increasingly, non-government welfare agencies like Burnside receive funding from governments to care for people in need. In a context shaped by ideals of evidence-based policy and practice, these agencies must routinely report information about how they assist service users to government funders, feeding data into the accountability systems designed to ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of government spending.

However, the performance indicator systems in place are designed to capture numeric counts of client turnover or service episodes. While these measurement systems allow crude economic assessment of performance, they risk leaving governments without critical information about the value and meaning of quality care in users’ lives. By introducing service users’ perspectives, this thesis challenges how academics, policy makers and managers can think about evaluating care services. In doing so, it explores broader problems regarding the purpose of social policy, social service delivery, and the nature of social justice.
The problem of performance measurement

At a practical level, performance measurement has critical implications for how child welfare systems are resourced, managed and organised. Performance measurement is a type of evaluation involving ‘the regular collection and reporting of information about the efficiency, quality and effectiveness of human service programs’ (Martin and Kettner, 1996:3). Aptly described as ‘the new accountability’ in human service administration (Martin and Kettner, 1997), performance measurement is part of the managerial tradition in evaluation that has become increasingly influential in Australian child welfare systems over the last decade.

Within the performance measurement paradigm, evaluation is seen as a source of routine, impartial, scientific knowledge for managers and politicians to use to sharpen their pursuit of the ‘three E’s’: economy, efficiency and effectiveness. Such an approach is based on an assumption that human services are, like manufacturing processes, ‘closed systems’ which directly convert resource inputs to outputs to affect outcomes in the community. In this approach, the human service process is conceptualised as determinate and largely unaffected by broader contextual factors. Service ‘economy’ captures the volume of inputs (such as money, staff time and facilities). ‘Efficiency’ refers to how well inputs achieve outputs (such as ‘treated’ clients). ‘Effectiveness’ refers to how converting service inputs to outputs affect outcomes for people and communities (for example improved quality of family life and child wellbeing).

Performance measurement systems presume that like the natural world, aspects of the social world can be measured, calculated, predicted and rationally managed. However, measurement criteria and methods are premised on essentially political assumptions, values and choices (Kemshall, 2002). How efficiency and effectiveness are understood and measured, and how performance information is used have important political and economic implications for service provision and policy. What should count as good performance, who should define quality and outcomes, and which evidence should be used to measure performance are disputed in both evaluation practice and in social
services research, and are particularly contestable in public and non-profit services, where decisions lack the guidance of a single (financial) bottom line. The values embedded in performance indicators are a key source of conflict, and requiring performance to be measured against economic criteria can raise tensions where services are guided by social justice and other value-based goals.

The increasing use of purchaser-provider relationships as the main institutional mechanism for organising early intervention services in Australia makes it timely to address the challenges of performance measurement in child and family welfare. In Australia, a mix of state, federal and local government agencies manage the provision of services aimed at enhancing child, family and community welfare\(^1\). These government agencies tend not to provide family support or other early intervention services directly. Instead, services are most commonly delivered by specialist non-government organisations (like UnitingCare Burnside) under contract to government purchasers\(^2\).

Where service provision is organised and managed through contracts, service purchasers do not necessarily have easy access to information about performance. Purchasing agencies are removed from the frontline and do not directly provide or consume services. As such, they are structurally positioned away from direct evidence of the efficiency and effectiveness of the services they purchase. Mandating contracted providers to report performance information is thus a rational way to elicit the information necessary to systematically monitor how competing providers use resources to achieve policy goals. Establishing and controlling performance-reporting requirements also offers other benefits to purchasers. Reporting regimes can exert pressure on provider organisations to ensure internal management information systems are in place to self-monitor performance. The management information derived from providers’ internal systems can be used to feed into overarching systems of government

\[^1\] State government agencies manage the notification and investigation of suspected cases of child abuse and neglect. In NSW the Department of Community Services is responsible for child protection, and is also the main funder of family support services.

\[^2\] Non-government service providers also provide services independently from government. In 2004-05 for example, government funding to provide services comprised 67% of Burnside’s total expenditure (Burnside, 2005). This increased from 2003-04 (when government funding comprised 63% of spending) and significantly from 2001-02, when government funding comprised 51% of agency expenditure (Burnside, 2004a).
accountability, such as the data collections of audit and other ‘watchdog’ or ‘oversight’ agencies, like the Productivity Commission at the Commonwealth level or the Council on the Cost and Quality of Government in NSW.

Although performance measurement purports to strengthen social service management systems, this kind of evaluation also embodies risks. If quality and outcomes are poorly defined or if measurement methods cause critical evidence to be overlooked, indicators will misrepresent the performance of funded services and skew government purchasing decisions overall. This poses particular problems in social services. Social services deliver information and care directly to vulnerable populations, helping people to care for themselves and to care for others. As such, the quality and impact of services is specific to individuals and personal relationships in their social contexts. Because of their specificity and association with personal, emotional worlds, the performance of these services is not easy to measure in discrete physical, quantifiable, comparable and interchangeable units (Folbre, 2006: 18).

Left unresolved, the technical, conceptual and political challenges of performance measurement (described in more detail in Chapter Two) risk biasing accounts of performance in favour of the more easily measured dimensions of service contributions, such as simple counts of client throughput, at the expense of critical information about personal wellbeing, community development and social justice. This compromises the usefulness of performance data for managing service systems to promote quality and outcomes. Moreover, the quality of performance information directly affects the potential for other stakeholders and citizens to understand and contest the use of scarce public welfare resources.

Performance measurement research in child and family services

In recent years, the role of performance measurement and reporting in child and family services has attracted international attention from academic researchers in the fields of public management and administration, evaluation, and social work and social policy. A dominant technocratic strand of research has attempted to help managers and evaluators across the human services adapt to emerging performance measurement
requirements, and choose the ‘right’ performance indicators (Friedman, 2002; Martin and Kettner, 1996; Bullen, 1998).

Research has also identified obstacles to measuring performance in complex services like child and family welfare. Such research notes conceptual and practical barriers to measuring service outcomes, and the political choices implicit in assessing performance (e.g. Fischer, 2001; Moxley and Manela, 2001; Tomison, 1999; Smith, 1995). Critical perspectives identify that what indicators measure (and how they do so) are not neutral or objective, but instead convey the values with which government policy is constructed (Tilbury, 2004; Newcomer, 1997:7). Australian public administration and child and family welfare research has recently contributed empirical evidence to these perspectives. These studies show how performance indicators capture statutory child protection activities more thoroughly than family support (Tilbury, 2005; Tilbury 2004b), and highlight how practitioners’ perspectives on performance measurement in family support question the priorities institutionalised in government contracting and indicator systems (Meagher and Healy, 2003).

The role of service users is a missing theme in performance measurement research. In family support (like other public and social services), users tend to feature only in performance measurement’s justifying rhetoric, argued to be the eventual beneficiaries of the enhanced efficiency and effectiveness that performance indicators supposedly encourage (Pollitt, 1988:77; Tilbury, 2002). Research in Australian child and family services makes only cursory reference to the importance of investigating the role of service users in performance measurement (Tilbury, 2004: 62-63).

The failure to investigate the implications of particular performance indicators and measurement methods for service users, and to explore service users’ role in this type of social service evaluation is surprising. There has been extensive research about service user perspectives on quality and outcomes in other social service contexts (e.g. Francis and Netten, 2004), and influential international public management theorists

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3 I use the term ‘service user’ as a relatively neutral descriptor, and to avoid misleading connotations of dependency in the term ‘client’ and exaggerated agency in the term ‘consumer’. However, the term ‘service user’ is not ideal, and contains both those actively choosing to use services and those Clarke (1997) terms ‘captive clients’, who are obliged to receive state sanctioned services.
have called to bring service users into performance measurement across the public services (Pollitt, 1988).

In response, this thesis contributes to research into performance measurement in child and family services, using the case study of family support in New South Wales. The thesis breaks with dominant strands of performance measurement research, by identifying the importance of performance measurement as a potential strategy for revaluing the care and relationship building work at the heart of family support and other social services (an approach established by Meagher, 2002a; 2002b). Uniquely, I explore the role service users play (and might play) in performance measurement systems, questioning how their participation might affect the potential of this type of evaluation to make visible the value of social services in enhancing the quality of family and personal life.

Although they are socio-economically disadvantaged and often characterised as deficient with respect to evaluation, users of social services offer insight into evaluation methods and practices. Users simultaneously co-produce and consume services, and so experience service quality and outcomes first hand. When child and family services are working well, outcomes will be evident in adult users’ relationships with their children and other family members, in how parents perceive themselves as parents and citizens, and ultimately, in the wellbeing of themselves and their children. The position of parents and their children in service delivery structures gives them access to critical evidence about service quality and outcomes. Such evidence is not available from any other stakeholder position yet it offers to enrich the capacity of performance measurement to make visible the impact of social service delivery.

Indeed, there are strong arguments from a range of theoretical positions in favour of user involvement in evaluation. As I show in Chapter Four, users are argued to offer essential evaluative data from theoretical perspectives as diverse as managerialism and feminism, and participation in evaluation can be seen to implement users’ basic rights to shape social service policy and delivery. More broadly, the policy making process—and the quality of social policies—can be strengthened when standpoints, perspectives
and experiences of affected groups are directly represented (Young, 2000 cited by Lister, 2004: 168).

Because service users are marginalised from current performance measurement systems and because research about their perspectives is lacking, I conducted empirical research (the ‘Burnside Study’) to explore adult service users’ place in performance measurement⁴. The exploratory potential of qualitative methods proved appropriate for investigating what parents using family support think of service ‘performance’ and evaluation methods, and how they see their own role in assessing the performance of the services they use. In particular, my empirical research explores the following questions:

- What ideals do parents who use family support services have against which to measure ‘outcomes’ and ‘quality’ in these family support services?
- How do adult service users personally evaluate the services they use?
- Which evaluation methods do users think evaluators should use to assess service performance?⁵
- How do service users see their own role in assessing the performance of family support services?

By answering these questions I explore the core problem of the thesis: how service users’ perspectives might help define and measure ‘performance’ in family support in ways that more thoroughly capture the value of these care services.

**Performance measurement, service users and care**

Drawing on service user and worker perspectives, the thesis confirms the centrality of relationship building in the family service production process. Yet the centrality of

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⁴ While the study focuses on parents’ perspectives, these do not necessarily reflect the views of children who are involved with family services, and the research makes way for subsequent studies to establish how children think about performance measurement in family support.

⁵ Whereas the previous question seeks to explore service users’ evaluative thinking, this question explores their views on evaluative inquiry. Such a distinction has been highlighted by Shaw (1999b:18).
relationships makes performance measurement particularly complex. Family support services involves performing generic caring activities which, in the context of nursing research, are described as ‘attending physically, mentally and emotionally to the needs of another and giving a commitment to the nurturance, growth and healing of that other’ (Davies, 1995: 18-19). Further, working with children and disadvantaged parents requires the development of relationships, so that this type of care differs from the ‘non-caring’ emotional labour that characterises service interactions between strangers (Himmelweit, 1999: 561; Hochschild, 1983). Feminist social scientists have shown how historically, the provision of paid and unpaid care has been constructed as a natural female propensity rather than learned skill, and is subsequently undervalued (James, 1989; Daniels, 1987). Further, commentators have observed that the activities and value of caring and relationship building can be rendered invisible in policy debates, and can ‘get lost’ in bureaucratic systems or be undermined by particular policy arrangements (Waerness, 1996; Henderson and Forbat, 2002).

In a way that parallels feminist arguments to represent caring in national economic indicators (Waring, 1988) or in wage-fixing systems (Cortis, 2000), here I identify the collection of management information by service providers and funders as an opportunity to more fully represent the value of care services. However, capturing care is a particular challenge for performance measurement in child and family services. These services are even more deeply imbricated in networks of care provision than other paid care work (such as aged or disability care). Not only does emotional caregiving constitute a key dimension of the paid labour process in child and family services, these services are performed specifically to improve the way disadvantaged parents care for their children. Thus, the challenge for performance measurement is to capture care and relationship building in the process of service delivery, and in the impact of services in users’ lives, families and communities.

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6 These debates have taken place with reference to other care services, such as aged, disability and children’s services, and not in the context of family support services specifically. However, the insights of wider care research into the causes of undervaluation are useful for understanding the caregiving dimensions of family support.

7 Care in family support can thus be seen to traverse the worlds of paid and unpaid work, involving paid care as a process and unpaid care as an outcome.
However, the exchanges of emotional care and the building of personal relationships are rarely captured in measures of service efficiency or effectiveness. In family support services, the characteristics of service processes and outcomes are fluid, and their salience cannot be reduced to measures of duration or frequency of contact (Schluter, 1996). Without the certainty and legitimacy of a quantified value, quality-critical dimensions of these services can seem unimportant in conventional systems of measuring program performance, and can remain invisible in service purchasing, planning and management.

In response, the thesis explores whether and how service users’ perspectives might affect the scope of performance measurement in social services. I explore how adult service users define and experience the value of family support and how they believe it should be measured. Service users’ structural position at the interface of formal care provision (family support) and informal care (parenting) mean their perspectives are likely to provide important clues about the scope for performance measurement to capture these personal, relational dimensions of service performance. The thesis thus offers a practical case study of the challenge of making the value of care visible in bureaucratic systems.

**Research approach**

In the thesis I treat performance measurement as a critical *opportunity* to expose evidence of the social and economic value of care provision, to legitimise investment in social services, and to help decision makers adjust the allocation of welfare resources in favour of dignified, respectful care. This approach accepts that performance measurement is a calculative practice that makes particular aspects of the economy visible— a practice that has the potential to more fully represent the value of care services*. The thesis draws from critical perspectives on performance indicators that recognise how seemingly objective ways of judging service performance reflect the underlying values, assumptions and priorities of government policy (e.g. Tilbury,

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8 Such an approach can be traced to the groundbreaking work of Marilyn Waring (1988) in identifying the bias institutionalised in measures of national economic production.
Indeed, I treat performance measurement as a socially located and politically contested practice. Those marginalised from mainstream measurement practices (including service users) may have different ways of defining and evaluating performance, and may compete to use the performance measurement process to pursue their own political and economic interests (Taylor, 2005). Moreover, feminists and social service organisations can actively harness performance measurement as a strategy for making the value of care services visible. Armed with first-hand experience of whether and how services make an impact, service users offer to contribute to a fuller understanding of service quality and outcomes, and to illuminate evidence of the critical difference these services make in their lives and those of their children.

Findings from the ‘Burnside Study’ (presented in Chapters Six to Nine) detail service users’ criteria for measuring service quality and outcomes in family support. Participants described what they hoped to achieve by using family support (outcomes), what they thought made a good service (quality), and how they believed outcomes and quality should be measured (evaluation). The parents’ accounts of using family support capture their unfulfilled social ideals and broader visions of the justice they hoped these services would help them achieve. Such accounts embody core themes that theorists of social policy and social justice have struggled to analyse. Drawing on concepts of justice as ‘social inclusion’ (Burchardt et al, 2002 Levitas, 1998), as ‘capabilities’ (Sen, 2004; Nussbaum, 2003) and as ‘redistribution’ and ‘recognition’ (Honneth, 1995; Fraser and Honneth, 2003), I argue that users in the study articulated the purpose of family support primarily in terms of the pursuit of recognition, self-realisation and respect. These users’ perspectives therefore emphasise how social politics are not only about the distribution of goods or ‘who gets what’, but also about systems of support for relationship and human flourishing in personal and emotional life. I argue that although some aspects of Nancy Fraser’s approach are useful, these service users’ accounts are best captured in the approach to recognition expounded by Axel Honneth (1995).

Williams (2001) makes the point that empirical studies—such as the Burnside case study that I present in the thesis—can help explore wider questions raised by theoretical debates about the politics of recognition and respect. Indeed, the thesis makes a critical
contribution to theoretical debates about the purpose of social services and social policy in achieving justice, by highlighting the role of family support services in disadvantaged parents’ struggles for recognition. Doing so extends theoretical understandings of recognition politics to child and family welfare, while helping illuminate and analyse users’ alternative criteria and methods for measuring performance. The findings reframe the purpose of family support services in terms of the production of relations of recognition and respect, and question the invisibility of these critical dimensions of service performance in conventional measurement systems. Overall, the research challenges prevailing concepts of quality and outcomes in family support, as well as the usefulness of the evaluation methods and approaches implicit in the ‘new accountability’ of performance measurement.

Outline

In Chapter One, the thesis examines and interprets the growing significance of family support services in Australian welfare, and explores the factors that hamper accurate definition of family support services (which in turn makes performance measurement difficult).

In Chapter Two, I examine the emergence of performance measurement in this growing area of government policy, by considering the public management reforms that have mediated the growth of family support in the 1990s, and the management theory on which reforms were premised. In New South Wales, family support grew through the development of purchaser-provider relationships, with contract relationships making performance measurement central to the regulation and accountability of these services. Yet while performance indicators are a seemingly necessary feature in the relationships between government agencies and non-government service providers, measurement also presents some challenges in family support and other social service contexts, which I outline.

Having grounded the thesis in existing research about performance indicators and the public management of family support, Chapter Three uses policy and program documents to analyse how government performance indicators currently capture and
represent family support services in New South Wales. This contributes a systematically derived typology of the indicators with which governments seek to capture family support services. It assesses these against two criteria: firstly, the extent to which they capture results or outcomes (and so reflect services’ social contribution); and secondly, how they implicitly treat– and involve– service users. This contributes evidence which links the limited range of outcome measures to service users’ marginal involvement in the main performance indicators currently applying to family support in NSW.

Chapter Four more closely assesses arguments about the inclusion of service users in performance measurement. I examine the treatment of service users in research about performance indicators and evaluation practice, and consider the potential of user involvement from a range of theoretical positions (including managerialism, consumerism, professionalism, and feminism). On this basis, I challenge constructions of social service users as ‘deficient’ with respect to evaluation, and highlight the need for empirical research about their perspectives on quality, outcomes, and evaluation methods.

Chapter Five outlines the fieldwork methods used to examine how a sample of family support service users think about performance measurement (the ‘Burnside Study’). I justify the need to undertake fieldwork, the methodological approaches, the design and process of the qualitative data collection, the ethical issues, possible biases, and the approach to data analysis.

In Chapter Six I present preliminary findings and develop a simultaneously empirically and theoretically grounded conceptual framework with which to pursue a deeper analysis of how participants in the study experienced, defined and measured the ‘performance’ of family support services. This shows how users’ perspectives intersect with broader academic debates about the nature of justice. After exploring notions of justice as ‘inclusion’ (SEU, 2004; Levitas, 1998) and as ‘capabilities’ (Sen, 1995, 2004; Nussbaum, 2000, 2003), I argue that users’ criteria for measuring the performance of family support are best interpreted when these services are reconsidered as part of disadvantaged parents’ personal and political struggles for recognition (Honneth, 1995, 2009).
Along with the Chapters that follow, Chapter Six shows how service users understood the value of services primarily in terms of how they helped overcome harms associated with humiliation and disrespect. This point highlights family support as a case study in the politics of recognition, challenging values conventionally embedded in performance indicators. Indeed, the social justice criteria for ‘performance’ that users articulated challenges the appropriateness of the managerially oriented ‘Three E’s’ of economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

Having reframed family support services as a case study in the politics of recognition in Chapter Six, Chapter Seven applies the social justice framework to more closely present and interpret service users’ criteria for measuring family support outcomes. I adapt Honneth’s categories of ‘love’, ‘legal status’, and ‘solidarity’ to capture the typology of outcomes they described, and present their perspectives on each.

Chapter Eight continues to consider users’ criteria for performance, interrogating their definitions of service quality. This shows the significance of the ‘helping relationships’ between workers and users to their perceptions of quality, thereby highlighting the role of family support services and welfare professionals in facilitating users’ struggles for recognition. I explore how helping relationships raise problems for performance measurement methods. Left unresolved, these problems heighten the risk that indicators maintain the invisibility of the complex interpersonal dimensions of service delivery.

In Chapter Nine I outline users’ perspectives on evaluation methods in family support, highlighting the ways their approaches to evaluation both challenge and endorse elements of existing performance indicator systems. Service users articulated a model of evaluation which was qualitative and informal, and which stood in tension with management systems that prioritise quantifiable evidence. Further, they articulated views on formal evaluation, which, in important ways, challenge concepts implicit in the ‘new accountability’ of performance measurement. Users’ perspectives highlight a more general clash between, on the one hand, collaborative and democratic models (which allow evaluation to act as a tool of empowerment for users and frontline staff, see Fetterman, 1996; Greene, 1999) and on the other, rational-technical constructions,
which support evaluation as a tool of managerial or expert control (Martin and Kettner, 1997).

In Chapter Ten, the thesis concludes by drawing out the theoretical and practical implications of service users’ perspectives, and identifying questions for further research. The findings have several implications for how policy makers, researchers and social service practitioners can think about the quality and purpose of family support and the nature of social justice, and how they might design evaluation systems to constructively engage service users. Considering the implications of the findings helps establish how service users’ perspectives challenge performance measurement, and the extent to which their participation might overcome some of the difficulties in capturing the value of family (and other) welfare services in delivering quality care and achieving social justice.
Chapter One

The growing significance of family support services

1.1 Introduction

Family support services provide practical, personal and material help to improve parents’ capacity to care for children and strengthen family relationships. Family support workers counsel parents to help them through crises and the trials of family life; visit families in their homes to provide practical assistance; bring parents together to share proven techniques for raising children; and provide a range of other forms of emotional and practical assistance and advice. Such services are usually targeted to families where professionals hold concerns about children’s safety and wellbeing, or where social, economic and personal factors intersect to place children’s healthy development at risk. Family support services can be organised to intervene intensively (to prevent imminent breakdown or reunify separated families) or to provide more complementary services to strengthen relationships. Such services occupy an increasingly significant place in Australian child welfare systems, and require closer scrutiny in social service evaluation theory and research.

In Australia, paid workers in the non-government sector most commonly provide family support, although these services can plausibly be provided by paid or volunteer workers in public, private or non-government organisations. Although most non-
government organisations provide family support services independently, government agencies are increasingly purchasing their services to help target ‘risk’ factors for child abuse and neglect, like domestic violence, social isolation, and poverty, while simultaneously addressing maltreatment itself\(^\text{11}\). Family support services are thus a means through which governments are attempting to address wider social, health, emotional and economic factors as a way to prevent the financial and human costs of child abuse and neglect\(^\text{12}\).

In this Chapter I introduce family support as an evolving social service that demonstrates general shifts in child welfare policy, from post-hoc investigation and child removal to early intervention. In seeking to prevent maltreatment, family support services respond to fundamental transformations in society and the welfare state, including the breakdown of nuclear family norms and the increasing public and professional gaze over, and regulation of, the archetypal ‘private’ act of parental caregiving.

In Australia, family support’s increasing significance is evident from the national and state-based data collected and reported to describe the characteristics of child welfare systems. However, capturing the detailed characteristics of these services, explaining their growth, defining their quality, and assessing their performance, are more challenging tasks. The problems of more thoroughly measuring family support arise

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\(^{11}\) Recent evidence from South Australia confirms the correlation between substantiated child protection cases and indicators of poverty and isolation, including low income status, single parenthood, public housing and living in dwellings without a motor vehicle (Tennant et al, 2003). In the UK, Ghate and Hazel (2002) highlighted the relationship between hardship in family life and low income, poor mental health and behavioural difficulties. Lister (2004: 135) also links poverty and child abuse and neglect, highlighting how parents living in poverty are required to adopt material survival strategies that can override their capacity to attend to individual needs of children.

\(^{12}\) In 2004-05 for example, 6.1 children in every thousand aged sixteen or under were the subject of substantiated reports of abuse or neglect in New South Wales (AIHW, 2006:21). The extent to which this rate depicts growth or reduction in the incidence of child abuse and neglect is difficult to determine from reported figures given extraneous changes in reporting systems and community awareness. Notwithstanding, child abuse and neglect (and its social origins) are increasingly the subject of government activity.
from the complexity and ambiguity around the role, goals, activities and values of these services. After introducing family support in Australia, I show the factors that hamper the accurate definition of these services, which in turn, provide a basis for exploring the scope to measure the performance of family support (and to do so using service users’ perspectives) through the remainder of the thesis.

1.2 The evolution of family support services in Australia

Over the last decade, governments in Australia, the US and the UK have increasingly supported the provision of early intervention services to prevent child abuse and neglect, effectively transforming local charitable activity into formal and professional service structures subject to explicit government policy. In the twentieth century, charities in Australia built on the previous century of work supporting ‘destitute’ families by providing material aid to families, despite the idea underpinning government child protection systems that children needed to be separated from their parents to be helped. From the 1940s charities organised local volunteer ‘parent-aides’ to visit the homes of the needy to provide personal and practical support (Nocella, 1996; Scott and Swain, 2002:139). Since the 1960s, these support services have developed into a more coherent service sector, through three general and overlapping phases.

Firstly, small and largely volunteer based family services began to attract funding from governments, as government sought to respond to historic transformations in family form which became apparent in the 1970s. In a second phase in the 1990s, family support services (as they became known) developed roles in child protection strategies, with services increasingly provided through government partnerships with non-government agencies. Partnership arrangements also characterise family support’s current (third) phase, as the sector is being increasingly integrated into government

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13 While I draw primarily on Australian evidence, the characteristics of family support internationally are also relevant to the development of the sector here. As such, I draw primarily on Australian literature, and use international sources to show the wider significance of themes in the development of Australian family support.

sponsored community planning and development initiatives and targeted to specific geographic areas.

1.2.1 Phase One: Family support and family breakdown

In the first phase of family support’s development in the 1960s and 1970s, the Commonwealth piloted and subsequently funded services in response to concerns about rising divorce rates and the social impact of relationship breakdown. In this period, family support services focused on helping families adapt to conditions stemming from the historic breakdown of male breadwinner family wage systems that shaped families, as well as labour markets, through most of the twentieth century in Australia and other wealthy countries (Nocella, 1996; Featherstone, 2004: 62-65).

In Australia, a distinct family support service system emerged from the 1960s. The Commonwealth was supporting non-government organisations to provide marriage counselling, and broadened this support to include other services aiming to promote and maintain quality family relationships— such as relationship education, mediation services, and parenting programs (ANAO, 2000). Amidst the social transformations of the 1970s and the introduction of no-fault divorce in 1975, the Royal Commission on Human Relationships recommended funding family support services to prevent family breakdown (RCHR, 1977:30). The Commonwealth subsequently piloted services nationally under the Family Support Services Scheme, and a decade later transferred services to the States via a 50-50 Commonwealth-State cost sharing arrangement (Family Support Australia, 2002:3; Industry Commission, 1995:D5). In 1988, the Commonwealth share of funding became part of general, untied revenue to the states, allowing funding arrangements and service provision models to diversify (Family Support Australia, 2002:3; Allen and Bullen, 2003).

1.2.2 Phase Two: Family support and child protection

In what can be understood as a second phase of family support’s growth through the 1990s, state governments drew on these early intervention and prevention services to promote the quality of parenting and through this, child wellbeing, health and development. In this period, family support refocused on protecting children against maltreatment, in contrast to previous concerns (since the 1970s) about preventing
family breakdown. Indeed, this phase of growth is marked by family support’s increased ability to harness funding from statutory child protection departments, reflected in the sectors repositioning as an instrument of child welfare policy. Family support services came to be justified less for their role in preventing relationship breakdown (as at their inception as a Commonwealth Program), and instead were deployed to contain future social and economic costs for state governments by diverting families from child protection investigation and out-of-home care.

In this phase, family support can be understood to emerge as an area for state government activity in response to criticism about imbalanced resources between the prevention, investigation and treatment of abuse and neglect, and perceptions that statutory interventions were not effective for all families, especially those with multiple, overlapping or lower level needs (Wise, 2003: 183-184). Evidence emerged that while the numbers of reports to child protection authorities increased, many of those reports related to situations in which parents lacked the economic resources or personal skills to cope with their childrearing responsibilities (e.g. AIHW, 2006). Policy strategies have refocused more on collaborating with parents, with governments diverting resources towards the provision of preventative services like family support.

Government support for early intervention and prevention in this period was also shaped by legislative developments. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (adopted by the General Assembly in 1989 and ratified by Australia in December 1990), acknowledged the human rights of children, foreshadowing the need for governments to take responsibility for providing children with special care and protection. In NSW for example, legislation now supports early intervention strategies including family support, as DoCS is required to protect children from harm using the ‘least intrusive intervention’ and to attempt to provide alternative forms of support before taking children into care. These principles were established with the NSW Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998 (progressively proclaimed and enacted from December 2000). This second phase is marked similarly in the UK, with the Children Act 1989 introducing the notion of family support as a statutory responsibility for children in need (Featherstone, 2004: 85).
Triage-type processes identifying those families requiring less intrusive interventions, in effect rationing costly statutory involvement to the highest risk circumstances (Scott and Swain, 2002: 183). In this way, purchasing family support from the non-government sector offered governments a ‘ready-made’ child abuse prevention strategy, while effectively playing into emerging public management discourses of economy and efficiency.\(^{16}\)

The impetus for a stronger role for family support in child protection policy also came from international advances in child development research. Developmental psychology, for example, deepened insight into the role of parenting in the early years and the impact of poverty, depression and domestic violence on parents’ capacity to provide children with adequate care (Tomison, 2000; Sheppard, 2004).\(^{17}\) Indeed, family support can be understood as responding to the identification of the archetypal private act of caring as a public issue. This is premised on the understanding that economic and political renewal relies on the private wellbeing of citizens including the democratisation of emotional communication and family form and the quality of parenting (Giddens, 1998).

Understanding family support in this way associates its growth in the 1990s with recognition of the political and economic significance of the quality of parenting around the industrialised world. Miller and Sambell (2002) recognise the growth of the parenting education ‘industry’ as an attempt to prevent more costly future health, education, and justice interventions. They see the emphasis on parenting quality as a response to the perceived inadequacies of ‘trial and error’ or common sense, amateur approaches. Childrearing can thus be seen to have ‘become a public activity open to the scrutiny of parents and professionals alike’ (Miller and Sambell, 2002: 32). As well

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\(^{16}\) The preventative agenda of family support policy (i.e. the principle of investing now to save later) meshes well with priorities of efficiency. Chapter Two links the growth of family support to the purchaser-provider relationships characteristic of new public management reform, and so investigates these public management discourses in more detail.

\(^{17}\) Sheppard (2004: 67) for example points out how isolated mothers are more likely to lack opportunities for self expression and practical support, leaving them vulnerable to depression. Depressed mothers are more likely to express hostility to their children, to use corporal punishment, and to be less involved in play with children. Ultimately, their children are at greater risk of having behavioural difficulties and of abuse and neglect than other children.
as the emerging recognition of children’s rights and the shift to early intervention, the growth of family support in the 1990s reflects recognition of the lifelong impact on children of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ parenting, an evidence base justifying state intervention (albeit in partnership with non-government organisations) into this aspect of the historically ‘private’ domain of family life.

1.2.3 Phase Three: Family support and community development

A third (and current) phase in its development sees family support integrated into community development policy, being targeted to specific areas as part of large multi-site government welfare initiatives\(^{18}\). While developments in this period build on the government-non-government relationships characterising family support provision in the 1990s, family support services are being reshaped by the tendency for governments to target these initiatives toward geographic areas with high need populations, rather than to disadvantaged parents and children regardless of where they live. Commonwealth, State and local programs simultaneously (though with various degree of coordination) are justifying family support as an attempt to regenerate disadvantaged communities. Such interventions include the Commonwealth’s $490 million Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (2004-2009), and numerous state examples, including New South Wales’ integration of health and community services in disadvantaged areas under the ‘Families First’ initiative.

Importantly, these current developments reconstitute the purchaser-provider divides characteristic of service provision in the late 1990s. They emphasise co-operation across the purchaser-provider divide more strongly than competition amongst providers, and give increasingly complex roles to large institutionalised non-profits in planning and managing local family service systems\(^{19}\). A further characteristic of the emerging phase of family support’s development involves the entrance of for-profit

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\(^{18}\) Internationally, the UK Sure Start initiative establishes the area-based policy paradigm for early intervention and prevention.

\(^{19}\) The Commonwealth’s Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, for example, distributes funding to large NGOs in disadvantaged areas to define community needs and purchase the service mix from provider NGOs. The NSW DoCS Early Intervention Program requires NGOs in each community to form interagency partnerships to tender for service funding together.
organisations (DoCS, 2005b). However, this period in family support’s development is yet to unfold, as the for-profit sector and local service management roles of large non-profit organisations are still in their infancy. As such, my concern through the thesis is with arrangements evolving from the second phase in the growth of family support: in the 1990s. This is the period in which family support emerged most coherently as an area of government policy aimed at the prevention of child abuse and neglect, and, because of the growth of purchaser-provider relationships, performance measurement emerged as a paramount concern for social service administration. The funding and reporting frameworks and structures established then remain in place today.

1.3 The growth of family support in the 1990s

Data for New South Wales confirm the growing role for family support as a child welfare strategy through the 1990s. The numbers of family support users, the size of the family support workforce, and the source of referrals, characterise this phase in the sector’s evolution as one of growth. The data show growth in client throughput and, significantly, increasing numbers of referrals and corresponding growth in the amount of funding received from the Department of Community Services.

1.3.1 Family support service users in the 1990s

The annual Census of NSW family support services (funded by DoCS) charts the sector’s growth (Allen and Bullen, 2003). Not technically a census, the survey includes services which perform ‘typical’ family support activities, are members of the state’s Family Support Service Association, and receive money from the main source of state government funding, the Community Services Grants Program (CSGP) (Allen and

\[\text{Allowing for-profit services to tender for funding is a new feature in service systems (for example in DoCS Early Intervention Program). However, for-profit firms do provide other kinds of family support, for example marriage or relationship counselling. However, these are purchased privately by consumers, and are not funded as part of child welfare policy. As such, they fall outside the scope of the concerns of this thesis.\]
Based on self-reports from services, the data show that the number of family worker clients (in a calendar year) rose from 6900 in 1989 to 13600 in 2000, representing around 1 in 140 families (Allen and Bullen, 2003: 34). The number of group sessions provided by family support services rose from 7000 in 1988 to around 11,000 in 2000 (Allen and Bullen, 2003:29). The actual numbers of clients reported in Census week show less clear growth than the annual figures, from 3720 family worker clients in 1992 to 3900 in 2000 (with some fluctuation in between— see Table 1 below).

### Table 1  Key trends in NSW family support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>EFT Staff in Census Week</th>
<th>Clients in Census Week</th>
<th>DoCS Referrals (per year)</th>
<th>Clients per EFT Staff</th>
<th>DoCS referrals per EFT staff</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>3720</td>
<td>1500</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>380</td>
<td>4500</td>
<td>1700</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>380</td>
<td>4200</td>
<td>1840</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>3300</td>
<td>1630</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>3200</td>
<td>1840</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>370</td>
<td>3200</td>
<td>2370</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>375</td>
<td>3460</td>
<td>2530</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>3400</td>
<td>3055</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>345</td>
<td>3900</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Allen and Bullen (2003), various tables.

These figures highlight several important trends. Firstly, the growth in numbers of family support clients (as reported by respondent services) has occurred primarily in the area of group (rather than individual) work. This is consistent with the lack of growth in equivalent full time staffing numbers (shown below in section 1.3.2). However, the rising numbers of clients using family support have brought with them increasingly

21 Government data collections provide less detailed information than this census, although a systematic collection is being developed for family support (AIHW, 2005b). In New South Wales, entrenched problems with DoCS’ data collection and reporting systems have also contributed to the limited amount of administrative data available about family support. Initiatives by the AIHW should lead to more thorough evidence about family support services, clients and workers.

22 Unfortunately Allen and Bullen (2003) do not report family support service clients by gender, but have indicated through personal correspondence that in 1999, around 85 to 90 percent of family support service clients were female. Such figures support Featherstone’s (2004) argument for the importance of unpacking the seeming neutrality of terms like ‘family’ and ‘parent’ which are central to family support.
complex problems, a factor related to the rising tendency for DoCS to refer cases to family support. Indeed, the numbers of families referred to family support services by DoCS rose from 1500 in 1992 to 3055 in 1999 (Allen and Bullen, 2003:36).

### 1.3.2 The family support workforce in the 1990s

Nationally, the growth of family support is reflected in the size of the family support workforce. Available data show that across Australia, the number of family service workers in Australia increased by 35.4 percent, from 8,627 persons in 1996 to 11,678 in 2001 (AIHW, 2003:90). This included 44.3 percent growth in welfare workers, 38.2 percent growth in family support workers, and a 6.4 percent decrease in the numbers of family counsellors between 1996 and 2001. The growth in the family services workforce compares with an increase of 8.7% for all occupations, and growth of 26.8% in the number of workers in community service occupations over the same period (AIHW, 2003: 90).

In New South Wales, there has been less dramatic growth in the numbers of family support workers, despite the growth in client throughput described in Section 1.3.1. Using a narrower definition of family service workers than in the AIHW labour force collection (AIHW, 2003)23, the NSW Census shows that while 600 staff worked in NSW family services in 1992, there were 620 in 2003. Numbers reached 690 at the highest points (at the tail end of the recession in 1993 and 1994) (Allen and Bullen, 2003: 19). However, high rates of part time employment (linked to the fact that 94% of staff in family support organisations is female) mean these numbers overstate the potential capacity of the workforce (Allen and Bullen, 2003: 20). Yet numbers of equivalent full time staff also reveal the sector’s growth over the period, from 330 in

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23 The AIHW collection includes the large and general category of “welfare worker” in its ‘family service’ industry classification. In contrast, Allen and Bullen (2003) only include workers in services which perform ‘typical’ family support activities, are members of the state’s Family Support Service Association, and receive money from the main source of state government funding, the Community Services Grants Program (CSGP).

1.3.3 Family support in the 1990s: summary

A summary of key trends is depicted in Figures 1 and 2 (below), based on data from the NSW Family Support Census (Allen and Bullen, 2003). These show rising pressures on family support. The number of clients accessing these services fell after the recession in the early 1990s but rose after 1995. Growth in equivalent full time staff fluctuated relatively slightly through the 1990s. The most notable trend is the rising proportion of family support clients who have been referred by DoCS (from 1500 in 1992 to 3055 in 1999). However, the total number of clients (in Census week) rose only marginally, from 3720 in 1992 to 3900 in 2000 (with some fluctuation).

The overall ratio of clients to EFT staff changed little between 1992 and 2000. This suggests that families with child protection issues comprise an increasing proportion of family support clients. Pressures on the family support systems thus come from the increasing complexity of client families rather than increases in the numbers of families. Indeed, Figure 2 (below) shows the growth in DoCS referrals for each family support worker. The number of DoCS referrals per year for each full time position rose from 4.5 in 1992 to 8.5 in 1999, reflecting pressure on family support services.

From the data in Table 1 and Figures 1 and 2 (see below), it is clear that family support services play an increasingly significant role in New South Wales’ child protection system, with the number of DoCS referrals to family support per EFT staff member rising through the 1990s.

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24 In addition to their paid hours, in 2001 staff working in family support were estimated to contribute the equivalent of 17 extra full time staff on an unpaid basis, increasing their paid time by about 5% (Allen and Bullen, 2003: 20).

25 Indeed, referrals to family support are a likely response to the increase in notifications resulting from the extension of mandatory reporting requirements to a wider range of professional groups in the 1990s.
Figure 1: Clients and staff in NSW family support, 1992-2000

![Chart showing clients and staff over time](chart1.png)

Source: Allen and Bullen (2003)

Figure 2: Ratio of DoCS referrals to equivalent full time staff in family support, 1992-1999

![Chart showing ratio over time](chart2.png)

Source: Allen and Bullen
These trends are confirmed by evidence of rising DoCS expenditure to purchase family support services. DoCS spending on family support services grew from $18.2 million in 1997-98 to $31.7 million in 2001-02 (CCQG, 2003: 116), and was boosted again from 2003 as part of a political response to a perceived crisis in the capacity of the statutory system to adequately respond to all suspected cases of abuse and neglect (AIHW, 2004:7). The further injection of $150 million between 2003-04 and 2007-08 allows DoCS to develop its Early Intervention Program and extend family support to vulnerable children and families in specific disadvantaged areas. This involves deploying statutory early intervention workers, and purchasing services from the non-government and the for-profit sector (DoCS, 2005). Indeed, as statutory authorities in New South Wales and in other advanced economies continue to pursue alternatives to post-hoc investigation and child removal, these services’ funding, and the number of families with child protection issues they affect, should continue to swell (DoCS, 2004; Parton, 1997).

1.4 Challenges in measuring family support

Clearly, family support is an increasingly important instrument of child welfare policy and service provision. However, existing data do not offer precise detail as to the characteristics of these services, the factors impacting on their growth, and their contribution. Family support services have only recently been systematically monitored, have barely been subject to evaluative research, and have been assumed to be overwhelmingly ‘good’ in opposition to negative perceptions of coercive statutory child protection interventions (Tilbury, 2005). In this section I look beyond the data presented in Section 1.3 to other Australian and international studies of family

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26 Measured in nominal dollars.

27 Assumptions of ‘intrinsic goodness’ also prevail in social service areas other than family support. In the late 1970s for example, the Standing Committee investigating evaluation in Australian health and welfare services found a general complacency about service effectiveness. The Committee attributed this in part to assumptions that social service organisations were ‘doing good’ because they were apparently implementing the values of their missions and addressing needs (Senate Standing Committee, 1979: 8, 19). Institutional sociologists trace ascriptions of moral integrity to the absence of the profit motive, and raise questions about the adequacy of these assumptions (DiMaggio and Anheier, 1990:144; Kanter and Summers, 1987:164; Kramer, 1987:251).
support, pursuing a deeper understanding of the complexity of these services, their growth, and the factors impeding measurement of their activities and performance.

1.4.1 Recognising the conceptual ambiguity of family support

As shown in Section 1.3, family support can be defined in ways that enable basic counts of its clients and staff. However, family support remains a highly diverse and imprecise social service category, a factor that is not unique to the family support model or to Australian arrangements. Acknowledging the diversity and potential ambiguity in defining family support is necessary for examining the meaning of these services beyond their representation in existing data collections. Considering family support in this way clarifies that it exists across formal and informal categories of care, and includes a range of activities and policy goals.

- Family support as formal and informal care

One point of ambiguity in defining family support is that these interactions traverse informal and formal systems of care. Most commonly, family support exists informally, provided freely amongst families and friends in the private sphere (Healy and Darlington, 1999:3). But despite the prevalence of informal or ‘domestic’ assistance in everyday life, ‘family support’ is, in the context of social services (and throughout this thesis), reserved for reference to formal organised assistance for disadvantaged or ‘at risk’ families.

Unlike informal family support, formal family support services exist as organised and paid responses by trained welfare practitioners without the expectation of personal

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28 Given the similarities between the family support model in Australia and overseas, I draw on international studies where relevant.

29 While family service workers are paid, they are rarely paid directly by clients, with most workers in NSW being employed by non-government organisations. Note also that formal family support systems do not draw exclusively on paid labour. Fifty percent of NSW family support services in the 2003 Census were found to use volunteers (other than management committee members), although it is not clear exactly how these volunteers contributed (Allen and Bullen, 2003). For 2001 (for which data was complete) the number of volunteers involved was 306. However, they contributed an average of 4.4 hours per week, or 39 equivalent full time positions (compared to the 410 equivalent paid positions in 2001) (Allen and Bullen, 2003). As such, the formal family support system should be understood as overwhelmingly paid, though supplemented by unpaid volunteers.
reciprocity. However, formal and informal family support service systems are, in reality, entwined. Support provided from workers to clients seeks to promote and regenerate standards of care in client families—most often between partners and between parents and children. Importantly however, formal family support services should not be understood to substitute for exchanges amongst family and friends (Gilligan, 2000:15). Family support arranged or delivered by paid workers brings into effect a set of state and professionally sanctioned regulations, not least of which, in NSW, is the mandatory reporting of suspected maltreatment. Such requirements make both the paid caring of family workers and the unpaid care they aim to promote in client families far from private matters. The intersection of formal family support and informal family care mean that both of them become simultaneously subject to the scrutiny of state accountability systems and professional norms of safe and competent care. Despite some common features, family support services should be understood to supplement and regulate informal networks by, for example, helping mothers to nurture their children.

- **The language of family support**

Along with the ambiguity relating to the operation of family support across formal and informal systems of care, the language of family support is a further source of potential ambiguity. Internationally, family support usually refers to interventions in families with dependent children, rather than support for relatives in general (Featherstone, 2004:2). In this sense, the language of ‘family’ is narrower than commonly used, and does not refer to adults or children caring for dependent parents or others. Moreover, the term ‘family’ in family support can mask the fact that these services are delivered primarily to parents (Baistow and Hetherington, 1998). Finally, the language of both ‘family’ and ‘parent’ can obscure how these interventions overwhelmingly involve

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30 In NSW family services, 80% of workers have post-school qualifications. Half of these (40% of all staff in family support services) have vocational qualifications (certificate or Diploma level). 29% have a Bachelor level university degree and 11% have a postgraduate qualification (Allen and Bullen, 2003: 23).
mothers, given that they carry the major burden of childrearing (Devaney, 2004; Spratt and Callan, 2004: 212; Featherstone, 2004)\textsuperscript{31}.

- **The goals of family support**

Yet even when ‘family support’ is used to refer to the subcategory of formal support for mothers with dependent children, the term lacks a fixed and detailed definition. A third source of complexity relates to the goals of family support. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare for example categorises family support services in terms of the policy outcomes at which they are directed, defining them in general terms as ‘services that seek to benefit families by improving their capacity to care for children and/or strengthening family relationships’ (AIHW, 2001:3). The peak body for NSW family services also defines family support in terms of the services’ common aim of strengthening and supporting families with dependent children. It refers to these services roles in early intervention and prevention, and in encouraging ‘positive relationships within families and promoting environments which value, nurture and protect children’ (NSWFS, 2005).

When family support is defined in terms of its goals, ambiguity persists around the question of who it is these goals are pursued for. Family support can mean targeted preventative support for families in which children are identified as at risk of further involvement in the statutory child protection system. But it can also refer to universal policies that assist all families by promoting suitable environments for bringing up children, through health, education, financial security, community safety and healthy environments (May-Chahal et al, 2003:46). Commonly, these goals are distinguished using an analytical framework of primary, secondary and tertiary prevention derived from public health (Tomison, 1998: 4, citing Helfer, 1982; for examples see ACWA/FSSA, 2003:7; Family Support Australia, 2002:5; Healy and Darlington, 1999:7-8). This allows distinctions to be drawn between family support’s policy goals of:

- primary prevention (i.e. serving the community as a whole);

\textsuperscript{31} Featherstone (2004:9-10) is a particular critic of the use of ungendered terms such as ‘parent’ in family support, seeing this to obscure the differing investments made by men and women in fathering and mothering, thus perpetuating the entrenched gender roles that result.
secondary prevention (i.e. serving families with special needs or being ‘at risk’); and

tertiary prevention (addressing recurring problems of child maltreatment through statutory systems of out-of-home care or intensive family preservation) (Poole and Tomison, 2000; Repucci et al, 1997: 2).

Sheppard (2004:21-23) divides tertiary prevention into a fourth category of quaternary intervention. He considers tertiary prevention to involve action to prevent children being taken into care (e.g. family preservation), as distinguished from secondary prevention (referring to early intervention responses). Quaternary intervention then includes actions taken when the first three stages of prevention fail, and where children are admitted into care. Sheppard’s is a more sophisticated typology of family support’s possible goals, although the three-tiered framework is more common.

Importantly, classifying family support in terms of the multilevel goals of prevention shows how these service strategies straddle different stages of need in a ‘client career’ (Hardiker et al 1991, cited by Sheppard, 2004:22). Despite the range of family support services, my concerns in this thesis are with services in the category of secondary prevention, which includes parenting education and supported playgroups for families identified as at risk of further contact with statutory child protection systems. However, secondary prevention should be considered a fluid category: in practice these services can assist parents with needs where there is relatively low risk of child abuse and neglect (such as assistance with budgeting or behaviour management) and families in which children have been reported for suspected maltreatment.

However, although family support can be defined in terms of the particular outcomes they promote for families and children and for society in general, such a definition fails to capture their shared values and the similarities in activities these services perform.

The activities of family support

A related source of complexity relates to the activities of family support (or the ways they seek to achieve their goals). Family support’s activities are defined only loosely

32 Unlike regular playgroups, supported playgroups include a trained worker.
because, practically speaking, the family support model gives services the flexibility to carry out virtually any activity that assists parents to provide for and nurture their families (Family Support America, 2005). Because of their potential to involve a range of activities, family support can be defined as caring work, as it relates to ‘attending physically, mentally and emotionally to the needs of another and giving a commitment to the nurturance, growth and healing of that other’ (Davies, 1995: 18-19). While family support activities are wide in scope, they usually involve a mix of activities such as parenting skills development and education; mutual self-help groups; home and financial management skills; supported playgroups; counselling; home visiting and a range of personal and community development activities.

The AIHW (2001) classifies family support activities into six groups based on their activity type: information and referral; education/skills development; counselling, mediation and therapy; residential and in-home support; advocacy; and ‘other’ (including playgroups and self-help groups). Within these categories, activities can be specialised in order to respond to needs (such as post-natal depression or domestic violence), or to provide support through a particular process (such as court support or supervised access visits) (Family Support Australia, 2002:4). Importantly, these activities vary in duration, being delivered over the short, medium and long term, or can be delivered to families indefinitely. However, in New South Wales, 48% of family service activities take place in the medium term, defined as 6 months to 2 years (Family Support Australia, 2002: 6)\(^\text{33}\). The concerns of this thesis are confined to the activities of parenting and relationship education, parenting support, and playgroups, all of which count as secondary prevention, and in which the bulk of the growth in family support has occurred in the 1990s\(^\text{34}\).

- **The values of family support**

In Australia and elsewhere, family support services are not simply a collection of goals and activities at the intersection of formal and informal family care. Internationally,

\(^{33}\) 26% of service activities take place both in the short term (less than six months) and in the longer term (over two years) or indefinitely (Family Support Australia, 2002:6).

\(^{34}\) These service activities also offered most appropriate access for the field research to take place (as I outline in Chapter Five).
family support services are guided by specific value sets. Family Support America for example defines its services in terms of ‘a set of beliefs and an approach to strengthening and empowering families and communities’, and a social change movement oriented toward caring and optimising the wellbeing of children and families (Family Support America, online source, italics added).

Writing about the UK, Gardner fleshes out the values underpinning the ways in which family support delivers services: ‘Family support tends to promote an asset rather than a deficit model of work with family problems, emphasising solutions and mutual responsibility rather than pathology or dependence’ (Gardner, 2003:1). Similarly, Gilligan (2000:16) distinguishes family support from other welfare services on the basis of a shared approach that is less concerned with personal deficits, pathology and risk and more concerned to identify and nurture personal value strengths in service delivery. Indeed, family support’s focus on facilitating family and community strengths reflects its value base in non-stigmatising approaches to service delivery, centred around respectful direct staff engagement with families on the front line, and principles of cultural sensitivity (Tomison, 2002).

Associated with these values are priorities of service user self-determination, voluntary participation, and active involvement in decision-making and the development of context and family-specific welfare responses. Writing about the family support model in the US, McCroskey and Meezan (1998:67) describe family-centred practices as being: ‘based on respect for the integrity and strengths of families and their members, and on the belief that individuals can find solutions to their own problems through relationships with engaged and committed service providers’ (italics added). In this way the values underpinning the client-worker relationship comprise an important defining feature of family support, distinguishing it from other social services and, as I show through the thesis, providing a source of tension in attempts to monitor the performance of family support.

Finally, family support’s values arise from the organisational arrangements on which these services are premised. In the United States for example, family support has been defined as a shift in values and approaches to human services delivery, encouraging
public, private and non-government agencies to work together to make services more responsive, flexible, user-focused, and holistic, and ultimately more effective (Family Support America, online source). Similarly in Australia in the 1990s family support became largely predicated on joint service organisation and delivery arrangements between governments and non-government organisations, a trend compounded in family support’s current phase of development.

Like elsewhere, family support in Australia can be aptly described as an ‘ambiguous and elastic’ category of social services that can be deployed across varied welfare contexts and in pursuit of a range of policy goals relating to children and families (Featherstone, 2004: 6, 63). Yet the lack of fixed characteristics and a fixed definition in Australia does not preclude the collection of data about family support (such as that shown in Section 1.3). Existing data show the size and basic features of family support service provision in NSW, clearly demonstrating the growth of the sector. However, while family support can be described from existing data sources, these collections are less than ideal for capturing the goals, activities or values of family support, or for assessing the performance of these services (a point I consider in detail in Chapter 3).

1.5 Conclusions

This Chapter has identified three phases in the growth of family support in Australia, outlining the development of family support as a child welfare strategy and distinct area of government policy in the 1990s. In NSW, the second phase of growth is characterised by rising government outlays to purchase family support, as well as rising numbers of people receiving these services—especially those referred from DoCS. The rising complexity of families using family support is a key source of resource pressure on these service systems. Finally, the Chapter outlined the diversity and conceptual ambiguity that makes family support a slippery category and that underpins challenges for evaluation and research.

35 These relationships are not without their tensions (see Meagher and Healy, 2003). The institutional relationships shaping family support provision are explored in more detail in Chapter 2. Note that while family support is primarily shaped by government-non-government partnerships, for-profit providers are likely to have a more prominent future role (see DoCS, 2005).
However, while explanations for the growth of family support services considered so far capture some of the political and professional factors contributing to family support’s growth, they do not reveal the practical economic arrangements that have facilitated the growth of family support. In Chapter Two, I turn to consider the economic and public management conditions and ideas, which allowed family support to grow in the 1990s, and which make performance measurement critical to the ongoing sustainability of these social services in NSW.
Chapter Two

Performance measurement and the public management of family support

2.1 Introduction

The expansion of family support as a child welfare strategy embodies tensions about how governments should fund and manage social service delivery. Such tensions are expressed in the debates about ‘new public management’ that took place through the 1990s in Australia and elsewhere, as family support grew as an explicit area of government welfare policy. While the perceived need to intervene early to prevent child maltreatment offered professional and political support for incorporating family support into child protection policy (as shown in Chapter One), purchaser-provider partnerships between governments and community sector agencies constituted the economic and management framework that facilitated the sector’s growth in New South Wales. Dominant public management visions of government controlled yet

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36 The use of the term ‘public management’ is significant across publicly organised services, as it reflects the breakdown of confidence in the hierarchical and procedure-bound management styles associated with the earlier language of ‘public administration’ (Jacobs and Manzi, 2000:92).

37 I use the terms ‘community’ or ‘non-government’ to describe the non-profit organisations that deliver community services in Australia. While the terms ‘voluntary’, ‘charitable’ or ‘third’ can also describe this sector, they are less commonly used in Australia.

38 Within the current framework, family support services are almost universally provided by the non-profit sector. Yet it is conceivable for governments to provide them themselves, or for private for-profit organisations to tender for government funds to do so. However, the ability to make a profit from such services has so far been constrained. Unlike in the area of employment services (where contracted providers can charge prospective employers fees to match unemployed people to jobs), there is no scope to charge user fees in family support, given the poor financial circumstances of these service users. At a theoretical level, non-profit organisations are often perceived to have a structurally-embedded comparative advantage in delivering services to vulnerable populations, which derives from ownership, the complexity of their stakeholders and their flexibility (Billis and Glennerster, 1998).
decentralised service delivery systems (consistent with these partnerships) have made a particular kind of evaluation (performance measurement) a core feature of family support’s development.

In this Chapter I explore the theoretical basis of the contractual relationships through which family support services have recently developed, and highlight how these relationships have made managerial evaluation (in the form of performance indicators) central features in the regulation of these care services. In Section 2.2 I outline influential theories and practices that have defined public management reform in child and family and other social services, before showing how purchaser-provider relationships make performance measurement imperative (in Section 2.3). In Section 2.4, I outline how this kind of evaluation presents some challenges in social services. By examining the economic and political ideas and practices from which performance measurement has arisen in child and family and other social services, the Chapter grounds detailed examination of government performance indicators in family support in NSW that follows (in Chapter Three). Establishing the characteristics of existing performance indicator systems also helps ground more creative exploration of the scope of performance measurement in child and family services in the remainder of the thesis.

2.2 Public management reform: ideas and practices

Performance measurement emerged as governments in wealthy liberal economies restructured and reshaped their boundaries through the late 1980s and 1990s, attempting to affect their own internal workings and the environments in which they act. ‘New public management’ captures the mutually reinforcing cluster of practices and ideas introduced through this reform movement in English speaking countries (Pollitt, specialisation, combined with the increased specification of services (enforceable via contract) is seen to offer cost reductions to purchasers, whilst appearing to hive off risk. Note however that recent developments in NSW funding policy explicitly aim to open family support to competition from for-profit providers (DoCS, 2005b).
1995)\textsuperscript{39}. Such practices have fundamentally shaped the emergence of family support services in NSW. In this section I trace the ideas and practices that characterise new public management, and locate Australian child and family and other welfare services within this program of reform.

The early stages of new public management reform generally included the disaggregation of bureaucratic organisations and decentralisation of management authority in government agencies. Reforms also introduced corporate management practices to the public sector, and restructured institutions to promote purchaser-provider relationships and competitive tendering. Strategies focusing more closely on service quality, including benchmarking, performance audit and evaluation, were then imposed in this restructured institutional environment (Rieper and Mayne, 1998:118). In effect, these practices shifted bureaucratic effort toward ‘post-bureaucratic’ principles of efficiency, effectiveness, competition, consumer choice, and quality in the management of public resources. The significance of the new wisdom of service management and delivery is reflected in their common abbreviation to the ‘three E’s’ of economy, efficiency, and effectiveness. Applied to social services and social policy, these principles have been argued to dominate to the extent that they effectively supplant concerns about eliminating poverty and disadvantage (Shaw, 1997: 469).

Although new public management contains both pro-market and non-market dimensions (Baines, 2004)\textsuperscript{40}, it is usually recognised as most strongly shaped by liberal or neo-conservative scepticism about the efficiency and effectiveness of governments to deliver services. Indeed, these beliefs have been influential to the extent that some theorists perceived new public management to be deployed on the basis of faith rather than any evidence of likely impact (Pollitt, 1995: 150; Davis and Wood, 1998: 87).

\textsuperscript{39} Pollitt (1998:49) makes the point that the English speaking countries most strongly celebrated new public management. Continental European countries proved more cautious and selective in their adoption of these ideas and practices, and drew noticeably less on purchaser-provider structures.

\textsuperscript{40} In rejecting characterisations of new public management as a set of neutral and technical strategies, Baines (2004) noted new public management’s simultaneously pro-market and non-market ideological basis. On the one hand, this set of reforms legitimises and extends markets, and in some cases paves the way for private profit seeking organisations to enter the public sector (Baines, 2004: 6). Yet as new public management appears to construct market mechanisms, the processes in operation remain outside the realm of capital accumulation, in her words: “while they produce savings for the state, they do not generate surplus in the sense of profits” (Baines, 2004:6).
However, new public management is not a universal paradigm for thinking about the role of government, despite being characterised to the contrary by its influential proponents (Osborne and Gaebler, 1993). Rather, it is more plausibly considered to involve core principles that overlap with localised belief systems: in the Australian case the need to account for resource use to the economic rationalist bureaucratic elite (Melville, 1999; Pusey, 1991).

Varied values and beliefs give rise to local diversity in the practices associated with new public management reform. As such, Australian reforms should not be confused with the more thoroughly documented UK and US cases. In the United Kingdom through the late 1980s and early 1990s for example, reforms introduced quasi-market arrangements that reconfigured the role of local authorities around enabling, brokering and regulating care services rather than directly providing them (Le Grand and Bartlett, 1993). Those reforms occurred at the interface of services and consumers. Examples include reallocating budgets to consumers of aged and disability services living in the community (Hoyes et al, 1992), emphasising local authorities’ responsiveness to service users’ views on quality, and introducing ‘Citizens Charters’ requiring governments to publicly demonstrate value for money (Barnes and Prior, 1995:53; Jacobs and Manzi, 2000: 90; Taylor, 2005: 601). In the United States, new public management principles appeared in the form of legislative requirements for performance reporting under the Government Performance and Results Act (1993) and the ‘Service Efforts and Accomplishments’ reporting initiatives of the Governmental Accounting Standards Board (Martin and Kettner, 1997).

In contrast, Australian public sector reforms in the 1990s were most distinctively shaped by centrally driven National Competition Policy in the early 1990s. These reforms required government agencies to identify functions that could potentially be provided more efficiently and effectively by the private sector, and to ‘market test’ and

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41 The Government Performance and Results Act required federal departments to develop and report measurable outcome indicators from 1998, linked to five year strategic plans, with these mandates inevitably passed on to contractors. Note also that the Service Efforts and Accomplishments system of reporting was adopted into New South Wales, and is discussed in Chapter Three of this thesis.
eventually facilitate competition in key areas. In the late 1990s, competitive pressure was compounded by the National Commission of Audit report (NCA, 1996). This report set out a national agenda for economic and management reform under the newly elected conservative Howard government, and recommended that Commonwealth family service provision be transferred to the States (where it was not already). Where services were to be retained, the report recommended they be delivered by purchaser-provider arrangements (NCA, 1996:4.9). While these pressures did not lead to the full transferral of family service provision to the state, they effectively spread competitive rationale throughout government, beginning with major utilities like transport and electricity, eventually affecting areas not tagged for privatisation, including human services (albeit with uneven impact due to the federal division of power) (APSC, 2003: 121; McDonald, 2002:101; Melville, 1999; Halligan and Power, 1992).

2.2.1 Purchaser-provider relationships: the core of public management reform

Purchaser-provider relationships form the heart of new public management reform (Pollitt, 1995) and, driven by National Competition Policy, have come to characterise the provision of community services in Australia. Understanding the detail of their characteristics and impact is therefore necessary for understanding the economic arrangements through which family support services are managed – arrangements which make performance measurement imperative.

Contract relationships implicitly legitimise a role for non-profit or for-profit organisations in human service systems (McDonald, 1999; Dicke and Ott, 1999:503).

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42 The principles of National Competition Policy were established in the influential Hilmer Report (Hilmer et al, 1993). The NSW Government also introduced a contracting and market testing policy in 1994, later renamed the Service Competition Policy (NCOS, 1999).

43 Competition policy reform was agreed to by the Commonwealth and states following the Hilmer Report (Hilmer et al 1993), and the reform agenda gained momentum through the mid-1990s beginning with major utilities (Davis, 1997). These agreements did not specifically require competitive tendering of human services, which were instead affected less directly through the legislative reviews, structural reforms, and dissemination of ideas associated with the policy approach. Human services can be expected to be subject to a further stage of reform, given the Productivity Commission’s (2005) recent identification of the human services – in particular health and vocational education – as ‘under-reformed’ areas ripe for further competitive development.
In the United States, the emergence of purchase-of-service contracts between governments and non-profit agencies has been understood to construct an implementation network of the ‘shadow state’ (Wolch, 1990), in which the ‘hollow state’ relies upon private or non-profit organisations to deliver public services. This set of developments has been described as the most critical development in American child welfare policy since the 1960s given the potential of these relationships to alter non-profits’ client and service mix (Smith, 1989: 289).

Similarly in Australia, purchaser-provider relationships now define the politics and economics of child and family welfare provision. The experience of family support shows how purchaser-provider relationships can be deployed to facilitate expansion as well as retrenchment in key areas of government spending and activity (albeit with the intention that investing in family support will spare government from future costs of protective investigations and out-of-home-care). As I explain in the remainder of the Chapter, the entwinement of family support’s growth with new public management theory and practice has enhanced the importance of a controversial managerial model of evaluation—performance measurement.

In essence, purchaser-provider arrangements use contracts to invite a degree of managed competition into public service systems. As Walker (2002:65) points out, the contract is the ‘liberal form of agreement par excellence with regard to forming, and setting boundaries of, relationships between independent organisations or actors’. Contracts construct and reinforce an institutional division of labour between ‘specialist’ purchasers and providers, and limit accountability to the immediate parties to the contract. Such arrangements allow state purchasers to control service delivery, maintaining responsibility for specifying the type, amount and quality of service to be provided, and for selecting and managing service providers via contract. In effect, government purchasers are repositioned as the service ‘customers’, acting as agents or proxies for service users and taking primary control for rationing care and prescribing quality (NCOSS, 1999:13-14). Such arrangements weaken provider power to specify services, instead supposedly enhancing the sensitivity and responsiveness of government purchasers to the needs and preferences of users (with providers acting as arms of government) (Knapp, Wistow et al, 1994).
In his comparative work (which included Australia), Christopher Pollitt (1995) emphasised the importance of purchaser-provider divisions by characterising them as the means with which governments pursue other reform goals. He explained how governments adopted these arrangements because they offer a way to simultaneously disaggregate monolithic bureaucratic structures, decentralise management authority and hive off risk, and introduce market-like competition (Pollitt, 1995: 134). Indeed, purchaser-provider arrangements were a key feature of the simplistic yet influential calls for leaner government made by American management commentators Osborne and Gaebler (1993), who argued for governments to limit their activities to ‘steering not rowing’, so as to control or influence services strategically without providing them.

In Australia through the 1990s, federal government agencies were encouraged to take on a ‘steering’ function, reflected in the directives of the National Commission of Audit (1996) and the Australian Public Service Commission which justified the change in terms of the need to ‘concentrate on core functions’ and ‘shed non-core functions’ (APSC, 2003: 121-122). Yet treating government purchasing only in terms of how it constructs a steering-rowing dualism overlooks the potential complexity of institutional roles and relationships in the delivery of public services. Aucoin and Heintzmann (2000:253) point to a more nuanced picture, in which governments not only continue to ‘row’, but also engage partners with whom to ‘steer’. To some extent, such complexity can be observed in the emerging field of Australian child and family service delivery. While some contract relationships (for example the Community Services Grants Program (CSGP) in New South Wales) clearly fund service providers to deliver direct services or ‘row’, others are more complex. For example, the ‘Communities for Children’ initiative funded under the Commonwealth Government’s Stronger Families and Communities Strategy assigns an intermediate ‘steering’ role to large non-government players in selected local areas, who are responsible for planning, managing and purchasing the appropriate local service mix, but not for providing early intervention services themselves.

Although layered relationships are emerging which challenge simplistic notions of a division of labour between ‘steering’ and ‘rowing’, conventional (and more common) purchaser-provider forms are important for explaining the significance of performance...
measurement. Contracts act as the conduit through which performance requirements can be codified and cascade inside government from ministers to managers, and outside government from purchasing agencies to external providers (albeit via intermediaries, as in the Stronger Families example described above) (Pollitt et al, 2004).

One supposed benefit of purchaser-provider contracts is to give governments (or other purchasers) primary power to specify services and provider performance. In the ‘official’ account of the Australian reform experience, performance contracting is applauded for allowing public agencies to ‘concentrate on setting out the standards of service that the contracted provider will deliver and overseeing performance, without directly delivering the service’ (APSC, 2003: 132). Maintaining centralised control through contract specification diminishes the risk of engaging community organisations in public service delivery. This responds to concerns of community organisations’ ‘accountability deficit’ in relation to public or private organisations, as neither the financial bottom line of the private sector or the ‘public interest’ standard of the public sector applies (Mulgan, 2001). Indeed, adopting performance contracting has been credited by others with managing risk by enabling governments to increasingly prescribe (and monitor) the kinds of community services its agencies support (House of Representatives Standing Committee, 1998:13; Nevile, 1999).

As such, service specification (and measurement against these specifications) provides a centralised control that enables bureaucrats (and through them, politicians) to control expenditure and service delivery whilst governments disperse services to providers outside the state, thereby allowing arms-length risk management of decentralised systems (Carter, 1994; Pollitt, 1988:77). Yet at the same time, service specification

44 I use the term ‘performance contracting’ or ‘performance-based contracts’ to distinguish this feature of new public management from ‘competitive tendering’. Although performance-based contracts could be offered via fully competitive tendering arrangements as in the case of employment services in Australia, they can be offered via moderated forms of competitive grants, as in the case of the Community Services Grants Program in NSW.

45 Unlike public companies in the private sector, community organisations are not required to provide annual financial reports to the public (Mulgan, 2001:7). Further, community organisations don’t have a clearly measurable bottom line, and so activities are argued to be more difficult to measure than either the bottom line of profit and shareholder value applying to the private sector, or the ‘public interest’ standard applying to the public sector (Mulgan, 2001: 9). However, such analysis suggests accountability can be managed only by political or economic conventions, devaluing systems based on direct participation or adherence to values (such as social justice).
limits the degree of decentralisation, by enabling purchasers to establish accountability and control systems, to ‘reign in’ poorly performing providers.

2.2.2 Purchaser-provider relationships and child and family services

The accountability requirements arising from purchaser-provider relationships naturally affect those outside as well as inside Australian government agencies. Institutional theory alerts us to the cultural, political and economic contexts in which organisations are embedded, and the ways that government agencies (through their control of funding and regulatory power) can trigger the transformation of other organisations, including non-profits. In particular, institutional organisational analysis helps us understand how pressures can emanate from public sector (and other) organisations and affect the ‘organisational field’, defined as the community of organisations subject to a set of cultural norms and regulatory forces (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991: 64).

DiMaggio and Powell’s (1983) idea of ‘institutional isomorphism’ captures how service providers tend to conform to the expectations of the organisations on which they depend for resources. This concept points to the ways the norms and structures associated with reforms inside government agencies transfer into the field in which these agencies operate, and into non-state organisations themselves.

In child and family welfare, community providers have confronted public management reforms through their funding relationships with (and for some, resource dependency on) government agencies. Importantly, the introduction and maturation of market-like forms has occurred in the detail of administrative arrangements, and not at the service or policy interface with service users. Family support thus demonstrates a more moderate market trajectory compared to the sale of public assets, the transferral of subsidies or ‘vouchers’ to consumers to allocate resources, or the outsourcing of

\[\text{Within institutional theory are classical institutionalism (focused on intra-organisational problems) and neo-institutionalism, focused on inter-organisational relations (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991). My concern here is primarily with relationships between government purchasers and non-government providers, and therefore with the neo-institutional strand.}\]
formerly publicly provided services (as in the supposedly ‘paradigmatic’ case of employment services)\textsuperscript{47}.

In the 1990s, Australian government agencies that funded welfare services gradually adapted programs according to a purchasing model, doing so at the same time that political and professional support for family support grew through the 1990s. Programs that formerly provided non-government providers with grants or ‘input-based funding’ were reformed to provide support for specific projects, distributed via more competitive processes (Melville, 1998). In essence this involved a shift from models of funding in which governments allocated funds while attributing a high degree of independence to services, in favour of a more competitive mode, often involving governments offering shorter term funding accompanied by performance requirements enforceable under contract (McDonald, 2004: 5-7). Unlike ‘submission’ based models, these new arrangements tend to involve an initial phase of needs planning— that is, consultation by governments with stakeholders (including service providers and peak bodies) (NCOSS, 1999; Lyons, 2001). This allows government purchasers to gather the information required to specify the service required and service delivery standards, and subsequently, to place reporting requirements on provider organisations to ensure accountability\textsuperscript{48}.

To understand contracting in family support, it is necessary to recognise that these services involve strategies for achieving competition and quality control that differ from

\textsuperscript{47} McDonald and Marston (2002:383) describe the ‘Job Network’ (introduced to replace the Commonwealth Employment Service in 1998) as characteristic of ‘the new regime of welfare and governance’ given the degree of contestability and the government’s neutral preference for non-profit or for-profit providers (see also Considine, 2000). Yet as the case of family support shows, such characteristics are far from universal across welfare services.

\textsuperscript{48} While the impact of contracting has not been evaluated in the context of family support specifically, it has proven controversial across the welfare sector (Maddison et al, 2004; Melville, 1998; Nevile, 1999; Rawsthorne, 2005). Internationally and in Australia, critics have pointed to potentially negative impacts on non-profit organisations, including reduced independence, autonomy and democratic accountability; as well as goal diversion, loss of capacity to collaborate, innovate, and demonstrate ‘outward’ accountability, and the marginalisation of non-profits from policy development (Craig, Taylor et al, 2004; Lipsky and Smith, 1990; Knapp, Wistow et al, 1994; Rawsthorne, 2005; McDonald, 2002, 2004; Chalmers and Davis, 2001; Ranald, 1997, House of Representatives Standing Committee, 1998). In Australia specifically, contracting has also been seen to create new burdens for government. However, the potentially negative impacts of contracting seem to have been only partially borne out (Rawsthorne, 2005).
straight outsourcing or privatisation of government services\textsuperscript{49}. Rather, bureaucratic grant-making functions were used as a means of planning and contractualisation, with performance-reporting requirements gradually introduced as the family support sector grew. Largely, this reform strategy took place differently within the various government funding agencies and programs for family support, resulting in performance measurement requirements that were highly differentiated across agencies and programs.

One of the main purchasers of community services in NSW (and the main purchaser of family support), the Department of Community Services (DoCS) revised its service agreements with community organisations ‘to reflect the shift from funding based on inputs to purchasing based on outputs and outcomes’ (DoCS, 2001: ii). DoCS gradually transformed its main program to fund family support (the Community Services Grants Program)\textsuperscript{50} from a submission model to one of moderated competition. This process is reflected in the latest phase in the evolution of the CSGP service framework, which traces DoCS attempt to shift from ‘funding community services’ to ‘purchasing welfare outputs’ (DoCS, 2001:ii). Importantly, in the case of the CSGP, performance-reporting requirements were introduced as part of a political trade-off with service providers, involving the replacement of annual service agreements with triennial contracts. In DoCS words, these were designed to incorporate a negotiation process between purchasers and providers around the ‘the type of services to be provided, relevant performance measures, such as outputs and outcomes, and the cost of providing such services’ (DoCS, 2002: 6).

Although DoCS attempted to avoid characterising the new service framework for CSGP as an attempt to allocate funds via competitive tendering (DoCS, 2002:6), these reforms move decisively toward such a model, requiring funded programs to better describe their objectives and adopt appropriate performance measures. This enables government to not only monitor program success. It also sets up systems that would

\textsuperscript{49} This reflects the point made by Daly and Lewis (2000:291) that the marketisation of European care systems tends not to be a straightforward trend, being more complex than privatisation or funding cuts.

\textsuperscript{50} Family support services in New South Wales are funded under the Family and Individual Support component of the CSGP. Of course, many obtain support from other sources instead of or in addition to CSGP. However, CSGP is the dominant funding source for the sector.
eventually allow purchasers to compare performance and pick and choose between potential providers vying for a share of government funds.

While using performance contracting to adapt how it funds family support through the CSGP, DoCS is also using performance contracts to further fuel the sectors growth. This is reflected in DoCS recent injection of $150 million over five years for its new Early Intervention Program, which is being allocated via competitive tendering for services in prescribed locations and for a fixed period (DoCS, 2004). An interesting feature in this program and indeed in DoCS emerging funding policy is the ascendance of the principle of competitive neutrality (which can be traced in Australia to National Competition Policy in the early 1990s) and the consequent entry of for-profit organisations into the child and family welfare sector (DoCS, 2005b).

2.3 Purchaser-provider relationships and performance measurement

Section 2.2 linked the growth of family support services to purchaser-provider relationships, locating their development in debates about the role of government in community services, and a comprehensive program of public management reform. This section more closely considers the models of accountability associated with family support’s growth trajectory. Critically, purchaser-provider relationships make an arms length approach to accountability necessary for governments to monitor contract compliance. Monitoring involves ‘ongoing oversight conducted during the performance of a contract’, using reported indicators of inputs, processes, outputs and outcomes (as specified in contract) (Dicke and Ott, 1999: 506). Martin and Kettner (1996:3; 1997:18) similarly describe performance measurement as a comprehensive approach to accountability involving ‘the regular collection and reporting of information on the efficiency, quality, and effectiveness’ of human service and other public programs51. They call for performance measurement on the basis of its technical

51 In this way, the model of evaluation is linked to the 3 E’s of economy, efficiency and effectiveness, which constitute the core values of new public management.
capacity to combine accountability for efficiency, quality and effectiveness into one system, without emphasising any of these three priorities (Martin and Kettner, 1996:3).

An alternative perspective has been expressed in an Australian context by Tilbury (2004). She identifies how performance indicators express the values with which governments construct their relationships with service providers, so that what is measured (and how it is measured) conveys the top-down priorities around which government policy is built (Tilbury, 2004a, 2004b). Interpreting performance measurement as socially constructed challenges Martin and Kettner’s view that performance measures are ‘value free’, given the universal primacy of principles of economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

Other researchers have also recognised how performance measurement takes place in social, political and economic contexts, and have consequently identified the ‘top-down’ priorities implicit in performance measurement. Cutler and Waine (1994: 31), for example, identify that it is management superiors (or a purchasing or regulatory agency) rather than service practitioners or service users who set criteria for performance. Jacobs and Manzi extend this critical perspective, pointing to the instrumental rationality that performance measurement represents, seeing it as a means through which ‘management replaces the practice of politics in the public sector’ (2000:92).

These perspectives on performance measurement draw from broader theories of accountability. Power (1997) for example identifies that the audit and accountability practices of government express key shifts in the role of the state, pointing out that ‘audit is not simply a solution to a technical problem, it also makes possible ways of redesigning the practice of government’ (Power, 1997:11). Miller (2001) also treats calculative practices like audit and performance measurement as examples of ‘technologies of government’, pointing out how what we know about economic activities is constructed through the counting and costing that make them visible. In previous work, Mary Henkel (1991) identified the institutional basis underpinning the rise of measurement as a technology of managerial governance. She argued that the development of evaluative oversight agencies inside the UK government in the 1980s strengthened governmental authority by facilitating a shift from professionalism to
managerialism. The resulting plethora of oversight institutions constituted what she termed a ‘new ‘evaluative’ state’.

While performance measurement reflects fundamental shifts in the role of the state, it is important to note that it does not arise solely from service contracting. In the United States, for example, pressures for performance measurement arise from philanthropic institutions as well as government funders, including the donor intermediary United Way of America and large grant makers like the Ford or Rockefeller Foundations (Poole et al, 2001). In 1996, for example, United Way recommended that agencies use performance measurement to communicate results and assist in attracting funds, and this national organisation also considers indicators when distributing funds (Fischer, 2001; Martin, 1998:68). In the United Kingdom, commentators have found performance measurement preceded the proliferation of service contracting, identifying its antecedents in the league tables developed for health, education and public infrastructure in the early and mid-twentieth century (Cutler and Waine, 1994: 27). Further pressure for performance measurement comes from international obligations. Although performance indicator systems have not been as far reaching in continental European countries as in the UK, European Union and OECD, obligations to supply data are a source of pressure for national performance measurement and reporting systems (Van Dooren, 2004).

Despite these other sources of pressure for performance indicators, contracting is clearly a key facilitator of performance measurement in Australian child and family services. In contract negotiations, government purchasers specify the quality and

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52 Australia has not developed philanthropic institutions like the United States has, in part because of lower levels of religious observance, but also because the state has taken a more active responsibility for welfare (Lyons, 1994).

53 In the US, philanthropic grants have been argued to have been redefined from ‘gifts’ or unconditional contributions to investments, as donors pay more attention to the value their donations create, pressuring recipient agencies to perform to their full potential (Easterling, 2000:482).

54 The antecedents to evaluation in Australian welfare services can be traced to the Senate Report titled “Through a Glass Darkly” (SSCSW, 1979). This reviewed evaluation in health and welfare, recommending cross-government reviews of program efficiency, effectiveness and appropriateness. Of course, services were previously subjected to some public scrutiny and did conduct evaluation. However, evaluation was not officially recognised as a problem for the sector before this report. Moreover, performance measurement was not institutionalised in government programs until service contracting made it imperative.
quantity of services to be delivered (usually in the language of outputs and outcomes) requiring providers to regularly report their financial probity and that they achieve tangible ends. In this way, the outputs and outcomes specified in contracts construct the criteria through which government purchasers can monitor service delivery. These requirements give rise to a cycle of data collection and reporting, shaped tightly around political agendas of fiscal constraint and accountability, and which feed into government systems of accountability.

When reported, performance indicators act as signposts or pointers representing key dimensions of service processes and product, and can be constructed to show patterns over time or to analyse the comparative performance of different providers. Within the ideology of new public management, performance measurement helps show decisions are grounded in ‘scientific’ evidence, focusing on the observable, often quantified and supposedly objective indicators of the difference programs are making in participants’ lives (Greene, 2002).

Spicker (2004) highlights three main types of indicator systems: headline indicators (which can risk skewing the focus of analysis to a few key areas of performance); summary indices (composite measures summarising a set of indicators– which raise problems of validity and weighting; and a third and more common system: multiple indicators. In child and family services, performance indicators are usually multiple for a given program, drawn from simple administrative data collected in the process of service delivery (as I show in Chapter Three). Yet regardless of the type of indicator adopted, the requirement that they be reported is key, as this provides a central control that enables governments to manage decentralised public service systems (Carter, 1994).

2.4 Problems of performance measurement in community services

Performance measurement can strengthen the management of contracted service provision, offering program managers tools to ensure program quality and effectiveness, while supposedly ensuring a focus on key client outcomes (Rapp and Poertner, 1987). For contract managers, indicators are seen as beneficial for enhancing
governments’ capacity to distinguish service quality and purchase worthwhile human services on behalf of citizens or disadvantaged clients, for helping refine program objectives, and for encouraging providers to be more accountable for the quality of their performance (Mulgan, 2002:48; DoCS, 2001:11). Central financial agencies also draw on indicators as proxies for price signals, using them to create pressure for productivity and cost efficiency improvements for government agencies (NSW Treasury, 2001; Yaisawarang and Puthucheary, 1997).

Despite their potential usefulness for program and contract managers and government regulatory agencies, performance measurement raises some conceptual and practical difficulties in community services. In general, these can be linked to the mismatch between the outcomes measurement model and the actual production process in human services; as well as organisational factors, including the context in which agencies need to evaluate performance.

- **Performance measurement and the production process in social services**

The challenge of performance measurement can be linked to the character of production in human services (Meagher, 2002a). Performance measurement is premised on a neat, logical and linear concept of production in which inputs (such as equipment and staff) produce tangible outputs (such as completions of programs) that affect outcomes for individuals and society. While this process model is adapted from the logic of manufacturing production, measurement is recognised as exceptionally difficult to conceptualise where production involves non-routine tasks, and where it is seen as less determinate and more likely to be affected by range of stakeholders, including service users (Van Dooren, 2004). Goals and service processes may vary between programs, and even the same programs seek different outcomes for different service users (Qureshi, 1999:258). Moreover, service users are ‘co-producers’, whose characteristics and choices affect service production, and whose participation and choices are necessary for interventions to succeed.

The social service production process is the focal point of feminist critique of performance measurement. Such arguments stem from feminist sociological studies of the production of care, to explore the tension between performance measurement’s
controlling, quantifying and pseudo-scientific intentions, and the nature of caring labour. Graham, for example, argued that caring activities can only be understood through subjective experience, and so can’t be specified (in contracts, for example) with any degree of certainty (Graham, 1983). Kari Waerness (1996) observed how caring values and care relationships can ‘get lost’ when brought from the personal, private world into the bureaucratised public world. Henderson and Forbat (2002:670) identify this tendency in recent policy for UK carers. They point out how the UK Department of Health’s National Strategy for Carers loses the relational components of care, leading to a failure to monitor these components even though participants identified them as critical to quality. Henderson and Forbat argue that research about caring and emotional labour in health and welfare highlights the mismatch between official accounts of care and the accounts of those involved in the care dyad (Henderson and Forbat, 2002:677). Their critique states: ‘policy chooses not to reflect the voices of both sides of the care relationship and, indeed, often fails to incorporate any recognition of the importance of the relationship itself’ (Henderson and Forbat, 2002: 684).

Feminist critics also point to the problems relationships pose for performance measurement (Meagher, 2002a; Meagher, 2002b; Baines, 2004; Himmelweit, 1999). Baines (2004: 9) suggests the centrality of relationships poses problems for new public management generally, stating that: ‘…caring labour eludes quantification as it is nested in ever-changing relationships, community dynamics and the outcome of daily struggles over resources, identities and power’. Himmelweit (1999) also associates relationships with the difficulties confronted in attempts to specify the skills or process involved in caring:

Because the work involves the development of a relationship, caring labour provides limited scope for routinization and control by the worker (or her employer) or for economies of scale to be reaped through professionalizing caring. In addition, the skills needed in caring are not in general the codifiable skills of a formal training scheme. Rather, many of the skills that a carer needs are tacit, difficult to codify, and generally picked up in the course of developing a particular caring relationship with a particular caree (Himmelweit, 1999:34).
Even when attempts are made to measure the process and product of caring, it risks being undervalued, given its historical (and persistent) characterisation as a supposedly natural female proclivity rather than learned skill. James (1989) challenges explanations for the undervaluation of care that focus on the character of the production process. Rather, she argues that difficulties in specifying and evaluating care stem from its historical exclusion from public and academic discourse rather than the innate character of its production. In her view, the provision of care is poorly recognised and paid because of the minimal attention it has been subject to, and its consequent invisibility.

These accounts point to the risk that performance measurement will fail to fully capture the outcomes of care-based services including family support, given the difficulties of specifying them in contract. Because of the importance of performance indicators in contract management, those aspects of services which aren’t well articulated—such as the interpersonal and relational dimensions of quality and outcomes—risk being overlooked in funding allocations and policy development, and in service management. As a result, performance indicators risk characterising service delivery in favour of easily measurable financial or bureaucratic achievements, at the expense of practice achievements—including the development of relationship (Qureshi, 1998:140-141). This raises questions about performance measurement’s overall potential to improve efficiency and effectiveness in sensitive care services, like family support (Lindgren, 2001; Love, 1998).

**Performance measurement in organisational context**

As well as the production process, performance measurement is also difficult because of other characteristics of social services, including organisational values, accountability models, and professional and client factors. In terms of values, agendas of government control, competition, and economic efficiency that underpin performance measurement have been perceived to conflict with some defining characteristics of social service provision. Because new public management intersects with economic rationalism, criteria of efficiency are often privileged in indicator systems, despite the influential claims of neutrality by Martin and Kettner (1996) and others. Indicators of efficiency are also more common than those relating to quality or effectiveness given the relative ease of measuring the ratio of inputs to outputs, compared with measuring outcomes.
Priorities of economic efficiency implicit in performance measurement in practice have implications for social services. Such priorities are perceived to mesh poorly with the values of social justice, inclusion, dialogue and participation, upon which many social service organisations are founded (Love, 1998:146; Hood, 2000).

Secondly, the model of accountability intrinsic in performance measurement can raise difficulties in community services. Whereas performance measurement is predicated on priorities of ‘upward’ accountability to managers and funders, community welfare organisations tend to have flatter management structures and seek ‘outward’ accountability to clients, communities and colleagues (Mulgan, 2001). As such, the marginal role of service users in conventional performance measurement can generate tensions for non-profit social services, given basic priorities of human agency and client self-determination in social service provision, and because of growing trends for users to routinely participate in other aspects of the management and planning in health and welfare (Edwards and Staniszewska, 2000; Pollitt, 1988).

Thirdly, the challenge of performance measurement has a professional dimension. Zeira and Rosen (2000) point out how social service workers have traditionally focused on describing and understanding problems rather than on evaluating their interventions. They suggest the ready availability of tacit knowledge for use in social service practice may overshadow explicitly learned and formulated knowledge, historically contributing to the low level of appreciation for formal evaluation (especially where it involves quantification) in social work services (Zeira and Rosen, 2000:104). Indeed, a documented challenge for performance measurement in social services relates to the lack of expertise and resources (including time) to undertake evaluation, a factor perceived to contribute to the poor quality of outcome data (Fischer, 2001: 564).

Finally, client factors present a further challenge to performance measurement. Those clients with brief or transient contact with services (e.g. telephone crisis counseling) may be difficult to follow up, and outcomes for preventative programs (e.g. family support) may not be immediately quantifiable because they occur for services users in the distant future, beyond their contact with programs (Fischer, 2001:565). For
these interventions, collecting and reporting measures of output seem more practical than measuring outcome. However, performance indicators may poorly capture the contribution of such services, and may misrepresent the efficiency of work with clients experiencing the most difficult social problems. Indeed, performance indicators can provide incentives for services to alter the client mix, to serve less disadvantaged clients for whom change is more likely, to achieve better looking results (Fischer, 2001: 564). Thus, the credibility attributed to performance indicators can indeed undermine organisational performance and skew the use of scarce welfare funds (Jacobs and Manzi, 2000:101).

- **Responses to the challenge of performance measurement**

Yet despite the challenges stemming from characteristics of the social service production process and service delivery organisations, performance indicators have continued to be adopted by governments and community service providers. Research and development efforts have responded by attending to the technical challenges of adapting performance measurement to specific community service areas, including defining outputs and outcomes, and choosing and collecting the ‘right’ performance indicators (e.g. Friedman, 2002; Gain and Young, 1998).

Some researchers have focused on how governments and service providers have adapted their evaluation practices in response to the challenges of performance measurement. Commonly, governments have responded to the challenge of performance measurement by requiring a relatively narrow range of indicators, focused on inputs and outputs rather than outcomes for users. Tilbury (2004) analysed indicators used in UK child and family services, finding these to include only one measure for family support, that of government spending levels (an input measure) (Tilbury, 2004: 124-125). Tilbury also points out the lack of client satisfaction indicators used, despite the importance of principles of ‘user involvement’ in the policy discourses of UK social services discourses (2004: 128). Similarly, her investigation of the performance indicators for family support in Victoria (Australia) found that only one client satisfaction measure was required, but this was not reported publicly.
2.5 Conclusions

As I have outlined, performance indicators are a product of the reform agenda through which family support has grown in the 1990s. In NSW, governments have developed and reformed family support through the detail of administrative arrangements, constituting a more moderate change trajectory than outsourcing or privatisation. Indeed, DoCS used its bureaucratic grant making function to enhance performance reporting requirements while increasing funding to early intervention services. In doing so, it has repositioned itself as the arms-length manager of service provision via contract. Despite scepticism about the appropriateness of contracting in social services and the capacity of performance indicators to fully capture the contribution of social service work, these reforms have firmly entrenched performance measurement, which now constitutes a key feature in the way governments and non-profits deliver family support. In Chapter Three, I continue to explore how performance measurement constructs family support services, by considering the specific performance indicators currently manifest in NSW family support. These indicators reflect many of the dilemmas associated with performance measurement considered in this Chapter, and suggest the need for a broader exploration of the scope to capture meaningful measures of service quality and outcomes.
Chapter Three

Government performance indicators and family support

3.1 Introduction

Facilitated by public management reform in the 1990s, governments have incorporated family support services into their strategies for preventing child abuse and neglect. Purchaser-provider partnerships have allowed family support to grow, confirming that new public management practices can facilitate expansion as well as retrenchment in key areas of government activity. Service contracting has enhanced the role of performance measurement and reporting in family support, despite controversies around the appropriateness of these practices in social services (as discussed in Chapter Two).

In this Chapter, I document how the performance indicators introduced by government agencies currently seek to capture and represent family support services in New South Wales. In doing so, I establish the key features of the performance information routinely reported in this growing area of government welfare expenditure and service provision. The approach I take rejects dominant managerial characterisations of performance indicators (e.g. Martin and Kettner, 1997). Such characterisations treat measurement systems as neutral, objective, and technical exercises for collecting and reporting information about service efficiency and effectiveness. In contrast, here I treat performance indicators as expressing the priorities embedded in public policy and government relationships with non-government service providers. While performance indicators institutionalise seemingly objective ways of judging service quality and outcomes, what is measured (and how it is measured) convey both the values with which government policy is constructed and the power of particular stakeholders (Tilbury, 2004; Newcomer, 1997:7).
As shown in Chapter Two, government agencies can use their purchasing power to specify and ‘steer’ service delivery. Purchasers embed criteria for performance assessment in service contracts, so can determine which aspects of provider performance will be reported and monitored. However, performance is difficult to measure in complex human services. As outlined in Chapter Two, different service users and providers have different goals, and evidence of service outcomes can be technically difficult (and resource intensive) to capture. Because of these conceptual and methodological challenges, performance indicators tend to characterise service delivery in terms of the easily measurable financial or bureaucratic achievements, at the expense of practice achievements such as developing and sustaining worker-client relationships and delivering quality care (Qureshi, 1998: 140-141).

Family support service providers have been obliged to adopt performance indicators prescribed by government funders, despite their limitations. In NSW, service providers tended to comply pragmatically with indicator requirements attached to their funding, with some seen to experience a ‘performance measurement fatigue’ resulting from the succession of reporting requirements that were tested in the late 1990s (Mahony, 1999). Community organisations funded through DoCS Community Services Grants Program (CSGP) were observed to bypass the difficulties of developing outcome measures based on their own value sets, instead adopting performance indicators developed by service purchasers in ways perceived to aim primarily to appease funding bodies (Bullen, 1998). Such tendencies have also been observed in Queensland community services. Although community organisations there were initially allowed to report their own measures, they tended to report indicators that were easier to collect and kept as basic administrative records rather than the most meaningful data (Ryan, 1999)\textsuperscript{55}. But while

\textsuperscript{55} Some studies identify factors limiting the development of meaningful performance measurement which are internal to service providers. McDonald’s (1999) study of the evaluation processes internal to Queensland community service organisations found that performance evaluation “appeared to have a ceremonial quality validating performance by reference to values or beliefs, not performance” (McDonald, 1999:18). McDonald identified four factors limiting internal monitoring and evaluation: evaluation skills deficits in community organisations the routine focus of service delivery on client needs (rather than data collection); professional reluctance to introduce monitoring systems; and the availability of poor quality data. Fischer (2001:561) specifically identified the lack of evaluation skills as a reason for the limited development of meaningful performance measurement in human service provider organisations in the United States.
service providers in some cases can influence how governments measure performance, government requirements (as embedded in service contracts) are the key forces shaping performance indicators across the family support sector.

The analysis in this Chapter contributes to debates about performance measurement in family support, by identifying the kinds of information and sources of evidence governments treat as sufficiently important (and practically possible) to measure and report. The aim is to assess the quality of evidence with which governments seek to measure and portray service performance, without actually evaluating service performance. This means I focus on the kinds of information that governments call for in attempting to achieve accountability for the performance of contracted services. I am not concerned with the content of any reported data, i.e. how efficiently or effectively family support services appear to be performing.

After introducing the data sources in Section 3.2, I analyse the indicators with which governments capture the contribution of family support services in NSW (Section 3.3). Three points emerge from the analysis. Firstly, family support falls largely outside government performance measurement systems. Performance indicators capture the investigation and statutory responses to child maltreatment, more thoroughly than the early intervention and prevention activities which government agencies like DoCS fund. Secondly, the performance indicators that exist for family support capture service outcomes in only a limited way, representing these services in terms of their inputs and outputs (a stronger feature in the data collections of state and national oversight agencies). Thirdly, the indicators reflect a relatively narrow range of perspectives and, importantly, fail to involve service users. After identifying and discussing these features of performance measurement systems, I select one theme— the role of service users—for closer analysis in Chapter Four, and in the remainder of the thesis.
3.2 Data sources

There are four main reports that capture the performance of family support services in NSW\textsuperscript{56}. These reports are related. Figure 3 shows that services funded under the main family support program in NSW, the Community Services Grants Program (CSGP), are required to report performance indicators ‘up’ to the government funding agency, the Department of Community Services (DoCS). CSGP indicators are compiled using detailed performance data, as reported to DoCS by each contracted service provider. While the performance data itself is not publicly available, the specifications for the performance indicators that are required to be reported are available in the CSGP Service Framework (DoCS, 2002). DoCS can use CSGP data to monitor and report its own performance, by incorporating them into its agency level planning and corporate reporting responsibilities (for which some performance data is publicly available through, for example, Annual Reports and Portfolio Budget Statements).

The Department of Community Services must then report performance data to both federal and state performance ‘watchdog’ or oversight agencies (which complement the government auditors and other financial oversight agencies)\textsuperscript{57}. Federally, the Review on Government Services, an initiative of the Council of Australian Governments, reports information about family support\textsuperscript{58}. This publicly available annual Report has included performance indicators for Community Services over the last decade, with family support receiving minor (though increasing) attention over the last few years, reflecting its growing significance in child welfare systems around Australia. The state oversight

\textsuperscript{56} Because the focus of the chapter is on the performance information that mediates relationships between government funders and service providers, my focus here is on government performance indicators and reports only. As such, I do not specifically consider the data providers use for internal service management, or the data collection efforts of the NSW peak body, the Family Support Service Association. Note also that there are other government performance reports for family support services operating in NSW. For example, services funded by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services which operate in NSW will face a different set of requirements (although one which is also shaped by the need to report under the Review of Government Services).

\textsuperscript{57} Together, performance and financial oversight agencies strengthen governmental authority while facilitating a shift from professional to managerial models of authority (Henkel, 1991).

\textsuperscript{58} The Council of Australian Governments is the peak intergovernmental forum in Australia. It is comprised of the Prime Minister, State Premiers, Territory Chief Ministers and the President of the Australian Local Government Association.
agency is the Council on the Cost and Quality of Government, which reports evidence of NSW Government performance through the inter-agency ‘Service Efforts and Accomplishments’ (SEA) performance reports. This data, which is publicly available, shows how family support services are captured and reported in the state government’s cross portfolio performance reporting initiative.

**Figure 3 Relationship between four main performance reports***

Naturally, the CSGP indicators are designed to capture performance information at the purchaser/provider interface, and so give most comprehensive information about the performance of funded services. In contrast, the Review on Government Services, Council on the Cost and Quality of Government ‘SEA Reports’, and DoCS Corporate Performance Indicators consist of only the performance information made publicly

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*Data from subordinate reports feed up, reporting requirements feed down*
available by DoCS (a subset of the information actually collected). Together the four data sources reveal the range of political and administrative points at which governments measure and monitor the performance of community services: through national and state level ‘performance watchdogs’ or oversight agencies; in corporate reports; and at the point of service contracting.

The four sources do, however, give only a partial perspective on the design and use of performance indicators. Firstly, the data collections I consider are evolving, as are family support services and monitoring systems themselves. Further, the data sources reflect the challenge of developing a unified system of performance reporting for services which are diverse (like family support), and which lack nationally agreed definitions for their activities and performance and a common funding source.

Although an initiative to develop national information for community services was established in 1999 (AIHW, 1999), there are not yet specific guidelines for the sector. Indeed, in its 2005 report on Australia’s welfare (AIHW, 2005a: 117) the AIHW notes the persistent lack of national data about family support services, and points to its current attempt to develop a national framework for counting responses to child protection reports that occur outside the formal child protection system (which would include family support). Notwithstanding these developments, it remains expedient for both purchasers and providers of family support services to collect and report performance information that is easily available or required rather than that which is most meaningful.

Of course, these data sources overlap, as the national and state governments’ data relies on information collected at the agency and program levels. However, I considered the sources to ensure that the resulting typology constituted a comprehensive coverage of relevant indicators.

Possible reasons for the lack of a national minimum data set is that the family service sector is relatively new, and that haphazard funding means it is constituted by small, unstable programs, giving rise to a tendency to conduct one off, small scale process evaluations rather than focus coherently on outcomes across the sector (Tomison, 1999).

This point was made in Devaney’s examination of UK child protection indicators (2004:35). Similarly, Tilbury’s analysis of performance indicators in England (2004: 125) showed how what can be counted takes precedence over what should be counted. Of course, this is a natural response to constraints in evaluation resources, and the lack of agreed data collection requirements.
3.3 National performance reports

3.3.1 The Report on Government Services: Indicators for federal oversight

A summary of performance information collected by the States about child and family services is included in the annual Review of Government Services, which has been undertaken since 1995. These reviews are conducted by the Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (SCRGSP)\(^{62}\), an oversight agency auspiced by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), and managed by the Productivity Commission. The review is reported annually, as a requirement of national competition policy to provide comparative performance data for government services across the states, and to outline reforms underway (or under consideration) by state and federal government agencies in each portfolio area. These reports act to highlight the lack of performance information in some areas (including family support) and are a key driving force to develop nationally comparable indicator systems (AIHW, 1999:10).

Interestingly, the Reports on Government Services have altered in scope over the last decade, in response to the public management trends outlined in Chapter Two. In 1998 the name of the Report changed from ‘Report on Government Service Provision’ to ‘Report on Government Services’ (which it has since maintained). This change reflects the need for the report to specifically capture the performance of all services and not just those directly provided (SCRCSSP, 1998: 3). In 1999, the Report noted the role of performance measurement in providing information to help governments decide how to organise services, recognising alternatives to direct provision, such as output based funding, purchaser-provider splits, devolution and decentralisation, and user fees (SCRCSSP, 1999:7). This issue was clarified in the 2000 Report, which stated the report would examine performance for the system as a whole where government purchases services, and at an operational level when the government provides services directly (SCRCSSP, 2000:7). However, as I show here, the limited data available about

\(^{62}\) Note that the name of the Review Team changed in 2003 from the Steering Committee on the Review of Commonwealth/State Service Provision.
purchased family support services show that the report has not yet developed to measure the child and family service sector as a whole.

The Report uses a generic indicator framework for all services, using various measures of efficiency (inputs per output) and effectiveness (in terms of quality, appropriateness, access, and achievement of client outcomes). Child and family services fall into the ‘Protective and Support Services’ category in the Community Services section. An analysis of the performance indicators published in this category reveals three main themes. Firstly, there are few measures reported that relate to family support at all. Secondly, those that do relate to family support most comprehensively capture service outputs. Finally, the indicators are overwhelmingly designed top-down, showing minimal user involvement in providing the information the indicators represent. However, the reports show signs of evolving to review and report a wider set of perspectives, acknowledging the usefulness of ‘consumer views’ in the associated areas of child protection and out-of-home care.

- Limited coverage of family support

The latest Report on Government Services (SCRGSP, 2006) continues to focus on the traditional statutory responsibilities of child protection and out-of-home care, and on supported accommodation and assistance. Non-government service providers are largely excluded from this national performance report, despite the increasingly significant place of family support in child welfare systems. The ‘Protective and Support Services’ chapter in each report estimates the cost of child protection in each state based on the numbers of notifications, investigations and substantiated cases of child maltreatment (SCRGSP, 2004:15.26). Even though child protection authorities refer reported cases to the family support agencies with which they contract, the report includes only a subset of these services (Intensive Family Support Services).

However, the report is gradually recognising the role of non-government family support providers. In 2002, the Report recognised, for the first time, the role the non-government sector plays in providing family services (SCRCSSP, 2002:793). Further

63 Supported accommodation and assistance is aimed at those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, including women and children escaping domestic violence (SCRGS, 2006).
developments are evident in more recent reports. From 2003, the Report has included data for Intensive Family Support Services (IFSS) (a subset of general family support services). Akin to ‘family preservation services’ in the United States, these are designed to be close alternatives to child removal in cases where separation is imminent, or to facilitate reunification where children have been removed (SCRGSP, 2006: 15.3).

Using the typology of Sheppard (2004) outlined in Chapter One of this thesis, Intensive Family Support Services can be classified as tertiary intervention, as distinguished from secondary prevention (early intervention for those at risk) and quaternary intervention (where prevention has failed). For these intensive services, the report includes input measures of spending levels by the states on IFSS in real and per child terms and the number of services (some of which are provided by the non-government sector) (SCRGSP, 2005: Tables 15A.1, 15A.21).

The Report also captures the numbers of children commencing IFSS (SCRGSP, 2005: Table 15A.22) describing their Indigenous status, gender, age and living circumstances (i.e. whether they were in out-of-home care). Also an input measure, this indicator captures the volume of clients the services attempt to serve. Because it counts them in terms of commencements rather than completions, the indicator doesn’t reflect the output or volume of service actually produced. This reinforces critiques made elsewhere (e.g. NCOSS, 2005:15) that the Review on Government Service Provision tends to overuse measures of input and output at the expense of measuring results or outcomes.

Of course, there are practical constraints that cause the Report on Government Services to collect input indicators for intensive family support only. Indicators are hampered by the absence of an agreed minimum data set across the country, making it impossible to compare family service characteristics and performance across Australian jurisdictions (see, for example, SCRGSP, 2004). As such, it is rational to begin attempting to count family support for a subset of similar services only (in this case, tertiary interventions).

Importantly, the Report on Government Services has noted (since 2002) the scoping study undertaken by the AIHW (2001) to provide an overview of current data
collection efforts relating to family support services across Australia. It also made clear its intention to extend coverage to include indicators for family services, as data is gradually made available from the states. However, more comprehensive performance data for family services (aside from IFSS) are not yet available, rendering the contribution of the non-government sector largely invisible, despite the intention of the Steering Committee to capture service systems as a whole, even where they are contracted out. While the latest data collection plan restates commitment to improving national data collections for family support and to integrating these with existing child protection reports, there is so far little evidence of progress (AIHW, 2005b).

- **Client perspectives and performance indicators**

A further theme evident in the Report on Government Services is the tendency for indicators relating to child and family services to lack client or consumer involvement. Yet interestingly, client perspectives are evolving as an issue for including in the Report, at least in relation to child protection and out-of-home care (but not yet in family support). Indeed, an examination of the content of the Report on Government Services over the past decade shows a small but growing acceptance of the importance of incorporating client perspectives into performance indicators.

In child and family services, the 2002 report highlights how Victorian and Queensland child protection departments have developed client surveys to underpin their performance measures (SCRCSSP, 2002: 818). In the Victorian case reported, for example, indicators were based on clients' experiences during their initial involvement; their perception of child protection workers; their involvement in decision-making; their experience of links to other services; and their overall perception and experience of services. The Queensland Survey reportedly sought to capture overall satisfaction with the services clients received, the amount of contact clients had with service

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64 In their 2001 publication titled Family Support Services in Australia 2000 (AIHW, 2001), The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) provides an overview of the state’s data collection efforts relating to family support. Defining family support services as those which “seek to benefit families by improving their capacity to care for children and/or strengthening family relationships”, the AIHW report notes that it is only one step in what will be a “long and ongoing process to provide meaningful, useful and beneficial information about an important area of community services” (AIHW, 2001: xi).
officers and the number of officers they worked with, children’s numbers of placements, and overall satisfaction with the care received.

In recognising these state developments, the Report on Government Services lists client satisfaction indicators as ‘under development’ for future publications in child protection and out-of-home care (although as of 2004, they were being developed as output rather than outcome indicators) (SCRGSP, 2004:15.4). Again in the 2005 report, the Steering Committee identified ‘client satisfaction’ as a future indicator of government provision of quality services that meet the needs of recipients (SCRGSP, 2005:15.15). In 2006, the Report lists initiatives across the states to survey clients of child and family services. As such, client satisfaction is emerging as an issue to be captured in future performance indicators relating to child protection, and may also, eventually, be collected in relation to family support.

3.4 New South Wales Government Performance Reports

3.4.1 NSW Council on the Cost and Quality of Government ‘Service Efforts and Accomplishments’: Indicators for State Oversight

In the late 1990s, the NSW Government established its Council on the Cost of Government (renamed the ‘Council on the Cost and Quality of Government’ in 2000) with the aim of advising the government about how it is achieving value for money and quality services. A core task of the Council is to report the performance of government across agencies, which it does using the Service Efforts and Accomplishments (SEA) framework, developed by the Governmental Accounting Standards Board in the United States. This model is built around the notion that governments should be actively accountable to their citizens, and has been described as a natural extension of financial reporting responsibilities, as it requires governments to routinely provide additional information about non-financial aspects of their performance (Brown and Pyers, 1999: 102).

In the late 1990s, the SEA reporting model was promoted as being best practice in public reporting, and in the US, was described as ‘a profound initiative’ affecting the
future of human services (Martin and Kettner, 1996). In NSW, SEA reporting represents a comprehensive ‘endeavour to report available information about what government activities are actually achieving’ (Walker, 1999:9). For each policy sector, SEA reports attempt to report performance indicators over a five-year period to highlight government achievements and any constraints impacting on performance. The Council recently found that its approach had resulted in the use of 650 indicators of the outputs and achievements of NSW government agencies (CCQG, 2005). In response, it attempted to develop an ‘outcomes hierarchy’ to show how service efforts and achievements link together to affect 33 core goals shared across government agencies.

As the analysis below shows, the types of information collected in the SEA reports are similar to those in the Report on Government Services, in that they leave the performance of services outsourced to the non-government sector (such as family support services) largely beyond scrutiny.

- **Limited coverage of family support**

  For child protection, the SEA reports monitor administrative outputs, such as numeric counts of child protection reports, assessments, and care and protection orders. Outcome measures count non-accidental injuries and assaults, and child homicides, revealing the impact of child protection systems failing. Where the family support components of the protection system are directly monitored, it is in terms of inputs, such as the value of DoCS grants for family support (CCQG, 2004: 112), the number of funded family support projects as well as the number of children referred to services. In 1998, an output measure was included for family support (the number of children who receive DoCS funded family support services) (NSWCCG, 1998: 30). However, this indicator has not featured in subsequent reports.

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65 For a critique of SEA reporting as best practice see Brown and Pyers (1999).

66 More recently, NSW Treasury (through its Financial Management Framework) has popularised Mark Friedman’s ‘Results Based Accountability’ across the public sector (see NSW Treasury, 2004). Friedman’s system advocates a process through which the logic underpinning programs can be clarified. As such, results-based accountability represents a process through which measurement systems can be constructed rather than a unique measurement system. Currently, both Friedman and SEA approaches are being used in the NSW Government.
Although the performance of non-government providers is not captured in the indicators, the 1998 SEA report (like the Report on Government Services) recognised that around a third of the state’s expenditure on social and community services is distributed to non-government community services and that the majority of family services are run by non-government agencies (NSWCCG, 1998: 105). The Council pointed out that although DoCS funding for non-government programs and the number of funded non-government family support projects increased substantially in the early to mid 1990s (a trend which has continued) this process was not supported by basic data about the number of client families or children involved, let alone more comprehensive output or outcome data (NSWCCG, 1998). The report goes on to state that ‘with such a large investment in community infrastructure and programs, it is of concern that limited data are available on the performance of those services’, and that ‘apart from an initiative of the Family Support Services Association of NSW, there are no data on the outputs or outcomes of these services’ (NSWCCG, 1998: 106). Further, they recommend that ‘information relating to services provided by funded organisations needs to be integrated with departmental data in order to fully evaluate the Government’s efforts in this program area’ (NSWCCG, 1998: 106). Interestingly, similar statements or comments to follow up these suggestions are absent from subsequent reports.

- **Client perspectives and performance indicators**

Like the Report on Government Services, a second point of interest in the SEA reports for child and family services is that it fails to measure how services affect outcomes for clients, or client satisfaction. Indeed, the only social service for which SEA reports measure client satisfaction is public housing (see CCQG, 2004: 118). However, the CCQG has consistently recommended developing measures of client feedback about child and family services, in order to improve knowledge of service outcomes (NSWCCG, 1998:116). In 2000, the Council made a general recommendation to develop a methodology for evaluating program performance which includes consideration of client factors, including assessing whether agencies have structures in place to capture client views; whether a client analysis has been done; and what clients expect from the service and how their views can best be captured (CCQG,
2000). However, its recent discussion paper attempting to develop a whole-of-government outcomes framework (CCQG, 2005) contains no mention of future inclusion of client satisfaction indicators for social services.\textsuperscript{67}

3.5 Agency performance indicators

3.5.1 DoCS performance indicators: corporate reports

The Department of Community Service’s most recent corporate plan (2004/05 to 2008/09—see DoCS, 2005a) sets out the performance indicators shaping its reporting priorities since its budget was bolstered in late 2002.\textsuperscript{68} Over half of the new funding announced was intended to be spent on purchasing services from providers external to DoCS, with a priority being for early intervention programs to reduce the rate of growth in demand for statutory intervention (DoCS, 2004: 2).\textsuperscript{69} However, the performance of purchased family support services is not directly reflected in the Department’s six headline indicators. Instead, the headline indicators include the percentage of children and young people who are the subject of two or more substantiated reports of child abuse or neglect within twelve months.\textsuperscript{70} The other headline indicators focus on children in out-of-home care (including placement stability); the efficiency of reporting processes (such as call waiting times on the telephone reporting system); the cost of child protection per substantiated child protection notification; the unit costs for out-of-home care; and DoCS internal financial management processes.

Early intervention services, including family support, are captured in the performance measures that feed into these headline measures. These ‘lower level’ indicators include

\textsuperscript{67} In fact, client satisfaction was proposed to be measured only for the objective ‘to hold the public sector to account’ and not for specific services (CCQG, 2005: 74)

\textsuperscript{68} In December 2002 the NSW Government announced an extra $1.2 billion over five years for services for children, young people and families.

\textsuperscript{69} As argued in Chapter Two, this shows how purchaser-provider splits are being used to expand the provision of family support.

\textsuperscript{70} Of course, this figure may be affected by the effectiveness of family support, in cases where families are directed to these services to prevent further substantiations. However, the indicators will not necessarily reflect service performance, as it is more strongly influenced by investigation policies and practices.
a measure of the subsequent safety of those children receiving early intervention services, indicated by a reduced rate of children placed in out-of-home care (who had previously been assessed as requiring early intervention rather than placement). A further indicator focuses on the development of those children receiving early intervention services, reflected in the percentage of children receiving early intervention services under five who reach appropriate developmental milestones (such as school readiness and physical and mental health). These measures seek to capture and represent service outcomes in more meaningful ways than the other data sources so far assessed, and they also require a degree of client involvement (at least in terms of measurement of child development, however passive this involvement might be). A final indicator for early intervention focuses on the cost of service delivery, expressed as annual real recurrent spending per child admitted to the program (an input measure).

Overall, the indicators DoCS plans to include in its corporate reports promise to capture more meaningful outcomes than those reported in the Report on Government Services or the NSW Government’s SEA reports, although they capture non-government family support activity only partially. The emergence of child development amongst the outcome measures is a definite shift in approach, which will require a degree of client involvement in the data collection, although the indicators (at least in the Annual Reports) are not yet sufficiently detailed to show whether (and how) this is taking place.

### 3.5.2 Program level performance indicators: the CSGP

Performance measures at the program level offer richer accounts of the operation and contribution of purchased services than do the corporate and government level indicators. For family services, the largest and most established purchaser-provider framework for family services in New South Wales is the Community Services Grants Program\(^7\). In 2004-05, the CSGP administered $72.58 million (DoCS, 2005c).

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\(^7\) The CSGP developed following the gradual transferral of the first family services from the Commonwealth to the states through late mid 1980s (initially via Commonwealth-State cost sharing arrangements). Since 1989, family services have been the responsibility of states, and in NSW, are funded primarily through the CSGP (Bullen, 2003: 28-29).
Approximately a third of this ($23.73 million) was provided to 207 programs under the Family and Individual Support component (which serves families experiencing stress).72

Since 1989, recipients of CSGP funds have been required to use performance indicators to measure outcomes (Bullen, 2004:23), and compliance with a performance monitoring framework continues to be a prerequisite to maintaining support (DoCS, 2002:3). In 2002, DoCS introduced a new service framework (DoCS, 2002), assisting the transition from a model of funding community services to a ‘partnership’ model of purchasing (DoCS, 2001). The framework requires services to articulate their program logic, by linking their activities to objectives and more clearly specifying performance measures. Although the indicators in this system are more comprehensive than those so far considered, those relating to family support services funded under the CSGP (see DoCS, 2002) give only a partial representation of family support services, and continue to assess services more thoroughly using service ‘outputs’ rather than ‘outcomes’.

In the new service framework, DoCS justifies the performance measures in a standard way: that indicators allow the agency to assess and report the impact of services purchased, so that they can account for the results they achieve with public funds in line with their legal and reporting obligations.73 DoCS has expressed the need for performance measurement carefully, appealing to the need to maintain the public legitimacy of the sector and the need to establish service contributions to enable the Minister to argue for larger budget allocations, so as to support service providers and through them, service users (DoCS, 2002:3).

The Family and Individual Support component of CSGP has the objective of ‘supporting children, young people, individuals and families so that they can enhance their independence, safety, self-esteem and quality of life’. Performance indicators are required to measure how well services achieve each of the five activities: 1) providing information, options, and referrals; 2) counselling, casework, group work and

72 ‘Family and Individual Support’ is distinct from other components of CSGP: child protection, community development, and youth services.

73 These obligations include the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998 and the Community Welfare Act 1987. Other obligations are those affecting public agencies generally, such as Treasury’s Financial Management Framework.
therapeutic interventions; 3) practical, physical and material assistance; 4) recreation or vocational services; and 5) co-ordination and advocacy activities.

Table 2 (below) shows the types of indicators used for each of the five activities. In general, they fall into four main types: the number of activities or occasions of services, the number of clients assisted, the number of referrals made or received, and the number of requests not able to be met (DoCS, 2002:13). In addition there are descriptive measures of resource use, to ensure services reach their target populations, such as the number of clients experiencing child protection or domestic violence issues. The reliance on output measures in this performance indicator framework has caused the Family Support Service Association (the peak body for non-government family support agencies in NSW) to argue that ‘the preoccupation with number crunching and outputs overlooks and diminishes the importance of qualitative outcomes for individuals and communities and provides only a simplistic view of what is happening in CSGP funded programs’ (2001).

However, the CSGP indicator system does capture outcomes of client wellbeing, and does so more thoroughly than the national and state ‘oversight’ or agency level indicator systems. This is unsurprising, because the CSGP indicators are built with data directly reported from providers. As Table 2 shows, outcomes of the activity of providing counselling, casework, or group work intervention, are measured in terms of the proportion of cases where staff assess that the risk of crisis is reduced or prevented, where self-esteem, independence, safety and quality of life have improved and where the safety and wellbeing of children with child protection issues has increased. Other outcome indicators also draw data from practitioners’ judgments. Outcomes resulting from practical, physical or material assistance also rely on staff assessments as to whether clients are better off. For counselling, case work and group work activities, and advocacy services, outcomes are also assessed by practitioners, according to the percentage of cases where the risk of crisis is reduced or prevented.
Table 2  Community Services Grants Program performance indicators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Output measure</th>
<th>Outcome measure</th>
</tr>
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| Information, options, and referrals | Occasions of services | % clients requesting information that are referred to services
| | Clients assisted | |
| | Unmet requests | |
| | Referrals made & received | |
| Counselling, casework, group work & therapeutic interventions | Clients per group session | Percentage of cases where risk of crisis is reduced (Staff assessment) |
| | Unmet requests | |
| | Referrals made & received | |
| | Children with child protection issues | Percentage of clients with improved self esteem, independence or quality of life (staff assessment) |
| | DV cases | |
| | Ratio of home visits to client visits to centre | Percentage of child protection cases where safety & wellbeing has improved (staff assessment) |
| | No. case closures | |
| | Average waiting time | |
| Practical, physical/material or related support | Instances where support is provided (by type of support eg court support, accommodation, transporting clients) | Percentage of clients where circumstances improved according to staff assessment |
| Recreation or vocational services, including drop in | No activities by type and average number of clients | Percentage of satisfied clients |
| Coordinate casework or advocate access to services | Number of clients/instances | Percentage of cases where the risk of crisis is reduced (staff assessment) |
| | No clients for whom the service was the case manager | |
| | No. Children with child protection issues | |

Table adapted from DoCS (2002: 13-14)

The outcome indicators in the CSGP service framework come closer to capturing meaningful impacts of services for clients than do measures in the government and corporate level indicator systems. Indeed, the analysis highlights the failure of program level data to filter up for inclusion in the ‘higher level’ performance reports. A common theme across all the measurement systems is the minimal client involvement. Although outcomes for service users are measured in the CSGP service framework, this could be done without their direct involvement (with the exception of the satisfaction

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74 Although DoCS lists this as a measure, it is only likely to capture the number of clients channelled through the system, and not any evidence of client wellbeing.
measure). Indeed, client involvement is confined to measuring satisfaction with recreation and vocational activities, like drop in centres (DoCS, 2002: 14).

3.6 Conclusions

Overall, analysis of four government performance indicator systems suggests that program level performance indicators capture outcomes for clients more thoroughly than the performance measures that operate at the agency level or for cross-agency systems like the NSW Council on the Cost and Quality of Government. Interestingly, the indicators at the program level are not used to feed into higher-level performance indicators, like the DoCS corporate performance indicators or the SEA reports, and through this, into government policy. Further, where government purchasers of family support services monitor outcomes for clients (in the CSGP), indicators rely primarily on assessments by practitioners, with little space for direct client involvement.

Figure 4  Indicators and client involvement in four performance reports for family support

Review of Government Services (Federal Oversight)  Council on the Cost and Quality of Government (State Oversight)

Department of Community Services Corporate Performance Indicators

DoCS Performance Indicators for the Community Services Grants Program

Oversight level
- Input / output data
- No direct client involvement

Corporate level
- Some outcome data
- No direct client involvement

Program level
- Outcome data
- Some direct client involvement
More detail about the input, output and outcome indicators in recent versions of the reports reviewed in this Chapter are listed in detail in Appendix A. This shows how the outcome measures listed are concentrated amongst measures at the program and agency level, not in the NSW Government SEA reports or in the Review on Government Service Provision. The sources of data used to capture the outcome indicators also reveal how staff assessment is the privileged method for measuring outcome, with service users’ perspectives confined to a measure of satisfaction under the CSGP. Figure 4 (above) summarises these findings.

As the Chapter has shown, the performance indicators reported for family support focus primarily on inputs and outputs, rather than outcomes, and thereby enable judgment of service efficiency. Those that filter up to the oversight level facilitate simplistic *economic* determinations about the performance of these services. Finally, the analysis in the Chapter found client satisfaction indicators are largely absent from these performance indicators. While some of the reports suggest monitoring client satisfaction in the future, service user input and involvement in these performance measurement systems have not yet materialised, and the indicators continue to fail to capture the meaning and complexity of family support services in service users’ lives.

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75 This confirms findings in other public administrative and service contexts. For example Ryan (1999) found that performance indicators in Queensland and in New Zealand consisted of simple numerical counts of activity, and gave little insight into quality or outcomes.
Chapter Four

Service users in the ‘New Evaluative State’

4.1 Introduction

Family support services have grown in importance in Australian child welfare policy and service systems. Purchaser-provider arrangements have facilitated their growth over the last decade, and have made performance indicators central to the pursuit of accountability. However, the cross-government, corporate and program level indicators currently used inadequately capture the performance of family support in NSW. As shown in Chapter Three, inputs and outputs are measured more often than outcomes, and when outcomes are measured, indicators are built primarily using evidence drawn from administrative data and professional reports. Further, the performance indicators currently used to monitor family support lack direct input from service users, with only one indicator for the CSGP attempting to capture client satisfaction.

Some problems of performance measurement in child and family services have attracted recent research attention (such as those discussed in Chapter Two). Tilbury (2003, 2004) for example explores how performance indicators capture statutory child protection activities more thoroughly than family support in Australian contexts. Researchers in Australia and elsewhere have noted the conceptual and practical challenges in measuring outcomes in complex human services (eg Fischer, 2001; Moxley and Manela, 2001; Tomison, 1999; Smith, 1995), and some have focused on practitioners’ perspectives on evaluation (Shaw and Shaw, 1997; Meagher and Healy, 2003). However, one theme emerging from the analysis in Chapter Three— the role of service users in performance measurement— has not been thoroughly interrogated.
Indeed, research has neglected to examine what service users think of evaluation and how they see their own role in assessing the performance of the services they use.

Service users experience the outcomes of family support in their personal relationships, their sense of self, and their experience of parenting. Yet as Chapter Three has shown, service users are barely involved in defining and measuring performance in family support. Research in other social service areas suggests that users may interpret and experience quality and effectiveness differently to that implied in managerial performance indicators, and judge service performance against criteria that are not necessarily embedded in the design of evaluation systems (Mitchell and Sloper, 2001; Beresford et al, 1997). For others, users have particular strengths– even epistemic authority– in evaluating aspects of quality and effectiveness (Pharis and Levin, 1991; Winefield and Barlow, 1995). Such perspectives derive from understandings that oppressed groups experience different realities and so have different perspectives in addition to absorbing dominant views. On this basis, those lacking power can be understood to experience more complex and ‘fuller’ realities.

Consumer, citizen or user participation in negotiating the design and operation of performance measurement systems is underdeveloped across public and social services internationally, contributing to the tendency for indicators to privilege managerial priorities (Pollitt, 1988:77; Watson, 2002:886; Drewett, 1997). When users have been involved in evaluation and other aspects of service management and planning, it has been argued that the models employed reflect tokenism, co-option, and give rise to ‘consultation fatigue’ amongst a potentially unrepresentative sample of users (Beresford, 2002; Gilliatt et al, 2000; Harrison and Mort, 1998).

In part, the lack of user involvement in designing performance indicators or providing data is rooted in the political and economic context of Australian child and family services, which have offered little economic incentive to include users’ perspectives. Family services have not depended on users’ direct financial support, users are highly vulnerable and lack financial resources and purchasing power, and users have little power to choose between services, in many cases being required or obliged to use services. In family support (like other public and social services), users tend to feature only in
performance measurement’s justifying rhetoric, argued to be the eventual beneficiaries of the enhanced efficiency and effectiveness that performance indicators supposedly encourage (Pollitt, 1988:77; Tilbury, 2002). Unlike in performance measurement, user involvement is a recognised principle of ‘best practice’ in social service delivery, and recent research has called for further research into users’ perspectives on quality and outcomes in child and family services (Tilbury, 2004:62-63). However, the scope for service user involvement in measuring performance, what service users think of performance measurement, and how to constructively incorporate users’ perspectives has not been established in child and family services.

Building on the evidence of users’ marginal position in performance measurement systems (shown in Chapter Three), here I show how service users are theoretically positioned as key to evaluating social service quality and outcomes. In Section 4.2, I review two sets of explanations for welfare service users’ marginal position in performance measurement: firstly, the priorities of government funders and oversight agencies (evidence of which was shown in Chapter Three); and secondly, characterisations of service users as having ‘deficits’ in relation to evaluation. I go on to assess how theoretical perspectives as diverse as managerialism, feminism and consumerism treat the potential involvement of service users. Ultimately, I argue for more careful assessment of the scope for incorporating users’ perspectives into performance measurement in family support: a task requiring more thorough empirical research, which I carry out in the Chapters of the thesis that follow.

4.2 Users and performance measurement

Users can be involved in social services at three levels: the level of policy (in setting the conditions for social services), the level of organisation (in contributing to planning, managing and evaluating services) and at the level of practice (in the interactions between service users and professionals) (Braakenburg, 2001:150). As performance

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76 In contrast to child and family services, arguments for performance indicators to incorporate service users’ perspectives on quality have begun to emerge in other human services, including British home care for the aged and disabled (Francis and Netten, 2004).
measurement has different roles at the levels of policy, organisation and practice, the implications of performance measurement differ for each. For policy, user involvement in measuring performance can provide information with which governments can adjust the arrangements governing how service systems are resourced, organised and managed. At the organisational level, users’ perspectives offer to contribute additional sources of evidence which can help services manage for quality and outcomes. For practice, service user involvement in assessing quality and outcomes can reconfigure power and relationships with professionals, empowering users to shape service delivery practices to meet their own needs. In these ways, user involvement in performance measurement has potential to alter and improve organisational, policy and practice level arrangements.

In reality, users occupy only a marginal position in performance measurement (as shown in Chapter Three). This can be traced to two sets of factors. The first relate to the approaches and priorities dominant in government performance measures (Section 4.2.1). The second relate to the perceived characteristics of service users, which limit their involvement in performance measurement and in evaluation research (Section 4.2.2).

4.2.1 User involvement and government evaluation priorities

As shown in Chapter Two, the most recent phases of public management reform have reshaped child and family services at the interface between governments (redefined as service purchasers) and community organisations (redefined as providers of child and family services). Unlike the interest in users’ perspectives generated by strong consumer rights movements in UK health and welfare, service users have tended to be of peripheral concern in the Australian reform process (Phillips, 1998). In UK community care for example, the reform trajectory introduced strongly consumerist models in the 1990s: models that promoted government agency interest in users’ views and experiences (Clarke, 1997; Beresford, 2002: 98). Clarke and Newman (1997:122) for example describe how community care policy discourse was underpinned with a ‘micro-politics’ of competing representations of the consumer or service user, whose
figure was inflected by various stakeholder positions to justify managerial power, to defend professional practice and to demand extending user rights and entitlements. Service users subsequently become an ‘issue to be managed’ and an issue for research, with interests colliding over how to consult, inform and involve service users in internal decision making processes and evaluation (Clarke and Newman, 1997:117).

In contrast, service users have been positioned largely outside the core administrative and economic concerns of this phase of public management reform in Australian family support. As shown in Chapter Three, performance indicators pursue accountability of child and family service providers to service purchasers, rather than to service users. The performance indicators required by government funders thus contribute to the lack of user involvement in the performance measurement systems of service providers. Because of their political and economic role at the interface between service purchasers and providers, performance indicators in family support are designed primarily to collect data on output volume and funding, allowing crude assessment of financial efficiency. Less common are indicators that measure results in the form of outcomes in service users’ quality of life. Indicators thus focus on ‘performance’ in the process of service purchasing rather than in service delivery, which implicitly reduces scope for service user involvement. Indeed, managerial performance indicators are privileged in the epistemological hierarchies of evidence-based practice and policy. These hierarchies are argued to devalue clients’ accounts as subjective, anecdotal or ‘soft’, restricting users’ role to that of eventual beneficiaries of the enhanced service that measurement and monitoring are supposed to bring about (Pollitt, 1988:77; Tilbury, 2002; Marston and Watts, 2003).

In the UK case, Clarke (1997:60) argues that images of the public as ‘taxpayers’ were used to justify the first phase of reforms, which involved the pursuit of the three E’s (economy, efficiency and effectiveness). In contrast, the ‘consumer’ and ‘consumer choice’ acted as reference points for the subsequent waves of service specific reforms that introduced market relationships into health and social care. On this basis, it is possible that consumers may become more important in further phases of reform in Australian child and family services.

Indeed, the tendency for performance measurement systems to capture efficiency and effectiveness at the point of contracting out (and not across the whole service delivery process) is a recognised feature of other social service systems, for example the government-community partnerships in UK probation services (see Kemshall and Ross, 2000).
However, the priorities of government funders and oversight agencies are not the only contributors to users’ exclusion. Research in New South Wales community services traces resistance to user participation to the practices of non-government agencies as well as government funders (Phillips, 1998). Phillips’ study of 62 non-profit human service agencies found that despite widespread recognition of ‘consumer choice’ and ‘consumer focus’ as principles of good practice in services for disadvantaged people, organisations tended not to have structures of participation in place. In that study, only 38% of service provider respondents indicated that they involved consumers in day to day service delivery, and 33% involved users in day to day service management (including evaluation). Although that research doesn’t explore the specific reasons for the gap between organisational beliefs about participation and participation in practice, it traces resistance to user involvement to service provider organisations as well as service purchasers. Users’ marginalisation from performance measurement can thus be understood to result from the reporting requirements passed from government purchasers and oversight agencies to service providers, with the practices of social service providers also playing a role.

4.2.2 Users’ characteristics and evaluation: ‘deficit’ factors

As well as the practical disincentives to user involvement established in government indicator systems and the management practices of non-profits, a lack of user participation can also be explained in the ways service users’ characteristics are understood to impede ‘rigorous’ evaluation. These arguments posit that users’ characteristics and experiences inhibit their capacity to make scientifically valid contributions. While recognising the disadvantages users face, such assertions are not founded in empirical research with service users, and risk reinforcing a deficit model that focus overly on the obstacles to achieving user participation. Such perceptions

Note that debates about user participation have primarily taken place in areas of health and community services outside the child and family sector, and in relation to users of public rather than non-government services, particularly in the UK (see for example Smith, 1996; Nocon and Qureshi, 1996). However, these offer insight into the issue of involving social service users in evaluation generally.
focus on two layers of ‘deficit’ factors: the limited nature of service user knowledge, and
the limited ability of service users to express their perspectives.

**Perceptions of service users' limited knowledge**

The first set of perceptions focus on the limited, partial character of users’ knowledge
given their lack of control over service delivery and access to management information.
This is perceived to constrain their capacity to access and provide meaningful and
reliable data (Russell, 1990: 44). In particular, poverty and social inequality can mean
that service users are socialised to accept standards of living and service that the wider
public are less likely to regard as acceptable (Qureshi, 1998: 142; Shaw, 1999a: 161).
Indeed, as Shaw (1999a: 161) points out in discussing the limits of satisfaction surveys
in social services: ‘the more that people see themselves as powerless the more likely
they are to adjust their aspirations regarding what they can reasonably expect to gain
from the exchange’. Users are thus understood to set low standards against which to
measure service performance and to inaccurately assess the characteristics and value of
service exchanges.

As well as a lack of economic and political power, the specific psychosocial
characteristics and experiences of social disadvantage are often understood to limit the
sophistication and usefulness of users’ evaluations. Such views focus on the difficulties
users face such as low education levels, and cognitive or emotional impairment. In
their overview of evaluation in health and social services, Atkinson and Elliott (1994:
156) point out how service users’ perception, evaluation, memory and reporting on
events are affected by personal feelings and attitudes. Users’ characteristics are
subsequently seen as ambiguous, and researchers have questioned ‘whether the high
rate of satisfaction is related more to factors like lack of knowledge or limited
expectations, than the actual helpfulness of the service contact’ (Rees and Wallace,
1982: 77 as quoted by Shaw, 1999a: 162).

Similarly, in general discussions of Australian public services, users have been
understood to lack ‘consumer knowledge’ and consequently, to lack the capacity to

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80 However, they usefully challenge the idea that these problems (and the need for appropriate
evaluation methods) relate only to consumers (Atkinson and Elliott, 1994: 156).
assimilate relevant information about service performance (Ryan, 2001:106). While such accounts rightly identify user evaluations as shaped by socio-economic characteristics and experiences, the effect is to emphasise the limits to user involvement, characterising users as poor potential players in evaluation.

- **Perceptions of the limited capacity for service users to express their perspectives**

While the arguments above present users as having difficulties in privately gathering and processing evaluative information and forming valid judgment, users’ position toward the bottom of social, political and organisational hierarchies in social service systems can also be understood in a second way: to constrain their capacity to *express* their insights, and thus to participate in formal evaluation processes. Such arguments focus on users’ dependence on, and deference to, professionals. For example, in their discussion of outcome measurement across the human services generally, Moxley and Manela (2001) use examples of people with disabilities as well as the homeless and people who are institutionalised, to make the generalisation that welfare service users’ experience of disadvantage makes it difficult to realise and articulate their perspectives. They state that:

> Many service recipients are truly dispossessed because they may have little to say about what happens to them and what amenities and services they seek. Many recipients are marginalised since they neither have the supports nor the skills to speak on their own behalf. (Moxley and Manela, 2001:573)

Similarly, debates about promoting user choice in UK social services point to users’ limited experience in expressing preferences with respect to the service they receive. Such debates highlight how users’ fear, deference to professional authority, and loss of identity can inhibit their realisation of their own interests and perspectives as well as their self-expression (Barnes and Prior, 1995:56-57).

Evaluation theorists have also pointed out how less powerful stakeholders may be habitually quiescent and deferent, and use forms of communication that differ from those of other stakeholders and which are not easily tapped by standard evaluation methods and design (Mathie and Greene, 1997:281). Overall, users’ characteristics and position in the social and organisational structure are usually seen to impede their
formation and expression of judgments, thereby limiting a belief in the authority of users’ knowledge and their capacity to participate in evaluation.

- **Challenging ‘deficit’ constructs of service users in evaluation**

Alternative perspectives on service users’ characteristics and behaviour challenge representations of universal client passivity, and recognise the role of social services in empowering users and restoring their personal and political ‘voice’. Such characterisations seek to capture the capacity of users (as human agents) to critically reflect and reshape their self-identities, negotiate their status as consumers, and actively engage with professional systems to pursue their interests (Ferguson, 2003; Hetherington and Piquardt, 2001; Williams, Popay and Oakley, 1999; Bolzan and Gale, 2002). Such perspectives reject essentialist characterisations of social service users as a fixed category of ‘the oppressed’ (as per the deficit model). Instead, they attribute users personal and political agency in spite of social disadvantage, accommodating possibilities for users to access resources and enhance their skills and gain power.

Such a position also recognises that although participation risks privileging articulate middle-class consumers, non-government organisations can help give the most excluded people the confidence and resources they need to participate (Schwimmer, 2001: 113). Indeed, developing ‘agency’ and ‘voice’ in parenting and family decision making are key goals of family support. Discussing family support specifically, Ferguson (2003) rejects the notion that users are so marginalised that they are unable to develop goals, evaluate change, and actively engage with services in the pursuit of positive outcomes. Instead, he emphasises users’ agency and reflexivity in relation to their use of child and family welfare, while recognising resources for reflexivity and strategy are not equally shared. Others point out how family-centred practices are ‘based on respect for the integrity and strength of families and their members, and on the belief that individuals can find solutions to their own problems through relationships with engaged and committed service providers’ (McCroskey and Meezan, 1998:67). Family services are thus seen as strategies that seek to challenge deficit models of service use, by recognising users’ resourcefulness, and the potential for users to develop skills with which to reflect on service quality and outcomes. By recognising that users can actively form and express their perspectives, evaluation is thus redefined
as an opportunity for users to constructively contribute to policy, organisation and service delivery.

4.3 Rethinking the scope for user involvement: conceptual frameworks

Whereas Section 4.2 examined the constraints on user involvement and challenged constructions of users as inherently deficient with respect to evaluation, in this section I explore arguments in favour of user involvement. Reflecting the emerging importance of engaging users in service delivery and management, in 2001 the European Committee on Social Cohesion established a specialist intergovernmental group to examine best practice in user involvement. Background work by Albaert Evers (2003) identified five intersecting strands of theoretical debates about user participation: welfarism (which treats users as social citizens), professionalism, consumerism, managerialism and participationism (collective self-help). But whereas Evers treated these with respect to participation in social services generally, I consider how key theoretical perspectives apply specifically to participation in social service evaluation. I include a set of positions more relevant to Australian child and family services and evaluation, including stakeholder pluralism and feminism. Altogether, I identify six perspectives which offer scope for user participation in evaluation: consumerist approaches; managerialism; professionalism; user empowerment; stakeholder pluralism and feminism (Beresford, 2001; Evers, 2003; Braye, 2000). The theoretical positions I use to examine various arguments for user involvement in evaluation are listed in Figure 5 (below).

Figure 5 shows how the six theoretical positions I consider treat the purpose of user involvement in evaluation. As I will argue, the market approaches of managerialism and consumerism treat user involvement to provide an essential source of data.

81 Focusing on arguments for participation in evaluation rather than participation in social services generally also responds to Healy’s (1998) caution about adopting misleading decontextualised concepts of participation. However, whereas she identifies a missing conceptual axis in terms of the field of social work practice (drawing attention to the specificity of participation in child protection work) I identify the relevant organisational process—in this case evaluation—as the key factor in developing appropriate concepts of participation.
Professional and user empowerment perspectives highlight user involvement as a ‘right’. From within stakeholder pluralist and feminist approaches, user involvement can both provide essential data to evaluators, and implement users’ fundamental rights.

Figure 5 Summary of arguments for user involvement in evaluation

Understanding user involvement in evaluation as a right or essential data source draws from Martin’s (1986) pioneering exploration of consumer participation in human service evaluation. Martin found arguments for user involvement were woven around the two core principles: firstly that service users provide essential data discernable only from users’ position in service delivery systems; and secondly, that service users have a right to have their opinions and preferences taken into account in evaluation. However, I add a third hybrid category to capture and analyse overlapping arguments for user involvement derived from the six theoretical positions I consider.

The conceptual framework has the advantage of highlighting the diversity of theoretical perspectives that overlay the simple, commonly used continuums of participation derived from Arnstein’s ‘ladder of participation’ (1969). I also depart from Croft and Beresford’s (1992) dualism between instrumental, ‘consumerist’ notions

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82 Arnstein’s ladder is an influential conceptual tool originating from citizen involvement initiatives in urban planning in the United States through the 1960s. Each of eight rungs represents a level of citizen power, with manipulation (effectively non-participation) at the base, rising through tokenistic consultation, partnership and genuine citizen control.
of user choice on the one hand, and liberating, ‘democratic’ notions of user control on
the other. This dualism, perpetuated through over a decade of research into user-
involved in disability and other social services (e.g. Beresford, 2002; Mullender and
Hague, 2005), constrains understandings of participation, by denying the diversity of
service users’ circumstances, activities and perspectives. In the following sections I use
a conceptual schema based on Martin (1986) to explore theoretical perspectives on user
involvement, showing how the insights of feminism most effectively challenge the
‘deficit’ perspective that has shaped understandings of user involvement in evaluation.

4.3.1 User involvement as an essential source of data

The first set of arguments outlined by Martin (1986) treat user participation as
necessary because it provides evaluators with essential data, available only from users’
perspectives. Arguments that service users provide essential performance data
discernable only from their positions in community service structures are emphasised in
consumerist and managerialist perspectives.

Consumerist approaches for example, highlight the market function of evaluation, in
overcoming the information imperfections that arise when governments purchase
services on users’ behalf (as in, for example, the case of family support). Unlike rational
economic consumers, community service users have limited market alternatives
through which they can evaluate services. Their social marginalisation and financial
disadvantage means they can rarely impact on service quality by casting choices with
dollar votes, or by exerting negative sanctions such as ‘shopping around’ or ‘exiting’
when the product fails to satisfy (Russell, 1990). Social service consumers do not
directly discharge welfare budgets nor choose between services to affect provision.
Users don’t buy services such as family support directly, they often have the right to
receive them, they may be compelled to attend services, and professionals can refuse
them access (Pollitt, 1988:80). Allowing service users to influence the design of
assessment systems and routinely evaluate performance thus offers a non-market
strategy through which human services and funding bodies can enhance their sensitivity
to consumers’ experiences and preferences. In this frame, consumer evaluations are
instrumental: they transmit basic information about preferences to influence the efficiency and responsiveness of provider activity and resource allocation. User evaluations therefore offer proxy demand signals which can assist service purchasers and providers– and markets overall– to rationally adapt to meet emerging needs.83

Like consumerist approaches, managerialism treats service users’ evaluations as offering information essential for ensuring efficiency and accountability. Performance measurement is seen as beneficial because it elicits information with which policy makers and public administrators can exert tight, centralised control over service efficiency and effectiveness (as they distance their own agencies by dispersing service delivery) (Hugman, 1998; Pollitt, 2000). Users’ assessments of how services meet their needs supposedly helps keep check on the conduct of decentralised service providers, thereby assisting to manage the risk of poor performance from a distance.

Although managerialism supports consumer involvement in evaluation in theory, in practice users’ perspectives are rarely prioritised in the design of managerial evaluation systems, including performance measurement. Support for user evaluations are eclipsed by the seemingly more urgent (and easily attainable) market data concerning financial efficiency and output volume (as shown in Chapter Three).

4.3.2 User involvement as a right

The second category (drawn from Martin, 1986) emphasises how participating in evaluation allows users to exercise basic rights to self-expression and self-determination– depicting evaluation as a process offering social, political and therapeutic benefits. These arguments emphasise the social policy benefits of user involvement, seeing participation in evaluation not as a means to an end, but as a space in which to encourage users to exercise their basic rights and act autonomously in social

83 An alternative response to information imperfections in social service markets is conceivable from the institutional sociology of Hansmann (1986). From this position, problems of a lack of information about consumer preferences could be resolved if service providers adopted a non-profit form. In this perspective, service user participation in evaluation is not seen as necessary, as the non-profit organisational form engenders trust, and so ensures that uncertainty about quality will not be exploited. Thus the problem identified in the consumer perspective (imperfect information) could be argued to be resolved institutionally, without the need for their involvement in evaluation. While this is conceivable, it assumes ‘intrinsic goodness’ on the part of non-profits, and is an uncommon way of thinking about social service markets.
policy and social service processes. By defining and assessing how interventions affect their wellbeing, involvement in evaluation can be considered to implement users’ democratic rights to ‘voice’ and self-determination, to promote inclusion and to reduce power imbalances between users and other stakeholder groups. User involvement as a right therefore reconfigures conventional understandings of evaluation as solely a technical exercise (and evaluators as technicians). Rather, evaluators are conceived of as ‘scientific citizens’ with responsibility to use evaluation systems for educative and democratising ends, and not solely for ‘measurement’ and reporting per se (Greene, 1996, as discussed by Shaw, 1999b: 29; Dullea and Mullender, 1999; House and Howe, 2000).84

As well as drawing support from democratic theories of evaluation, user involvement is also justified as a right from user empowerment and professional perspectives in social policy and social work practice. User empowerment perspectives argue most strongly that involvement in evaluating performance is a basic right (eg Beresford, 2002)85. Such views reject assumptions that professionals will necessarily prioritise users’ interests and self-determination, instead pointing to the potentially compromising middle ground professionals can occupy between users and the state. While these perspectives are more thoroughly developed in disability than child and family services (largely because of the maturity of consumer movements in disability services), the theoretical position they embody is nonetheless relevant, as they frame users as having rights to act in social policy matters in ways that go beyond them being an instrumental source of data for managers to opportunistically tap into (Beresford, 2001: 508).

Professional perspectives also recognise user empowerment as a practice and policy goal. Historically, professionals have been granted status as both benevolent and scientifically authoritative, precluding the need to consider service users’ perspectives. Yet premised on the insights of social constructionism, social service professionals have effectively demystified their power, challenged constructions of professional expertise

84 This conception of evaluators and evaluation in social services can also be perceived as responding to arguments for the third sector to be cultivated as a site of democracy and citizenship (e.g. Carson, 2001).

85 Principles of user empowerment overlap with some professional perspectives—strength based practice, for example, incorporates user empowerment as a goal.
as universal truth, and modernised professional roles through the adoption of ‘strength based’ approaches to social work (Saleebey, 1997).

Professionalism in the strengths paradigm focuses on facilitating change by employing principles of user engagement, participation and client self-determination – principles which extend beyond social service practice to service management and evaluation. Indeed, views amongst helping professionals (and especially social workers) that individuals are experts in their own lives gives rise to priorities of actively engaging users in all aspects of service planning and decision-making so as to enhance users’ expertise, power and self determination (Boehm and Staples, 2002:450-451; Dullea and Mullender, 1999). Thus, in the strengths based paradigm currently shaping family service professionalism, user participation in evaluation can be justified on the basis of implementing user rights to self-determination in policy and service delivery (rather than on the basis that users contribute evaluative data, as in the managerialist and consumerist perspective).

4.3.3 User involvement as both an essential source of data and a right

The third, hybrid category I add to Martin’s conceptual schema links the promotion of rights to the integrity of evaluative data, supporting involvement on the basis that users offer both essential evidence for evaluation, and have a right to communicate their perspectives. Two main theoretical positions generate this perspective: stakeholder pluralism and feminism.

The stakeholder pluralism derived from both management and evaluation theory (eg House and Howe, 2000) emphasise the need to construct reality based on a full set of perspectives. By seeing truth as consensus, this perspective treats each stakeholder position as equally plausible, and so highlights the legitimacy of users’ views without privileging their knowledge over any other position (Vanderplaat, 1995). In the pluralist view, stakeholder participation – including participation by users – is thus seen as necessary if evaluation is to build a complete understanding of the meaning and content of services. While pluralism can be criticised for lacking means of assessing competing knowledge claims, it is argued to be appropriate for the context of community services, where service impacts are dispersed and diverse, and require monitoring from multiple
perspectives (Mathie and Greene, 1997; Moxley and Manela, 2001: 575). Similarly, the stakeholder paradigm treats user involvement in evaluation as a right (Stoney and Winstanley, 2001: 608). As stakeholders, users have implicit rights to participate, and doing so offers essential evaluative data (which can lead to better decision making). The stakeholder pluralist paradigm thus treats service users both as essential participants in evaluation, who offer to contribute valuable evidence available only from their particular standpoints and as citizens with fundamental rights.

The final set of perspectives I analyse, those deriving from feminism, advocate service user involvement in evaluation in order to capture essential data and achieve democratic legitimacy. Drawing from standpoint theory (Harding, 1986), less powerful groups (for example mothers using family support services) can be argued to offer research and evaluation a more ‘complete’ set of accounts of service quality and outcomes, given the legitimacy of their first-hand, personal knowledge of the experience of oppression in relation to childrearing and family life, as well as their experience of welfare interventions. Applying this view, women’s experience of oppression and intervention would mean that their definitions of ‘performance’ provide more appropriate and insightful measurement criteria than that emerging solely from privileged perspectives (such as evaluators’ or managers’ definitions). This approach is preferable here, as it directly challenges the ‘deficit’ perspective shaping ideas about user participation in evaluation. Rather than their position in service systems and experience of oppression rendering them unable to usefully contribute to evaluation, standpoint theory validates users’ perspectives on the basis of their unique structural position. While service user participation can be perceived to enhance the legitimacy of evaluation, feminism also generates arguments for user participation on the basis that this provides localised opportunities for the exercise of women’s democratic rights to

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86 Standpoint theory is criticised by other feminists for implicit gender essentialism, assuming there is an underlying ‘reality’ to be discovered, and for assuming that the perspectives of the subjugated are ‘innocent’ and not ‘damaged’ by their social experience (Flax, 1990; Harding, 1986; Haraway, 1988). In the case of evaluation however, standpoint theory supports user involvement without treating women social service users as an undifferentiated group and without romanticising the ‘truth’ or innocence of their contribution. Rather, a more moderate position sees service users to offer experience based knowledge based on their position in service systems. However, this knowledge must be considered in relation to the perspectives of other stakeholders and in such a way as to capture differences in perspectives amongst service users.
influence matters that affect their lives, and through this, to achieve personal (and collective) empowerment, and social justice.

Feminist perspectives provide the strongest arguments for service user involvement in performance measurement, advocating involvement both on the basis of data and rights. Unlike stakeholder pluralism, feminist perspectives offer a way to assess competing knowledge claims. Standpoint theory alerts us to the additional experience-based knowledge that service users obtain from directly using services. In doing so, feminist perspectives help to challenge ‘deficit’ constructions of users in evaluation. Simultaneously, feminism helps reconceptualise evaluation as socio-political space in which service users (and workers) can act to make visible the quality of social services and the outcomes the achieve in their lives, thereby helping to reshape social service policy, organisation and delivery around a recognition of the value of relationship building and care. I thus adopt an approach to exploring scope for service users’ participation in performance measurement, which is grounded in feminist arguments for user involvement.

4.3.4 The need for empirical research

In this Chapter, I have shown that users’ marginal position in performance measurement can be explained in part by the priorities of government funders and oversight agencies, and have examined prevailing characterisations of service users as deficient with respect to evaluation. I have argued that despite these constructions, users are theoretically positioned as key to evaluating social service quality and outcomes. Arguments for user involvement in evaluation emanate from at least six theoretical perspectives, which I have examined. Service user involvement can be supported by managerial and consumerist perspectives on the basis that they contribute essential data, and by professional and user empowerment perspectives on the basis that they implement users’ fundamental rights to participate and influence service delivery and policy. Feminist and pluralist perspectives advocate service user involvement on the basis both of rights and essential data. Shared support for user involvement across these diverse theoretical positions suggests the need to more
carefully assess the scope for incorporating users’ perspectives in performance measurement.

4.4 Conclusions

This Chapter has built a case for exploring the problem of user involvement in evaluation. Overall, the Chapter has shown the service users are theoretically positioned as key to assessing service quality and outcomes, and scope for their involvement in performance measurement warrants further exploration. Yet despite the strength of theoretical arguments for service user involvement, family support has been sheltered from growing political and research interest in user involvement in other social service contexts—most notably, in social housing and care for the elderly, children, and disabled (Beresford, 2002; Kemshall and Littlechild, 2000; Lister, 2002; Netten et al, 2004; Mason and Gibson, 2004). In family support like in other social services, evaluation may offer opportunities for service users to contribute their perspectives and exercise political voice, while also implementing users’ fundamental rights (and developing their capacity to do so). These theoretical arguments, combined with the political and economic factors identified in Chapter Two, show the need to more closely explore questions about user participation in performance measurement in family support.

Establishing the scope for user involvement in evaluation requires determining how users judge the value of the services they receive, how they think service should be evaluated, and how they see their own role in evaluation. In response, the remainder of this thesis documents a detailed empirical examination of how a group of family support users perceive service quality and outcomes, performance measurement methods, and their own role in evaluation.

The findings from the ‘Burnside Study’ (presented in Chapters Six to Ten) show the scope users see— and indeed assume for themselves— in measuring the performance of family support. The parents in the study strongly challenge assumptions that they are deficient with respect to evaluation. Their accounts redirect attention to the goals of social services in overcoming poverty and disadvantage to achieve their visions of social
justice. In doing so, the ‘social justice’ criteria with which users measured performance, and the evaluation methods they suggested, effectively challenge the ‘new accountability’ of economy, efficiency and effectiveness.
Chapter Five

The Burnside Study

5.1 Introduction

Having justified the need for research into service users’ perspectives on performance measurement, this Chapter documents the process and methods employed in the Burnside Study. The Chapter justifies collecting observational, interview and focus group data from adult service users and family support workers in the four study sites, and outlines the modified grounded theory approach with which I drew meaning from the data. This opens the way for the findings to be presented in Chapters Six to Ten.

5.2 The qualitative approach

The research was designed to establish service users’ perspectives on performance measurement, and the scope for user involvement. In particular, I set out to address the following questions:

- What ideals do people who use family support services have against which to measure service ‘outcomes’ and ‘quality’?
- How do service users personally evaluate the services they use?
- Which evaluation methods do users think evaluators should use to assess service performance? and
- How do service users see their own role in assessing the performance of family support services?

87 Whereas the previous question seeks to explore service users’ evaluative thinking, this question explores their views on evaluative inquiry (a distinction usefully made by Shaw, 1999b: 18).
The exploratory nature of these questions and the need to attribute a voice to those directly involved with family support services made the inductive logic associated with qualitative research approaches most appropriate. Collecting qualitative data was necessary as the research questions aimed to *discover* rather than *confirm* any existing hypothesis. That is, qualitative approaches were chosen to explore phenomena for which existing research has been non-existent or inconclusive. The strengths of qualitative approaches include their ability to pursue both breadth and depth of understanding so as to generate hypotheses which assist in *discovering* how participants experience and assess social phenomena (as outlined by Strauss and Corbin, 1998). In this case, they have strengths in discovering how service users experience ‘service performance’ and ‘performance measurement’ in family support.

Importantly, qualitative approaches offer opportunities to gather in-depth responses that generate meaning grounded in the context in which the data was collected. Qualitative approaches allow the use of research instruments that do not impose pre-established questions, on the basis that pre-determined issues or categories can carry with them assumptions based on privileged perspectives (Patton, 2002). Indeed, ‘fixed’ research instruments aimed at hypothesis testing and prediction (such as closed questionnaires) would have risked the data’s authenticity and the context validity of the information gathered, by restricting participants’ capacity to prioritise and influence which information was relevant enough to be included in the study.

I therefore adopted a modified grounded theory approach for its strengths in exploring phenomena from the perspectives of research subjects themselves. The remainder of this Chapter explains the method and data collection techniques with which I have systematically collected and analysed evidence of users’ (and workers’) perspectives on performance measurement.

### 5.3 Introducing the field work

I undertook the fieldwork component of the study to understand the experiences of service ‘performance’ from the perspectives of the research subjects themselves: family service users. I entered the field with some knowledge of how government...
performance indicators were operating in family support, but no knowledge of the perspectives of service users on either service performance or its measurement, given the lack of research in the area.

After gaining ethics approval from the University of Sydney and UnitingCare Burnside’s Research Advisory Group to conduct observations, interviews and focus groups, I collected data at four sites at which UnitingCare Burnside’s family support services were delivered (see Table 3). The fieldwork, which I conducted in 2003, consisted of a mix of focus groups, pair and single interviews, and observations of parenting education and support groups, service user meetings and evaluation exercises in progress. The interviews and focus groups involved 66 service users who were participating in parenting education and support groups at that time (or had done in the last year and maintained connections with the service). Interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded with participants’ permission, and later transcribed. Ethical principles require that research maintain the anonymity of participants. As such, pseudonyms are used throughout the thesis.

I also interviewed 9 staff members who were involved in facilitating the parenting education and support groups in which the parents in the study participated. Staff member’s perspectives were included primarily to form a data set to compare and contrast with users’ accounts, to assist in accurately interpreting users’ accounts. Interviews were used to elicit staff’s views about the outcomes and dimensions of quality in their work given documented deficiencies of other potential sources of evidence (such as case notes). Opie’s (1993) study of records kept by hospital social workers for example highlighted the inadequacy of written case notes about social service processes and results. Notes were found to both reduce the complexity of service delivery processes, and to lack explicit criteria against which either service quality or outcomes could be evaluated.

88 From the outset, the ‘Currencies of Care’ collaboration intended that data would be collected at Burnside services for this PhD project. Burnside also provided practical support in the form of assistance from staff and facilities in which to conduct the research, and ensured policies were in place to guide it, such as Burnside’s Research Code of Ethics recognised as a model for the field (Darlington and Scott, 2002). The process of doing collaborative research for this project is documented in more detail in Cortis and Gibson (2005). For other work arising from the research partnership see Healy and Meagher (2001); Meagher (2002a); Meagher (2002b); Meagher and Healy (2003).
In Opie’s study, social worker participants were found to superficially condense information, representing service delivery as constituted by routinised, mundane actions requiring low levels of skill, thereby contributing to the invisibility of the interpersonal and therapeutic dimension of social work, and the public deskilling of the social work profession. The decision to elicit workers’ perspectives through interviews was thus determined by the likely limitations of establishing workers’ criteria for assessing service quality and outcomes using written records.

Staff perspectives, as revealed in the interviews, helped to triangulate and verify findings from service users to ensure the trustworthiness of the study, following established research conventions (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In addition, observations and both users’ and workers’ accounts were also compared with findings in published research studies in comparable service contexts, as a means to further verify and understand the findings.

### Table 3  Data collection techniques at the four service sites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS</th>
<th>HOURS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Focus groups*</td>
<td>Pair interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Midnorth Coast</strong></td>
<td>18 (3)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Western Sydney</strong></td>
<td>17 (2)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Outer Western Sydney</strong></td>
<td>12 (1)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Southwest Sydney</strong></td>
<td>5 (1)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>52 (7)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Numbers in brackets refer to numbers of focus groups.

#Note that the observation hours in outer western Sydney included the researchers' voluntary participation in two quality assurance assessments at the centre.
The qualitative data collection techniques were broadly informed by constructivist (or interpretive) approaches to social inquiry, as the research questions focused on the ways that family service users experience family support and construct the meaning of ‘service performance’. In addition, the data collection process provided a forum in which users (including those without established views) could consider, articulate and reconsider their position on the issues raised. In this way, the inquiry process both gathered existing views and offered opportunities for the construction of perspectives, recognising that those in focus group or pair interviews developed their position in relation to the perspectives expressed by others.

The study was also informed by feminist research approaches, both in terms of the method and topic of inquiry. Feminist methods of inquiry challenge conventional research goals of objective knowledge, instead recognising that knowledge is situated in specific cultural and social contexts mediated by gender relations (Haraway, 1988). The methods adopted build on the understanding that knowledge is not universal and can be constructed by the ‘objects’ of the research. Further, the study was founded on recognition that research can facilitate service users’ construction and articulation of situated knowledge, to contribute both to the quality of overall knowledge about service performance (and its measurement) and to users’ own skill development and empowerment.

As well as being embodied in the research approach, feminist concerns are also reflected in the topic of research. At a basic level, the interviews and focus groups covered topics related to the traditionally female area of parenting. Researching family support involved accepting the legitimacy of services that, through their very existence, challenge pervasive cultural and economic stereotypes that parenting skills and knowledge are innate female attributes. Further, the research pursued the perspectives of parents that may be missed by dominant perspectives on performance measurement, a key epistemic underpinning of feminist methodology (De Vault, 1996).

Fifty-five of the sixty-six user participants were female, as were eight of the nine staff participants. Estimates indicate that as an exclusively male focus group was included on the mid north coast, the gender ratio roughly represents the presence of males.
amongst the New South Wales population of family support service users. Notwithstanding the precise gender representation in the sample, all participants were either women experiencing multiple social disadvantages associated with their role as primary carers, or were men attempting to break masculine stereotypes by using family welfare services and seeking an active and constructive role in childrearing and family life.

### 5.4 Data gathering: design & process

#### 5.4.1 Site selection: The family centres

As noted in Chapter One, ‘family support’ is a loose category that can encompass a range of strategies for promoting healthy family life and preventing child abuse and neglect. In response, I focused on secondary preventative services delivered by UnitingCare Burnside. As Figure 6 (below) shows, this includes a range of service types such as information, skill development, counselling and advocacy, playgroups, parenting skills groups, domestic violence prevention, and fathers groups, which I group together using the term ‘parenting education and support’.

As well as choosing sites to focus on parenting education and support, I chose Burnside sites on the basis of their geographic dispersion (to include a mix of urban, urban fringe and regional services); and because they were part of different management structures (which could contribute to different approaches to evaluation). Exceptions were the western and outer-western Sydney service sites, which shared the same senior manager but delivered a different range of services.

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89 Unfortunately the family sector’s census (Allen and Bullen, 2003) does not routinely publish client numbers by gender. However, an author of the 1999 survey (Jane Allen) estimated (in personal correspondence) that 10-15 percent of clients in 1999 were male. On this basis, the sample used for this study contains a similar proportion of males (16 percent). However, the representation of males in the study must be considered in light of the fact that Burnside specifically targets some family services to fathers, and that I deliberately included a fathers’ group in the study to highlight any gender differences in how service users perceive service performance.
Each of the family services in the study were operating in areas with high numbers of reports to DOCS of suspected child abuse and neglect and which fall into the fourth and fifth quintile of socio-economic disadvantage in the state. All four provide child abuse prevention interventions run by UnitingCare Burnside, one of the largest non-government providers of child and family services in New South Wales. Burnside’s publicly stated purpose is to ‘provide innovative and quality programs and advocacy to break the cycle of disadvantage that affects vulnerable children, young people and their families in New South Wales’ (Burnside, 2003). Burnside began as a home for orphaned and abandoned children in 1911 and today focuses on prevention and early intervention by providing family counselling and family support, educational support and development, and political advocacy and research, as well as out of home care.

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90 This is based on ABS SEIFA data, which uses information about economic resources, education and occupational status from the 2001 Census.
While Burnside partially funded the project and supported the collection of data in its services, the final selection of sites depended (like in other organisations) on the co-operation and endorsement of ‘gatekeepers’. I gained initial consent from senior managers (primarily with strategic responsibilities) then service co-ordinators (with primarily operational responsibilities). Staff members responsible for facilitating parenting education and support groups then allowed me to initially observe services and invite users and staff to participate in the interviews and focus groups\textsuperscript{91}. An initial stage of observation allowed potential participants to become familiar with the researcher before they were invited to take part in any interviews or focus groups, which reduced the risk that participants would respond with answers they perceived as ‘correct’ or socially desirable\textsuperscript{92}.

Although each centre is part of the same organisation and so shared core organisational priorities of social justice and the provision of ‘strength based’\textsuperscript{93} services, each reflected slightly different ‘flavours’ resulting from their unique responses to local needs, their mix of funding sources, and management preference.

- **Mid-north coast**\textsuperscript{94}

  The first service site I visited to conduct observations was the regional family centre on the mid north coast. This family centre had a legal flavour, being co-located with a domestic violence court support service. This family service provided playgroups and parenting education and support groups aimed at preventing domestic violence, as well as a support group for fathers covering issues of custody and contact. The service is located in a high-growth regional centre, with a largely bifurcated population (relatively large proportions of people aged over sixty-five and under 15) (ABS, 2002), and high

\textsuperscript{91} Parenting education and support groups were a more appropriate and accessible type of service delivery to observe than one-to-one counselling or home visits, for example.

\textsuperscript{92} Further insight from this project into the ingredients for a successful process of collaborative research in the child welfare field can be found in Cortis and Gibson, 2005.

\textsuperscript{93} Rather than focusing on client problems, strength based practices identify families’ resources and abilities, and seeks to harness them in the process of effecting personal and social change (e.g. Saleebey, 1997).

\textsuperscript{94} To preserve anonymity of respondents, neither the name of the service nor participants is used. However, the region gives important contextual information.
rates of family breakdown. This service also runs supported playgroups and other services in the rural towns and surrounding coastal residential areas that have experienced rapid growth in recent years.

- **Western Sydney**

  A second service was located in western Sydney. Staff and participants at this centre emphasised the services focus on *education*. This reflected the structure of the service. Parents were invited to attend parenting groups if their children participated in tutoring, some of the workers at the centre were trained educators, and the service had strong links with local schools. As well as providing tutoring for children and parenting support, this centre also delivered language classes, computer classes, and took part in a range of learning and community building activities, many of which sought to include non-English speaking families in the area. The families in that area were predominantly low income, with the child abuse report rate over twice for the wider DOCS area (Burnside, 2002). However, this service centre is in an area adjoining some more prosperous suburbs, and a thriving commercial centre.

- **Southwest Sydney**

  The third site I included was in Sydney’s southwest. Here workers and service user participants emphasised how parenting groups helped develop *community*. The centre mixed family support, counselling and social skills groups with playgroups and community functions in public housing estates, group outings, craft groups, and other ‘soft entry points’ which would engage families otherwise estranged from using these services.

  The southwest Sydney site serves its surrounding suburbs which were established as public housing estates in the 1970s, and which are widely regarded as amongst the more disadvantaged areas of Sydney. Around 48 percent of households in the services catchment area are headed by single parents, and the area has one of the higher rates of child abuse and neglect notifications per capita in the state (Callaghan, 2004: 11).

- **Outer-western Sydney**

  A fourth site included in the study was in Sydney’s outer-west. There the service involved a structured program for mothers and children with a *therapeutic* flavour,
delivered at two family centres (treated as a single site for the purposes of this study). Both are in areas of Blacktown on the western outskirts of Sydney characterised by high unemployment, low levels of household income and a significantly higher proportion of single parents with dependent children (35.2% of households) compared to the state average of 15.8% (Burnside, 2002).

This service was established in the late 1990s based on a UK designed program, aimed at parents of children aged under five at risk of abuse and neglect. The service helps parents relate to their children through play and to build support networks with other parents, through a drop in centre, play facilitation, befriending and peer support network, and personal development program. In this study, participants strongly acknowledged the centre's contribution to their personal growth and therapeutic outcomes.

5.4.2 Observations: entering the field

I began collecting data by spending 70 hours observing parenting education and support groups at the four family centres between April and October 2003 (preceding the first focus groups and interviews). In accordance with established principles of qualitative data collection (Darlington and Scott, 2002: 76), this initial stage of observation was necessary to help me understand the context of service delivery, to refine the research questions and Questioning Route, and to gain and reinforce the trust of the service managers, centre co-ordinators, family workers, and service users. The experience and field notes compiled from the initial stage of observations informed the design of the interviews and focus groups subsequently conducted with participants of parenting education and support groups.

I observed supported playgroups, and education and support groups such as conflict resolution, domestic violence prevention and fathers’ groups. The groups I attended involved less sensitive content, and were therefore more accessible to me as a researcher and ‘outsider’ than were private counselling sessions or home visits. Focusing on parenting groups also allowed me to observe how client-client as well as staff-client interactions and relationships might contribute to service outcomes, as these factors have previously been identified as critical to quality (and thus important to
evaluation) in other health and social service areas (Qureshi, 1999:258; Winefield and Barlow, 1995).

### 5.4.3 Sampling strategies

Service users’ perspectives were collected primarily from focus groups and semi-structured interviews, techniques likely to yield differing, yet complementary information. The sampling technique represents a compromise between the ‘purposive’, and ‘convenience’ approaches to sampling described by Padgett (1998:51)\(^{95}\). Having identified study sites on the basis of geographic and management differences and the range of services provided (purposive sampling), the final selection of sites required approval from centre staff (an element of convenience sampling). I then invited service users from parenting education and support groups at each of the sites to participate in the focus groups or interviews. Examples of the invitations and information brochure distributed to potential participants are in Appendix B and C.

Focus groups were the preferred data collection method, as their usefulness for exploring how consumers’ points of view are constructed and expressed is well established (Kreuger, 1988). Importantly, focus groups allow participants to use their own frames and concepts, yielding rich evidence of participants’ priorities, formed on their own terms and expressed in their own vocabulary (Boehm and Staples, 2002:451). Groups were also preferable as the service user participants were accustomed to meeting and speaking together, and because they provided an opportunity for the group to respond to each other’s perspectives on the common program they received.

Where possible, I conducted the focus groups with the parenting groups that I had observed. However, there were two exceptions. Firstly, at the centre in southwest Sydney I conducted the group with an established group of service user representatives. These participants had longer-term experience of a combination of programs provided at the centre (two years or more), and met regularly with Burnside workers as a consultative group to assist in service planning and evaluation. As such they had more detailed knowledge of organisational processes including evaluation. A second

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\(^{95}\) Purposive samples are selected by researchers to ensure the inclusion of a range of phenomena. Convenience samples comprise subjects who are more accessible to researchers.
exception was at the outer-western Sydney site, where, in addition to parenting group participants, I interviewed longer-term program participants who were being trained as volunteer ‘befrienders’ to engage and support new parents at the centre (Amber and Isabel96). Further, although I had not observed the particular outer-western Sydney group in action, I had met most participants individually, and had observed the way services were delivered, as I had volunteered in the previous months to help the centre interview clients as part of their regular quality assurance exercise. This experience allowed me to gain the degree of familiarity I had gained through service delivery observations carried out at the other centres.

Recruiting from existing parenting groups had advantages for obtaining a broad overview of the service. Most participants had previously used the centre’s private counselling or home visiting services in addition to the parenting groups, and so also discussed their experience of these. Using established groups also meant that participants were comfortable with each other, which, along with a small incentive payment ($20), heightened their enthusiasm to participate. It was also mutually convenient to conduct the research in established groups for practical reasons, because participants were already organised to attend, and the services had organised transport and childcare for the group time. It was also less disruptive for staff, whose assistance I would have drawn on more extensively to organise alternative arrangements.

### 5.5 Study Participants

#### 5.5.1 Service user participants

As Spratt and Callan point out, the word ‘parents’ in family support usually refers to mothers (2004:212). In this study, sixty-five of the sixty-six participants were parents97. Fifty-five were female and eleven were male. Although children’s perspectives could also yield useful and interesting data about quality, outcomes and evaluation in family support, their input was not pursued for practical reasons. Moreover, the secondary

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96 To help preserve the anonymity of participants, the real names of the participants are not used here.

97 The other participant was a teenage daughter of a parent. She attended the playgroup with her mother to help care for her younger half-sister, and as a volunteer helper for the group.
preventative services selected for the study were primarily aimed at parents, albeit with
the express intention of affecting longer-term child welfare outcomes. The socio-economic difficulties faced by participants were revealed through their own description of their lives in interviews and groups, through discussions with family centre staff, and through observations and casual conversations in the field. These encounters revealed that most participants were sole caregivers with pensions or benefits as their main source of income. Participants also tended to live in public housing or rental accommodation, and had relatively low education levels and limited experience in paid work. Most had also experienced other forms of disadvantage and distress, such as domestic violence, mental illness, and social isolation. Participants described difficult relations with ex-partners, parents or other potential sources of support. Approximately a quarter of participants volunteered information that DOCS had removed their child from their care. According to Padgett (1998:115), when sensitive information like this is volunteered rather than directly elicited, the figure is likely to underestimate the phenomenon in the particular population.

5.5.2 Focus groups and interviews with service users

I conducted the service user focus groups and interviews between August and December 2003 (after the initial stage of observation). Participants were invited to explore the issues listed in the Questioning Route in Table 4 (below). Questions were open ended, and some repetition was built into the Questioning Route to maximise opportunities for participants to thoroughly respond to the core issues. In each group or interview, the Questioning Route was modified slightly so as to explore emergent issues and cross check participants’ responses.

Where service users preferred to speak privately, were unable to attend the focus group session, or wanted to speak in greater depth than was possible in a group, I offered individual or pair interviews covering the same content as the focus groups. Fourteen people participated in this way, usually because they couldn’t make it to the focus group rather than because they preferred a private interview. Three people

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98 Research about what children think of quality and outcomes in family support is a legitimate and indeed important area for future research.
participated in interviews using interpreter services (Farsi speakers at the western Sydney centre).

Users’ preferences for group rather than individual interviews confirm Patton’s recommendation that groups are both an appropriate and convenient way to access the perspectives of vulnerable respondents (2002:389). As he points out, focus groups can provide ‘safety in numbers’ for socially marginalised participants, who can draw confidence and a sense of camaraderie out of being part of the interview group. Patton (2002:389) also states that in general, focus groups are less likely to draw out sensitive material than are individual interviews. However, I found this not to be the case. The groups had been in operation throughout the year, and so had carved out a safe and therapeutic space in which to discuss sensitive issues associated with parenting and social disadvantage. In any case, in both the group and private interviews, participants were able to select the precise degree to which they disclosed any information about themselves or the service. In the end, participants explored quite similar issues about their experience with family services, regardless of whether data was collected through interviews or focus groups.
### Table 4: Questioning Route for Focus Groups & Interviews with Service Users

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Rationale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What do you hope to get out of being involved with Burnside?</td>
<td>1. To establish which outcomes service users were aspiring for by using family support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What are you learning by participating?</td>
<td>2. To establish which outcomes service users were experiencing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What are the best things about being part of a group like this?</td>
<td>3. To establish what users thought made services good (i.e. service quality)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What are some of the things that make services for parents not as helpful as they could be?</td>
<td>4. To establish what users thought contributed to poor service performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Imagine your ideal parenting group... What would it be like? What would it help you achieve?</td>
<td>5. To draw out users’ visions of good family support, and their aspirations for change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. How do you know if the things you’re doing and learning in the group are useful?</td>
<td>6. To highlight the ‘ways of knowing’ and sources of evidence that service users were drawing on in their private evaluations. In some interviews I asked question 6 straight after Question 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Pretend that you're a new parent in the area and you're coming to the centre for the first time. You think you might want to get involved in one of the parent groups, but you feel a bit unsure. How would you decide if this is a service that's worth coming to?</td>
<td>7. To determine the information or evidence service users would look for to determine service quality, using a hypothetical case</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. So that services like this one can keep doing good work (or change if they need to), they need to know how well things are working for you-- the people who come here. Imagine that an evaluation consultant visits the centre for the first time. This person doesn't know anything about what happens in this parent group, but she’s been hired to judge how well things are going. What would you tell her about your experience here to help her decide how well the group is helping families in the local community?</td>
<td>8. To establish what information about their experiences service users think evaluators should consider</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Pretend you’re in charge of this group. How would you decide whether it’s making an impact?</td>
<td>9. To find out which indicators of success service users think should be important to managers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. How would you involve group participants (people like yourselves) in assessing how well services are making an impact?</td>
<td>10. To find out how service users think they could be involved in evaluating service performance.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.5.3 Interviews with Staff

As well as service users, I collected data from nine staff who were facilitating the groups attended by the service users in the study. Although their responses are interesting in their own right, they were included primarily to contextualise, clarify and verify users’ accounts.

Eight of the nine staff participants were female. All were interviewed after I had conducted observations and service user focus groups and interviews at the centre in which they worked. The staff came from three of the four centres. No worker was interviewed at the outer-western Sydney site because recent staff changes had disrupted normal centre operations, and because I felt the data already collected was sufficient to ‘saturate’ or effectively answer the research questions at that late stage (December 2003).

At the southwest Sydney site, all three of the staff interviewees had professional backgrounds as teachers. One was qualified as an early childhood teacher, another was a qualified primary teacher, and the third had both a psychology and teaching qualification. At the western Sydney centre, one interviewee was a qualified psychologist and the other was a senior social worker qualified at the Masters level and had extensive experience in family work. Of the four staff interviewees on the mid-north coast, one was a qualified social worker, another was trained counselling, and a third had diploma level qualification in community welfare from TAFE\textsuperscript{99}. The fourth did not have a formal tertiary qualification, but had experience working in the education sector.

The Questioning Route used for staff interviews is in Table 5. As for the service users, the experience of conducting each interview and undertaking preliminary analysis between interviews led to slight modifications in the questions, which helped explore and cross check for emerging issues.

\textsuperscript{99} TAFE (Technical and Further Education) Institutes provide vocational education and training in New South Wales.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Rationale</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. By working with this group, what do you hope to help participants achieve?</td>
<td>1. To highlight which outcomes staff work toward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What are some of the things you do to try to make these things happen?</td>
<td>2. To ascertain how workers seek to produce outcomes for users (i.e. the production process)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What are participants hoping to get out of coming to the group?</td>
<td>3. To elucidate staff’s perceptions of the outcomes service users seek</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What do people ‘take away’ with them from participating?</td>
<td>4. To show what staff see service users to actually achieve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. What are the signs that tell you a group is useful?</td>
<td>5-6. To determine the evidence of outcomes that workers’ look to (Qs 5 &amp; 6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. What are the signs that tell you a group may not be working as well as it could?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. What are some of the things you think might make some groups not as helpful as they could be?</td>
<td>7. To identify perceptions of obstacles to effective services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. On what basis should Burnside decide how useful groups like this are?</td>
<td>8-9. To determine what staff think is useful performance information, and for who (Qs 8 &amp; 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. On what basis should agencies that contribute funding decide how useful groups like this are?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. How would you like to see service users involved in evaluating services?</td>
<td>10. To determine staff perspectives on user involvement in performance measurement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.6 Potential limits of the study

5.6.1 Addressing possible bias

Despite attempts to address possible bias, some limitations of the study remain. Firstly, the study was small scale, drawing data from only four service sites operated and managed by a single organisation. The views expressed come from those using (or delivering) Burnside services only. In addition, because I primarily drew on established groups of current service users, parents in the study were those for whom the service was, at least at that time, working well enough for them to be actively persisting with parenting groups. Recruiting current participants from parenting groups also tended to draw participants who were more strongly integrated with the service, as users tended to participate in groups in addition to other secondary preventative services, such as private or family counselling.

Potentially, the sampling strategy could include service user participants with higher current levels of satisfaction than if I had actively pursued those who had, for example, recently ceased attending the service. The recruitment strategy naturally excluded those who had, for example, found the groups unhelpful and dropped out for some other reason. However, the potential oversampling of service user participants with higher levels of engagement with the service is unlikely to greatly affect the results. The research was not intended to evaluate services, but instead focused on how service users experienced family support and how they judged whether services were helping them. The questions did not ask participants to actually assess the quality or effectiveness of the service (although some volunteered this information).

Where participants may have felt uncomfortable if they appeared critical of services in the discussions, I ensured that they understood they would not be identified, and actively probed to encourage participants to describe how they knew when services weren’t working well. I also invited people who had less positive experiences of other family services (Burnside and non-Burnside) to discuss these too, and offered to pause the tape to enable comments about poor service quality to be made ‘off the record’ if
required. However, pausing the tape was only requested briefly in one interview and not at all in a focus group.

5.6.2 Monetary incentives

Following conventions of focus group research (Padgett, 1998:39-40; Krueger, 1988:100), I offered $20 as a ‘gift’ to encourage participation and to compensate respondents for their time. This small incentive reinforced the value of users’ participation to the research, but was not essential as the invitations to participate built primarily on existing relationships—both between the university and Burnside and between myself and service users and staff. Such relationships are recognised to heighten participation (Kreuger, 1988:100). The incentive was also paid to volunteer childcare workers or drivers who enabled the research to take place (but not to paid staff).

Having the resources to offer a financial contribution to participants seemed to make co-ordinators at the family centres more enthusiastic about their centre participating, although some said they were concerned that service users would come to expect to be paid for participating in future research. As a relatively uncommon practice in child and family services, paying vulnerable populations for participation in research raises ethical issues. Where prospective respondents are poor and lack alternative means to supplement their income, paying for participation in research can risk coercion. ‘Purchasing’ respondents’ co-operation undermines their autonomy to a greater extent than when respondents have alternative sources of income (and less need for extra money, therefore lower ‘opportunity costs’ of opting out). To mitigate any possibility of coercion, when inviting people to take part I tried to appeal to their desires to help improve models of evaluation and family support programs, rather than to their pecuniary interest, although the payment was modest. I also provided the incentive at the beginning of each session so that people did not feel they had to stay if they did not enjoy the groups, and to ensure that they did not feel they had to provide certain responses in order to receive it. I also asserted that the payment was a sign of appreciation for their time, and not for their responses, ensuring that participants felt free to speak as much or as little as they chose.
Although the incentive was a very small token of appreciation some participants were bothered by taking it. A few parents would only take the money when I had told them it came from the University and not from Burnside (although Burnside had contributed cash to the research, which was administered by the University). After initially refusing to accept the payment, one person phoned me after the interview to tell me she had donated it back to the family centre. Others described how it would make a difference to their weekly budget by telling me the small luxuries they would buy, such as clothing or toiletries or small food items for their children.

In one case, a staff member at one family centre allocated a participant to an earlier focus group because she had run out of money. Some potential participants had also asked if they could bring husbands or other adult family members to the group, in the hope that they could access the incentive. Overall, the reactions to the small monetary incentive reflect the paucity of opportunities for people in the four service communities to regularly access even small amounts of additional income. Yet while the payment may have contributed to the enthusiasm with which participants approached the interviews and groups, and may have raised participation rates slightly, there was no evidence to suggest that the incentive payment affected participants’ responses.

5.7 Analysis

With participants’ permission I recorded and transcribed the interviews and focus group to allow comprehensive analysis of transcripts and field notes. I sought to discern those themes relating to how service users experience and understand service performance, and how they judge when interventions are working well. Rather than analysing data within pre-existing categories, I discovered patterns, themes and categories in the data inductively. The grounded theory approach used in the preliminary analysis exposes the richness, complexity and uniqueness of participant

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100 Information was also gleaned during the process of setting up of interviews, and from incidental conversations and non-verbal interactions during the interviews. However, the content of the interviews far surpassed this in terms of importance to the research question. As a result, I will only discuss this incidental and non-verbal data where it informs the analysis of interview transcripts.
views to an extent not possible if their words were forced into predetermined categories.

5.7.1 Early analysis

The early stage of analysis involved open coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998:223), or determining possible categories, to ensure emerging theory was firmly grounded in the data. For this stage I used NVivo computer software to help code for the existence of a concept in a passage of transcript, regardless of its frequency or intensity. In the following stage, I continued to analyse the data so as to uncover any patterns, relationships and connections within and between the open-coded categories and subcategories, and also considered the frequency and intensity with which themes occurred. This built the foundation for me to subsequently extract meaning, by making comparisons, drawing conclusions, determining substantive (rather than statistical) significance, and generating theory, a process which followed the tactics for generating meaning outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994: 245).

Although I analysed data from clients and workers separately, both fell in to the same five areas. Three of these categories— and those I focus on in the remainder of the thesis— relate directly to issues specifically elicited through the Questioning Routes (in Tables 4 and 5).

The first category related to the types of effects or outcomes participants said they experienced as a result of using services (or those which workers perceived people to experience). These effects were in the area of users’ family lives, their ‘selves’, their children, and their community. As outlined in Chapter Six and developed in detail in Chapter Seven, the findings in this category included the observation that each ‘effect’ or outcome related to users’ experiences of, and claims for positive personal and social change, and social justice.

The second category relates to those aspects of services they valued, which related to staff factors and the quality of the ‘helping relationship’ and organisational factors (such as access to free transport or childcare) (the subject of Chapter Eight).
The third theme arising from the Questioning Route related to the evidence and methods with which service users said they judged service effectiveness, and how they thought evaluators should assess quality and effectiveness (discussed in Chapter Nine).

The fourth theme arising— and one not directly elicited in the Questioning Route, related to clients’ experience of social, economic, legal, or health problems. While not directly answering key research questions, these responses helped establish the context of participants’ lives, grounding emerging understandings of the service outcomes they sought and dimensions of quality they perceived.

The fifth category included other attitudes which participants expressed, which related to receiving (or providing) help, including attitudes to Burnside. Again, discussion in this area was not directly elicited but provided contextual data that grounded the findings in the other categories.

I compared the results within each category on the basis of various attributes, such as gender, ethnicity, parents’ experience of child removal (if they disclosed it), and how long service users or staff participants had been involved with Burnside. Differences were also considered on the basis of the service site, and for staff, their area of training.

- **Data about service users’ perspectives on service outcomes**

The data about service outcomes (presented in Chapters Six and Seven) results from questions inviting parents to discuss the things they were learning or gaining by attending Burnside’s parenting education and support groups, and the changes they hoped to experience as a result of their involvement. This relates primarily to Questions One, Two, and Five in the Questioning Route (see Table 4). The discussions allowed me to identify the specific outcomes valued by the parents, and to examine any differences based on gender, location, ethnicity, and program type.

Where participants found it difficult to distinguish the effects of the parenting groups from the other Burnside services they were involved with (e.g. family counselling), they described the impact made by Burnside services more generally. Incorporating these wider responses attributed participants a degree of control in drawing on other issues they saw as relevant to the effectiveness of services but which were not envisaged in the planning of the research. Indeed, broadening the focus from parenting education and
support groups to include users’ discussion of counselling, volunteer work, and other activities enabled a more accurate reflection of these parents’ experience of receiving family services. Most were simultaneously involved in other service activities as well as parenting education and support, and sometimes attributed outcomes to Burnside generally, without fully apportioning their experience to discrete service activities. However, I encouraged participants to talk about the parenting groups specifically to maintain the focus on the outcomes of parenting education and support.

- **Data about users’ perspectives on service quality**

Users’ perspectives on service quality were elicited primarily through Questions Three, Four, Five and Seven in the Questioning Route (Table 4). These questions invited parents to discuss what they found to be good (or not so good) about attending parenting education and support groups, what their ideal parenting group would be like, and what, in a hypothetical situation, would signal to them a group was worth going to. I explored issues of quality with staff by asking what they do in their work to try to make groups work well, and how they know when groups are working well (see Table 5). The discussions that these questions provoked allowed me to identify and compare what parents and staff in the study saw to make services good (and thus to constitute ‘service quality’), and to examine any differences in their perspectives based on gender or location, for example. As I show through Chapter Eight, the parents’ definitions and ideals of quality share some common features across the sites, and were shared in important ways, by staff interviewees.

As shown above, the interpretive framework was initially generated using a grounded theory approach. Preliminary thematic analysis led to the finding that service users in the study did value many of the tangible elements of the service’s physical and organisational infrastructure, such as the availability of free transport or childcare. Yet they defined service quality more strongly in terms of the relationships they experienced with Burnside workers in the process of receiving services, offering more detailed and sophisticated analyses of relationships than they did of the other aspects of services. Relationships were also the most salient themes in staff interviewees’ conceptions of service quality, as their discussions focused more on what it takes to establish and manage relationships with vulnerable parents than any other factor.
Data about users’ perspectives on evaluation methods

I provoked the discussion about evaluation methods and processes using Questions Six through to Ten in the Questioning Route for service users (Table 4). These questions invited parents to discuss how they knew whether parenting education and support groups were helping them, which was intended to reveal how they arrive at their personal evaluations of service performance, and the kind of evidence that informs their judgments. Further, I asked how, in a hypothetical situation, service users would decide whether a new service was worth going to, a topic again designed to elicit information about the types of evidence service users look to when evaluating services, and how they come to judge quality and effectiveness.

A further set of questions used hypothetical situations to explore which information service users would bring to the attention of evaluators to help them decide how well services were helping families, and how, if they were a Burnside manager, they would decide whether services were working well and making a difference. Together, these questions helped to repeatedly elicit how service users think evaluators and managers should build indicators of service performance. A final question explored the role users saw for themselves and their peers in assessing how well services make an impact.

I asked similar questions to the nine staff in the study, to help interpret and contextualise service users’ responses, and to identify whether (and how) their perspectives contrast and overlap. I asked staff about the signs that tell them how well groups are working, to determine any similarities between the evidence they look to in deciding whether services are ‘good’, and that which service users draw on. I also asked these family workers how Burnside, and agencies that contribute funding, should assess their performance. Finally, I asked the staff how they would like to see service users involved in evaluating service performance. Overall, comparing these perspectives recognises that service users and staff share different positions in human service systems, yet a common location in frontline service delivery, and that these structural

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101 In future, parallel research with children could be conducted to explore how they decide when services are good or not so good, how they judge whether services are making a difference in their lives, and how they would prefer to participate in evaluation. This would be particularly helpful in ascertaining how children’s perspectives on evaluation differ to those of their parents.
configurations are likely to manifest in the form of similarities and differences in perspectives on how service performance can (and should) be measured.

5.7.2 Corroborating themes with theory

Following the preliminary analysis that resulted in identification of themes within the three categories described above, I continued to interrogate the themes by comparing and contrasting them with the insights of existing theories and research. This helped identify the broader significance of the data, and locate the findings in political and philosophical context. In this way, I modified the grounded theory approach initially undertaken. I used the emerging themes to treat each aspect of users’ experience or expectations of outcomes as a thread of their collective vision of social justice and personal wellbeing, using more general debates in political philosophy and social policy to highlight these aspects of the data (see Chapter Six). To understand users’ perspectives on service quality, I developed a theoretically informed model of professional helping as social justice to capture and interrogate their perspectives (Chapter Eight). Finally, I interpreted users’ perspectives on evaluation methods in terms both of their relationship to existing methodological approaches to evaluation, and as part of their collective vision of social justice (Chapter Nine).

5.7.3 Corroborating themes and theory with participants

To confirm that the meaning generated through the process of analysis were valid and replicable, I prepared an interim report containing preliminary findings for each site, and presented this in person to service users and staff at two of the data collection sites (western Sydney and mid-north coast) in October and November 2004. Feedback from participants was used to corroborate the findings and the emerging theoretical framework, as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994: 275). At these two personal follow-up visits, I asked both staff and service user participants to indicate whether they believed the analysis captured their perspectives, and whether there was anything they thought the analysis had missed, or captured inaccurately. At the Western Sydney centre, the Farsi translator was also used for this feedback meeting. The findings were received positively at both of the sites, regenerating discussion amongst service users.
that reaffirmed the importance of the issues raised, and the relevance of the conceptual framework.

5.8 Conclusions

This Chapter has described the process through which I collected observational, interview and focus group data from parent using and practitioners providing family support services. Each of the family services in the study was operating in disadvantaged areas, and participants were primarily mothers with children identified as at risk of abuse or neglect. Detailed analysis of transcripts using NVivo software allowed me to discern the themes relating to how service users experience and understand performance, and how they decide whether services are achieving outcomes. While I adopted a grounded theory approach in the preliminary stage of data analysis, a more thorough understanding required corroboration of themes with theory. The preliminary data and the modified grounded theory approach are described in more detail in Chapter Six.
Chapter Six

Interpreting users’ perspectives: a social justice framework

6.1 Introduction

To understand how service users judge the performance of family support and what they think of evaluation, I collected empirical data from service users and staff at four of Burnside’s family services. In response to questions posed, the service users in the focus groups and interviews talked about how the service helped them better understand themselves and their place in society, and to care for their children. Participants described what they hoped to achieve by using family support (outcomes), what they thought made a good service (quality); and how they believed outcomes and quality should be measured (evaluation). The parents’ accounts of using family support capture their unfulfilled social ideals and the broader visions of the justice they hoped these community services would help them achieve. Such accounts embody core themes that theorists of social justice have struggled to analyse. As such, users’ accounts can inform the development of a theoretical framework with which to more systematically examine their aspirations for personal and social change. Developing a framework that is simultaneously empirically and theoretically grounded helps to more clearly define the meaning of social service outcomes and quality and to determine the extent to which users’ perspectives can be captured in performance measurement.

To this end, this Chapter develops a framework for understanding service users’ perspectives. I begin by using a grounded theory approach to draw user-defined criteria for measuring service performance from the interview and focus group data (Section 6.2). In Section 6.3 I consider these findings in light of debates about the nature of
social justice, so that service users’ accounts, along with existing perspectives in social and political theory, shape the analytical framework used to interpret service outcomes and quality in Chapters Seven and Eight. In Chapter Nine I extend the framework to capture the methods participants used to assess services (and those they believed evaluators should use), capturing their perspectives on techniques used to measure performance in family support.

6.2 Users’ perspectives on service performance: emerging themes

In Chapter Five I introduced the five main categories emerging from the ‘preliminary analysis’ of the qualitative data collected. Here I give a more detailed summary of those that directly pertain to service users’ criteria for measuring the ‘performance’ of family support services. Shaped by the Questioning Route, the five categories emerged from the initial coding of the themes in the data and from the generation of meaning through the grounded theory techniques described in Chapter Five.

The first category (outlined in Section 6.2.1 and in more detail in Chapter Seven) relates to the effects of family support, as perceived and defined by service users. Responses included the impact of family support on family life, on parents themselves, on children, and on the community. This theme relates primarily to Questions One, Two and Five in the Questioning Route for service users (in Table 4).

A second category (outlined in Section 6.2.2 and in more detail in Chapter Eight) relates to those aspects of service processes which service users value, which can be understood to constitute their definitions of service quality. This category includes staff factors (most importantly their helping demeanour), and organisational factors (such as transport, childcare, and the atmosphere at the service site). Users’ perspectives in this category were drawn primarily from responses to Questions Three and Four in the Questioning Route.

Staff perspectives also fall into these categories. However, the interpretive framework has been developed primarily around users’ perspectives, with workers’ perspectives used to verify or triangulate their accounts and the framework itself.
A third category (introduced in Section 6.2.3) turns from issues of *definition* to issues of *measurement*, capturing the measurement methods and sources of evidence which users believed were appropriate for evaluating family support. This category of responses relates to the techniques used to obtain information from individuals (such as service users’ behaviour and attitudes), methods for collecting evidence at the organisational level (such as attendance data, referral sources, and staff knowledge and records), and the collection of performance information from the community level (such as crime levels and child protection reports). This category was built from responses to Questions 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10 in the Questioning Route and is considered in more detail in Chapter Nine.

A fourth category related to service users’ experiences of problems, such as how they discussed their socio-economic disadvantage, their isolation, health problems and family problems. Although these perspectives emerged incidentally throughout the interviews and focus groups and give critical contextual to users’ responses, they were not expressly pursued through the Questioning Route.

The fifth category related to service users’ general attitudes about receiving help from Burnside, including their accounts of their satisfaction, and their experiences with other social services. As with the previous category, these perspectives were not directly elicited through the Questioning Route, as the intention was to establish users’ perspectives on evaluation and not to actually evaluate services. Although they provide useful contextual information, responses in these last two categories are not treated as discrete themes in the remainder of the thesis.

In Section 6.2.1 and 6.2.2, I introduce users’ perspectives in the two categories that pertain to their *criteria* for measuring the performance of family support (outcomes and quality). Together, the range of perspectives in these categories reflects service users’ overarching views about the *purpose* of family support and the *characteristics* of good services. In doing so, users’ accounts establish ‘social justice’ as the key concept against which they experience and assess the quality and effectiveness of family support. The unifying category of social justice is confirmed in Section 6.2.3, where preliminary analysis reveals users’ aspirations for *participatory methods* for assessing the performance
of family support. However, the complexity of the themes emerging in 6.2.1, 6.2.2 and 6.2.3 suggests the limits of a grounded theory approach. A more thorough and meaningful interpretation of the content of users’ accounts can emerge by corroborating the empirical data with existing theoretical frameworks of social justice (as documented in Section 6.3).

6.2.1 Users’ perspectives on outcomes

Preliminary analysis of how the service users described the impact of family support and their aspirations for service-led change, locate family support outcomes at four levels: in the existence of a family unit and how it functioned, within parents’ own lives, in child wellbeing, and in the more general wellbeing of the wider community.

- Effects on family life

Participants perceived family support to impact on family life and family functioning by helping them as a household unit access material resources and opportunities, and by providing emotional support and practical parenting information and advice. Georgia in western Sydney, for example, saw services contributing to family life in a range of ways, by reducing her social isolation as a parent, and offering trusting, caring relationships as well as practical support in helping keep her family together. She explained:

I had a lot of violent relationships in the past. And coming to the groups here and actually feeling like I could trust the staff and the other mothers has made a big difference. And given me opportunities to change so many different things that you didn’t think were possible. And knowing that there are other mothers and fathers out there that are going through the same things that I’m going through, like problems with their two-year-olds and things like that. So just knowing that I’m part of a service that does care and does want to support – to try to keep me and my family together and work out as many problems as possible. (Georgia, western Sydney)

Similarly, Megan expressed service outcomes in terms of dealing with the break-up of her family. She valued Burnside’s support throughout custody proceedings involving her former partner. She explained:
Her father took off with her when she was three months old … Yeah, I’d just gone for a walk to the shop, come back and she wasn’t there. He wouldn’t give me contact and I had to go through court to fight for her. He lied about me in court. Burnside helped me with that, Debbie [Megan’s family worker] came to court with me and helped me out. (Megan, mid-north coast)

In southwest Sydney, Phillip described the effect of family services on his family’s functioning by linking access to affordable activities with reduced stress levels and enhanced relationships between himself and his children. He valued the fact that family support services allowed him to:

get out and go places with the kids and stuff like that, it just improves your relationship. Places you go, trips that you couldn’t afford to go on your own makes it a lot less stressful. (Phillip, south-western Sydney)

In contrast Adrian, a father in Sydney’s outer-west, emphasised how these services delivered practical skills in playing with and raising children:

For the dads, learning how to interact and communicate with our children, which isn’t a male’s strong point. Being able to get in and play with kids and interact with them. It’s helped me out a lot playing with them, to be able to get in that bit more to support ’em and help them to develop without sort of boxing them in (Adrian, outer-western Sydney)

Together, the accounts show the range of ways these services impact on family life and family functioning, supporting parents through formal legal and child protection proceedings, facilitating access to material resources and opportunities, and providing practical techniques to enhance parent-child relationships.

- **Effects on parents**

As well as expressing the impact of services on the family unit, participants also identified outcomes of services affecting them personally as parents. The strongest theme emerging in this category relates to how family support helped overcome the isolation of parenting. Patricia expressed the impact of this:

I no longer feel like an alien, all alone and this is just happening to me. (Patricia, western Sydney)
Similarly, for Paula, the service gave opportunities to share the process of raising children and to gain support, reducing her isolation and improving her mental health:

…being a parent is one of the hardest jobs I’ve ever done in my life, and one of the hardest challenges because I don’t know, I just do the best I can do which I’m sure we all do. But it’s nice to come – that’s one of the positives, it’s nice to come and see how we deal and cope with in raising the children … because it’s so hard sometimes to, you know, you just want to scream sometimes because it so difficult with them, but it’s a normal feeling – it’s accepting that, because you always – being a parent you want to do the right thing and when you’re feeling these feelings you think there’s something wrong with me, there’s something wrong for feeling like this, but in actual fact there’s nothing wrong, it’s a normal reaction to the situation. (Paula, mid-north coast)

Glenda described how the family service gave her personal benefits by offering a sanctuary from which to reflect on home life. In doing so, she alluded to service outcomes in terms of enhancing mothers’ mental health:

When something really bad’s happening at home then this place is the best place to be to take your mind off it, it helps. (Glenda, western Sydney)

At the same centre (through an interpreter) Tahmeena also defined service outcomes in terms of her own mental health, referring to feeling ‘a bit better’ for having talked through her problems with a counsellor:

Sometimes the father of my children hurts us. He harasses the kids and sometimes he makes calls, telephone calls and harasses me. And that makes me very stressed. And I told the counsellor here my problems, and the previous teacher here was a counsellor also. They talk to me about my situation and they ask me about the court situation and the custody of the kids. And they have treated my children very well. And when I talked to them and I opened up, I opened myself to them and I cried and later on I felt a bit better. (Tahmeena, western Sydney)

As well as achieving outcomes in terms of parents’ mental health, these services also helped parents by offering opportunities to gain skills and confidence to participate in life outside their household. This point is reflected in the responses of Tony and Olivia below:
I wouldn’t talk to anybody but now – I find it a bit hard talking to you now but once I get to know you it’ll be all right. But they brought me out of my shell here you know. (Tony, south-west Sydney)

… many people don’t have access locally to areas so they need somewhere – a local point of access – so then they can sort of springboard off into the rest of the community, because if you don’t have something where you can practice your skills you’re never gonna be confident enough to use them. So here’s a chance in this centre for us to use all of our – everyone’s varying skills. And find out what you’re good at mostly, and sort of go on and achieve (Olivia, western Sydney)

As these accounts show, parents described personal benefits from using family support relating to overcoming social isolation and improving their mental health, and improving their skills and self-confidence to achieve.

- Effects on children

As well as making an impact on family life and parents’ personal wellbeing, participants also identified the way these services contributed to outcomes for children. Tina in outer-western Sydney described this in terms of breaking harmful intergenerational cycles. She said:

They [the service] also give me the courage and strength to change my family cycle so my children don’t grow up in the same abuse with me. (Tina, outer-western Sydney)

At the same centre, Isabel described how play-based interventions helped the children to develop, noting how important it was that this be done without stigma or judgment:

the playroom side of it encourages your children to be the best that they can be. There’s no judgment on your child because they’ve come from any certain aspect of life. (Isabel, outer-western Sydney)

Sandra emphasised the therapeutic benefits of the same play program:

when my daughter was three and a half my husband was badly burnt, and she saw it and would not speak to anyone. But because of the play facilitator and the play worker here at the time, the other mums and the other kids, they helped her open up and helped her accept and understand it (Sandra, outer-western Sydney)

In southwest Sydney, Phillip emphasised how family support provided children with opportunities for social interaction:
it’s the only place my kids see other kids cos there’s none in the street or anything
and that, and so it’s, yeah, that’s their only social thing (Phillip, south-west Sydney)

Anita on the mid-north coast perceived that social interaction was a mutual benefit for her and her child, as her supported playgroup helped overcome both children’s and parents’ isolation. She valued the way services helped by:

getting your children to meet other children of their own age group because when
you are sometimes on your own, at home, could be married you might be on your
own, single, divorced or anything. You’ve got your children on your own and if
they’re not going to school you’ve got them at home and I’m not joking they’re with
you and there’s nobody else for them to play with. When you’ve got a group
together you’ve got the other children for them to come and play, with, you’ve got
other mothers to come and talk to, and that’s basically one big enjoyment! (Anita,
mid-north coast)

Also on the mid-north coast, Abigail described how ultimately, ensuring children would have ‘a good life’ was the reason she used services to develop her parenting skills:

Abigail: learning positive parenting is – to me that is really one of the main issues,
and self-esteem.

Natasha: So what do you mean by positive parenting?

Abigail: Positive parenting. I mean to bring up, to bring up children in a positive
way that will enable them to have a good life you know. Hopefully I will raise a
happy, well-adjusted, well balanced child … I just hope I can bring a happy well-
adjusted child into the world that will go and do things – she’s a very intelligent child
– she needs to go out and do things and go to university and, and get a good job and
never have the same problems I had [agreement from group] (Abigail, mid-north coast)

Participants thus identified a range of outcomes of family support pertaining directly to children, including breaking intergenerational cycles of abuse, allowing children to escape stigma or judgment, therapeutic benefits and social interaction, and ultimately, enhancing the opportunities for children to lead ‘a good life’.

- Effects on communities
A weaker theme emerging in the preliminary analysis relates to the impact of services at the community level. Tony in south-west Sydney alluded to community-level effects in reducing anti-social behaviour, when he said that:

If it wasn’t for Burnside a lot of kids would be roaming the streets at odd hours of the night (Tony, south-west Sydney)

However for others, the impact of services on communities was less clear. Olivia alluded to the contribution of services in providing a hub for local community development activity around raising children:

it doesn’t matter where you come from, what background you’ve got, we’re all united by the one thing that we’ve got, that we want to raise our family, we want to achieve better for ourselves, and we want to all help each other do that you know like, no one’s sort of, everyone sort of wants to help everyone they can if they’ve got the ability to, so it’s a real action resource centre. (Olivia, western Sydney)

Similarly, Karina captured the way in which family support generated networks of helping that reverberated through the centre and into the community, as clients took on the role of informal helpers:

we’re clients but at the same time we’re moving up to say ‘hey we’re here, but we’re also here, we can also help you now’. If we float around after we’ve got over our personal crisis we can deal with different things at different levels, but now we can help somebody else. (Karina, south-west Sydney)

Together, the themes emerging from the preliminary analysis reflect both users’ experience of family support, and their aspirations for ‘a good life’ for themselves and their children, and for their community more broadly. In particular, users identified the ways in which they drew on services to effect changes in their family structure and family functioning, as well as seeking improvements in their personal wellbeing and that of their children.

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103 This does not imply that there were fewer benefits at the community level, but rather, that those at the individual and family level were more apparent to service-user respondents, and perhaps easier to articulate.
6.2.2 Users’ perspectives on quality

As well as establishing criteria for measuring performance in terms of the outcomes of family support, the Questioning Route also invited participants to describe how they defined the quality of services. Preliminary analysis revealed accounts of service quality in two main categories: organisation (such as accessibility and atmosphere), and those dimensions specifically relating to the actions and helping dispositions of staff.

- Organisational dimensions of quality

The organisational dimensions of service quality described by service users related primarily to access, such as free transport and childcare, and to the warmth and openness which they attributed to the site and to the service (but not to the staff specifically). In terms of transport, each centre operated a minibus with a pick-up and drop-off service for parenting groups and playgroups (with the exception of western Sydney, which was well served by public transport). Andy, a wheelchair-user, portrayed the sentiment shared more widely across the centres, and particularly at the regional centre on the mid-north coast:

You also need to be accessible, right, so, not just because I’m in a wheelchair, but accessible in terms of transport because as people have said, there’s no use sticking a centre in the middle of a community without people having – if they physically can’t get there. (Andy, outer-western Sydney)

As well as transport, these parents also saw childcare as an essential element of service quality. This is reflected in the comments of both Patricia and Ryan:

That fact that they’ve got child minding while we have the groups, that is such a big plus. (Patricia, western Sydney)

It’s just me, me and the boys. I don’t have parents, my ex lives who knows where, and it’s not just like I can go ‘oh, can you look after the kids while I go to group you know, and this can be your access night’. (Ryan, mid-north coast)

Other organisational dimensions of service quality relate to the organisation of time at the services. Kimberley in western Sydney described how having time allowed her to spend enough time to work through problems with workers:
Just being rushed, I mean that’s not helpful. If you’ve got a problem you want to know that you can spend as little or as long a time with that particular person. For me, I find that if people have schedules and say, ‘oh, I can only spend five minutes’, you don’t feel like you can actually talk to them, so you think ‘oh well ok, I’m not coming back here again’. But here it’s like they’ll spend as little or as long a time with you to sort out whatever you need to sort out. (Kimberley, western Sydney)

Along with transport, childcare, and ‘open’ time management, the atmosphere of the organisation, and how users felt treated by Burnside services was something participants identified as an element of quality (but did not necessarily attribute solely to the behaviour of individual staff). Patricia identified a compassionate, non-judgmental ‘feel’ as critical:

You walk in here and you can feel um you walk in the door, you just walk in the gate and you can feel there’s love, there’s compassion, there’s friendship, the primary thing is its non-judgmental. (Patricia, western Sydney)

Jennifer described this ‘organisational warmth’ as a homeliness and openness in a time of need:

It’s a homely situation. You know if you’ve got a problem in your life you just come up here and if they’re busy or not they always seem to make time for you. Like as I said the day my daughter got stabbed the first place I come was here. They were open to us, the whole lot of them. (Jennifer, western Sydney)

At the same centre, Julia described the quality of the atmosphere in terms of feeling personally respected at the service:

We always communicate, it’s a real communication open place, you don’t feel like a number, you feel like part of the person, you know, the family. (Julia, western Sydney)

How parents were treated in relation to child protection matters was particularly important. For Alison, providing support and respect to enable parents to maintain their dignity was not at the expense of child protection (a factor that she attributed to the organisation rather than any individual staff behaviour):

It’s hard to explain like but they are very supportive. Like put it this way if Burnside seen there was neglection or something wrong they would take your children from
you – of course it’s like any person. But they don’t treat you guilty you know what I mean? (Alison, mid-north coast)

Together, the organisational dimensions of quality relate to access, in terms of transport and childcare, and the availability and openness of the service to users evident in staff availability and time, and a non-judgmental and supportive atmosphere.

- **Staff dimensions of quality**

Service-user participants at each of the sites captured the quality of organisational factors (such as transport, childcare, time, and ‘organisational warmth’). However, they more thoroughly described a range of specific staff behaviours and helping dispositions that they saw determined the overall quality of family support. Phillip described the quality of workers in terms of feeling comfortable with them. However, he was alone in identifying the importance of training:

> One thing that would disadvantage it would be lack of quality of worker as well. Like you need people like you’ve got who will listen and understand, I mean it’s no use having the services there if you don’t feel comfortable talking to the people or you know, you don’t like them or anything like that then it’s no use, but you know something, yeah I think training and that is important to make sure the people that you have there to help you are actually going to help you (Phillip, southwest Sydney)

More often than training, users in the study associated quality in workers’ helping demeanour with their treatment of clients without prejudice, as well as worker displays of trust, respect and confidentiality. This is reflected in the accounts of Craig and Glenda below:

> … and there’s no prejudgement of your situation before you come like there is with mental health services, there’s no prejudgement at all, you’re treated as just a normal person, they treat you as they would like to be treated and that’s the way it is, so it’s natural, a much more friendly environment (Craig, southwest Sydney)

> … they’ve got respect, which is something, you know, and they trust what you say if something is confidential they – y’know, it doesn’t go out there, it stays here, which is something that I think that we respect them so much. (Glenda, western Sydney)

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104 The importance users placed on the quality of workers’ helping demeanour is not surprising, given the labour intensity of these services.
For Olivia, it was important that staff had a genuine understanding of service users’ lives. Interestingly, she thought this authenticity came from the workers having had children themselves. Describing her experience of ‘bad’ quality workers she described:

they don’t understand, they’ve never walked in your shoes so their inability to understand limits them and their ableness to give you what you need, y’know and it’s just here they understand it, because they’re all mothers – a lot of these women are all mothers, or have all had kids, they can all relate to it (Olivia, western Sydney)

Of course, ‘good workers’ did not necessarily draw knowledge from their personal experiences of having children as Olivia (and others) perceived, and not all of the workers did in fact have children. However, while it is interesting that users sometimes misattributed workers’ understanding and insight to their personal experience of mothering rather than to professional training or skill, it is more important to note the emphasis users placed on worker authenticity as an element of quality helping. Indeed, from users’ perspectives, an indicator of the staff dimensions of service quality included feeling that workers had ‘walked in their shoes’ to the extent that they felt workers were allies, advocates, and even friends.

### 6.2.3 Users’ perspectives on evaluation methods

As well as establishing criteria for outcomes and quality, the Questioning Route also explored users’ perspectives on evaluation methods and processes in family support. Two main categories emerged from the preliminary analysis. The first relates to the ways in which users knew when services were working well and which sources of evidence they believed informed their judgements, revealing how they judge for themselves whether services are worth using. The second category related to how users believed evaluators and managers should decide how well services were working, revealing users’ preferences for participatory models of evaluation. These categories can be traced to Questions Six to Ten in the Questioning Route (Table 4).

- **Users’ evaluative evidence and methods**

  Preliminary analysis highlights differences amongst service users as to which evidence they used to assess the performance of family support. Those users who were renegotiating their legal or family status with child protection authorities assessed family
support primarily according to the extent to which they made progress toward having children restored to their care.

I have got my three children, I’ve got my son Damien back. So that shows you pretty much how Burnside’s pretty well supportive (Alison, mid-north coast)

However, parents who did not have children removed or children notified to authorities drew on other sources of evidence, by considering less visible evidence such as feelings of change in their lives, and in particular, change in their perception of themselves as parents. Pete on the mid-north coast summed this up:

I don’t know how I can measure this, but the reality is I know I’m a better person and I know I’m a better parent and in some ways it doesn’t matter what’s outside of me, there’s that feeling … I can say look myself in the eye and I can look my daughter in the eye and say I’ve done my best, been the best father I can be. (Pete, mid-north coast)

Parents drew evidence of service performance from their self-assessments of their own mental or psychosocial state, attributing reduced levels of anxiety and feelings of isolation to the effectiveness of the family services they used. Parents also assessed services according to whether they found that parenting skills and strategies helped improve communication with their children or child behaviour, so that it could be said that the strategies ‘worked’. In Lydia’s words, she knew services were working because we’re putting them [the parenting strategies] into practice. We go home and we experience, we use it. (Lydia, western Sydney)

Importantly, parents in the study privately assessed how well services were working by combining these sources of evidence, rather than drawing on any single source. Most cross-checked their own feelings with feedback from other people, including information they received from their peers and children. This ensured their evaluations did not rely on a single way of knowing.

- How users believe evaluators should assess family support

Service users’ accounts of evaluation methods highlight the centrality of personal relationships and participation in their ideals for evaluation. When asked how evaluation consultants or managers should evaluate the services, users assumed that
their reports of changes in their lives would form the primary source of evidence, making their involvement central to evaluation. Overwhelmingly, users expected personal conversations with evaluators about the kinds of outcomes they were experiencing, and expected that this would be in their language and on their terms. This is reflected in the beliefs of Isabel and Craig that evaluation would allow them to simply explain their experiences.

I would probably share my life experience and how things had changed for me.  
(Isabel, outer-western Sydney)

we can sit down and explain our experiences. (Craig, south-western Sydney)

Users also expected evaluators would be able to observe service-user change directly. Isabel, for example, said that

you don’t have to have a guide or a measure, you just see it.  (Isabel, outer-western Sydney)

In this way, users assumed the family services they use would be evaluated by somebody close and involved enough to ‘just see it’, not by a neutral, distanced, scientific evaluator who doesn’t have a pre-existing relationship with them. Thus, these users’ perspectives on evaluation methods point to the importance of social service workers feeding users’ perspectives into evaluation. Indeed, users believed that their relationships with workers would guarantee that their experiences would be reflected into formal evaluations.

6.2.4 Summary: reinterpreting ‘performance’ as social justice

Sections 6.2.1, 6.2.2 and 6.2.3 revealed the preliminary themes emerging from the analysis of users’ experiences of service outcomes and service quality, and their aspirations for service-led change. Together, users’ perspectives establish the criteria and methods with which users assess the performance of family support. On the surface, these accounts capture the contribution of parenting education and support to the wellbeing of users and their families, and in doing so, highlighted the organisational and staff factors contributing to quality care. When considered together, users’ accounts point to their common pursuit of changes in personal and family life, the
importance of quality relationships with staff, and their aspirations for *status* in the evaluation process.

In terms of outcomes, users emphasised how services contribute to the functioning and structure of their family unit as well as their material resources, enhancing their confidence and sense of self and ultimately, their ability to bring up children to have ‘a good life’. In terms of service quality, users emphasised organisational and professional values of respect, absence of stigma and judgement, openness, authenticity and even friendship. Together, these themes point to users’ distinctive visions of the purpose of family support and the goals of social services. These users described the value of family support in terms of how it helped them overcome hardship and enhance their wellbeing, reflecting the social ideals they aspired to in using these social services. Indeed, the preliminary analysis leads to the observation that each user-defined outcome or dimension of quality relates to their *experiences of* and *claims for* inclusion and a type of social justice encompassing priorities of respect and relationship (although participants did not use the term ‘social justice’ to describe their experience).

However, ‘social justice’ is an amorphous concept that can refer to a range of competing theoretical conceptions and ideals. Not all conceptions of justice embody the themes of relationship, authenticity, and care that emerged from the preliminary analysis of users’ perspectives. This means that despite its empirical grounding in the data so far discussed, the overarching category of ‘social justice’ requires more considered analysis if it is to meaningfully capture the distinctive criteria with which these service users perceived the value and contribution of family support.

To this end, in Section 6.3 I explore competing conceptions of social justice, to develop a more sophisticated theoretical framework with which to interpret the data. I show how modifying the grounded theory approach helps in the pursuit of a more detailed and theoretically informed interpretation of users’ criteria for service outcomes and quality (developed further in Chapters Seven and Eight respectively). The thesis then interprets users’ perspectives on measuring these dimensions of performance in family support (in Chapter Nine).
6.3 Competing conceptions of social justice

Arguing that the performance of family support should be conceptualised, defined and measured in terms of how it overcomes specific injustices identified by service users raises the problem that a range of prevailing theoretical conceptions of hardship, deprivation, wellbeing and justice exist. To select, develop and justify a simultaneously empirically and theoretically grounded framework for capturing users’ perspectives, I turn from analysing the data to exploring theoretical debates about the nature of hardship, deprivation and personal wellbeing, which I encapsulate here in the idea of social justice. I draw on debates in political theory and social policy to explore how appropriately three different constructs capture how service users experienced and understood the family support’s contribution of social justice – as reflected in the themes emerging from the preliminary analysis.

These three potential constructs are justice as ‘social inclusion’ (Section 6.3.1), justice as ‘capabilities’ (6.3.2), and justice as ‘recognition’ (Section 6.3.3). These were selected on the basis that each departs from the conventional emphasis on the material aspects of poverty and inequality (the need for this approach is shown in the preliminary analysis). I explore these alternative ways of understanding justice and argue that users’ criteria for measuring the performance of family support is best interpreted when these services are considered as part of disadvantaged parents’ personal and political struggles for ‘recognition’. Informed by disputes about the nature of recognition (Fraser and Honneth, 2003), the analysis justifies considering the deeper themes emerging from the study using an interpretive framework drawing primarily on Axel Honneth’s exposition (1995, 2001). With a framework of justice that is simultaneously empirically and theoretically grounded, I return to examine users’ perspectives on service outcomes, quality and measurement methods in Chapters Seven, Eight and Nine respectively.

As Ruth Lister points out in unpacking the meaning of ‘poverty’, for example, that some core concepts of social policy are value-laden, and choosing between theoretical positions is a political as well as social scientific act (2004:12). Developing a theoretically informed framework with which to interpret users’ experiences and ideals of wellbeing and justice (as I do in this section) inevitably requires political choices.
6.3.1 Justice as social inclusion

One way to understand service users’ aspirations for justice is in terms of ‘social inclusion’ and its converse, ‘social exclusion’. Over the last decade, these concepts have come to dominate discussions of social problems, particularly in the UK where exclusion is defined in official policy discussions as ‘what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, unfair discrimination, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown’ (SEU, 2004: 4). Unlike in the UK, the concept of exclusion is not institutionalised in Australian social policy to the extent that a national unit is specifically charged with overcoming it (like the UK Social Exclusion Unit)\textsuperscript{106}. However, the concept is evident in policy discourse, with notions of inclusion and exclusion, for example, reconfiguring the national goals of welfare reform around social and economic participation (Reference Group on Welfare Reform, 2000).

Implicitly, concepts of social exclusion construct social problems by dichotomising the ‘included’ and ‘excluded’. These approaches conceptualise social problems as existing ‘outside’ of mainstream society, marginalising focus on mainstream structural inequalities of income poverty and class based inequalities, resource deprivation and the gendered organisation of care. As such, these approaches lead to arguments for policies that pursue ‘inclusion’ via individual participation in the ‘ordinary’ activities of paid work (Levitas, 1998; Saunders, 2003). Such arguments are reflected in attempts by government (especially in the UK) to arrange social policy goals around preventing the ‘included’ from becoming ‘excluded’ (by reducing family breakdown, teenage pregnancy, and neighbourhood decay) and by encouraging the ‘excluded’ to become ‘included’, primarily through paid work (Levitas, 1998).

Social exclusion could be used to understand service users’ perspectives, yet it allows only limited insight into the views that emerged in the study. The most important problem is that the insider-outsider metaphor is only partially reflected in the

\textsuperscript{106} South Australia is an exception.. Since 2002, it has had a Social Inclusion initiative operating out of the Department of the Premier and Cabinet. The initiative focuses on issues of school retention, drug use, Aboriginal health, homelessness, youth employment and youth crime. The ACT has also adopted the language of social inclusion in the ‘Community Inclusion Board’, charged with implementing Canberra’s social plan (2004).
perspectives of these family support service users. Users seemed to aspire more strongly for change in relation to themselves (self-realisation) than change in relation to others (inclusion) and, given their role as primary (and often sole) carers for young children, few aspired for the inclusion that comes with participation in paid work.

Other problems with concepts of social exclusion are their conceptual inconsistency, as they incorporate multiple deprivations (Burchardt et al, 1998; Burchardt et al, 2002; Levitas, 1998). While social exclusion usefully captures social problems apart from poverty or a lack of employment, the concept needs to be defined in particular contexts. However, while the context specificity of the concept of social exclusion is considered a potential problem in other research literature, here it is not an obstacle, as it could be adapted to capture service users’ criteria for service performance. Indeed, users’ perspectives could be used to establish the meaning of inclusion in these family support contexts. Such a framework would include criteria for performance against those factors identified in the preliminary analysis so far, including helping parents to connect with peers and the service system and overcome their isolation, improving parenting skills so as to reduce child abuse and neglect, and eventually, expanding the participation in education and paid work of parents, service users and their vulnerable children. However, the pursuit of such a typology offers little more clarity than that provided by the preliminary analysis on its own, and fails to highlight the process through which ‘exclusion’ is produced and can be remedied to achieve social justice. Further, such an interpretation fails to engage with more critical readings of the social exclusion debate.

Ruth Levitas (1998), for example, identifies three deeper discourses which shape the meaning of social exclusion, and which create additional problems for using this concept to capture the goals of family support. She terms these the redistributionist discourse, the moral underclass discourse, and the social integrationist discourse.

Redistributionist discourse intertwines discussions of the problems (exclusion) and remedies (inclusion) with an understanding of the material dimensions of poverty. However, the preliminary themes described in Section 6.2 relate only partially to users’ experience of and aspirations for material outcomes from family support. Reflecting
the purpose of family support in reducing the risk of child abuse and neglect rather than redistributing resources specifically, these parents’ accounts emphasise the non-material dimensions of poverty, such as personal confidence in child-rearing, social connection, and respect in dealing with welfare professionals especially around child protection issues.

A second discourse Levitas (1998) identifies is a ‘moral underclass discourse’, characterised by an emphasis on the morality and behavioural delinquency of the excluded. Influenced by neo-conservative and neo-liberal ideas that welfare spending leads to dependency cultures, this discourse associates the remedies for social problems with strategies aimed at overcoming personal pathology. This focus is inappropriate for capturing service users’ perspectives as they emerged in the study, as users conceptualised justice in ways that sought to overcome rather than reinforce constructions of their dependency and personal pathology. Instead, they articulated claims for respect, relationship and wellbeing rather than for overcoming personal pathologies.

A third discourse of social exclusion is what Levitas (1998) terms ‘social integrationist’, which defines inclusion primarily in terms of labour market attachment, seeing paid work as the ultimate source of social cohesion and goal of social policy. As with the other discourses, this conception fails to adequately reflect users’ experiences of how family support helped them to achieve positive social change, as users’ aspirations for change were located overwhelmingly in the domestic, private realm of unpaid and emotional labour, such as enhancing parenting skills, family relationships and personal wellbeing. For these reasons, neither the overarching metaphor of social exclusion, nor the three main discourses argued by Levitas (1998) to shape its meaning, can adequately capture the principles of respect, relationship and care that featured in users’ constructions of social service outcomes as social justice.

6.3.2 Justice as capabilities

A second framework that could be used to capture service users’ accounts of the performance of family support treats justice as ‘capability’. Developed in the work of economist Amartya Sen (1995, 2004) and philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2000, 2003), this approach advocates an understanding of social policies and social institutions in
terms of the extent to which arrangements enhance people’s ‘capabilities’ to function. This notion collapses the insider-outsider dichotomy that characterises social exclusion. Instead, justice as capabilities refers to two factors essential to human freedom: the economic and environmental ‘conversion’ factors which allow people to ‘be’ and to ‘do’; and more personal ‘conversion’ factors, encompassing, for example, the self-confidence and self-esteem of individuals.

This approach could quite plausibly be used to capture and interpret the experiences of using family support that service users described in the study. Sen (2004), for example, conceives of justice as capabilities without using fixed criteria. Instead, he advocates that a ‘list’ of human capabilities that constitute justice be specified through public participation and democratic deliberation in specific contexts. Thus, his conception accommodates the development of an ideal of justice via such processes, for example, as were undertaken in this study, in which members of a social service community were invited to collectively establish criteria against which the performance of family support service should be measured. Indeed, the initial typology of service outcomes arising from the preliminary analysis and described in Section 6.2 could be an example of such a list, justified within Sen’s capabilities approach by its development through deliberation amongst service users, and not in relation to any externally validated principles of justice.

However, Martha Nussbaum (2000, 2003), another proponent of the capabilities approach, disagrees with Sen’s argument for a deliberative means of specifying capabilities. She makes the compelling argument that capabilities should set universal, minimum or fundamental standards of justice (Nussbaum, 2003). Nussbaum makes a start in designing such a set by constructing a list of essential capabilities that would ensure a more thorough protection for those with a weaker capacity for democratic negotiation, than negotiating capabilities in a social context as Sen argues. Her list, which is stated in general terms only, includes life (not dying prematurely); bodily health and integrity; education and freedom of thought and expression; love, attachment, emotional freedom and affiliation with others; practical reason; co-existence with other species; enjoyment of recreation or play; participation in political life and being able to hold property (2000: 78-80).
Nussbaum’s list of fundamental capabilities has the strength of including both economic dimensions of freedom and inequality, and personal freedoms such as those experienced in the realm of emotion and attachment. These dimensions of justice incorporate ideals of care within an ideal of justice, and in doing so, capture the issues of relationship and connection emerging from the preliminary analysis of the users’ perspectives in the study. Nussbaum’s approach offers conceptual resources for addressing inequalities suffered within families and hidden from the public sphere, as well as ‘public’ and material forms of inequality. Her universal principles offer a framework for assessing justice claims beyond the public sphere, and hence have the potential for interpreting the service users’ accounts of outcomes as they emerged in this study.

Indeed, users’ criteria for outcomes could be understood in terms of either Nussbaum’s list of capabilities or Sen’s framework of democratically derived criteria (although Nussbaum’s offers superior protection of justice for vulnerable populations). However, neither Sen’s nor Nussbaum’s approach is adequately linked to a dynamic vision of how capabilities are developed and enhanced. Neither incorporates a theory as to how economic arrangements and social interventions can achieve the ‘capabilities’ vision of justice (unlike Honneth’s understanding of justice as recognition – see below). A less substantial shortcoming is that both Sen’s and Nussbaum’s work has been designed and tested in relation to notions of wellbeing in international contexts of economic development, rather than specifically for the inequalities and suffering experienced in developed societies (unlike ideals of social inclusion and recognition). Indeed, the suffering and injustices experienced in wealthy countries like Australia are, with the exception of some Indigenous rural communities, unlikely to fully correspond with problems of issues of health and extremely premature death experienced in poor countries. In developed welfare state societies such as Australia, justice is more likely to be a matter of flourishing than a matter of survival (Ignatieff, 1984).

6.3.3 Justice as recognition

Although justice as inclusion or capability could plausibly help unpack users’ conceptions of the performance of family support, a third framework, recognition,
offers to more thoroughly capture users’ articulated justice goals of respect, relationship, emotional care and wellbeing. Adapted from Hegel to understand how subjects mediate relationships between each other and within themselves (Honneth, 1992, 1995), recognition has recently been deployed in debates about the goals of socio-political movements mobilised around class and identity politics (Fraser, 1995, 2003). In Axel Honneth’s frame, social actors take part in a morally motivated struggle for self-realisation, respect and dignity, with these claims for recognition forming the basis of political claims for social justice.

Such ideas are present in studies of social services and welfare systems in advanced economies. Ignatieff (1984) captured the essence of recognition when distinguishing the necessities for human flourishing compared to the necessities for human survival, highlighting the importance of love, honour, dignity and respect to social services and social policy. In his study ‘The Needs of Strangers’, he articulates how the nature and moral quality of social service contexts and relationships determines service effectiveness, stating that:

Giving the aged poor their pension and providing them with medical care may be a necessary condition for their self-respect and dignity, but it is not a sufficient condition. It is the manner of the giving that counts and the moral basis on which it is given: whether strangers at my door get their stories listened to by the social worker, whether the ambulance man takes care not to jostle them when they are taken down the steep stairs of their apartment building, whether a nurse sits with them in the hospital when they are frightened and alone. Respect and dignity are conferred by gestures such as these (Ignatieff, 1984:16).

More recently, the concept of recognition is increasingly being used to understand social policy and social services. Recognition has been used to understand the nature of poverty (Lister, 2004), the values underpinning welfare settlements (Williams, 1999), care workers’ struggles for justice (Macdonald and Merrill, 2002), and social workers perceptions of their clients (Garrett, 2005). Yet recognition is rarely applied to understand quality, outcomes and evaluation in social services. As I will argue, recognition has underutilised potential as an analytical framework for capturing how
disadvantaged people perceive the contribution and quality of social services, such as those perspectives presented by the family support service users in this study.

While some researchers have applied the concept of recognition without discussing its contentious meaning (e.g. Garrett, 2005), two main approaches to recognition have been stridently counter-posed (Fraser and Honneth, 2003). I argue that aspects of both Nancy Fraser’s and Axel Honneth’s frameworks of recognition can usefully capture and reflect service users’ social justice criteria. In general, both frameworks act as ideals of justice, and simultaneously portray recognition as part of the process facilitating social change, thereby overcoming the shortcomings of the frameworks of capabilities and social exclusion which lack an adequately dynamic theory. However, I find that Axel Honneth’s tripartite construct of recognition (explained later in this section) offers several advantages over Fraser’s. Specifically, Honneth’s framework legitimises and renders visible the psychosocial service outcomes that users identified, and the intersubjective or relationship-based processes of change they saw family support facilitating. As such, it more thoroughly captures service users’ perspectives on the outcomes and quality of family support.

In the remainder of this section, I introduce and explore both Fraser’s and Honneth’s understandings of recognition. In doing so, I develop and justify a conceptual framework which, in the chapters that follow, I apply to interpret and analyse users’ criteria for service performance and evaluation. The interpretive framework is built on an exploration of the problems emerging from Fraser and Honneth’s debates about the nature of recognition: whether recognition and redistribution are irreducible dimensions of justice (for which I accept aspects of Fraser’s arguments); and debates about which dimensions of social life constitute injustices of misrecognition and remedies of recognition (for which I accept Honneth’s approach).

- **Recognition and redistribution as mutually irreducible: adapting Fraser’s account**

  Nancy Fraser equates recognition with overcoming the disrespect which is institutionalised through value-laden cultural hierarchies, such as racism and homophobia (Fraser, 2003:16-17). Ultimately, overcoming these injustices involves the
acceptance of difference so that ‘assimilation to majority or dominant cultural norms is no longer the price of equal respect’ (Fraser, 2003:7). Fraser sees misrecognition to emanate from the cultural (as opposed to economic) institutions of the public sphere, and to be distinguished conceptually from the injustices of socio-economic maldistribution or class-based inequalities generated through the division of labour. The result is that, for her, responses to injustices must effectively interweave recognition with redistribution. As each is mutually irreducible, Fraser sees overcoming both maldistribution and misrecognition to be necessary preconditions for the achievement of social justice, which itself should be assessed against a standard or ideal of participatory parity, or whether arrangements allow all members of society to interact with one another as peers (Fraser, 2003:36)107.

Dichotomising economic and cultural injustice can seem to simplify social suffering (and its remedies). However, Fraser clearly dissociates recognition and redistribution for analytical purposes only, arguing for their necessary entwinement in practice, and the need for integrated political responses (Fraser, 1997:15). This represents a point at which Honneth’s concept of recognition diverges. He argues that Fraser exaggerates and misinterprets the significance of economic justice, by divorcing it from what he sees as the fundamentally moral quality of social relationships (Honneth, 2003a: 116). In contrast, he contends that distribution does not simply derive from the class-based relations of production, but instead, that economic arrangements, like wage inequalities, are a means through which institutions express their esteem for particular socio-cultural activities (Honneth, 2001:54). Thus, in Honneth’s alternative conception, distributive or economic outcomes are understood as expressions of cultural recognition, on a continuum of respect (Honneth, 2003a: 135)108.

107 I appreciate Fraser’s recent revision of this framework (Fraser and Naples, 2004; Fraser, 2005) and addition of the category of ‘representation’, which contributes the political dimension necessary for realising the economic and cultural strategies identified in her previous work, in particular in an international context (e.g. Fraser, 2000, 2001). I do not adapt ‘representation’ to the framework used here. However, ‘representation’ can be understood as something service users sought through their participation in evaluation.

108 Similarly, Young (1997:149) rejects Fraser’s dichotomy, preferring instead to pluralise categories to reflect the fusion of economic and cultural power.
On the question of whether recognition itself constitutes social justice or is part of it (alongside redistribution), I accept Fraser’s basic position in order to clearly represent the themes emerging in service users’ accounts. While Honneth’s critique is valid, isolating economic redistribution as a conceptually discrete aspect of justice helps to capture the visions of participants in this study of the outcomes of family support. Although they are evident as weak themes only, redistributive outcomes did emerge in users’ accounts (as shown in the preliminary analysis above). Indeed, adapting Fraser’s category of redistribution alongside recognition highlights that these welfare services played a role in transferring material resources and education, especially to single parent families in poverty (almost all of whom were, in this case, estranged from the labour market or in low paid, unskilled, intermittent or voluntary work). Identifying redistribution as a discrete category of justice is also important because, while it shows that material outcomes were important to service users, it also allows the interpretation to show the value participants placed on this service outcome compared to outcomes of recognition, allowing the framework to rightly portray economic outcomes as present yet ‘weak’ themes emerging from the data.

In this way, a framework separating the distributive and recognition aspects of users’ ideals of justice more appropriately captures how they valued the contribution of these social services. Economic outcomes would be overshadowed and obscured if understood solely on a continuum of recognition as portrayed in Honneth’s alternative. Indeed, as I have suggested in this Chapter (and as I show in more detail in Chapter Seven), service users in the study valued the services’ direct contribution of pooled resources that allowed them to obtain basic household items, and to participate in activities they would otherwise be unable to afford. In other words, users’ accounts make visible the direct economic value of the items and activities offered to them by family support, rather than solely the respect or cultural status associated with these items.

109 Of course, the relative weakness of this theme is not surprising, as directly redistributing resources to overcome poverty is not the central task of family support services (although some interventions seek to alleviate poverty in order to reduce the risk of child neglect).
Maintaining a separation between redistribution and recognition allows us to show the emphasis these service users placed on achieving respect and recognition than overcoming material injustices (which, given the nature of family support, would not be legitimate to expect). Further, Fraser’s dichotomy helps make visible the wide range of outcomes users identified that relate to the elimination of disrespect, showing how they used these community services primarily to achieve these outcomes rather than gain any direct help in overcoming the material aspects of poverty and inequality. I therefore justify adapting Fraser’s distinction between recognition and redistribution for its resonance with the visions of justice evoked in participants’ accounts of family service outcomes.

Zurn (2003) also identifies strength in how Fraser’s framework does not displace maldistribution by absorbing it into the analytical category of misrecognition, because this leaves the framework open to complex interconnections between the two categories. However, while he makes a generalised argument on the basis of the philosophical advantages Fraser’s framework has over alternatives, I incorporate Fraser’s distinction for its substantive significance: because of the resonance between its basic categories and the typology of service outcomes that emerged through the preliminary generation of grounded theory in this research, and not for any supposed universal superiority for conceptualising injustice.

Fraser’s categories add clarity by highlighting the emphasis users attributed to recognition, without marginalising the outcomes of redistribution they did experience in using family support. This helps show the strength with which service users in the study consider family support services in terms of their pursuit of recognition and respect. However, as I show in the following subsection, the users’ perspectives on family support outcomes are more thoroughly and insightfully expressed through Honneth’s concept of recognition.

- **What constitutes recognition? Adapting Honneth’s account**

For the purposes of this study, Fraser’s framework helps identify the importance of recognition but does not enable the analysis to fully capture the detail of how these service users experienced family support services. In contrast to Fraser’s focus on
recognition as overcoming *institutionalised* status subordination, Honneth defines recognition as a process of self-realisation through which subjects overcome humiliation or injuries to personal integrity, honour and dignity. For him, recognition is an essentially *intersubjective* process: ‘one’s attitude towards oneself emerges in one’s encounter with an other’s attitude toward oneself’ (Anderson and Honneth, 2005:131). Individual identity is formed only in and through interactive relations of recognition, and a healthy and intact sense of self is the critical ingredient and the ultimate essence of social justice and change.

Honneth’s approach focuses on the psychological underpinnings of personal and socio-political change, taking the position that ‘the experience of disrespect is anchored in the affective life of human subjects in such a way that it can provide the motivational impetus for social resistance and conflict, indeed, for a struggle for recognition’ (1995:132). In this frame, negative psychological responses or emotional reactions to social interactions, such as feeling ashamed, angry, hurt or invisible are understood to ‘comprise the psychological symptoms on the basis of which one can come to realise that one is being illegitimately denied social recognition’ (Honneth, 1995:136). In other words, social struggles for recognition can be catalysed by *feelings of harm*. The idea of ‘felt harm’ as a catalyst for change helps explain how the stigma, shame, frustration, depression and inadequacy commonly felt amongst parents and children using family welfare services are potentially change-inducing (Colton et al, 1997a, 1997b).

Honneth therefore captures the ways in which suffering, which is psychological and relational in character, can facilitate social change, and how the elimination of such suffering can constitute a legitimate standard for evaluating social progress. Importantly, this accommodates injustices not necessarily subject to the political articulation of social movements or, in his words, those ‘social struggles that occur in the shadows of the political public sphere’ (Honneth, 2003a: 122). Honneth’s concept thus offers to capture the harms the family support service users felt in their private worlds of family life, and in their interactions with the child protection system, which exist without political articulation by the social movements so central to Fraser’s
account. Indeed, making these relational and non-material forms of injustice overt and publicly visible is cited by Lister (2004, 2002) as a reason for departing from Fraser’s concept of recognition, given the centrality of these kinds of suffering to the experiences of people in poverty. Macdonald and Merrill (2002) also criticise Fraser’s eschewal of the psychological and inter-subjective dimensions of recognition, in this case in relation to care workers’ struggles for justice.

Honneth’s conception of recognition highlights the psychosocial and motivational dimensions of personal injury reflected in the family support service users’ claims for wider social change. Indeed, service users’ circumstances are well captured by this position, as no public political expression or organised justice strategy exists to address the injustices they face. By identifying the injustices manifest in the realm of personal interactions, Honneth’s construction of recognition thus resonates with these family service users’ descriptions of the suffering they experienced, and their aspirations for self-realisation and personal authenticity.

There are other reasons for using Honneth’s framework to understand family support. Doing so responds to observations that the recognition paradigm has been surprisingly underutilised in research about mobilisations for social change by, for and about mothers (termed ‘motherist’ by this author) (Valiente, 2003). The parents who use the parent support services are predominantly mothers, and they expressed the value of family support in helping overcome the suffering they felt in their personal relationships with children and partners, and in their interactions with welfare professionals. As I have documented in the preliminary analysis (and show in more detail when I apply the interpretive framework in Chapter Seven), participants expressed their experience of service-led change most coherently in terms of ‘feeling better’ about themselves as people and as parents, through the gradual self-realisation and personal authenticity associated with achieving change in the realm of partner and parenting relationships. As such, Honneth’s concept of recognition most appropriately captures these parents’ aspirations, which were not expressed in terms of overcoming

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110 No formal advocacy organisations exist in Australia for parents involved in either statutory or non-government child welfare interventions.
institutionalised status subordination (Fraser’s conception), achieving ‘inclusion’ or enhancing their ‘Capabilities’.

Importantly, evaluating the extent to which Honneth’s and Fraser’s approaches capture these service users’ perspectives leads to different conclusions from those arrived at by assessments conducted in purely theoretical terms. Zurn (2003), for example, assesses them without an empirical point of reference, and makes a point contrary to the one I make here. He argues that Honneth’s framework is inferior to Fraser’s because it defines injustice as subjectively felt harm, while I have agreed with Honneth that conceptualising injustice as ‘felt harm’ helps bring hidden forms of suffering out of the ‘shadows’. Zurn argues that Fraser’s ideal overcomes the ‘false consciousness’ dilemma, which occurs in instances where people may be subordinated and not feel harmed, or vice versa, where people may feel injustice although their status is not downgraded. However, the concern of this research is to interpret service users’ perspectives on the outcomes of family support (with the aim of reconsidering what it is that performance measurement should capture and what service users can contribute). As such, it is necessary to treat users’ feelings and accounts as valid perspectives and not as false consciousness. Indeed, this is appropriate given that family support services purposefully train service users to interpret and respond to their own needs, and to gain the self-awareness to necessary set their own goals and work toward their ideals for family life.

Overall, Honneth’s encapsulation of subjective experiences of harm allows a fitting detour from Fraser’s limited focus on the kinds of respect claimed by ‘legitimate’ social movements organised in the public sphere (e.g. gay rights, anti-racism). With the injustices faced by family support users in mind, it is possible to see that Fraser’s concept of recognition risks reproducing exclusionary mechanisms that direct attention to organised, accepted struggles over more fragmented forms of injustice, such as those occurring within families and personal relationships.

Unlike Fraser’s approach, Honneth’s concept of recognition applies to those social problems and injustices that have not attained the organisational level of a political
movement (Honneth, 2003a: 119). The result is a richer, broader concept that encompasses forms of injustice and social struggle that go beyond those currently organised and accepted as legitimate movements in the public sphere. The theoretical framework of recognition which results from Honneth’s work better reflects the context of disadvantage, such as the isolation, exclusion and violence which shapes family support service delivery and the lives of service users. Moreover, it has superior potential for capturing the ideals of justice described by these family support service users.

- **Honneth’s tripartite concept of recognition**

Closer consideration of Honneth’s concept of recognition more precisely reveals its strengths in establishing ‘love’, ‘legal status’ and ‘solidarity’ as the formal conditions for human dignity, personal integrity and a good life (Honneth, 2001:50). These principles are intended to be formal and abstract enough to be universalised (Zurn, 2003:528), and are summarised in Table 6, below.

For interpreting the findings from this study, differentiating recognition into Honneth’s categories of love, legal status and solidarity helps highlight the complexity and richness of these service users’ perspectives on the outcomes resulting from family support. Importantly, using these three categories as forms of misrecognition simultaneously brings together and distinguishes the kinds of moral injury (and their social contexts) that Honneth (1995) identifies. These are, firstly, the denial of the basic human rights of physical integrity and emotional attachment (in the category of ‘love’); secondly, the withdrawal of formal ‘legal rights’; and thirdly, the humiliation and damage to honour resulting from stereotypes of personal failings and from the failure to recognise the individual’s abilities and achievements as productive citizens (captured in the category of ‘solidarity’). Incorporating this tripartite distinction into the

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111 Regardless of their social change goals, neither family support services nor their service users can be considered to be part of organised ‘social movements’ in the usual sense, even though some US commentators have described family support as a ‘movement’ (e.g. Kagan and Weissbourd, 1994). Family support service users do not have formal organisations and do not participate in collective action.

112 In subsequent work (e.g. Honneth, 2001, 2003a) Honneth does not use the term solidarity, but instead refers to this principle as ‘achievement’. However, the term ‘solidarity’ is most appropriate for
conceptual framework enables us to differentiate among the ways family support services can achieve justice.

Table 6   Summary of Honneth’s tripartite construct of recognition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form of recognition</th>
<th>Love</th>
<th>Legal Status</th>
<th>Solidarity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent relationships</td>
<td>Primary relationships</td>
<td>Legal relations, rights</td>
<td>Community relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parent-Self</td>
<td>Parent-State</td>
<td>Parent-Peer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parent-Child</td>
<td></td>
<td>Parent-Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parent-Partner</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical relation-to-self</td>
<td>Self Confidence</td>
<td>Self Respect</td>
<td>Self Esteem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form of disrespect</td>
<td>Abuse, neglect, rape</td>
<td>Denial of rights, exclusion</td>
<td>Denigration, insult, isolation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threatened component of identity</td>
<td>Physical integrity</td>
<td>Social Integrity</td>
<td>Honour, dignity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emotional attachment</td>
<td>Rights</td>
<td>Acknowledgement of achievement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With the exception of ‘parent relationships’, this table is adapted from that in Honneth (1995:129)

For Honneth, the tripartite concept of recognition can be used to reveal the social realities of suffering, to understand the impetus for struggles for change, and importantly, to evaluate the moral dimensions of social change. In his words, the three principles ‘can be interpreted as indicators of moral progress in the sense that they can inform us about the desirability of processes of social change’ (Honneth, 2003b: 263). Further, the indicators of progress can inform us ‘in a way that allows the perspectives of those affected to be articulated’ (Honneth, 2003b: 265). For these reasons, capturing the outcomes described by service users in the study, which are outlined in more detail in Chapter Seven.

\[113\] Indeed, Honneth envisages the use of his framework of recognition as an evaluative standard for assessing the capacity of legislation and policy to guarantee these relationships (Markle, 2004). As such, it can also be applied as an evaluative standard for assessing the contribution of welfare interventions.
Honneth’s tripartite framework provides a structured theory for interpreting the data on outcomes generated in the study, but allows the resulting interpretation to preserve the diversity and authenticity of the service users’ accounts that emerged in the study.

6.4 Conclusions

Grounded in a preliminary analysis of service users’ accounts, Chapter Six has developed a theoretically informed framework for more a detailed interpretation of users’ perspectives on service outcomes, quality and evaluation. By considering how users’ accounts reflect their unfulfilled social ideals and broader visions of justice, the framework draws service users’ perspectives into debates about the goals of family support and, indeed, the goals of social policy, and criteria for assessing progress toward them.

By interpreting the themes emerging as threads of service users’ visions of social justice, I raised the need to develop an interpretive framework which is not only empirically grounded but also corroborated with existing theoretical approaches. Having considered justice as ‘social inclusion’, ‘capabilities’ and ‘recognition’, I argued that although it is useful to capture users’ accounts in Fraser’s categories of redistribution and recognition, Axel Honneth’s exposition (1995; 2001) of recognition most thoroughly encapsulates the priorities emerging from service users’ accounts.

In Honneth’s framework, harms of misrecognition are primarily psychological and inter-subjective, including domination, humiliation, invisibility and disrespect according to their cultural identities (including, but not limited to, factors like gender, race and religion). Recognition thus relates to overcoming humiliation, inauthenticity, degradation and disrespect so that people have the capacity to act morally as individuals and in wider social and political systems (including social services). As I have argued, Honneth’s framework of recognition as ‘love’, ‘legal status’ and ‘solidarity’ helps generate theoretically grounded criteria for understanding (and evaluating) the

However, I am unaware of any other use of Honneth’s tripartite concept of recognition for conceptualising criteria for evaluating social service interventions specifically.
contribution of welfare interventions. In the following Chapters, I apply and interrogate this framework in more detail in order to understand users’ perspectives on the outcomes, quality and evaluation of family support, and to establish the scope for incorporating their perspectives in performance measurement. The resulting taxonomy reframes community services – and indeed, social policy – in terms of the pursuit of respect, a position that highlights the limitations of the efficiency focus currently underpinning social service evaluation and funding.
Chapter Seven

Users’ criteria for evaluating service outcomes: a case study in the politics of recognition

7.1 Introduction

Service users’ criteria for measuring the outcomes of family support are well captured using the social justice framework developed and justified in Chapter Six. These criteria, along with those with which users assess service quality and their preferred evaluation methods (see Chapters Eight and Nine), form the alternative discourse of ‘performance’ with which users routinely experience and assess the value of family support. The findings show how service users construct evaluation criteria and prefer evaluation methods that do not align easily with dominant approaches to performance measurement (such as the government performance indicators examined in Chapter Three).

The findings I present in this Chapter build on the preliminary analysis featured in Chapter Six, in which I argued that service users define and assess the performance of family support according to how these services facilitate their struggles for social justice. However, the range of potential meanings of ‘social justice’ highlighted the need to corroborate users’ definitions with the insights of different theoretical approaches. To this end, I explored the possibility of capturing users’ perspectives within three competing concepts: justice as ‘inclusion’, justice as ‘capabilities’ and justice as ‘recognition’. I concluded that justice as recognition best captures users’ experiences and aspirations for service-led change. The interpretive framework developed in Chapter Six drew on aspects of two conceptions of recognition that have been
stridently counter-posed (Fraser and Honneth, 2003). The content of the preliminary findings led me to adopt aspects of Fraser’s separation of justice into two components (redistribution and recognition), and of Honneth’s understanding of recognition as internally constituted by three dimensions: ‘love’, ‘legal status’ and ‘solidarity’. Fraser’s conceptual framework reflects how users in the study experienced redistributive outcomes by using family support, although overcoming the material dimensions of poverty and inequality are not primary goals of these services. However, Honneth’s concept of recognition best captures the types of harms users described overcoming, as well as the intersubjective (rather than institutional) process through which family support services facilitate social change outside of the organised social movements visible in the public sphere. The interpretive framework that results can be summarised and depicted graphically, as in Figure 7 (below):

Figure 7: Summary of interpretive framework

![Diagram of interpretive framework]

In this Chapter, I apply this framework to present and more thoroughly dissect service users’ accounts of the outcomes of family support. These accounts resulted from discussion generated in the interviews and focus groups around questions one,
two, and five in the Questioning Route (See Table 4, Chapter Five). In Section 7.2 I consider the outcomes that relate to distributive justice, as they emerged in users’ accounts. In Section 7.3 I present users’ criteria for outcomes in terms of the three categories of recognition drawn from Axel Honneth’s work and justified in Chapter Six. The first is ‘love’ (7.3.1), which I adapt to the context of family support to capture users’ experience and expression of ‘self-love’ (7.3.2) and ‘familial love’ (7.3.3). The second category (7.3.4) is ‘legal status’, which relates to users’ rights and self-respect as morally responsible actors (especially in their interactions with child protection authorities). The third category, ‘solidarity’ (7.3.5), captures how users saw family support helping them to achieve connection by forming bonds of community and overcoming isolation and socio-cultural difference.

### 7.2 Outcomes of distributive justice

Service users in the study described achieving (or hoping to achieve) outcomes that remedy what Nancy Fraser terms ‘distributive’ injustices. Fraser’s category of distributive injustice includes the poverty and unemployment which users experienced, and which is rooted in the economic structure of society. Service outcomes described by participants in this category include gaining access to otherwise unaffordable household items and opportunities, gaining skills and knowledge which they believed would help them find paid work and eliminate poverty from their household, and taking steps to ensure their children would grow up with the education to participate fully in work and society. However, only two people (Olivia and Kay, who took part in the same focus group) directly referred to receiving help because of their ‘low income’ status or because they were ‘living on the poverty line’ (though the sentiments they expressed were not contested by the others\(^{114}\)). Olivia explained how, for herself and

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\(^{114}\) Interestingly, Olivia and Kay took part in the same focus group in Western Sydney. That service was located in a suburb which, despite being relatively deprived, was in close proximity to wealthier areas. This centre was in an area easily accessible to a major metropolitan centre as well as a middle-class local government area. In part, this location meant that residents tended to mix with wealthier people on a daily basis (unlike at the services in Sydney’s outer west and southwest). This is likely to have contributed to their articulation of their disadvantaged economic position. However, as well as recognising their poverty relative to localised pockets of prosperity, these parents’ language is also a likely reflection of the discussions they were exposed to at that centre (which was involved in some
her children, the family service offered opportunities for education with which to break the cycle of material disadvantage. She said:

> Because we’re on low incomes, a lot of the children all are aware of what it’s like to live on the poverty line basically. And they’re not gonna want to have that in their life. So with here, we’ve got the resources to show them how to achieve better. (Olivia, western Sydney)

Yet although parents rarely used terms like ‘poverty’ or ‘inequality’ to discuss the hardship they faced, they did mention things like daily ‘problems with money’ and ‘not being able to afford things’, albeit in passing. On the mid north coast, Heidi explained how she saw this kind of hardship, and others in the group agreed. She said:

> Most of the women here are single parents, so I mean you’ve got the stress of bringing up the child. And the stress of – you know, financial worries (others signal agreement), housing and all that sort of stuff. (Heidi, mid-north coast)

Indeed, service users’ consciousness of their common experience of economic injustice is reflected in their perceptions that Burnside was helping them to redress problems by providing access to specific items like furniture or clothing, or accessing opportunities like education or social activities which participants did not think they’d otherwise have because of the cost.

### 7.2.1 Material resources

At every centre, participants described how services allowed parenting group attendees and their families to pool material resources. This sharing was both informal, as parents borrowed and lent things like clothes and household items spontaneously amongst themselves as their peer networks expanded, and formally organised by staff. ‘Formal redistribution’ occurred at all the family service sites as parents received donations of second-hand clothing and other household items distributed by charities, community advocacy work, including work in the media and in fundraising, especially through the local member of parliament).

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115 The fact that economic difficulties emerged as weak themes only does not imply users lacked awareness of the economic dimensions of justice they faced. Instead, the weakness of redistributive goals relates to the fact that these were only one in a set of difficulties they faced; that family support is not primarily focused on resource distribution; and in some cases, users may have been accustomed to the material dimensions of poverty they experienced.
or were able to use the resources of the family service itself. For example, at the southwest Sydney centre, second-hand items were regularly distributed, supplies were stored in the ‘clothing cupboard’, and families described how they used Burnside’s office equipment on occasion. Gardening equipment was also formally shared amongst the families involved with the centre. At the western Sydney centre, larger items that had been donated were usually organised for distribution through raffles. Olivia explained the benefit of this:

… here they have the raffles, and I was able to benefit by getting a double mattress for my daughter … it was very expensive to outlay for a mattress but I was able to get the bed and then get the mattress for free, which was very helpful. (Olivia, western Sydney)

At the western Sydney centre and on the mid-north coast, material help at stressful times of the year such as Christmas, was repeatedly cited as a service outcome. Heidi, for example, articulated the impact of the extra help for her, referring to things middle-class people tend to take for granted:

the hamper at Christmas was really handy and I mean it wasn’t just food there was a lot of toiletry stuff in it, like soap and toothpaste and shampoo … even the plastic plates, the paper plates, the napkins, the bonbons as well, that was in it as well … Y’know they came round and delivered it and it wasn’t small. It was huge … and a lot of the tinned stuff as well … It was very much welcomed I can tell you. (Heidi, mid-north coast)

7.2.2 Affordable activities

As well as getting help to access material resources like food or clothing, at all the sites and in all the focus groups, participants identified how parenting groups facilitated access to opportunities, activities and local knowledge that their families wouldn’t otherwise have had, largely because of the costs. Suzannah, in outer-western Sydney, and Tony, in south-west Sydney, described the help in these terms. They said:

Being a single parent myself, we can go on excursions, and we go to places we might not have been able to afford on our own. (Suzannah, outer-western Sydney)

There are places where you go to where you gotta pay money to go on outings and that sort of stuff. This place you don’t, you know. (Tony, south-west Sydney)
For Phillip, a single father, Burnside provided the family with a free place to go for recreation. He valued being able to

... come to a group and see the kids havin’ a ball and laughing their heads off and enjoying things that they wouldn’t have if it wasn’t for this. I mean I can’t take my kids many places because I can’t afford to. (Phillip, south-west Sydney)

In western Sydney, the family centre’s provision of access to activities was particularly important for recent migrants, although they emphasised how this gave them local knowledge to overcome isolation as well as free activities. As one mother who had migrated to Australia in the mid-1990s described:

Because of my family problems, especially because of my husband’s illness I didn’t know anywhere, I hadn’t gone anywhere. But through Burnside I was able to see some parks here … I got to know where the park was and the next day I was able to take my kids there myself. (Saira, western Sydney)

Staff interviewees verified that access to affordable opportunities was an important outcome for these service users and their children. Nerida, for example, explained:

we take them out in the holidays to places they haven’t been or to places they may not get to go because there’s a lack of transport, a lack of money (Nerida, southwest Sydney)

Similarly, on the mid-north coast, Debbie, a family worker, explained how the service helped provide activities for families, by pooling and saving money for modest and inexpensive outings or activities. Interestingly, she did not frame this as an ‘economic’ benefit, but instead as something which would broaden participants’ horizons:

They may take away an experience they wouldn’t normally have – like go on a barbeque … they don’t go to those places very often, and like we said also that we’d save up our money from group\(^{116}\) that we didn’t spend and then go to Chinese. I mean it’s things that they don’t do. So I think it broadens their horizons (Debbie, mid-north coast)

\(^{116}\) Debbie is referring to the small weekly food budget used to run the teenage parent group.
7.2.3 Education and employment

In all the groups and interviews, female participants described how these family support services improved their children’s school performance, and would ultimately help them to escape poverty, citing school reports and tests as evidence of performance. Education and employment were identified as service outcomes most strongly at the western Sydney centre, where programs were explicitly designed to use education to break cycles of disadvantage, where this logic was a strongly articulated shared value amongst parents and staff, and where the opportunity to participate in parenting groups resulted from children’s participation in tutoring or playgroup. This was true for Tahmeena, who had migrated to Australia from Afghanistan in the mid-1990s, and who found the support of extra tuition to be the main outcome of her involvement with the centre, as it helped her children to overcome the disruption and material disadvantage faced in migrating. Through a translator, she explained this in terms of the affordability of services:

I’m on a pension myself and I cannot ever afford to be able to have extra tuition for my children. And the teachers here are pretty experienced and they help our children. (Tahmeena, western Sydney)

Another mother at the same centre saw that she and the other migrant families more strongly valued tutoring, and used this assistance to a greater extent than did Anglo-Celtic Australian families. She explained this through a translator:

I have observed that some Australian families, for example, they come to homework group or for maths teaching but they don’t pursue it further, they don’t continue, they leave it off and they don’t sort of take advantage of the help provided. But with us, I don’t have the money to spend and my children and myself are very sort of enthusiastic about learning (Saira, western Sydney)

Yet Anglo-Celtic Australian parents in the study did value the support of the service for their children’s education, as the tutoring provided help that they could not. Jennifer for example, articulated her difficulty in helping with children’s homework, in a way that pointed to similar outcomes identified by the migrant mothers. But whereas

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117 Education and employment outcomes were not discussed by the men’s group on the mid-north coast.
the migrant mothers interpreted their needs on the basis of language difficulties, Jennifer interpreted her need in terms of changes in the education system over the years (although she also had an interrupted schooling):

well it’s all changed, the mathematics that I used to learn at school, I can’t even sit down and say to my kids ‘that’s how you do it’. (Jennifer, western Sydney)

While education outcomes for children tended to be mentioned early in the discussions, participants only identified these as outcomes which services helped them to achieve for themselves after they had discussed services’ impact on other factors such as their parenting skills and family relationships. A young mother, for example, described that without her parenting group:

I wouldn’t be doing school, I wouldn’t be getting myself a job … I would be thinking that I can’t do anything. (Megan, mid-north coast)

In the case of the men, only in one focus group (south-west Sydney) did they mention that family services benefit their education and employment, whereas women at each of the centres mentioned these outcomes\textsuperscript{118}.

Towards the end of the interview with Jennifer in western Sydney, she explained how Burnside helped her to consider beginning a career in childcare, a goal she set for herself for the time when the youngest of her seven children started school. Although she was nervous about this after so long out of paid work, the parenting courses she had done through the centre gave her confidence she felt she could draw on in pursuing training and a career. She explained

I was very timid, shy, ‘go with the flow’ you know what I mean? A follower and not a leader. Where I’m getting to the stage where I’ve got the brainpower, I think ‘I can achieve this if I put my mind to it, I can do anything’. And I do. As I said I’m petrified about starting TAFE … I am petrified of starting in the workforce. But I thought childcare, what better input? Twenty-six years of childcare experience and all the courses I’ve done, I’ve gotta have a foot in the door! (Jennifer, western Sydney)

\textsuperscript{118} Quite possibly, the greater emphasis women placed on this outcome reflects their lower levels of connection with the labour market compared with men, especially given the high incidence of sole mothers in the study.
However, other mothers at the western Sydney service had mixed views as to the importance of the employment outcomes of family services. One participant in a pair interview would have preferred the service to place more emphasis on achieving employment and education outcomes. She said:

The courses that we were doing, yeah they were great for our children and all that but they never gave us a job or gave us the – they gave us confidence, yes, but not all that much to go back out in the workforce. (Rose, western Sydney)

Encountering this critique at the western Sydney service was surprising, given that this centre did offer some courses with a vocational focus (e.g. computer classes). However, Rose’s perspective was atypical on this matter, perhaps reflecting that she had been involved with the centre for longer than others, had successfully stabilised her family through a succession of interventions, and had recently re-entered the workforce. In recent years, she had become less involved with the centre, so perhaps had seen the limitations of the assistance the service could provide, compared to the extensive skills and qualifications required for employment and mobility in the labour force. However Olivia, another long-term service user at the same centre (but in a different focus group to Rose) placed a lower priority on this outcome, and even felt that it might be worthwhile to trade it off in favour of developing a broader ‘life’ understanding.

I’d rather have done this than have ever gone out and got a job and got money because it’s helped me understand so much more. (Olivia, western Sydney)

It was not only the content of the parenting groups that was seen to assist parents to achieve education and employment outcomes, but also the opportunities to develop skills and awareness in family support which parents expected to be more widely applicable. Parents in both western and south-west Sydney valued the contribution of family services in terms of opportunities to build skills through the practical experience of volunteering at the centre, for example, answering phones and helping at the reception desk, believing this would assist them to get a job eventually. Others described gaining awareness from informal discussions with other mothers who had recently entered education or work. It is important to note that the most vigorous discussion about the employment outcomes occurred at the western Sydney site, where
parents lived in closer proximity to jobs than did those in the outer-west and south-west services, and where the service had an explicitly educational focus. This may have influenced the discussion in those focus groups about the extent to which family support should aim to achieve employment outcomes.

Staff described outcomes relating to education and employment in slightly different ways to the parents in the study, although their responses do confirm these outcomes as important overall. Staff emphasised the educational outcomes for the children (as did the parents), but they did not mention any contribution the services might make to parents’ prospects for further education and employment. Of course, this is not surprising, given that the services are aiming primarily to enhance the wellbeing of children, and to increase the attentiveness of parents to children for child protection purposes. Indeed, the parents expressed stronger aspirations to rejoin the workforce or further their education than staff seemed to respond to, with staff instead emphasising parents’ role in caring for children and contributing to their future workforce potential, rather than their own.

7.3 Outcomes of recognition

As described in 7.2, redistributive outcomes such as access to material resources, activities, and education emerged as clear themes in parents’ accounts of using family support. Yet as I will show in the remainder of the Chapter, users identified stronger and more complex themes relating to how family services help address kinds of subordination and suffering which are less directly linked to their economic status than their personal wellbeing, self-realisation and respect.

As discussed in Chapter Six, Axel Honneth’s portrayal of recognition as intersubjective and as embodying three dimensions (‘love’, ‘legal status’ and ‘solidarity’) offers to capture users’ perspectives as they emerged in the preliminary analysis. Honneth rejects Fraser’s separation of material forms of justice, instead arguing that economic redistribution reflects cultural value systems which can be captured in the concept of recognition. However, service users’ perspectives give only weak support for Honneth’s interpretation of recognition as containing dimensions of economic
justice, hence my separation of their perspectives into the categories of redistribution and recognition. As I outlined in 7.2, service users in the study defined the modest material resources they received as part of the service, like obtaining second-hand goods and access to affordable activities and education, as important service outcomes. But while participants articulated the value of these welfare services in easing their experiences of financial difficulty and improving their economic status, they also valued the way material benefits made them feel rewarded and part of a community. In this way, outcomes of recognition and redistribution can be understood to partially overlap in the sense captured in Honneth’s account. This is reflected in Lydia’s comment that:

We go home with goodies on a Thursday don’t we? We have little raffles, things to make us feel like we got rewarded or we’re getting something as a gift that we don’t get out there. (Lydia, western Sydney)

However, relatively few users in the study expressed perspectives strongly supporting the inclusion of economic outcomes within a framework of recognition. Thus, separating the outcomes of redistribution and recognition for analytic purposes remains a useful exercise. Indeed, the interpretive framework I apply here traces the injustices parents saw themselves overcoming both in the economic structure and in patterns of societal recognition.

However, while service users aspired to both redistribution and recognition, the outcomes they defined are most thoroughly encapsulated in Honneth’s articulation of social justice as recognition, or as overcoming humiliation or injury to one’s dignity via mutual, personalised exchanges. Olivia’s accounts emphasise the intersubjective nature of the social justice that she, and other service users, were pursuing. She claimed that ‘we’re genuine people, we don’t need people not being genuine to us’, and ‘if society wants people to change, it’s going to have to change its attitudes toward people’, adding that ‘Burnside is the only place that I know who’s done that’ (Olivia, western Sydney). Olivia’s claims capture the dialogic nature of recognition, in ways well accounted for in Honneth’s concept. Further, Olivia also revealed how she valued service outcomes which are best classified as aspects of cultural recognition, and considered these outcomes more highly than things like getting a job. Drawing nods from others in the focus group, she said that without the group:
I wouldn’t have walked in other people’s shoes, I wouldn’t be empathetic or understanding or anything. (Olivia, western Sydney)

The following sections apply Honneth’s categories of recognition as love, legal status, and solidarity, to more deeply interpret the significance of service users’ perspectives on family service outcomes of recognition. In doing so, I characterise family support services, and the organisations and welfare professionals that provide them, as facilitators of service users’ struggles for recognition.

7.3.1 Love

- Adapting Honneth’s idea of ‘love’ to family support

In Honneth’s framework, the most basic form of recognition is ‘love’, located in primary relations of affection such as parent-child and partner relationships, and intimate friendships. Honneth’s idea of affective acceptance and encouragement in the form of ‘symbiotically nourished bonds’ (Honneth, 1995:107) that are free from physical degradation characterises love as the first stage of reciprocal recognition, as subjects ‘confirm each other with regard to the concrete nature of their needs and thereby recognise each other as needy creatures’ (Honneth, 1995:95). For Honneth, ‘love’ includes the basic emotional self-confidence brought about by and through these primary relationships: ‘the courage to engage with one’s deepest feelings both openly and critically is facilitated by the sure love of others and the self-trust it supports’ (Anderson and Honneth, 2005:135). Indeed, for Honneth, intersubjective experiences of love, such as the archetypal emotional attentiveness of ideal parental love, are psychological preconditions for self-knowledge, the expression of needs and feelings to others, the development of self-respect and, ultimately, autonomous participation in public life (Honneth, 1995:107).

Here I accept the notion of ‘love’ that Honneth posits, insofar as he sees self-confidence and trust in oneself to be essential preconditions for self-expression and public participation. However, adapting the idea of ‘love’ to the contexts of family service provision requires some slight divergence from Honneth’s position. Although he sees love to be transmitted through interpersonal exchanges, he accepts that because ‘positive feelings about other people are not matters of choice, the love relationship
cannot be extended at will’ (Honneth, 1995:107). He states: ‘because such attitudes of emotional acceptance are tied to preconditions outside the control of individuals, such as sympathy and attraction, they cannot be transferred at will to a wider circle of interacting members’ (Honneth, 2001:49). In this way, Honneth suggests that love is natural and instinctive, portraying loving relationships as bounded by an attraction and a moral particularism that makes them largely unresponsive to intervention.

Honneth’s suggestion that love relationships are fixed is an aspect of his position not completely compatible with family support practices and values. In essence, these services are organised helping interventions designed to actively regenerate ‘love’, so as to assist vulnerable mothers and fathers both to manage the burdens and to experience the pleasures of family care-giving. Here I find it necessary to interpret family service outcomes by breaking, at least in part, with Honneth’s understanding, attributing to subjects the moral agency to influence their experiences of love relationships, and to services the capacity to support the self-determination of service users in intimate life.

My use of the concept of ‘love’ recognises that professionals and governments can support exchanges of love, for example, by provide childrearing information and guidance. When they work well, family services can help reorganise ‘love’ relations within families in attempts to ‘quality manage’ women’s, men’s and children’s intimate relationships, specifically to eradicate domestic violence and child abuse and neglect. By assisting women living in poverty and isolated from kin-based supports, family support services can, for example, help women to reconstruct and extend love exchanges into relationships where this may not be being expressed (for example, with children). Further, they can support women to withdraw their love from violent, degrading or dissatisfying intimate relationships. Family support interventions can therefore implicitly challenge assumptions of the naturalness of motherly and wifely care. Using Honneth’s category in this context requires that it be adapted into a feminist frame, so

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119 Gillies (2005) is critical of the values that underlie parent support interventions instigated by the Blair government. She offers a cogent critique of how interventions are driven by a moral agenda seeking to regulate and control the behaviour of poor families. While her critique focuses on the class-based ideologies with which governments construct parenting (and parent support), it implicitly supports the fact that governments and welfare professionals can play a role in supporting exchanges of ‘love’.
that intimate relationships are seen not to be fixed or natural but as matters of choice amenable to personal and organised interventions\textsuperscript{120}.

As I use the category here, outcomes of ‘love’ are implicitly underpinned with the feminist understanding that interventions like family support services can and do help parents, and mothers in particular, to manage their unpaid emotional and nurturing role in ways that further reproduce ‘love’ through the reciprocal recognition of family care. This understanding acknowledges the capacity of human services to help extend love relations to primary or other relationships, where ‘natural’ love may not be initially felt or expressed, especially between parents and children. Indeed, producing and reproducing ‘love’ between parents and children can be understood as the core business of child and family services. These services draw on workers’ professional skills in purposefully generating ‘love’, a process which can also be considered in terms of workers displaying the moral and political values associated with an ethic of care (e.g. Noddings, 2002; Tronto, 1994). Noddings (2002:22-30), for example, identifies an ‘ethical caring’ which is instrumental in establishing and restoring clients’ capacities for the ‘natural caring’ of family or kin-based love, a position clearly in contrast to Honneth’s fixed construction of ‘love’. Indeed, family workers’ ‘ethical caring’ forms part of their professional strategies for reproducing parental care for children, thereby assisting the facilitation of disadvantaged parents’ struggles for recognition\textsuperscript{121}.

For these reasons, I accept Honneth’s category of love as an element of the recognition sought by family service users in the study. However, I reject his characterisation of love as an idealised and static ‘natural’ care, recognising instead the role of governments and welfare professionals in facilitating the ‘love’ dimensions of users’ struggles for recognition. This adaptation of Honneth’s category more thoroughly accounts for the specific ways that quality family welfare interventions can produce, regulate and regenerate intimate and parent-child relations. In doing so, I

\textsuperscript{120} Indeed, family support services are founded on feminist orientations to change. They recognise the complexities of mothering, and, by assisting mothers to improve their positions, these services expose the falseness of biologically-based assumptions of childrearing as natural female proclivity (Featherstone, 2004).

\textsuperscript{121} The ways family workers facilitate struggles for recognition are considered in detail in Chapter Eight, as they constitute an element of service quality and are not outcomes in themselves.
accept the human capacity to actively foster and display more positive feelings about others, especially with regard to parental relationships with children. This accounts for the kinds of reciprocity and recognition that can be nurtured through organised and professional welfare interventions, attributing to governments, services and practitioners a role – and indeed a responsibility – to facilitate progress towards justice for service users.

- Outcomes of ‘love’

Two subcategories emerge from the analysis of users’ accounts of the ‘love’ outcomes resulting from using these family services. Firstly, by helping parents to show affection and manage their relationships with their children and each other, services helped improve parents’ own feelings toward themselves and their basic self-confidence (that is, their ‘love’ for and recognition of themselves). Secondly, services helped regenerate parent-child and other intimate family or ‘kinship’ relationships. As I show in this section, parents identified service outcomes relating to ‘love’ that resonate with broad social trends identified as affecting intimate life. Williams (2002:514), for example, highlights a shift from constructions of the intimate realm as one of tradition and convention, to one involving the negotiation of a sense of self-identity (which I capture in the category of ‘self-love’ – see section 7.3.2). Giddens (1999, 1992) identifies trends of democratisation and liberalisation affecting the sphere of familial love, as coercive power in partner and parent-child relationships is replaced with ideals of democratic public politics. Such principles include dialogue and mutual trust, equal rights, obligations, and respect, or other ‘authority relations which can be defended in a principled fashion’ (Giddens, 1992:109).

122 Support for this comes from the now burgeoning ‘emotional labour’ literature emerging from the work of Hochschild (1983).

123 Importantly, Williams attributes the emergence of demands for intimacy marked by negotiated commitment and identity, trust and respect to feminist struggles around sexuality and sexual identity, violence in personal relationships, and sexual abuse.

124 Ferguson (2001:8) also links child protection work to Giddens’ (1992) idea of the democratisation of family relationships, pointing to the way ‘best practice’ in this field should enable parents and children to communicate and negotiate in ways that promote equality and self-actualisation.
Indeed, the outcomes of recognition in the category of ‘love’ reflect users’ (and service workers’) visions of a democratised private sphere. Mothers in the study described how family support services helped them both to renegotiate their identities in intimate relationships, and to reconstruct their family relationships around non-coercive, non-violent principles. In doing so, they identified outcomes relating to their relationships with themselves, their partners and their children, and linked their achievement of personal physical autonomy (by escaping the violence to which they and their children were exposed) with confidence in their own self-worth and ability to parent. These service users framed their practical and emotional needs in intimate relationships as key elements of their personal and political aspirations for social change and justice. I characterise the components of the ‘love’ dimensions of recognition in two categories: self-love (7.3.2) and familial love (7.3.3).

### 7.3.2 Self-love

The service users in the study (both women and men) described service outcomes in terms of their improved ability to communicate and trust, their newfound confidence and independence, and more realistic ideals of the kinds of relationships they could have with their children. Most participants perceived improvements in their psychosocial health in terms of strengthening or rediscovering their identity, saying that in Burnside parenting groups for example ‘you just have an opportunity to really find out who you are’ (Olivia, western Sydney), and ‘you feel like you’re useful again’ (Craig, south-west Sydney). In focus groups and interviews at all the service sites, parents discussed how the groups encouraged them to develop their self-confidence. Olivia, for example, spoke of how Burnside groups helped parents to:

> get back your control – control of who we are, instead of everyone controlling us for a change. We’re empowered. (Olivia, western Sydney)

Louisa articulated her self-confidence in terms of the realisation she felt she achieved through parent groups:

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125 Note that Olivia’s experience of service outcomes as self-realisation compared to Craig’s experience of ‘feeling useful’ may reflect more deeply gendered constructions of self-identity.
They helped me come out of domestic violence that I didn’t realise. And also just to get my own personality back, because that made me scared and hiding. But they made me ‘Me’. I feel me again. (Louisa, outer-western Sydney)

In these ways, the mothers in the study established criteria of self-realisation, control, and personal authenticity in their definitions of the ‘love’ dimensions of service-led change, especially when describing how the services helped them escape or overcome violent partner relationships. In Honneth’s framework these forms of ‘self-love’ are seen in symbiosis with love for others, of which the archetype is the unconditional emotional attentiveness of familial (and in particular motherly) love.

7.3.3 Familial love

At each of the family service sites, participants gave examples of how parenting education and support helped them enhance the love relationships they shared with family members, especially their children. Both mothers and fathers gave examples of how they’d increased their repertoire of parenting skills, describing how these helped them to express more love to their children. They described things like learning ‘ways to communicate without yelling and screaming’ (Rose, western Sydney), ‘crouching down and being at eye-level with a child when they talk’ (Pete, mid-north coast), playing together, understanding their child’s views, and ensuring discipline without resorting to smacking. In these ways, the self-love parents gained through the groups, and their expectations of more democratic personal relationships, reverberated through their families with parents feeling that, over time, services helped them improve their children’s safety and wellbeing.

Kimberley, for example, described how her parenting group helped enrich and strengthen bonds with her children, as she developed more realistic parenting strategies. She explained:

my child loves me even more for it because I’m a totally different person, I’m a more fun mum, I’m not a stressed mum. I still worry about him, I still don’t want him to do anything stupid or dangerous … but I’m not to the extreme that I was where I kept him wrapped up in cotton wool. (Kimberley, western Sydney)
For Isabel, parenting groups helped overcome her experience of violence, as she learnt to express love, not only to her children, but also to her friends. She described this:

When I first walked into [the service] you couldn’t sit this close to me. No one could get within three foot of me. That’s how big my walls were up around me … because of being abused as a child, and raped at twenty-three, and the abuse I’ve had through other things. Over time, [the service] has been able to slowly make that – that barrier smaller … They can hug me, and I can interact with other people in that way, in a touchy-feely-huggy way. Whereas I couldn’t before. Not even my own children could I do that with. (Isabel, outer-western Sydney)

For Alison, groups helped her develop realistic expectations of the personal resources she could put into parenting. She described this:

I felt that if I was not with my kids I was a bad mum. I felt like – that – y’know, I was neglecting. And now Burnside’s taught me that you do need time out. (Alison, mid-north coast)

In fact, in western Sydney, parents were excited to tell me that the parenting skills and communication strategies they learnt weren’t just helping with managing children. One all-female focus group insisted that:

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It works on the husbands as well – that’s the bonus that they didn’t tell us about! (Olivia, western Sydney)

Over time, parents and staff at all four sites saw outcomes in this category of ‘love’ to be evident in stronger relationships with children, more self-confidence, and less family conflict overall. The parents at all the centres described how they applied these skills with children and family members, ultimately resulting in stronger family bonds and reduced incidence of domestic violence, child abuse and neglect. Tina, a service user who had grown up in care herself, articulated this in terms of service outcomes of ‘love’ breaking intergenerational patterns of violence:

[the service] has helped us as parents change our lifestyle so we can change the future for the children. Now, when my daughter is twelve or fifteen and a boy goes to hit her, she will not stand for it, she’ll walk out that door straight away because we’ve taught her values. (Tina, outer-western Sydney)
In ways such as these, the self-love parents gained through the groups, and their heightened expectations of kin relationships, reverberated through their families, achieving what they saw to be outcomes in the realm of child-safety and wellbeing.

- **Fathers and love**

Like the women, the fathers in the study described outcomes of ‘love’ in terms of bonding with children, and developing confidence in their capacity to parent. However, most of these men felt excluded from a ‘full’ parenting role, so defined service outcomes of ‘love’ in terms of the usefulness of strategies for negotiating and bonding across non-standard parenting arrangements which they perceived to be less than ideal. Simon, for example, described how his group contributed by helping him:

> cope with maybe being a long distance father if it works that way, and what’s best I can do for them, and keep in contact with them, and bond with them. (Simon, mid-north coast)

Of course, this theme emerged only insofar as the men were non-custodial parents. A custodial father, on the other hand, described outcomes of love in ways which were more similar to those of the mothers in the study, emphasising learning skills to play and communicate with children so as to facilitate their development. Adrian explained how his group seemed to help him and other fathers:

> For the dads, learning how to interact and communicate with our children, which isn’t a male’s strong point, being able to get in and play with kids and interact with them. It’s helped me out a lot playing with them, to be able to get in that bit more to support ’em and help them to develop without sort of boxing them in. (Adrian, outer-western Sydney)

Victor also explained his experience:

> When I first started coming here I was real grumpy to the children, my step-children. Now they’re all over me, I’m all over the kids, I take them all over the place and you know, I’m a new bloke now since I’ve been coming. (Victor, outer-western Sydney)

- **Family workers and ‘love’**

Family workers who took part in the interviews verified the importance of love as a service outcome, both in terms of the parents’ achievement of self-knowledge and self-
confidence, and in terms of their formation of loving attachment with family members. Mandy, for example, intended that groups would help parents with practical and emotional matters. She wanted them to:

> feel a lot better about themselves and maybe stop, you know, doing things like using drugs, being involved in domestic violence relationships, maybe stop hitting their children or whatever and replace that with another way of disciplining. (Mandy, south-west Sydney)

In describing love as an outcome of family services, the facilitator of the fathers’ group emphasised his concerns about violence and child protection:

> I’m really wanting them to reflect on their relationships with significant people – with their partners and children and then really sort of stop and make a determination that what they’re doing is either not going to harm but build and encourage. (Jeffrey, mid-north coast)

In different interviews, Celia and Hannah on the mid-north coast gave a deeper analysis of the emotional process through which ‘love’ is regenerated. Celia pointed to the self-realisation that comes from learning your feelings are valid, and Hannah identified the outcomes relating to the formation of personal ideals for family relationships:

> I think for a lot of the women that come to our groups that they may be living with partners who could be suggesting that they’re over-reacting to situations, or that they’re silly or whatever for the feelings they have, so it’s really important that these people learn that their feelings are valid. (Celia, mid-north coast)

> …their minds become more open to ideas about how you can parent, how you can be with your child, what kind of relationship you can have, that they’re more empowered to create the kind of relationship, ideal relationship that they might have in their mind or at least start to think about what kind of relationship they really would like, rather than just putting up with the one that they seem to have landed with. (Hannah, mid-north coast)

Overall, users saw family support facilitating outcomes of ‘love’ in the categories of self-love and familial love. These outcomes were articulated across all the centres amongst both men and women, and were verified by family workers.
7.3.4 Legal Status

The second form of recognition identified by Honneth is legal status. This is concerned with ‘the denial of rights and with social exclusion, where human beings suffer in their dignity through not being granted the moral rights and responsibilities of a full legal person within their own community’ (Honneth, 2001:49). Honneth argues that these rights, or ‘depersonalised symbols of social respect’ (Honneth, 1995:118), underpin self-respect by giving options of legal recourse and by giving symbolic expression to society’s acceptance of subjects as morally responsible and equal persons.

In a practical sense, the legal dimensions of recognition are indispensable for interpreting users’ perspectives on the outcomes of child and family welfare services. These parents described highly problematic interactions with the state and welfare professionals around matters of child protection, custody, and domestic violence, and confronted stigmatising cultural assumptions given that they were identified as having children at risk of abuse and neglect. Here I classify legal outcomes as ‘strong’ where they directly relate to legal circumstances of children (such as custody or contact arrangements or child protection proceedings). I also consider outcomes relating to how participants felt treated by authorities as ‘softer’ legal outcomes.

- **‘Strong’ legal outcomes**

As family support interventions are ultimately directed at preventing child abuse and neglect, much of the service necessarily involves advocacy for the best interests of children in child protection and family court proceedings. It is thus not surprising that many of the outcomes that users described related to legal arrangements affecting children. For parents with a child removed from their care, retaining or regaining custody and contact was a major outcome sought, as was an improved relationship with government agencies such as DoCS. Participants who had a child returned to their care as a result of participating in Burnside services referred to this as an indicator of
outcomes. Alison, for example, had no uncertainty as to whether services were working. She said:

I’ve got three children back in my care since I’ve been here. (Alison, mid-north coast)

She went on to describe how improved communication with DoCS helped her achieve this goal:

It’s just helped me a helluva lot especially when it comes to communicating with welfare, y’know, like, you know, going ‘nyi nyi nyi’ [uses funny voice—laughter]. It’s not helping you know, like they just go ‘you’re an unfit mother’, yeah…(Alison, mid-north coast)

Of course, legal outcomes were more profound for parents like Alison seeking to renegotiate custody and contact arrangements. They hoped that parenting skills and family management courses would help them to regain their status as primary carer, improve their standing in the eyes of DoCS, or resolve the uncertainty surrounding their parenting status and role. Such outcomes were particularly important for those at the outer-western Sydney service, where most of the parents said they had been involved with the child protection system.

- **‘Softer’ legal outcomes**

Legal outcomes were not only expressed in the ‘strong’ sense of achieving changes in parents’ custody or contact arrangements, but also in a ‘weaker’ sense, relating to their awareness of their rights, and whether they felt professionals treated them as though they had rights.

Parents who had had what they saw to be dysfunctional dealings with DoCS described Burnside services to offer the opposite treatment. They felt that instead of sidelining their claims and interests, Burnside services modelled respect and treated them as equal people with legitimate interests and rights as parents. Thomas described the sentiment shared across the four centres:

A lot of people that come here have had problems with dealing with DoCS, or organisations like that. We feel that we’ve been treated like numbers, that we don’t get listened to, that we don’t get the assistance or the commitment that DoCS have
promised to us … DoCS has made commitments to the fathers and said, ‘look, we’ll help you here’, or ‘we’ll do this, we’ll do that, we’ll support you’, and yet not one of us fathers have found the support … we don’t get even treated with the respect of being a parent, we’re treated like criminals. Because for me, DoCS is the Department of Corrective Services, because that’s how they treat you, they treat you like a criminal. When they want you to do something, you have to do it, but when you want some support from them, you can’t get it, and that’s what places like [this service] fill in the gaps. (Thomas, outer-western Sydney)

Like Thomas, Nicola had a child taken into care and like many parents in that situation, did not feel that DoCS recognised her position. She agreed with Thomas that:

they do treat you like a criminal, just because you got something wrong, or done something wrong in your life, and you’re now trying to fix it up, they treat you like, excuse the French, they treat you like shit. Like, that your point doesn’t matter. (Nicola, outer-western Sydney)

Thomas and Nicola’s perspectives demonstrate how Burnside groups were seen by some to contribute to legal outcomes in a weaker and subtler way than necessarily achieving a full change in families’ legal relationships. Instead, legal outcomes were felt in terms of helping parents to know their rights and on this basis to communicate more effectively in child protection investigations, in the hope this would provoke authorities to reciprocate. Legal outcomes were also about overcoming representations of parents such as themselves as ‘undeserving criminals’, a part they felt typecast into in their dealings with government agencies.

Importantly, parents who had not had extensive contact with the child protection system also emphasised these ‘softer’ legal outcomes. Often, they described legal outcomes just in terms of how these services encouraged them to stand up for themselves in interactions with other public institutions, such as schools, health services, and social security administration. Phillip, for example, said

I’ve learnt like, what your rights are in society sort of thing, like where you stand. Y’know some places, some things, no one can help you with, but then other things you can get help with, and, um, I think you just sort of learn a bit of reality. (Phillip, southwest Sydney)
Similarly, Lydia from western Sydney said:

they connect you with the outside, or they give you information about what to do, where to go, stuff that we might not be aware of. (Lydia, western Sydney)

Simon explained how his parenting group was helping in terms of reducing the uncertainty associated with custody proceedings:

I could be faced with anything through the court system you know. I could have contact with them every two weeks or could have them full-time, so just knowing how to cope with that. (Simon, mid-north coast)

Olivia from western Sydney described how the parenting groups had legal implications for parents in the context of cultural difference, by providing a source of information about accepted parenting methods. She explained:

Australia’s such a diverse country, everyone has a different way of doing things, and it’s good to have a place to connect and we can all check in that we’re doing the right thing. (Olivia, western Sydney)

In summary, for parents who believed Burnside had helped them to have a child returned to their care, legal outcomes were by far the most important impact the services had. But the range of legal outcomes varied, and for most, they weren’t as clear as having a full change in their legal or parenting status. ‘Softer’ legal outcomes were more commonly described at all the centres, and were expressed in terms of parents’ awareness of rights and parents’ knowledge of their legal position and responsibilities in relation to their children. Importantly, in imparting knowledge about parents’ legal rights and responsibilities (which regenerated their claims for respect from government authorities), these services also treated service users respectfully, modelling and compounding their experience of the ‘status’ dimensions of recognition.

- **Workers’ perspectives on legal outcomes**

The accounts of service outcomes provided by family workers also verified the importance of legal outcomes. Mandy, for example, emphasised how parenting groups aimed to model respect as an antidote to the treatment these parents experienced in dealing with government agencies. Her account reflects the importance of ‘soft’ legal outcomes for parents, like recognising their self-determination and showing respect.
it’s a lot about how DoCS treats them or how other agencies treat them as well, I think because we treat them with respect they learn to expect that from other people as well, which is another thing I guess they get out of the group, learning that, like, you don’t have to be told what to do, you can say ‘this is what I want out of life’ and you can go for it. (Mandy, southwest Sydney)

### 7.3.5 Solidarity

Solidarity is the third form of recognition Honneth identifies. He argues that relationships of solidarity build self-esteem by enabling people to ‘find acceptance and mutual encouragement of their individuality, as individuals formed by their very life experiences’ (Honneth, 2001:50). In this way, he uses the category of solidarity to refer to the ethical self-assuredness that comes with accepting difference, occurring as individuals recognise others’ approval of their uniqueness and their contributions (Honneth, 2001:50). I draw on Honneth’s category of solidarity to capture service users’ accounts of the self-esteem generated through the shared values and the community built in using family support, as well as the encouragement, acceptance of difference, shared responsibilities, and acknowledgement of achievement and contribution associated with their service experience.

This category is integral to the interpretive framework as it encompasses outcomes which were at the heart of participants’ experiences of service delivery, such as realising they are not alone, and recognising their own worth as contributors to community beyond their immediate families. Yet like outcomes of legal status, outcomes of solidarity are not adequately captured in Nancy Fraser’s concept of recognition, which focuses on formally institutionalised injustices leading to status subordination. As a result, Fraser’s concept of recognition excludes those culturally devaluing forms of harm such as feeling socially isolated, which by their nature are not organised and represented through social movements in the public sphere.

- **Solidarity as connection**

  For participants in the study, outcomes of solidarity included forming connections with other parents whilst participating in a parenting group, and building communities
in which they felt appreciated. Forming connections helped these service users to find support and affirmation for the contribution they made to society as parents, citizens and unique individuals, thereby reducing their isolation\textsuperscript{127}.

In part, this outcome involved parents sharing their injuries with people with similar experiences, allowing them to regain a sense of appreciation, escape social stigma, and gain self-esteem (by finding others esteemed them). Parents subject to child protection investigations and removals, for example, can demonstrate a sense of solidarity from sharing their experiences of humiliation with others, in a way that resonates with findings from other social service contexts. In her research about mothers of drug addicts for example, Valiente (2003:250) points out how members of stigmatised groups can regain a sense of esteem and feelings of achievement from others in similar situations, in a way not possible with the wider population.

In this study, family support service users at all of the centres alluded to solidarity by describing how services helped them to form connections with people in similar circumstances to themselves, and to build communities in which they felt they were worthy contributors. The theme of ‘solidarity as connection’ emerged most strongly in terms of overcoming feelings of isolation at the regional service, on the mid-north coast\textsuperscript{128}. Repeatedly, these parents described overcoming feelings of shame, revelations that they are not alone, and how they gradually felt acknowledged as worthy members of this community\textsuperscript{129}. Paula and Natalie articulated perspectives widely reflected in the sample:

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\textsuperscript{127} While service users experienced reduced isolation only as an end in itself, staff articulated the instrumental aspects of building connections as well, in terms of ensuring vulnerable families were part of the service system should the need for further help arise.

\textsuperscript{128} This is likely to be because of local factors, and the types of programs offered at the site. The population in this area is highly transient. Many parents in the study had no family members and few friends living in the area. The lack of public transport, and the fact that the town primarily catered for self-funded retirees, contributed to parents’ experiences of isolation, which was broken down through the groups. In addition, this family service uses playgroups and parenting education as a soft entry point, and uses the ability of these programs to break down isolation as a central strategy for protecting children.

\textsuperscript{129} The communities of solidarity built at the services also allowed parents to develop strong female friendships, which provided relationships in which they could develop ‘self-love’. Indeed, it is useful to understand the experiences of the three types of recognition as mutually reinforcing.
I’ve learnt that everyone else is feeling the same feelings and the ups and downs and the hardship and the – y’know, all that goes along with being a single parent. (Paula, mid-north coast)

I’m realising that I’m not alone. Sometimes you think you’re the only one with a problem and you come here and you realise that – you know, it’s not that way at all. (Natalie, western Sydney)

For a young mother, it wasn’t connection with other parents per se, but bonding with other teenagers who were parents, which was the key outcome of solidarity gained from using family support. Megan said:

I’ve learnt that I’m not just going – there’s other people my age going through the same thing what I’m going through. So when I sit there and go ‘ohmygod this is driving me insane, I can’t do it any more’, I can think of all them other girls that I know that’ve got babies and are teenagers and they’re probably sitting there thinking the same thing. (Megan, mid-north coast)

Participants also valued the fact that the parenting groups provided a supportive social context in which to exercise their rejuvenated skills of communication and relationship building, by making friends and sharing knowledge and experience. As Isabel said:

Not only is it the courses, it’s actually coming to a place where you feel safe, not judged and you can make a network of friends where you might have been isolated before. (Isabel, outer-western Sydney)

The impact of the esteem gained in the family centres was indicated in parents’ perceptions that they could now participate more freely in the community. Jennifer, for example, perceived that without the self-esteem developed in parenting groups she would have remained afraid of social interaction:

I’d be one of those people that wouldn’t even say boo to anyone, wouldn’t have confrontations, I’d just slither along the road, get along my merry way from A to B and back home from B to A and that’s it and shut my door. (Jennifer, western Sydney)

At the time of the study, Allen’s primary involvement in the southwest Sydney centre was in community development activities and as a volunteer. He described his
experience of recognition by emphasising solidarity and reduced isolation in terms of having something more purposeful and meaningful to do, saying that, without the centre:

I’d still be at home waiting for the grass to grow so I could mow it  (Tony, south-west Sydney).

Craig felt the service also helped him define his own place in the community, which encouraged him to pursue his own projects:

encouragement to follow up with ideas and put them into practice, instead of just being fobbed off … not only are you encouraged, you are supported. And I’ve gone from just coming in a little bit to start with due to having problems with my son to now when I’m, I’m out in the community, I’m out pushing certain purposes, I’m trying to do something with the community. And in the first place I was pretty much a hermit.  (Craig, southwest Sydney)

Indeed, these themes of acting on ideas and feeling ‘useful’ recurred amongst the men at the south-west Sydney centre, which is not a surprising finding given that its services were explicitly designed to link self development to community development.

For Kimberley, solidarity at the western Sydney family centre came from the friendships she developed, which gave her another perspective on her parenting. She said:

I’m a single mum, so it’s great to come here and get other views on things that I may find hard to deal with in parenting, and I’m making new friends, getting that friendship network going.  (Kimberley, western Sydney)

Importantly, some parents felt esteemed as valued members of the service community when others noticed their absence from the groups, for example:

I find the best thing when you’re down or you’re not here, you get phone calls, it’s like, ‘where are you, why haven’t you been in?’  (Sandra, outer-western Sydney)

Overall, outcomes of solidarity were reflected in the connections parents felt family support helped them develop – in particular such outcomes as realising they were not alone, feeling part of a group without being judged, and being able to usefully participate in the community outside their immediate household.
- **Solidarity as changing gender roles**

As well as connection, solidarity encapsulates the way participants saw these services helping them overcome restrictive gender roles. Many of the mothers felt the friendships developed at the service helped them gain a sense of ‘self’ in their relationships with men. Descriptions of the solidarity they felt in this way resonate with understandings of how female friendships help women ‘survive’ men in ways that are not singular or once off, but instead are forms of ongoing, vigilant and protective work necessary throughout life (Limb, 1989). For some of the women, the communities they formed in the parent groups made them feel less dependent on men and they subsequently saw themselves as less vulnerable to domestic violence. In fact, Amber attributed her ability to eventually leave a violent relationship to support from other mothers in the parenting groups:

> I was very isolated and even though I had therapy and the facilitator was saying yes, that’s domestic violence, it wasn’t until this one over here [points to Isabel] piped up and said ‘what are you going to do about this?’ that the light suddenly went on, and because of her support and other people’s support here, I could pick up me and five children, and go to a refuge. (Amber, outer-western Sydney)

Yet solidarity was also an important outcome for the men in the study. Like the mothers, the fathers in the study also valued the fact that the family centre allowed them to establish social bonds and reduce their isolation, especially those who were primary caregivers. For sole fathers with young children attending playgroup, the groups were the only regular social opportunity, as they were for sole mothers. Phillip explained:

> When you’ve got young kids and all that you can’t go out. So if you didn’t have this then you’d have no social life or anything. (Phillip, south-west Sydney)

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130 Amber’s description of how support from other women helped her leave a destructive partner relationship shows how solidarity can help reinforce these mothers’ experiences of other dimensions of recognition, in Amber’s case pursuing more authentic ‘love’ relationships.
Further, participants in the men’s group on the mid-north coast placed particular value on how family support services helped them not only to form relationships with others, but to do so in a way that transcended stereotypes. According to Simon:

because of my strict German upbringing and men don’t cry and men don’t show emotions and I’ve got to win all the time, this group’s good in a way because it’s helping me bond with males and actually have an intimate relationship. (Simon, mid-north coast)

Thus, Simon and others articulated outcomes of solidarity in terms of achieving self-realisation and self-esteem by transgressing restrictive masculine stereotypes. In contrast, the women in the study articulated themes of solidarity associated with their empowerment in relation to men, and their support in ending violent, inauthentic relationships.

- **Solidarity as overcoming cultural and economic divisions**

As well as overcoming gender roles, services helped parents to form communities that overcame other cultural and economic divisions. Parents perceived that in the family centres and in parenting groups they were included on equal terms, and unlike in the rest of society, were not excluded or divided on the basis of money. Importantly, this perception came from being able to access the service with minimal financial contribution, compared to other playgroups where some complained, for example, that ‘it was ten bucks a day to turn up’ (Katie, mid-north coast). However, Burnside parents also perceived a kind of mutual respect that caused them to feel esteemed regardless of their financial situation. Katie mentioned this in her description of other playgroups she’d previously tried. She said:

a lot of them are really stuck up rich snobs, excuse me for saying that that way, but they were. They look at ya, turn their nose and keep walking. (Katie, mid-north coast)

Other parents also described these services as helping them overcome specific cultural stereotypes, and to recognise difference. Describing how these family services could overcome class and cultural divides, Jennifer from western Sydney described solidarity in terms of acceptance, when she said that in her group:
You know you’re accepted. It doesn’t matter what culture you are, what race or creed you are, what colour skin you’ve got, you know that you fit in. There’s no denomination, there’s no ‘I own my own house, she’s housing commission’ or ‘this one drinks Nescafe and this one drinks Homebrand’. None of that, you know what I mean? We’re all on the same level path and it doesn’t matter, it doesn’t. (Jennifer, western Sydney)

Paula explained the acceptance she felt at Burnside by comparing it with the class cultures she had encountered in traditional playgroups. She said:

I have a mental illness, and there was no way I was going to join a traditional playgroup. There was no way you were going to get me to where those yuppie mothers go and compare their nailpolish and drive up their cars up there. I would never go to that sort of place … I just couldn’t cope because they all live in fairyland, you know what I mean? They don’t – there’s no realism in their life, monetary things are more important to them and their little children dressed up and the way they are they never have a runny nose or they never have – it’s just they’re not real people and certainly I would be an outcast in their eyes if I ever joined. (Paula, mid-north coast)

Importantly, solidarity also emerged as a service outcome in the accounts provided by non-English speaking mothers. This was strongest at the more multicultural centre, western Sydney. For example, a Turkish participant in western Sydney said that one of the best things about groups like these were that they brought together and included people from different backgrounds. At the same centre, but in a different interview another mother said:

I have received a lot of help from here. Not any sort of financial help but the teachers here are very kind. But the most important thing is that there is no sort of discrimination or contradictory situation, like for example, I’m Afghan, that woman is Australian or Arabic, they help us all in the same level, they don’t sort of look at us differently or help us differently. (Saira, western Sydney)

- **Family workers: solidarity as connections**

Family workers who were interviewed confirmed the importance of outcomes of solidarity, but in doing so emphasised solidarity only in terms of establishing connection and reducing isolation. Overcoming gender, cultural or class divisions did
not emerge as themes from their accounts. Celia, for example described how in the groups:

they’re forming close relationships with other women – which for some of them
there’s not another forum in which they can do that. (Celia, mid-north coast)

Mandy explained the process of connection participants went through, emphasising how they come to see commonalities with others in terms of issues occurring within their families. She said:

When we started the group, a lot of them were saying ‘no-one will understand where I come from because I’m the only one who’s been here’, kind of thing. And now they’re realising that everybody else has similar kind of things, maybe not exactly the same – but they feel the same way about what’s going on. (Mandy, southwest Sydney)

Margaret and Nerida’s comments (below) enrich these understandings, emphasising how the ‘parent communities’ that developed through the groups provided parents with a form for mutual support and connection in which they could participate and to which they could contribute:

there’s the networking that the parents will have and that they will support each other, and also challenge each other sometimes about the way they’re relating to their kid. (Margaret, western Sydney)

they also form friendships and little networks and they start looking after each other as well. So not only have they got us when they need us, they’ve got the other friends that they’ve made that help them do all sorts of things. (Nerida, southwest Sydney)

Staff perspectives verify that the outcomes of solidarity experienced by service users in the study are deliberate and legitimate goals of these social services. However, while staff interviewees described the family support outcomes in general terms as reducing isolation and enhancing connection, service users fleshed out the detail of the meaning of solidarity, valuing services for building communities that esteemed people regardless of social divisions of class, culture and gender.
7.4 Conclusions

This Chapter has captured and interpreted users’ criteria for service outcomes, adapting and applying the social justice framework developed and justified in Chapter Six. The findings show how the perspectives of family support service users can be captured in a framework that draws elements from both sides of Fraser and Honneth’s debates about the nature of redistribution and recognition. Using Nancy Fraser’s dual analytical framework highlights that service users did experience outcomes that helped them overcome the material aspects of poverty and achieve respect. However, reflecting the purpose of family support in preventing abuse and neglect rather than poverty specifically, the service users in the study most strongly emphasised the respect and recognition aspects of justice that these family services helped them achieve.

Although users did see family support services contributing to outcomes of redistribution, they more strongly emphasised their contribution to overcoming feelings of societal degradation and disrespect (misrecognition). Axel Honneth’s differentiated concept of recognition is best adapted to exposing the kinds of suffering present in the social service contexts of family support. In this case, Honneth’s framework allows more intricate interpretation of participants’ accounts of their service-led experiences of achieving self-realisation, recognition and respect.

By adapting Honneth’s tripartite construct of recognition as love, legal status and solidarity, the analysis highlights the ways these service users understand and experience family support as overcoming misrecognition in each of its three dimensions. In the category of ‘love’, service users described achieving (and hoping to achieve) outcomes in terms of self-confidence and more authentic parenting and partner relationships. ‘Legal’ outcomes were strong for those with children who had been removed, whilst those describing ‘softer’ legal outcomes highlighted their awareness of their rights and their ability to stand up for themselves. Outcomes of ‘solidarity’ included the normalising of family problems that came from connecting with others, as well as the building of communities that acknowledged and supported members’ social contributions whilst breaking down gender, class and cultural stereotypes.
Overall, the analysis shows how Honneth’s construct helps build theoretically grounded criteria for defining and measuring how family service interventions impact on service users’ wellbeing and quality of life. Indeed, the taxonomy of service outcomes as love, legal status and solidarity can be considered a legitimate and user-defined framework with which to assess the contribution and value of social services and social policies. By focusing on service outcomes as recognition, users’ criteria implicitly challenge the dominant economic and managerial discourses that currently shape the definition of service quality and effectiveness (such as those embodied in the indicators in Chapter Three). Users’ perspectives restore the centrality of justice and the moral experience of using social services to evaluation and policy debate, thus stretching understandings of the role, contribution and performance of social services – and indeed of social policy – beyond a narrow discourse of output and efficiency.

The findings presented here have established social justice criteria for measuring service performance, based on the perspectives articulated by service users and frontline workers in the study. However, the Chapter has focused only on the dimensions of outcomes that users described and not on ‘performance’ in its entirety. Chapter Eight builds the social justice criteria for performance measurement in family support, by examining the meaning of service quality for service users.
Chapter Eight

Users’ perspectives on service quality: Recognising the helping relationship

8.1 Introduction

Asking service users what they achieved or hoped to achieve by using family support highlighted their aspirations for themselves and their children, and their ideals of dignity and social justice. Having explored some different ways to interpret the kinds of social justice described by users in the study (in Chapter Six), I have shown how their accounts are best understood as part of their personal and political struggles for self-realisation, recognition and respect. In Chapter Seven I developed and applied a conceptual framework grounded both empirically (in the preliminary analysis) and theoretically (in debates about the nature of recognition). I found Honneth’s categories of ‘love’, ‘rights’ and ‘solidarity’ to provide a framework which best captures service users’ criteria for defining the outcomes of family support.

Chapter Eight continues to interpret adult service users’ criteria for measuring performance, locating family support services in disadvantaged parents’ struggles for recognition. As in Chapter Seven, the focus remains on users’ definitions of performance. But whereas Chapter Seven interpreted users’ criteria for outcomes in family support, here I consider how they experience and define the quality of these services. In this way, the Chapter is concerned with users’ perspectives on the process through which family support services produce outcomes of recognition (rather than the social justice outcomes themselves). These aspects of users’ perspectives were gathered primarily using questions three, four and five in the Questioning Route (Table 4, Chapter Five).
The preliminary analysis in Chapter Six highlights how service users’ accounts of quality fall into two main categories. The first consists of those dimensions relating to the service’s organisational infrastructure. Users valued, for example, the childcare and transport services provided to enable access, and the ‘organisational warmth’ they felt emanate from Burnside (but which they did not trace to workers specifically).

The second category consists of those dimensions of quality relating to the behaviour, values and helping demeanour of workers specifically. Users saw these human dimensions to form the heart of service delivery and service quality. They defined service quality most strongly in terms of the relationships they experienced with Burnside workers in the process of receiving services and pursuing personal change, offering more detailed and complex analyses of these ‘therapeutic’ relationships than they did of any other aspect of the service. Relationships with clients were also the most salient themes emerging from staff interviewees’ accounts of service quality, with staff focusing more on what it takes to establish effective bonds with vulnerable service users than on any other element of service quality.

The centrality of the ‘helping relationship’ to users’ experiences and views of service quality is, on its own, unsurprising. Research shows that users of other care services emphasise the importance of their interpersonal relations with frontline workers, especially the degree of respect they are shown, and the extent to which they feel listened to (Qureshi, 1999:258; Francis and Netten, 2004). However, the importance of the quality of helping for service users has key (and largely unexplored) implications for performance measurement, and for the capacity of performance measurement to accurately represent the value of care in social service delivery.

Firstly, the significance of relationships to users’ experiences of quality and outcomes adds empirical evidence to understandings of how the social services achieve social justice. Service users’ perspectives highlight the role of social services and welfare professionals in facilitating service users’ struggles for recognition, a point not considered in Fraser and Honneth’s theoretical deliberations, nor in the literature generated as the concept of ‘recognition’ is incorporated into the language of social policy (e.g. Lister, 2002, 2004; Williams, 1999).
Secondly, helping relationships are a key source of tension in attempts to evaluate social services. Understanding relationships to form the core of service quality distinguishes ‘frontline’ discourses of performance (shared by workers and users) from managerial constructions. As users and workers explained, helping relationships are formed privately, and demand intensive inputs of workers’ time and skill. Performed through personal interaction, the characteristics, quality and impact of the relationship building process are largely hidden from outside observers, evaluators and policy. By revealing the importance of caring relationships to users’ (and workers’) experiences of quality, the findings in this Chapter highlight the invisibility of these human dimensions of service delivery in managerial performance measurement systems.

Yet while the findings highlight the problems that relationship-based service processes raise for performance measurement, users’ perspectives also point to the ways in which evaluators might attempt to capture the quality of helping. The Chapter shows how family support service users and staff saw relationships to contribute to their justice goals, and identifies criteria for defining and measuring relationship quality. These criteria are complex. Not only do they differ between service users and staff, important differences were also apparent amongst both service users and family workers. Not withstanding their internal differences, the findings do reveal the importance of relationships to users’ and workers’ experiences of quality, highlighting the role of social service organisations and welfare professionals in the pursuit of recognition.

The findings portray worker-client relationships as forming the core process through which family support services generate personal and social justice outcomes. In delivering parenting education and support, workers attend to service users’ emotional and practical needs, in ways that convey respect. Feeling respected helps users to renew their personal resources of self-confidence as parents and as citizens, building their capacity to attend to the needs of their children. By exploring the process through which social services regenerate relations of respect, the findings establish some

131 For a stark example, see the workers’ perspective on the role of personal authenticity in helping relationships in Section 8.5.1.
potential criteria for defining and measuring relationship and service quality (as well as some areas for further research).

8.2 Relationships and service quality

As shown in the preliminary analysis in Chapter Six, service-user participants saw the physical and organisational infrastructure through which family support services were provided to contribute to service quality. Important aspects included transport, childcare and a type of ‘organisational warmth’ which users linked to Burnside and the service community as a whole, and not specifically to their relationships with service workers. While these factors were seen to contribute to service quality, both service users and staff defined quality primarily in terms of the quality of relationships they (and their children) formed with staff in the process of service delivery. Service-user participants described their relationships with staff in ways that were deeper and more complex than their descriptions of the importance of physical and organisational infrastructure.

8.2.1 Users’ perspectives

Most commonly, users emphasised the need to form quality relationships with workers by describing the importance of liking, and feeling comfortable spending time with workers. This is reflected in Phillip’s account, which suggests that without quality relationships, the service would be ineffective overall:

> you need people like you’ve got who will listen and understand. I mean it’s no use having the services there if you don’t feel comfortable talking to the people or, you know, you don’t like them or anything. Like then it’s no use. (Phillip, south-west Sydney)

To convey the importance of relationships, service users often evoked metaphors of friendship, family and home. This is reflected in the perceptions expressed by Sandra, who described staff as friends, linking service quality to the level of moral equality felt in the relationship:
to me they’re not staff, and they’ve never ever made out that they’re better than us. To me they are friends. (Sandra, outer-western Sydney)

A similar sentiment was expressed in western Sydney, where Rose and Julia both described service delivery relationships in terms of ideals of family and home:

We also too are a big family as well. This is our home and Judy’s our mum and Janet’s our nanna [laughter]. So it’s like a home, and that’s what it’s always been like. (Rose, western Sydney)

We always communicate, it’s a real communication open place, you don’t feel like a number, you feel like part of the person, you know, the family. (Julia, western Sydney)

The openness and availability associated with ideals of family and home also emerged in the account given by Saleema, a recent migrant to Australia living in western Sydney. She used the metaphor of a ‘second home’ to articulate the integrity and quality of relationships she felt accustomed to, and also alluded to the value of openness and support of good workers. Through an interpreter, she described the service as home-like:

So far it’s for me, like a second home. And I believe that the people here support me, and I’ve gotten used to coming here so far, and whatever problem I encounter I can come here and ask for advice, ask for help. (Saleema, western Sydney)

Clients at each of the sites described how they understood service quality in terms of good workers simply ‘being there’ in times of need. For Megan for example, having a worker to simply ‘come over and talk’ allowed her to ‘feel a bit better’ and eventually leave a destructive relationship:

Me and her father, Erin’s father, he just would make me cry and cry and cry and cry and I didn’t want to be there and I was too scared to leave you know, and Debbie would come over and talk to me and make sure, you know she’d give me just a little bit of positive thought so I would feel a bit better and that was good. (Megan, mid-north coast)

8.2.2 Family workers’ perspectives

Interviews with family workers verified the link between helping and good family services. Yet these workers did not draw on ideals of family, friendship and home to
describe their relationships with clients. Instead, staff described good relationships in terms of the organisational values and professional values guiding their work. Hannah, trained in counselling, verified how she pursued outcomes by applying a deliberate moral orientation and presence:

it’s coming in with that kind of unconditional positive regard, that sort of open caring presence that will give them a sense of acceptance no matter what. (Hannah, mid-north coast)

Nerida also said that, as a family worker, it was her relationship with the clients that was her main means of intervening. She saw that with time and effort, relationships would help open communicative space for clients to define and express their needs:

we spend a lot of time building relationships with the clients so that they do feel comfortable to ask for whatever they need. (Nerida, southwest Sydney)

Nerida justified building relationships on the basis of their deeper significance. She described how the relationships formed offered to show service users their own inherent worth, helping reconstruct their self-esteem after domestic abuse:

they’ve had these years of being told they’re useless, they’re hopeless, they’re a waste of space, they’re this, they’re that, and then when they’re in a positive environment and people are like noticing their strengths and like really valuing them just being around and telling them nice things and helping them do things and praising their efforts, its like wow, it’s a whole different world and they notice it about themselves.
Where before they’ve just been busy getting hammered down, somebody lifts them up. (Nerida, south-west Sydney)

Also in south-west Sydney, Mandy identified the importance of relationships to service quality. She described how the workers simply ‘being there’ to listen and show clients they were ‘cared about’, showed service users they had personal worth, and could open their eyes to possibilities for change:

showing people that you’re there and that you’re willing to listen to them is a big part of the work, because they’ve never had that before. And the fact that there is someone who’ll do that, then they start thinking, ‘well, maybe I am worthwhile, maybe y’know, I shouldn’t be in this relationship where I get treated like shit’, or whatever. And then they start thinking about ‘well, why am I being treated that way,
why don’t I have someone around who is willing to listen to me’ and start making changes in that way. So I think caring and showing people that you care is a big part. (Mandy, south-west Sydney)

Mandy thus described service relationships as *models* which could generate users’ experiences of respect, heightening expectations of their treatment from others, and contributing to users’ pursuit of change. In these ways, family workers thus confirmed users’ accounts that relationships were critical to the quality of this kind of care. They said that successful helping involving workers who presented themselves with an open, caring, attentive presence, ensured service users felt listened to and respected. Although workers described the role of relationships without using vocabulary of family, friendship and home (as service users did), they shared the views expressed by service users that quality in family support involves mutual connection, respect, trust, and receptiveness. Indeed, the helping disposition was seen by both workers and clients to represent a key means through which these services generated recognition or respect, and pursued social justice.

However, while the accounts clearly characterise helping relationships as facilitators of the users’ struggles for recognition, more thorough data analysis is necessary to highlight the detailed criteria with which participants assessed quality helping, and to show differences amongst the service users’ and the staff’s perspectives. In the following section (8.3) I explore how helping relationships are treated in existing social services research. This informs the development of a conceptual framework with which to more thoroughly analyse users’ accounts of good helping (in Section 8.4).

### 8.3 Research about helping relationships

#### 8.3.1 Helping relationships and social service outcomes

The centrality of helping relationships to family service users’ criteria for service quality (shown in 8.2) is unsurprising. Across the social service professions, relationships are well recognised as forming the platform or the medium through which
workers affect outcomes for vulnerable clients. In Australia and internationally, key social work texts describe relationships as the source of growth and change (Compton and Galaway, 1999:171), the key to effective practice with children and families (Trotter, 2004:136), the communication bridge (Kadushin, 1990), and the vehicle through which workers interpret events and make decisions (O’Connor et al, 1998: 71).

In child and family services specifically, worker-client relationships are professionally recognised to contribute to outcomes. In a UK context, Trevithick (2003) considers that relationships with social workers offer clients reparative emotional experiences, helping to restore trust in others after abuse or abandonment, and provide the social and communicative space within which to work through problems. In a Canadian context, De Boer and Coady’s study found that relationships improved outcomes by ‘increasing honest disclosures, creating climates of nurturance and support, generating the mutual ownership of service plans, improving worker and parent self-awareness, and, in several instances, increasing worker efficiency’ (2003: 12). Trotter’s study in Victoria (Australia) found a positive relationship between client perceptions that child protection workers understood their feelings on the one hand, and workers’ reports on client progress and case closures on the other (2004:138). The converse is also accepted. Trotter, for example, found that poorer client outcomes were associated with clients’ identification of workers as overly critical and judgmental (Trotter, 2004:139).

More specifically, relationships are understood as critical to family support service processes and outcomes. Engaging parents in positive relationships with workers is argued to directly improve the ways they provide discipline, and emotional and physical care for children, thereby enhancing the safety of vulnerable children (Lee and Ayon, 2004; Drake, 1994). Schofield and Brown (1999) confirm the centrality of worker-client relationships to quality in UK family services. They see these relationships to encourage

132 Note that relationships are generally seen as necessary but insufficient conditions for outcomes (Trevithick, 2003). As a result, they are best considered as part of the service process rather than as outcomes. However, in some contexts it may be appropriate to treat the existence of a helping relationship as an outcome, for example, in the early stages of interventions for families with extremely impaired functioning, as relationships with workers can act as prototypes for clients to draw on in their other relationships (Dore and Alexander, 1996). Nonetheless, I treat relationships as elements of process and quality here. Themes of relationships emerged in relation to questions about what makes a ‘good’ service, rather than in relation to those items in the Questioning Route relating to outcomes.
clients to experience bonds free from fear and distrust; to help them to find stability; and to allow clients to be open about their behaviour without perpetuating their sense of rejection and reluctance to seek help. A wide review of effectiveness in parenting support confirmed that poor helping relationships indicate unsuccessful implementation and outcome (Moran et al, 2004: 97).

Further, while worker-client relationships are recognised to be important to social (and family) service quality, relationships are also considered to be as important in group-administered welfare interventions as they are to services delivered to individuals (Coady, 1993; Smith, 2002:152). Relationships are seen as especially significant to groups given the collaborative emphasis of group work and its origins in feminist, humanitarian, democratic and self-help philosophies (Coady, 1993:295). The use of strengths-based practice approaches in family support further enhances the importance of relationships. Indeed, the idea that social workers best serve clients by collaborating with them (Saleebey, 1997:14) places relationships at the centre of family service quality and effectiveness.

8.3.2 Good helping in child and family welfare

While researchers and practitioners agree that good helping relationships are essential to outcomes in family support and other social services, there is also general consensus around the characteristics of quality relationships, such as empathy, acceptance, warmth and trust. In his generalist text on interpersonal helping skills (intended primarily to train social workers and counsellors) Shulman (1991) stresses the importance of empathic skills in developing trust and a positive working relationship with clients. In child and family welfare, Moran et al (2004) found skills of interpersonal helping appear more important to user engagement and outcomes than staff characteristics, such as being the same sex or ethnic identity as the service user. De Boer and Coady (2003) found

133 However, whilst generally accepted, claims about the importance of helping relationships to group work are largely based on generalising research findings from one-on-one worker-client relationships rather than rigorous research findings. Indeed, there are likely to be differences what relationship quality means in different contexts, as in group work for example, support emanates from group members as well as the worker, and relationships with workers are shared (Compton and Galaway, 1999:172). More research is warranted to unravel the differences between helping relationships in group and individual contexts. Notwithstanding, here I accept existing generalisations about the significance of helping relationships in group-administered social services.
good helping relationships are similar in child welfare and other social services, including mutual liking between client and worker, as well as trust and respect. However, quality in the child protection interventions they studied included additional criteria, such as ‘informal worker style, the mindful and judicious use of power, and the pushing of professional boundaries’ (de Boer and Coady, 2003:11). Further, that study associated good helping alliances with the ability of workers and clients to work together to mend ruptures in relationships.

In family support, relationships have been found to be particularly important to how service users experience and construct quality (Maidment, 2006: 5). Parents in one study were found to return repeatedly to the topic of their relationships with social workers, irrespective of their referral source and their attitude to social workers prior to using family services (Spratt and Callan, 2004). In a comparative study of child welfare interventions in England and France, parents routinely sought practitioners’ moral and emotional support, even where the objective of the intervention was to overcome practical and financial problems (Baistow and Hetherington, 1998: 116). In an Israeli study of how family service users saw good relationships with social workers, clients were found to value workers who could simply ‘be’ with them, a process consisting of warmth, acceptance as equals, and listening (Ribner and Knei-Paz, 2002). Importantly, that study found that successful relationships provided a sense of equality in the relationship and embodied the notion that good helping should be similar to ‘natural’ social contacts and so should include the ‘chemistry’ of natural, spontaneous liking. Findings from a comprehensive literature review of quality and effectiveness in parenting support also highlighted the importance to parents of staff recognising their expertise, and working together in ways that don’t cause parents to feel belittled (Moran et al, 2004: 99).

### 8.3.3 Evaluating helping relationships

Yet despite general consensus about the importance of relationships to service quality, the characteristics of helping relationships, and their importance to users’ perspectives, research has not resolved the question of how the contribution of relationships can be captured in evaluation, or even whether they should be. It has been argued that
managerial pressures for accountability and ‘scientific’ proof have marginalised helping relationships, relegating them to the periphery of theory, research and practice (Coady, 1993; Trevithick, 2003: 165). Yet including the relationship dimension is critical if evaluation systems are to value the complexity of social service delivery and quality, and capture them fully. To this end, Trevithick (2003: 165-6) considers that service users’ perspectives can act as vehicles for identifying and measuring the specific benefits of good relationships in social services, raising the possibility that users’ experiences of relationships might help overcome persistent difficulties in evaluating these less visible aspects of service quality. In response, the remainder of the chapter establishes a conceptual framework that facilitates deeper understanding of the relationship factors that service users and staff in the study identified as critical to service quality.

8.4 Establishing a conceptual framework

8.4.1 Helping relationships as therapeutic alliances

Although there are recent studies outlining the range of factors that constitute quality helping in family support, relationship research is more developed in the established helping disciplines of counselling, psychology and psychotherapy\textsuperscript{134}. Systematic constructs for understanding helping relationships include the ‘therapeutic alliance’, also termed the ‘working alliance’ (Bordin, 1979)\textsuperscript{135}. This concept posits that any change-inducing human relationship will have three general components. Firstly, Bordin (1979) sees therapeutic relationships to be comprised of a bond between client and helper, involving the exchange of trust, empathy, personal liking and mutual valuing. Secondly, helping alliances are seen to involve a practical orientation based on mutual agreement about the goals set for the intervention. Thirdly, the helping relationship involves mutual endorsement of the activities or tasks involved in the intervention. Whereas

\textsuperscript{134} More systematic attempts to document and theorise helping relationships in these areas is unsurprising, given their lengthier histories. As shown in Chapter One, family support has only developed as an area of social services over the last few decades.

\textsuperscript{135} In recent work, Maidment (2006: 5) has also called for social worker-client relationships to be reconceptualised as alliances, using the ‘working alliance’ concept derived from Bordin.
Bordin (1979) considers the first component ‘bonding’, he classes the second and third components ‘collaboration’.

While the concept of bonding and collaboration as generic helping variables was conceived in relation to one-on-one time-limited relationships in psychotherapy (Bordin, 1979), they have been applied more broadly, including to mental health (Howgego, 2003), family preservation (Dore and Alexander, 1996), and counselling generally (Horvath and Symonds, 1991). The ‘alliance’ paradigm has been advocated on the basis that it challenges conventional professional boundaries by acknowledging that, like other ‘natural’ relationships, professional helping alliances require reciprocity and a degree of ‘actually liking’ between workers and clients (Maidment, 2006:5). As I will show, the idea that relationships require the development of bonds and agreement around goals and tasks can also be adapted to capture the detail of the helping relationships that users and workers saw as critical to quality in family support, and so can help identify criteria to underpin performance measurement.

8.4.2 Critique of the therapeutic alliance construct

While the working or therapeutic alliance is a useful analytical construct, it is in some ways problematic, being developed with respect to psychotherapeutic relationships and not those specific to family support. Jacobson (2001) highlights the risks of indiscriminately applying therapeutic models of relationships to social welfare contexts, on the basis that these can obscure the need for workers and social service clients to develop power-balanced helping relationships. She argues that such constructs can misrepresent welfare workers and clients in ways that more ‘resemble that of therapist and patient than that of two people united in a struggle for greater personal and social good’ (Jacobson, 2001: 52).

Notwithstanding this critique, the components of the therapeutic alliance in the model I use here accommodate the mutuality implicit in both bonding and collaboration. The components of the model help identify the presence of bonding and collaboration as characteristics across helping relationships, without prescribing which techniques should be used or how helping should take place.
8.4.3 Helping relationships and recognition

The concept of a therapeutic or working alliance is broad enough to allow its categories to accommodate detailed themes relating to the production of quality relationships in different practice contexts (including the perspectives emerging in family support in this study). The categories of bonding and collaboration provide a starting point for analysing relationships, because they help show both the emphasis users placed on the bonding dimension of their relationship with family workers, and the way in which professional helping relationships differ from other interpersonal interactions (as they are {	extit{purposeful}} collaborations around explicit goals and tasks). The construct therefore provides a useful analytical framework, opening space to capture and explore the ways these service users experienced quality in the services they received. However, here it is useful to fuse the concepts of bonding and collaboration with an understanding of {	extit{recognition}} both as the source and purpose of relationship-based change. In doing so, I draw together two conceptual frameworks not usually understood to overlap, but which together best reveal how quality relationships between clients and welfare professionals facilitate users’ struggles for personal change and social justice.

As depicted in Figure 8 (below) I accept that quality helping relationships in family support consist of bonding and collaboration. This framework separates the socio-emotional aspects of helping relationships (bonding) from the more practical and tangible factors through which clients and staff work together (agreement around goals and tasks).

In Section 8.5 I show that although service users in the study identified important aspects of both bonding and collaboration, their accounts most strongly elucidated the bonding dimensions – in this case in three categories: respectful disposition, fluid status boundaries, and the elimination of stigma. These three inductively derived categories show how service users in the study can be understood to perceive quality primarily in the degree of recognition they experienced in the bonding dimensions of their relationships with staff.
The conceptual framework I develop is summarised in the following Table (Table 7) (explained in detail in Sections 8.5 and 8.6).

**Table 7: Summary of relationship themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspects of helping (Bordin, 1979)</th>
<th>Service users’ perspectives (in family support)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bonding</strong></td>
<td>• Respectful disposition (worker authenticity and authority)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Fluid status boundaries between users and workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Elimination of judgment and stigma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collaboration</strong></td>
<td><strong>Agreement about goals</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• User participation in defining goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Agreement about tasks</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Provision of non-directive options and guidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Staff respond flexibly to users’ needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Appropriate pace, and persistence of workers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
8.5 Bonding

Bonding between clients and workers has been treated as an analytically distinct component of therapeutic relationships, involving mutual liking and valuing of the other (Bordin, 1979). The kind of bonding involved differs according to the type of service and professional context, including the expected duration of relationships and the issues at stake, with deeper bonds of trust and attachment required, for example, for ‘the more protected recesses of inner experience’ (Bordin, 1979:254).

In describing quality in the bonding dimension of their relationships, service users across the four study sites emphasised how workers’ interpersonal skills and moral dispositions shaped their experiences. Three themes emerged from these service users’ perspectives. Firstly, users in the study saw that being able to naturally like staff contributed to the quality of care. They identified authenticity, respect, warmth and genuine concern as critical ‘inputs’ for service quality in family support. Interestingly, these dispositions are, in Honneth’s account, critical to enhancing the self-confidence of subjects enabling them to experience the ‘love’ dimensions of recognition (generated through primary relations of affection). Controversially, users traced their liking of workers’ helping dispositions to workers having ‘real life’ experiences relevant to their work. Users valued direct experience, such as being a parent in difficult circumstances, over any formal skills or professional training. Not surprisingly, such perspectives were controversial amongst workers in the study.

The second theme relates to service users’ perceptions that their bonds with family workers were different from those in other services they experienced, with strong bonds seen to humanise service relationships to the extent that status boundaries between professionals and clients were fluid and negotiable. Bonding seemed to equalise the power differentials inherent in relationships between paid workers and clients, making service users feel they had respect and rights.

A third feature was that users saw that relationships were held together and strengthened by the absence of judgment and stigma. Bonds with workers can thus be understood to serve as models for socially just relationships which service users could seek to replicate in the rest of their lives, as identified in other studies of helping.
relationships (e.g. Dore and Alexander, 1996). This third feature of quality bonds identified by users aligns with Honneth’s idea of relationships of *solidarity*. In his frame, solidarity builds esteem through the acceptance of difference and ethical self-assuredness that comes with gaining approval from peers and community for individual uniqueness. Here I use these themes to present users’ justice-based criteria for assessing the bonding dimension of relationships, before considering their criteria for assessing the collaborative aspects (in Section 8.5.2).

8.5.1 Worker dispositions and bonding: service quality as ‘love’

- Worker disposition as respect: service users’ perspectives

For service users, workers’ displays of warmth and their authentic, likeable natures were strong contributors to the quality of bonds. This was evident in service users’ views that good relationships could be formed with workers who were ‘naturally themselves’, as described by Craig:

I find too with the staff it’s what you see is what you get. You’ve got none of this bitchy stuff, and I mean everybody’s naturally themselves, it’s much better like that. (Craig, southwest Sydney)

Service users saw that quality bonds were built on staff demonstrating a genuine effort to listen and care. Jennifer described this:

when you do talk to them, they are fully listening. Not just sort of like ‘oh yeah, yeah, yeah’. They are making an effort and they do care, they really do care. (Jennifer, western Sydney)

Glenda seemed to derive emotional self-confidence from workers’ warmth and their displays of respect, trust and confidentiality, expressing sentiments that emerged at all sites. She said:

they’ve got respect, which is something, y’know, and they trust what you say if something is confidential they – y’know, it doesn’t go out there, it stays here, which is something that I think that we respect them so much. (Glenda, western Sydney)

The importance of workers presenting a genuine helping disposition was also reflected in the frustration participants expressed in not having access to workers with
these qualities to help them in the past, a sentiment reflected in Olivia’s forceful claim that:

we’re genuine people, we don’t need people not being genuine to us. (Olivia, western Sydney)\textsuperscript{136}

Olivia continued to describe instances where she had not successfully bonded with workers in other services, tracing this to the workers’ limited understanding of users’ circumstances. She said:

they don’t understand, they’ve never walked in your shoes so their inability to understand limits them and their ableness to give you what you need. (Olivia, western Sydney)

- **Worker disposition as respect: workers’ perspectives**

Staff interviewees generally agreed with the range of helping dispositions that users identified as central to bonding, describing relationship quality as a matter of behaving naturally with service users, listening attentively and maintaining confidentiality to generate respect and trust. However, where service users emphasised the need for staff to relate authentically and to display a warm and respectful disposition, staff emphasised how they purposefully created conditions to engage service users in a change process. Celia, for example, drew on principles of strengths-based practice to articulate how developing authentic relationships with service users required her to:

point out people’s strengths and acknowledge what people have done well. And to support and understand and acknowledge the validity of their feelings when things aren’t going so well. (Celia, mid-north coast)

Hannah saw authentic relationships to come from the creation of environments in which service users felt no need to hide anything. In her words, she was seeking:

a strong sense of trust in the group and people are able to raise issues they probably have never – or may not have had a chance to raise before. (Hannah, mid-north coast)

\textsuperscript{136} Olivia’s claim here emphasises the *intersubjective* nature of the justice that she, and other service users, were pursuing, a point made in Chapter 7.
Of course, such authenticity opened a space to discuss and tackle taboo issues, and so played a role in the intervention. In this way, where service users perceived workers to be ‘genuinely caring’, workers described applying purposeful skills. Like Celia, Nerida described how she developed and maintained bonds by ‘checking in’ with people and ensuring they felt they could genuinely speak their mind to facilitate the intervention. In her account:

There’s lots of checking in with people, like if they haven’t come for a while it’s ‘is everything okay?’ And we do it in a way that it’s okay for them to say whatever they think. It’s not like what we want to hear. We kind of always make it – even with the kids, like we make it clear that it’s okay, whatever answer – like there’s no right or wrong answer, like we want to know what you think, we want to know how you feel.
(Nerida, south-west Sydney)

The comments of Hannah and Nerida capture the openness of expression seen as necessary for service users to experience warmth and naturalness in helping relationships. At the same time however, these features allow workers to collect information required to monitor parenting practices and adapt interventions. In this way, workers’ accounts exposed the purpose of their helping dispositions beyond that perceived by service users, with workers using relationships to open the space to gather the information they needed to provide interventions.

- Life experience and worker-client bonds: service users’ perspectives

In discussing the dispositions required for quality in the bonding dimension of relationships, a sub-theme emerged in service users’ accounts, which, when explored further in interviews with staff, raised controversial ethical questions about authenticity and boundaries in social service relationships. When describing those worker dispositions that they regarded as constituting quality, service users pointed to the importance of feeling they had common life experience with staff. For Olivia, for example, it was important to see that workers had first-hand understanding of the difficulties of being a mother. She described how this distinguished Burnside workers from others she’d encountered, binding their relationship together:

here they understand it, because they’re all mothers – a lot of these women are all mothers, or have all had kids, they can all relate to it. (Olivia, western Sydney)
Similarly, Jennifer thought that services were likely to be better quality if staff were mothers. She traced workers’ empathy to their (perceived) identities as parents rather than to their professional identities:

They’ve most probably gone through the same experiences as us. I mean, they weren’t always just teachers, co-ordinators and leaders, and they know, like life experience with us as well. (Jennifer, western Sydney)

This view was also expressed at the outer-western Sydney centre, where Nicola argued that workers’ parenting experiences helped the intervention process, especially as it increased the level of understanding and the strategies staff could offer. She said:

It helps because then they can understand where you’re coming from. And because they’ve been there they can give you different ideas and different ways of going about things. (Nicola, outer-western Sydney)

Patricia expressed a similar sentiment:

Even with the staff, like they’ve – all but Meredith, I’m not sure about Meredith – they’ve all got kids too. And you can be talking to any one of them, and they’ll say ‘yeah, when my particular son or daughter was that age, what a hassle’. (Patricia, western Sydney)

For Patricia, perceptions that her family workers had first-hand experience of parenting problems made her feel understood, and seemed to enhance the authority of the knowledge workers imparted. Believing workers had experience-based knowledge increased Patricia’s willingness to form relationships with them. Patricia reinforced this point by contrasting Burnside workers with DoCS workers, the latter of whom she perceived to lack the personal experience of parenting. Patricia explained how this perception discouraged her from entering into effective relationships with DoCS:

I’ve always followed a motto or whatever, ‘walk the walk before you talk the talk’. And DoCS for instance, eeeey! I had a really sad bad encounter with the DO [District Officer]. I said to her ‘how many kids do you have?’ And she said ‘well that’s none of your business, that’s not relevant’. And I said ‘well it is relevant’ and I said ‘how many do you have?’. And she said ‘that’s not relevant’ and I said ‘in other words you’ve got none’. You’ve got to walk the walk before you talk the talk. And here,
the staff, they’ve walked the walk and they’re still walking the walk and they can relate to you. (Patricia, western Sydney)

Other service users shared Patricia’s sentiments, stressing the strength of the bonds they shared with Burnside’s family workers by contrasting them with those they had attempted to form with other welfare workers, including with DoCS workers137. Such discussion was most thorough at the outer western Sydney centre. Nicola, for example, contrasted the bonds she formed with Burnside staff with DoCS workers who, she felt, ‘get it all out of a textbook,’ seeming to adhere to a predefined role rather than expressing genuine feeling that conveyed respect. Thomas felt similarly, and again associated formal training with a lack of direct experience of parenting:

a lot of us have problems with a lot of DoCS workers – it’s because they’ve been taught this way, this way, this way, this way [gestures]. And none of them, most DoCS workers – or a lot of them that I’ve dealt with – none of them have kids, they’re all just out of university. (Thomas, outer-western Sydney)

In these ways, service users considered family workers’ personal parenting experiences to enhance their capacity to empathise. This made them seem to really understand and genuinely care, factors that helped to build the quality of the overall bonds they could form.

Observational data verifies this belief that, in delivering services, some staff did draw on their own family and parenting experiences as resources with which to ‘seem real’ and connect with service users. Most often, this involved offering private anecdotes about critical incidents with their own children or with other family members or friends. Although the content of these personal contributions were important in illustrating the points the workers were making in the groups, they also seemed to work by simultaneously enhancing the authority and intimacy with which workers related to the parents. Disclosing aspects of their private experiences personalised the space in which helping relationships could develop, and so contributed to what service-user participants saw as good relationships and overall service quality.

- **Life experience and worker-client bonds: workers’ perspectives**

137 Of course, as statutory child protection workers, DoCS workers have a stronger investigation and intervention role than family support workers, and so they have reduced scope to bond.
Staff interviewees confirmed that self-disclosure and the use of personal parenting experience were strategies they sometimes used to form authentic bonds and authorise the knowledge they imparted in the parenting education and support groups. Indeed, self-disclosure may be a more general feature of social service practice, given ethnographic findings from other health and social services that show that quality when dealing with other people’s emotions requires that workers ‘must give something of themselves, not just a formulaic response’ (James, 1989:19)\(^\text{138}\). Such practices challenge the ideal of a separation between workers’ professional and personal worlds, which has been described as ‘something of a holy grail in professional ethics’ for the social service professions (Maidment, 2006:2)\(^\text{139}\). While perspectives differed amongst workers, sharing personal experience appeared to be used as a controlled and purposeful strategy for building relationships.

In the regional centre, Celia described how she harnessed her own experience of family difficulties and used this as a resource in forming equal bonds with parents in the groups. In her words, this was a kind of sharing that would ‘make me more real’.

When asked about this she answered:

> I think it is a natural part for me and it’s something that could be criticised by other professionals most certainly. But for me I feel that I’m as vulnerable as they are. I have experienced umm [thoughtful pause] the same sort of experiences as they may be going through now, and I think by doing that and sharing with them – and it – it’s equal sharing I hope you know, I hope I’m not – I hope it’s an equal sharing and that it make me more real to them. (Celia, mid-north coast)

The above response shows Celia saw herself to share a common experience with service users that enabled genuine, authentic relationship. Yet she (rightly) believed that using personal experiences to achieve authenticity might be controversial for other

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\(^{138}\) The emotional labour literature generated from Hochschild (1983) (e.g. Steinberg and Figart, 1999) focuses on the negative psychological and economic impact of this giving on service workers. Interestingly, despite being asked about what they did in their work to achieve outcomes, the family support workers in this study did not describe it as a struggle to conjure up sincere ‘performance’ as part of their work.

\(^{139}\) Refreshingly, Maidment (2006) questions whether separating work and private life in order to provide for a degree of emotional distance from clients is either possible or desirable for morally engaged professionalism in the social services.
professionals. She continued, outlining how her model of professional behaviour involved a degree of genuine friendship:

I think that [sigh] while we’re professionals in what we do, we’re also walking a line where umm [pause] we are also friends, we are also someone that they can come in and basically tell us when something horrendous is going down for them. (Celia, mid-north coast)

In fact, the three other staff interviewed on the mid-north coast all emphasised the role of sharing personal experience as a technique for relating authentically with service users. This was seen to assist the bonding process by purposefully humanising workers and creating warmth, closeness and space for honest disclosure, as comments by Hannah, Jeffrey and Debbie show:

I’m no ideal parent [chuckles] and there are times when I go over the top and so it’s, it’s important to tell everyone – to keep the idea in people’s minds that there’s no magic answers and we’re all struggling, grappling with the same issues and, yeah, maybe some of us are a bit luckier in the support that we have around us or the backgrounds we come from … it does bring closeness because it’s kind of saying, well I’m – I understand – it’s kind of, ‘I understand, I’m struggling with this too you know, and what’s happened in my case is this’. (Hannah, mid-north coast)

you can wear your heart on your sleeve a little bit with your clients, so you’re so not so coldly clinical about things, so you can actually be warm. And once your clients experience you being warm or tearing up about something or whatever, then that brings them – that humanises you a little bit, so you’re not the expert. (Jeffrey, mid-north coast)

I think if you share a bit of your life they’re more likely to share theirs (Debbie, mid-north coast)

Debbie also agreed with the sentiment emerging in service users’ accounts, that her own experience of parenting was useful for the bonding necessary in her work. When asked whether she thought that being a parent helped her to work with vulnerable parents she answered:

it does help definitely. You just don’t understand parenting in the same way. You might understand it but it’s not quite the same as experiencing it and I think that’s important because they feel that they know that you know what they’re talking about
usually, and plus being a single parent as well – they’re single, um yeah I think all that helps. I think they just think – cos otherwise they’d just go ‘how would they know?’ … they can say ‘she hasn’t had a kid, what would she know?’ (Debbie, mid-north coast)

Debbie, however, pointed out that she understood her experience was only part of the discussion, and not an ‘expert’ position which should steer users’ personal decisions:

you’re part of the discussion too, you’re no expert, you just did it your way and they’re doing it their way, but I think maybe because you’ve been there done it you can probably you know, maybe say that did work for me or it didn’t, but that’s just a personal thing. Yeah I just think its part of a discussion. (Debbie, mid-north coast)

Staff at the other service sites also found that sharing personal life experiences could help them to forge authentic bonds with service users. However, whereas staff on the mid-north coast accepted that self-disclosure had a role in developing helping relationships, at the centres in the urban and urban fringe areas, such a position was more controversial. In part, this can be explained by the fact that service delivery staff and clients in regional and rural areas are more likely to see each other outside the service and to share contacts in the community than staff in urban contexts, which can challenge prescribed boundaries between workers and clients (Maidment, 2006:2). A further explanation lies in the fact that staff respondents on the mid-north coast had, on average, lower qualifications than those at the other sites.

Carol, trained at the postgraduate level for example, saw that self-disclosure could risk burdening service users. She associated this technique with inadequate training:

this is a generalisation but you tend to find that more with people who maybe have had less opportunities to have quite thorough training – you know, university studies plus clinical studies – that generally speaking the less trained or qualified somebody is, that’s where you tend to find more crossing of boundaries, because there’s not as much appreciation of boundaries in the first place, there’s no understanding that, yes you do need to be connecting, but in order to connect that doesn’t mean that you open yourself up in that way, and in fact that can actually be a burden and get in the way for people in the group. (Carol, western Sydney)
Carol expressed a highly critical view of the use of private worker experience in delivering family support. She argued that while offering anecdotes of personal experience could facilitate connection in the helping relationship (in parenting education contexts), it also implicitly established a model or standard that could interfere with service users’ self-determination:

my view of a group leader – facilitator, is that it’s about facilitating each person, where they are, and for me to put my example in there might in fact privilege that or say ‘oh this is the way it’s supposed to be done’, or ‘my experience represents – is The Experience’. So if I have kids or didn’t have kids, I wouldn’t be choosing to share that or to share my reactions or how I’ve dealt with things because you know, I think you have to be mindful that you know, that can be difficult for some people in the group.  (Carol, western Sydney)

Carol’s account is the antithesis of Debbie’s (above). Carol chose to maintain boundaries by not sharing her experience, seeing personal disclosure as a kind of intrusion of the personal into the professional which could create difficulties for some service users. Whereas Debbie felt that it was okay to share her own experience of parenting on the basis that she was ‘not the expert’, Carol believed she should not do so because it risked privileging her perspective and subtly skewing users’ self determination. In contrast to the perspectives of workers on the mid-north coast, personal disclosure did not have a legitimate place in Carol’s professional practice.

Like Carol, other workers in the Sydney regions of the study were also critical of personal disclosure as a technique for bonding in helping relationships. In south-west Sydney Mandy, for example, agreed that offering an authentic part of herself in her relationships with service users was important for the service exchange:

I think if you pretend to be somebody you’re not it just doesn’t work, and if you be yourself they can tell that you’re sincere, you’re honest, and they’ll trust you a lot more and be more able to open up a lot more about things that are affecting them.  
(Mandy, south-west Sydney)

Yet Mandy was also critical of sharing personal experiences to strengthen bonds with service users. Rather than altogether ruling out the use of personal anecdotes and examples to connect with service users, Mandy saw this as just one way to bond.
Although she gave personal experience and disclosure some status as a practical resource, it was not one that she would choose to draw on routinely. Like Carol, Mandy also thought disclosing her experience could privilege it. She explained:

I didn’t find in this group that I had to self-disclose a lot, I mean, I guess the only thing they’d know about me is that I work here… I think you can kind of show that you understand some issues or whatever but I don’t feel that I have to do that because I’m not the expert, I’m just someone who’s there to help them draw out the knowledge that they already have. And I feel like they got to know me, like they know me, but they know my personality more than they know stuff about me. (Mandy, south-west Sydney)

Compared with Mandy and Carol, Margaret in western Sydney spoke more favourably about drawing on life experience to achieve authentic relationships with service users. However, she still emphasised the need for any examples used to be purposefully selected, and so, like Mandy, portrayed disclosure as an option, in a way similar to Mandy. Margaret said:

I think that sort of self-disclosure that’s purposeful, it actually fits with what you’re trying to teach, so it gives a real life example … I think sometimes they think that these kind of problems only happen in their family and they don’t happen anywhere else, which is crazy, because they happen everywhere. (Margaret, western Sydney)

Importantly, Margaret argued that having direct personal experience of parenting did make it easier to provide education and support. However, it wasn’t necessarily a prerequisite to having the disposition and knowledge to underpin strong bonds. She saw that other life experiences besides ‘being a parent’ could also help staff empathise. Indeed, Margaret saw workers’ attitudes of ‘not being the expert’ on users’ lives but instead supporting them instead, underpinned the helping alliance more effectively than any actual experience:

I know heaps of people who have run parenting groups excellently who have never had children, but they do draw on their experiences with their nephews and nieces, and all of that kind of stuff, and because they’re interested in families and what have you, and interested in child development, and if they take it from the tack of not ‘I’m the expert and I know best’, but ‘I’m with you on this, and I love kids and I want to
see the best for them and for you’, you know, that kind of attitude flows through and then they’re fine. (Margaret, western Sydney)

In these ways, staff recognised that being able to self-disclose and to offer personal parenting experiences formed one strategy for displaying effective helping dispositions to humanise service interactions and build an intimate, personal space in which to bond. Yet effective bonds could be forged in different ways, and techniques of disclosure proved particularly controversial amongst staff in the Sydney region in the study. Interestingly, staff across the sites defended choices both to disclose and not to disclose on the basis that it helped them avoid appearing to be ‘the expert’. Debbie, for example, justified her personal disclosures because she was ‘not the expert’, whereas Mandy saw that, because she was ‘not the expert’, she should not disclose her experiences, and instead limited her role to drawing out the experiences of others. Further, sharing aspects of workers’ private lives and private selves was seen by some workers to indicate poor training and quality (for example, by Carol), yet others saw it as a necessary technique for forging strong and personal bonds (for example, Celia).

This complexity accords with findings from another study that found workers in the child welfare field expressed vastly different views about the use of self-disclosure (Trotter, 1999:29-30). In Trotter’s study for example, some workers saw self-disclosure to enhance the working relationship, while others found it inappropriate and even linked to poor outcomes. This ambiguity makes it difficult to discern the relevance of self-disclosure to service quality. Despite the consensus amongst service users about the importance of workers sharing their relevant personal experience of parenting, doing so is controversial amongst staff. The existence of the controversy is sufficient reason not to base performance measures on the use of particular techniques (such as personal disclosure) for forging quality bonds.

8.5.2 Bonding and status boundaries

- **Service users and status boundaries**

As well as staff displaying warm, natural and authentic helping dispositions, service users also perceived quality helping relationships to involve the renegotiation of conventional status boundaries between clients and professionals. Of course, helping
relationships are, by their nature, premised on a degree of inequality between those lacking resources, and those being called on to assist in mobilising them. However, the ideal bonds that service users described revealed that they aspired to be treated respectfully and at least as moral if not practical equals of workers. The flexible informality of bonds enabled the workers to attribute to the service users a degree of power with which to self-determine, helping facilitate users’ struggles for recognition and respect. In such a context, the pervasive assumptions of client passivity and dependency cannot be maintained.

Interestingly, users alluded to ideal families or friendship to communicate the equality they felt when good quality bonds overcame status boundaries. Jennifer, an interviewee at the western Sydney centre, pointed to the absence of rigid role boundaries in good relationships when she said:

Even the teachers. To me they're not teachers they're friends. (Jennifer, western Sydney)

Andy also used images of an ideal natural family to allude to how good relationships (in this case with other service users as well as staff) blurred the status boundaries at the family centre:

When you come into it everybody welcomes you, you become part of that family. (Andy, outer-western Sydney)

In south-west Sydney, Tony emphasised the moral equality he felt in relationships with workers when he said that:

The workers here they're not real stiff-collared – they’re one of us you know. (Tony, south-west Sydney)

In the same focus group, Karina described how bonds were also formed through exchanges of emotional and physical expression in which workers contradicted the image of a formal, distanced professional:

they've all given me hugs, and the workers aren’t scared to hug the kids, they show their emotions to the kids and the kids quite openly respond. (Karina, south-west Sydney)
Relationships that overcome conventional boundaries between professionals and clients seemed to rely on organisational factors, including time management. Importantly for service users, bonds needed to develop freely and not in fixed timeslots. Thomas found that the free availability of help was exceptionally important to relationships and overall service quality:

There’s no use having a centre that’s just run on rules and regulations, you’re only allowed to be here between this time and that time and stuff like that. You’ve got to have that family, that family spirit. You’ve got to have people that understand or have empathy for your situation. (Thomas, outer-western Sydney)

Thomas elaborated on the importance of time for bonding, comparing the arrangements at the family centre to the more rigid practices of appointment-setting that distinguish status boundaries between professionals and clients in other contexts and set limits to users’ rights. In doing so, he again drew an analogy between good bonding in family service and those in an ideal family:

it’s like a family, like you know if you organise to say have lunch with your sister or brother you’d say ‘meet you at nine o’clock and then we’ll go and do some shopping and then we’ll go and do this’. That’s more the approach of [this service]. Well it’s friendly, it’s not like, ‘well it’s quarter past nine you’re not here, sorry, come back in two weeks time, we’ll make another appointment’, like with some of the other systems. (Thomas, outer-western Sydney)

The informality that Thomas saw resulting from successful negotiations of these boundaries between staff and service users was also identified at other sites as a factor contributing to quality bonding. Kimberley described an impediment to forming effective bonds as:

Just being rushed, I mean that’s not helpful, if you’ve got a problem you want to know that you can spend as little or as long a time with that particular person. (Kimberley, western Sydney)

Similarly, Heidi on the mid-north coast described how time was organised at the centre to support bonding by allowing spontaneous discussions and help:

if we’ve got a personal problem or anything then we can go up to Hannah or Nadine and say, ‘look, can I have a talk one-on-one, umm?’ and they’ll just go ‘yeah right
what’s going on’, and it’s just a case of you can sit there and talk. (Heidi, mid-north coast)

- **Workers and status boundaries**

Like service users, staff interviewed in the study agreed that the bonding process involved constructive negotiation of fluid status boundaries with service users, and that this was an important means to promote social justice through the intervention. This theme most commonly arose from workers’ discussions of the strengths-based practice principles they drew on. Using the professional jargon of avoiding the role of ‘the expert’, Jeffrey described:

> If people feel that you’re strutting around and you know your stuff and you’re almost being arrogant about being ‘the expert’ in inverted commas, that tends to put up a lot of defence stuff for people. (Jeffrey, mid-north coast)

Similarly, for Margaret, presenting material in ways appropriate to service users, and involving them in the groups, also helped reconfigure status boundaries and form bonds. She saw the importance of facilitating parenting groups by involving people without lecturing or judging:

> I mean people need to be involved, it needs to be at their level, yeah, all of those kind of things. So if they had somebody who was lecturing them, and also if somebody was sort of critical or judgmental or didn’t have that warmth, I think that would – that wouldn’t help them either. (Margaret, western Sydney)

For Susan, recognising and overcoming any division was an important factor for ensuring users were comfortable and active in the intervention process:

> we’re not in a hierarchy, so we’re in the same – we talk to the service users as we would talk to a working person. And they’re comfortable with us, therefore they allow themselves to ask us questions where I think in a lot of institutions the service user will feel a bit intimidated by asking ‘oh, how do you do that, or why do you do that’ (Susan, south-west Sydney)

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140 Jeffrey put ‘the expert’ in inverted commas. In doing so, he seemed to recognise that his expertise did not extend to defining family needs and interests in such a way as to impinge on their self-determination.
In these ways, staff alluded to the importance of renegotiating status boundaries or hierarchies so as to bond with parents. Techniques they used to achieve this were to present themselves as non-experts on matters relating to the users’ self-determination (such as framing the family’s problems and goals); by communicating as equals; and involving service users actively in the parenting education and support activities.

Notwithstanding these values and techniques, users and workers occupy inherently unequal positions in family support relationships. In one sense, the status boundaries are material: service users tend to experience poverty and social problems whereas welfare workers facilitate access to social resources. Further, the inequalities between workers and parents are constituted in the child protection surveillance role of workers, especially in New South Wales and other jurisdictions with mandatory reporting requirements. As a consequence, family support workers’ responsibilities as mandatory reporters of suspected child abuse and neglect means their role in mediating the rights and interests of children limits the fluidity of bonds with parents. Some adult service users in the study described respecting staff as mandatory reporters, although others were clearly insecure about this non-negotiable ‘surveillance’ aspect of their relationship. Some also said they sometimes self-censored while forming relationships with staff, fearing that what they did say to staff could be misconstrued as abuse or neglect. Mandatory reporting thus represents an acknowledged limit to the extent to which the bonds formed between staff and parents could deliver adult service users’ rights and transgress status boundaries. In limiting parent’s rights, their relationships with staff helped realise the rights of children to be free from maltreatment. On the whole, parents in the study accepted this boundary.

8.5.3 Bonding and solidarity: eliminating stigma and judgment

- Service users and stigma

As well as valuing the helping dispositions and the (partial) transgression of status divisions contributing to bonds, service users also identified quality in the way family service relationships eliminated stigma and judgment. Phillip, for example, felt he could bond with workers who were not from a privileged socio-economic background in ways that reduced stigma about his receipt of social security:
it’s not like if you had six workers out here that had been born and bred on the north shore or something and whatever and never knew what it was like to be on a pension or to be, not be loaded or anything like that. So they can relate to what’s going on, y’know and, it makes it easier (Phillip, southwest Sydney)

Phillip’s quote shows how service users consciously experience helping relationships in socio-political contexts. This revealed his aspirations for reduced power differentials between workers and clients, captured in the concepts of recognition and respect. For Phillip, there was a distinctive economic or ‘class’ dimension of relationships, which he saw affected how workers understood the constraints he faced. Similarly, Karina described this as a kind of cultural egalitarianism, where she wasn’t ‘put down’ by staff but felt able to bond with them as an equal. She said:

they’re heaps easy to get on with, and they don’t look at you and say ‘Well!’ and walk away. They don’t look at you snotty nosed do they, no they’re pretty cool. (Karina, southwest Sydney)

In the same group, Craig also described how he valued being able to bond with staff who did not treat him in a demeaning way because of his single fatherhood. He described how:

you walk into some services and you tell them that you’re a single dad and they look at you funny. Now – it’s like – y’know, you’re not entitled. ‘You shouldn’t be looking after your kids, it’s a mother’s job’, that’s what some services will treat you like and it’s very demeaning to be treated like that. (Craig, south-west Sydney)

Craig went on to describe how Burnside seemed to treat service users as equals and didn’t judge or stigmatise their identities:

there’s no discrimination whether you’re male, you’re female, straight, bi whatever, it doesn’t matter here, everybody’s treated as an equal person and treated fairly and helped the best possible way they can. There’s no judgment. (Craig, southwest Sydney)

Craig’s account of non-stigmatising bonds is well captured by the ideal of solidarity drawn from Axel Honneth, and discussed in Chapter Seven. This shows that as well as constituting outcomes of family support, bonds of solidarity can transgress status divisions (such as those in Craig’s list) and stigma. In this way, solidarity acts both as an
outcome of family support, and as part of the process through which it achieves its goals, thus contributing to service quality.

On the mid-north coast, young mothers saw that good bonds with staff allowed them to gain advice and mentorship without the personal judgment and ‘baggage’ of somebody they were close to. This is evident in the dialogue between Lisa and Megan:

Lisa: I think it’s really good too, cos you’ve got your parents and they’re really supportive, but then you want someone else, someone older who’s not your parents to talk to … like a responsible person

Megan: someone who hasn’t known you all your life and doesn’t have that

Lisa: yeah doesn’t have that personal opinion (Megan and Lisa, mid-north coast)

In these ways, service users saw that quality bonds with Burnside staff attributed them status by overcoming judgment and stigma faced in their other relationships and in the wider society. Interestingly, the ultimate indicator of status users identified was in how they were treated in relation to child protection issues. Alison’s account of not being treated as guilty of maltreatment while under the surveillance of Burnside workers captured this dimension of service quality:

It’s hard to explain like but they are very supportive. Like put it this way, if Burnside seen there was neglection or something wrong they would take your children from you – of course it’s like any person. But they don’t treat you guilty you know what I mean? (Alison, mid-north coast)

Thomas also alluded to the importance of bonding with Burnside staff in a respectful way, rather than being treated as a ‘child abuser’. He described how the inferior relationships he experienced with DoCS caused him to feel the stigma of criminality:

we don’t get even treated with the respect of being a parent, we’re treated like criminals. Because for me, DoCS is the Department of Corrective Services, because that’s how they treat you, they treat you like a criminal. (Thomas, outer-western Sydney)
Glenda also captured the ways in which strong bonds were premised on respect and the elimination of stigma. She described how, in contrast to her experience with Burnside, other early childhood services compounded rather than eliminated stigma:

The way the people treated you was like you were shit under their feet … And you could tell the people that stuck out like a sore thumb, and I stuck out like a sore thumb. And I thought no, I don’t want this. I mean it’s not good for me and it’s definitely not good for my son. (Glenda, western Sydney)

For Isabel, forming bonds in which she was not stigmatised as ‘dysfunctional’ was important to her perception of service quality. In explaining this, she links overcoming stigma to the way good services harness or ‘grab onto’ service users’ strengths:

I didn’t need somebody to sit there and say how, that I was doing it wrong and they had the answers to fix it. What I needed was support in myself, and some understanding and not judging me. So many times I was labelled dysfunctional it’s not funny. I’m not dysfunctional, I’m just multifunctional thank you! [laughter]. I have a complex family, I have a complex life, big deal, its just life experiences, and outside services didn’t grab onto that whereas [the service] did. (Isabel, outer-western Sydney)

- Workers and stigma

Workers’ accounts also pointed to how important it was that their relationships with users overcame stigma and judgment. Hannah on the mid-north coast sought to eliminate stigma for users by applying counselling principles so that service users felt they had intrinsic worth as human beings. She described how building up the desired bond based on trust took a long period of time:

I think it’s that accumulating thing, over time you get to know someone, you get to understand that they’re ok, you can be ok with them, you’re not going to criticise or, um, or betray or do any of those kind of things and … I really try to stay open. (Hannah, mid-north coast)

Margaret described how she ensured the development of quality bonds within the group by making the space safe for clients to self-disclose without stigma, especially about important child protection issues. She said that safe and non-judgmental environments create relationships and spaces to intervene when:
they feel they’re going to be heard and that it’s going to be a safe place and there’s an opportunity there to try new things and practice new things. And also that it’s non-judgmental, that people can say what they think, you know, so I remember in that group we had quite a debate about smacking as a strategy, and some people were totally, totally committed to smacking as a strategy. But people felt safe enough to do that, to talk about that, and hear from other people as well. (Margaret, western Sydney)

Jeffrey saw relationships free from judgment and stigma as particularly important to the fathers in the study. He pointed this out in terms of using his bonds with separated fathers to overcome fear of social stigma and judgment:

there’s a lot of that fear stuff that comes in, fear of being judged, fear of not being accepted, fear of being looked at and told ‘you did what?’ sort of thing, fear of being the only one who feels the way they feel. (Jeffrey, mid-north coast)

8.5.4 Bonding and users’ struggles for recognition

Overall, quality in the bonding dimension of relationships was seen by both workers and service users to require the elimination of the stigma and judgment that service users experienced in their other relationships and in wider society. Their bonds were clearly points at which service users and staff could implement the values of social justice and achieve recognition, particularly outcomes of ‘love’ and ‘solidarity’. Indeed, the elimination of stigma in the bonds between service users and staff is intertwined with the transgression of status boundaries and personal authenticity that emerged as characteristics of service users’ views of quality bonds.

The bonding dimension of helping relationships thus emerges as a key means through which family support services and welfare workers facilitate service users’ struggles for recognition and respect. This shows that not only does the concept of recognition capture users’ and workers’ experiences and aspirations for outcomes, services are also delivered via a process of reciprocal recognition, for which the helping relationship is the key to service quality.
8.6 Collaboration

Along with the bonding dimension of relationships, a second element of quality helping (according to the therapeutic alliance construct) is collaboration. This relates to how workers and clients work together in a practical sense to achieve change. Collaboration or working together can be captured using the loose analytical separation between agreement about goals and agreement about tasks, which originates in studies of psychotherapeutic helping but which is similarly useful when adapted for understanding relationships in family support. This theme emerged less strongly than the socio-emotional dimensions of relationships described above in Section 8.5. However, the practicalities of collaborating did also emerge in users’ and workers’ accounts.

Overall, service users valued collaborating with workers in ways that made them feel respected. Lydia, for example, described how, in her experience, Burnside staff worked with clients differently from the ways other professionals did. She describes her dissatisfaction with the lack of collaboration she received from a psychiatrist, for example:

- they’re supposed to be the professionals who help you find out what your problem is and they’re not, they’re telling you to go away and solve it yourself. (Lydia, western Sydney)

Burnside workers on the other hand, were seen to support clients, which both clients and workers regarded as essential to quality relationships and a quality service. This point was made by Olivia who saw collaboration with staff as a ‘two-way street’ which was the source of overall achievement:

- they’re always evolving with us, and that goes hand in hand, that evolution of us and them, from us learning from them, and it’s sort of a two-way street, and without that, no one would achieve anything. (Olivia, western Sydney)

8.6.1 Agreement on goals

Nicola believed agreement on goals, or in her words ‘that we all want the same thing’, was fundamental to having a good helping relationship with individual workers.
Further, these shared interests also seemed to act as the ‘glue’ that held together relationships amongst the whole ‘family’ at the centre. She outlined how:

here at [the centre], I mean Vicky’s like a mum to all of us, and we call her mum and Alice Auntie. We’re just so close because we’ve got that bond that we all want the same thing – to make our children’s life more easier and happy. It’s like an extended-extended-extended family, we can always count on somebody. (Nicola, outer-western Sydney)

For service users, quality meant having opportunities to participate in defining personal goals and in influencing the content of the parenting groups. This was reflected in Alison’s and Craig’s accounts of how they valued being consulted about the ways the service could address their needs. Alison, for example, saw quality in the ways that the services would:

ask the parents, like everyone that’s sitting in the group – ‘What’, like as Celia said the other week, like ‘What would youse like to do after the anger management one?’ Like we all sat and talked and said ‘assertiveness’. Thought that was good. (Alison, mid-north coast)

Craig described how:

we sit down now and then and come up with a bunch of suggestions about what we’d like to do. A lot of places don’t do that. They tell you ‘oh, we’re going to do this, this, this, and this’ …. this place doesn’t just set something up, they ask you what you would like. (Craig, southwest Sydney)

Similarly, worker interviewees emphasised the importance of service user participation in defining the goals and purpose of groups. Carol, for example, stressed the need for group goals to arise from the group:

it’s always preferable if a group comes out of a need that’s arisen from people – so like, the group of people is already there and they’re saying ‘hey yeah this is what we’re wanting’, and then you match that, rather than you standing there saying, ‘hey this is what I’ve got, who’s interested in it?’ (Carol, western Sydney)

In these ways, the collaboration around goals that both users and staff valued extended beyond individual worker-client collaboration, and into the planning and organisation of service delivery.
8.6.2 Negotiating tasks

For both family workers and service users, quality relationships in family support also required negotiated agreement about the tasks undertaken as part of the intervention. For service users, it was important that staff were committed to problem-solving yet provided options and guidance without over-directing user decisions. Users also valued the integration of staff as a team (to ensure they could access help with particular tasks when they needed it), and the appropriate pacing of service tasks. In these ways, forming agreement about tasks within user-worker helping relationships was buttressed by organisational factors (such as team work and time).

- **Service user views**

Participants valued the commitment of workers to the problem-solving tasks. Kimberley expressed how important it was for staff to help sort things out rather than being ‘focused on five minutes’, as she felt other professionals were:

> It’s not a matter of twisting words it’s like they’re focused on five minutes, like ‘I’ve gotta now go somewhere else’, and they’re not really spending that one-on-one time with you and trying to figure out well what’s causing the issues or what ways could we do to help sort that out. Whereas here they try and help you sort it out.
> (Kimberley, western Sydney)

Overwhelmingly, the non-directive approaches implicit in the strengths-based practice model used by family workers were the preferred way to negotiate and agree on tasks. As Craig pointed out, this approach gave him guidance in selecting between the many options thrown up by workers. He said:

> You’re given many options, many different ways of dealing with the problems you’re having with your kids. Like there’s no ‘you must do it this way’. It’s more of a guidance. (Craig, south-western Sydney)

Lindy made the same point, describing how the support her worker gave was not in terms of telling her what to do:

> just the support and sorta helping me to, advice with the kids’ father, you know? Had a lot of trouble with him, they gave me a lotta support. Not tell me what I should do or shouldn’t do, just being there as a friend, as support there for me and that means a lot. (Lindy, mid-north coast)
Olivia captured the value of workers providing subtle and gentle guidance towards a course of action, ensuring she could trust staff as they were ‘thinking about you all the time’:

I noticed how if you don’t see a problem too, they can direct you, even though you may not be admitting – like you don’t realise your problem, and they can guide you to the courses and say, ‘well this would be good for you’, and they can point out the areas and you can say, ‘yeah, you’re right’, cos you don’t have time to think about yourself, they’re thinking about you all the time. (Olivia, western Sydney)

Patricia valued the fact that she was given ‘a few different avenues to take’ with the final decision left up to her:

I can ring here and Meredith could answer the phone, for example, and nobody else is around, Judy’s not available, for example, and I could talk to Meredith about this: ‘and this is really going down and I don’t know what to do, I don’t know how to handle it’. And Meredith would guide me, whether I listen, whether I don’t, that’s up to me, and she could give me a few different avenues to take. And it doesn’t matter who answers the phone, who I speak to. (Patricia, western Sydney)

Importantly, Patricia’s comment above also highlights how she also valued having access to other team members, a point made in her comment that ‘it doesn’t matter who answers the phone’. This shows the role of organisational factors, such as the staff working as a team, in supporting quality worker-client helping relationships.

Like Patricia, Kimberley valued the fact that there were different staff members available for collaboration when she approached them for help:

I can ring up any time to speak to someone. In all the other ones that I’ve been in they’re only there these days, you can only ring them these days, but here you have a variety of people, whether the one person you want to speak to isn’t here, there is someone else willing to help you. (Kimberley, western Sydney)

Kimberley’s and Patricia’s comments suggest that the kind of collaboration taking place went beyond the immediate helping relationship between clients and their workers. Bonds extended from clients beyond the individual worker to the team and to Burnside more generally. Although these helping relationships had specifically personal
dimensions, service users also described quality as collaborative partnership with staff as a team, with the service as a whole, and even with Burnside as an organisation.

As well as the availability of a number of options, other aspects of quality task collaboration that were seen as important involved the pace of activity and staff persistence. For Karina, pace was important to the extent that it involved repeating material until progress was made and she felt ready to ‘go onto the next thing’:

they won’t give up, you know that must be their motto, they do not give up, they do not quit. It’s, ‘no, we are here, and no, we’re not going to just leave you high and dry see you later, and repeat it if need be. If it doesn’t need to be repeated that’s fine, we can go on to the next thing that you want to work on, the next thing that you want to improve’. (Karina, south-west Sydney)

For Jennifer, the relaxed and informal environment reduced her anxiety about performing learning tasks, allowing her to ‘take on more’:

I think because it was done in a situation that was homely we took more on board, and you didn’t have that sort of panicky feeling like ‘oh no I’m gonna fail’. Like she was absolutely lovely, it was just so relaxed so you seem to take on more. You know what I mean? It’s a homely situation. (Jennifer, western Sydney)

- **Worker views**

Staff confirmed the importance of collaborating around tasks without taking an overly directive approach. Celia, for example, saw her role as offering options, with service users being the experts on themselves. She described the importance of:

coming from the perspective that the people that we’re working with are the experts on themselves. And that we certainly are not the experts and all we can do is provide them with options. (Celia, mid-north coast)

In doing so, this reflected the approach valued strongly by service users at all the centres. Further, the kind of collaboration Celia described was underpinned by principles of positive reinforcement implicit in strengths-based practice:

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141 This point distinguishes the kind of helping relationships in family support from those in psychotherapy, which are necessarily individual. Quality family support relationships were experienced with individual workers but they were also dispersed throughout the broader service and organisational relationships.
all the time working from a strengths base, so if there are things that people are
doing very well, making sure that they have positive reinforcement for what they are
doing well and to try to stay away from the things that are negative. (Celia, mid-
north coast)

Role modelling was also a way staff showed clients particular strategies without
directing them to act in a certain way. Jeffrey’s example captures this:

I know a guy who watches me very closely about how I relate with children. So for
example if I’m talking to a child I won’t bend over from the waist because I’m five
foot ten, I’ll kneel and so I’ll put myself at that child’s level, to look them in the eye
and listen to what I’m saying. I’ve noticed he does it. And he did that very quickly,
within – once seeing me do it he suddenly started doing it, I thought, cool, I don’t
have a copyright on that so you know. I tend to realise what works and then
encourage the guys to model that. Um, so yeah, modelling is very important.
(Jeffrey, mid-north coast)

Debbie’s discussion of collaborating emphasises her role in guiding and encouraging a
particular service user to act on what they’d agreed, as well as her persistence and
careful pacing in collaborating around tasks:

some girls you have to be a little bit more, not forceful, but discuss the issues a little
bit more so they understand the importance of maybe their child’s development. I
mean one girl, her daughter’s not talking much and screaming and that, that’s sort
of, we pick it up that she’s sort of not actually developing how she should be, and I
think that’s my role to encourage her to do something about it. So you know I
dropped her off the other week and I said ‘so what are we organising this week?’ and
she went, ‘I don’t know, I’m going to go to the park’, and she didn’t get it, and I just
started laughing, and she goes, ‘what?’ it was sort of like treating her like a kid I
suppose, I said ‘no we talked about how you were gonna do something this week’
she went ‘oh, yeah yeah yeah go to community health’. I went, ‘that’s the one’. You
know like just to you know encourage, I mean we took her to the dentist one week
because she had a toothache pretty badly and I guess those sort of things mean
somebody cares for them, make the effort to care for them that they’re ok and their
child. (Debbie, mid-north coast)

That staff took service users’ input into the collaboration very seriously is captured in
Nerida’s description of how she worked with a particular young client:
we ask her what she likes, what she wants us to do. She doesn't want us to even ring her parents, see her parents, and I guess she knows her parents better so maybe it might make it worse, so you know, we listen to her because she’s our client so we do what she wants to do. (Nerida, southwest Sydney)

Overall, collaboration in helping relationships captures the practical aspects of how service users and staff work together. This is a weaker theme emerging from the data, seeming to be of less importance to service users than the bonding dimension of relationship quality. Importantly, quality in collaboration around goals was seen by both staff and service users to go beyond user involvement in defining personal goals. Collaboration was valued at an organisational level, with users citing the value of helping plan the content and operation of the parenting groups. Collaboration around tasks was seen to involve workers providing non-directive options and guidance to service users, and staff flexibility in determining responses.

8.7 Conclusions

Service users in the study considered their relationships with family workers to be critical to achieving their ideals for themselves and society, and the core of service quality. Both users and workers offered more detailed and complex accounts of the helping relationships they shared than they did of any other aspect of the service.

The participants’ perspectives presented in this Chapter contribute to knowledge about how users experience family support services, and how the quality of these services can be conceptualised and evaluated. Most importantly, the research highlights the importance of relationships in facilitating users’ struggles for recognition. Considering worker-client relationships as ‘therapeutic’ or ‘helping alliances’ consisting of ‘bonding’ and ‘collaboration’ highlighted the primacy of the socio-emotional bonding dimensions of these helping relationships. When services were good quality, these service users felt their bonds with staff were authentic and respectful, that they overcame status boundaries and eliminated the degradation and disrespect they experienced with other professionals and in other spheres of life.
However, the findings also highlight the risks of uncritically accepting service users’ evaluations of helping quality. These users inadvertently undermined the contribution and value of family work in mistaking purposeful, professional practice for displays of ‘natural’ friendship and for knowledge derived from personal experience rather than the purposeful application of formal techniques and skills. Family workers were sharply divided about the role of personal experience and self-disclosure with respect to service quality. Some staff (especially those in the regional setting) challenged professional principles of ‘keeping a distance’ from service users, and drew on personal experience of hardship as a resource in delivering family support. Others strongly believed this indicated poor quality helping. Overall, while service users’ identification of the importance of bonding with workers highlights legitimate criteria against which to measure service performance, their use of particular techniques for developing these bonds are clearly more controversial. The differences existing amongst workers around the role of personal experience and self-disclosure in forging effective bonds suggests that the use of specific bonding techniques should not be considered legitimate indicators of service quality.

The findings have important implications for performance measurement practices. The significance of relationships to service quality in the perspectives of service users and workers represents a key difference between ‘frontline’ and managerial discourses of performance, with these aspects of the family support process largely invisible in existing performance measurement systems. The findings highlight the risk that relationships – the key dimension of quality for service users – may be overlooked in performance measurement systems. Not capturing the quality of client-worker bonds limits the capacity of performance indicators to thoroughly represent the value of family support. Indeed, the invisibility of relationships in performance measurement models skews understandings of the family service production process, constraining the ability of services to organise their resources to promote quality relationships for service users. However, the findings call for further research both about the role of relationships in social service delivery and about how evaluation might capture these dimensions of quality. Particular areas for research are the differences between helping relationships in group social service contexts and in one-to-one relationships, and the
different ways in which workers and clients form helping relationships in small regional areas and in urban environments.
Chapter Nine

Users’ perspectives on evaluation

9.1 Introduction

As well as being asked to define criteria against which to measure performance, the parents in the study were invited to discuss how they evaluated the family support services they used, and how they believed others (such as managers and evaluators) should do so. Information about how service users decide whether services are working, how they believe others should do so, and how they felt about participating in evaluation were elicited using questions six to ten in the Questioning Route (Table 4, Chapter Five). In posing these questions, I probed further in order to distinguish users’ views on evaluation from their criteria for performance (which were elicited using questions one to five).

The analysis highlighted how service users understood and experienced performance evaluation in the context of their visions and aspirations for personal wellbeing and justice. As I have argued, Axel Honneth’s idea that overcoming humiliation, inauthenticity and disrespect is the source of both individual and social progress, helps capture the role family services play in the struggles for recognition that these service users described. In this Chapter I extend the arguments made in previous Chapters, showing the ways in which users treated evaluation systems and processes as opportunities in which to achieve their justice goals.

Users described how evaluation could progress their struggles for recognition in two ways. Firstly, evaluation could capture their private experiences of quality and
outcomes in family support. Users articulated a role for evaluation in *making visible* the contribution of family support in pursuing their personal developmental and social justice goals. Secondly, users saw evaluation as an opportunity *in itself* to facilitate recognition, treating it as a forum in which to *express* and *build respect* by involving users in participatory, interpersonal and informal data collection processes.

Reconsidering evaluation as part of users’ struggles for recognition has both practical and theoretical implications. Practically, the findings legitimise the evidence and the methods with which users privately assess service performance, and the role they see for themselves in assessing quality and outcomes. Further, users’ ways of assessing performance and their preferences for particular evaluation methods can inform evaluators about how they might engage service users in measuring performance. Although users’ ideas about evaluation challenge dominant notions of rigour, they point to ways evaluation systems might meet the expectations of social work evaluation theorists to achieve service users’ interests without compromising data quality (Shaw, 2000).

In a theoretical sense, identifying a relationship between evaluation and service users’ struggles for recognition extends the application of Honneth’s concept. As pointed out in Chapters Six and Seven, recognition frameworks are only beginning to shape mainstream social policy debates in capitalist welfare states (e.g. Lister, 2004), so it is unsurprising that this theoretical framework has failed to intersect with debates about social service evaluation. Although Honneth envisages his framework being used as an evaluative standard for assessing the capacity of practical arrangements to guarantee relationships of recognition (Markle, 2004), the implications of his work are yet to be fully explored in debates about how the evaluation process *itself* might contribute to justice.

**9.2 How users know services are working**

The questions in the interviews and focus groups assumed that users *would* assess quality and outcomes, given that a degree of evaluative thinking was necessary to inform daily decisions about whether services were worth attending. Yet some
participants found it hard to describe how they knew whether services were meeting their needs and catalysing change in their lives. Kathy, for example, knew services were working for her because she was:

- doing things a certain way instead of ways that I used to do it … I dunno, I can just feel it, it’s hard to explain. (Kathy, mid-north coast)

Kathy strained to think about and explain how she assessed services. Although others initially found it difficult to describe how they knew when services were working, the accounts that emerged together outline the range of sources of evidence with which users evaluated the family support services they used. Descriptions focused on how users formed their judgments around changes in their legal status, how they saw themselves as parents, their psychosocial health, and how services made them feel. Here I consider these sources of evidence within Honneth’s categories of ‘love’ (9.2.1), ‘legal status’ (9.2.2) and ‘solidarity’ (9.2.3).

9.2.1 Making ‘love’ visible

Parents described how, when they privately evaluated how services were working, they looked for evidence of change in their intimate relationships and their feelings about themselves. They used evidence of changes in their confidence and trust, and changes in their relationships with their children and partners. Because this evidence is located in primary and private relations of affection, evidence of service outcomes in these areas is not always apparent or accessible to others.

- Evidence of change in primary relationships

For some participants, evidence of how services contributed to the ‘love’ dimension of justice came from an awareness of improvements in their self-confidence and parenting efficacy. Pete’s account made this point, and showed how a process of self-reflection allowed him to collect data to evaluate these aspects of service outcomes:

- I don’t know how I can measure this, but the reality is I know I’m a better person and I know I’m a better parent and in some ways it doesn’t matter what’s outside of me, there’s that feeling … I can say look myself in the eye and I can look my
daughter in the eye and say I’ve done my best, been the best father I can be. (Pete, mid-north coast)

Nicola also knew services were performing well by considering how she felt about herself, and how she saw herself with more energy for parenting:

I can see the change in me, I’ve got more patience, I’ve got more time to deal with my kids. (Nicola, outer-western Sydney)

Veronica described how she knew services were helping because of how she offered herself to her children. She drew evidence of change from:

the way that you actually put yourself out towards them and understand them. (Veronica, outer-western Sydney)

Alison could find evidence of service outcomes in her experience with her partner, pointing to reduced levels of domestic conflict, which she saw the service had helped bring about:

me and Marcus don’t argue as much, there’s not as much stress. (Alison, mid-north coast)

For some parents, children would notice and comment on changes resulting from the interventions. Patricia said she judged service performance in this way, by soliciting her daughter’s perception of change:

I know because as I said I’m home at the moment with my daughter whose saying ‘Mum, you’re the best’ … I’ve sat down with Larissa and said, ‘Am I right when I say that you and I have broken some kind of animosity trail along the way here? Am I right when I say we’re getting along better, communicating properly, talking a lot more?’ And I said, ‘I know you’re not going to tell me everything because all teenagers have secrets from their parents’, I said, ‘and I appreciate that and I respect that, but do you feel that we’ve broken some kind of routine, not routine but negative form of lifestyle, and we’re on the right road now?’ And she said, ‘Yeah’. (Patricia, western Sydney)

Importantly, soliciting evidence of service outcomes – in this case Patricia’s relationship with her daughter – can work to reinforce the expression and generation of ‘love’. In forming and checking her judgment of changing relationships (i.e. gathering evaluative data), Patricia was able to confirm her daughter and exchange respect.
However, for most of the parents, feedback of service performance was less forthcoming, especially for those with younger children. Olivia’s comments locate the changes in the subtleties of parent-child interaction. She could evaluate service outcomes by observing her day-to-day relationship with her children, noticing that she was now able to show them her authentic humanity:

I seen the change in my children, just the facial behaviours and stuff like that, and also the respect the communication, it’s building better communication. And also I’ve been able to tell them that I’m wrong on certain things too and point that out that I’ve been wrong, and that I’m, y’know, just as human as other people. (Olivia, western Sydney)

Fiona based her evaluation of service effectiveness on feeling that her toddler son understood her better:

there’s a lot less friction y’know, a lot less going off at him and as I said to ya I’ve got to a point where I can talk to him in his language where he’ll understand it and he understands what I want, which is helping me a lot. (Fiona, mid-north coast)

Bill also drew evidence of service performance from his ability to communicate with children – in his case this was simply that:

the kids start talking to you again and communicate more openly. (Bill, outer-western Sydney)

- **Evidence of change in the practicalities of parenting**

Service users in the study also found evidence of change when they put new parenting strategies into practice (which can be understood as an action research approach to evaluation). When asked how she knew the knowledge and skills imparted at the parenting education groups were helping her, Lydia, for example, answered quite plainly.

Because we’re putting them to practice. We go home and we experience, we use it. (Lydia, western Sydney)

Indeed, this was a strong and recurrent theme at western Sydney, across all interviews and groups. Examples were the following comments:

You try it and it works! (Julia, western Sydney)
I actually put them into practice at home. (Georgia, western Sydney)

It’s not only a matter of having fun and laughter and whatever, there are points that from other people’s experience that you can learn and put in practice. (Tahmeena, western Sydney)

Olivia also described how she ‘knew’ that programs were working when they kicked in at critical moments and helped her prevent further conflict:

all the parenting programs here, they really kick in the most when you’re really angry and you think ‘hang on I learnt that’ and you can apply it. (Olivia, western Sydney)

On the mid-north coast, parents also said they knew services were performing because they implemented the strategies they learnt, which Lindy treated as ‘experiments’:

I go home and push that through at home sort of thing. Like try different experiments. Like talk to the women here you know? And they suggest something. I go home and try it. (Lindy, mid-north coast)

These findings show how service users gather evidence about the ‘love’ dimensions of recognition by reflecting on themselves and monitoring their relationships with their children and partners (which itself contributes to service outcomes of ‘love’). They also employed action research methods to put into practice new parenting strategies and assess their usefulness. Importantly, assessing service effectiveness requires users to reflect on themselves and their family relationships. Encouraging users to pursue self-knowledge and authenticity by evaluating how services affect their relationships to themselves and their families can therefore facilitate their struggles for recognition.

9.2.2 Making ‘legal status’ visible

For some parents, their changing legal status gave the strongest evidence of service outcomes. For Honneth, legal rights express the moral responsibility the state attributes to subjects (1995:118). The denial of such rights constitutes exclusion, which undermines subjects’ self-respect and their opportunities for recourse through state institutions.
In the study, a subset of service users considered the ultimate evidence of family service performance in how they were able to renegotiate their relationships with the state. These parents drew evidence of outcomes from their changing legal status in relation to children, partners and child protection agencies. Non-custodial parents judged service effectiveness according to any improvement in contact time they had with their children, with the ultimate evidence being having children restored to their care. These parents saw their relationships to the state (expressed through the legal and administrative arrangements regarding their children) to represent indisputable indicators of service outcomes.

When asked how they could tell how services were working, Alison and Lynette pointed out, in no uncertain terms, how having their children returned to their care gave the clearest evidence:

- I’ve got three children back in my care since I’ve been here. (Alison, mid-north coast)
- [Burnside] has helped me to get my daughter back. She was in DoCS’ care for a little while and now I’ve got her back. (Lynette, outer-western Sydney)

Also referring to evidence of her legal relationships with DoCS and her children, Karina explained how she judged the performance of Burnside services according to the cessation of child protection notifications relating to her children, and the closure of her file with DoCS. She treated this as the key indicator in assessing service performance:

- there were no notifications on my children for at least eighteen months, so I’ve been involved with Burnside for two years. So there’s an eighteen-month period. So obviously they’ve done something right to assist me. And to help my children, for me to better parent my children, DoCS have now, after twelve years, closed my file. (Karina, southwest Sydney)

In the same group as Karina, Phillip also saw custody of his children to constitute the clearest evidence of service performance. When asked what evidence he would want evaluation to capture he responded:
I could say ‘well here’s my two beautiful little boys that you know, I mightn’t have now’, or that I might not be around to enjoy them if not for that, kind of thing.

(Phillip, southwest Sydney)

Together, these examples show how a subset of service users treated custody and contact as powerful evidence for the effectiveness of family support. In doing so, they explicitly endorsed measures of performance based on reports of suspected abuse and neglect, and of child removals and restorations. However, while these legal indicators make relevant service outcomes visible for some service users, other parents did not consider such evidence. To consider only legal evidence would undermine the contribution of the work of family support in both preventing families from coming into contact with the child protection system and reducing the duration and intensity of involvement. Those parents who experienced legal outcomes such as having a child returned to their care drew strongly on this as evidence. However, this data was neither available nor relevant to most of the parents in the study.

Across the sites, there were parents who had not lost custody of or contact with their children, although all were identified (by DoCS, Burnside or other welfare agencies, schools, health workers or other professionals) as having children at risk of abuse or neglect (according to factors such as depression and domestic violence, learning difficulties, and poverty). Those parents who aimed to maintain relationships and strengthen them rather than to change their legal status with respect to their children found it more difficult to describe how they evaluated service performance. These participants judged the quality and effectiveness of services using a wider set of evidence sources, including their self-reflections on how their parenting strategies changed, how participating in the service made them feel, the feedback they received from others, and changes in their children’s behaviour. In the following section I capture the sources of evidence in the category of ‘solidarity’ derived from Honneth’s framework.
9.2.3 Making ‘solidarity’ visible

As well as drawing on evidence of service performance from their experiences of ‘love’ and ‘legal status’, service users also drew data from the sense of community, belonging and achievement that developed amongst the parents using family support. Axel Honneth’s category of ‘solidarity’ captures these dimensions of justice, which relate to the ethical self-assuredness that come from accepting difference, and exchanging approval of individual uniqueness and contribution (Honneth, 2001: 50). Relationships of solidarity allow individuals to claim social space as valid contributors to their community.

- **Solidarity and evidence of outcomes**

Many of the parents drew evidence of performance from their feelings that they were not alone, showing how family support services helped them to form bonds of community, gain the acceptance of others, and overcome isolation and difference. Phillip, for example, saw evidence of service performance in how he and others realised they were no longer:

sitting at home locked away feeling depressed and sorry for ourselves or anything.
(Phillip, southwest Sydney)

Instead:

they’ve helped us go from being stuck in a house to being out there and doing things. (Phillip, southwest Sydney)

Phillip pointed to how the involvement of users in community activities and relationships indicated service effectiveness. On the mid-north coast, Katie said she knew services were making a difference when the friendships she made extended outside the service, so she didn’t feel so isolated, to the extent that:

when you’re downtown you can say ‘hi, how you going?’ instead of just at the group
and leave it at the group. (Katie, mid-north coast)

Lindy also treated her knowledge that she can share things with others as evidence that Burnside had performed well. When evaluating services she said she considered evidence of:
how it’s changed my life, like to being positive and being supportive and open me eyes up, y’know, to different ways you can do things. I suppose the easier way if you know what I mean. ’Stead of doing it the hard way all the time it makes things a little easier and you can talk to people. You don’t have to keep everything inside and try to do everything on your own. (Lindy, mid-north coast)

- Solidarity and evidence of quality

As well as using evidence of ‘solidarity’ to demonstrate service outcomes, service users also drew on this data to demonstrate service quality. Overwhelmingly, users judged the quality of the service process by reflecting on the extent to which they felt better while using the service, and how they felt part of a community. Saira, for example, saw how being there helped her to feel better:

we’ve had a lot of sorrow and anxiety, and, you know, nervousness and problems, but when we come here we feel better because we talk to other ladies. (Saira, western Sydney)

Others also said they knew services were good by reflecting on how attending the service simply made them feel better at the time. Emma could tell services were working because:

when I really need the support, I really can’t cope and I go in there and I get it, cos I know by the end of the day I’ve gone home, I’m feeling fine (Emma, outer-western Sydney)

Nicola agreed, also emphasising how she judged service quality by how she felt at the family centre:

By the end of the day you’re laughing you know, and you don’t want to leave, you always want to stay here. (Nicola, outer-western Sydney)

Paula, Phillip and others, also considered their children’s attachment to the service to indicate that they felt an included, esteemed part of the Burnside community:

when I say to Millie we’re going to playgroup tomorrow, her face just lights up with delight (Paula, mid-north coast)

when I say to my kids, ‘do you want to go to Burnside?’ they’re straight out the door y’know, sort of thing, so they love the place. So it’s obviously good for them and
that, it’s something that they like … no one gets dragged in here kicking and screaming. (Phillip, southwest Sydney)

In these ways, service users evaluated service quality by reflecting on evidence of how they, and their children, felt while at the service, including how it helped them to feel they were an esteemed part of the community.

- **Evaluation as solidarity**

As well as deriving data about evaluative performance from the sense of belonging growing amongst service users, parents’ accounts show how the process of evaluating services itself can facilitate solidarity, as users recognise each other’s achievements through their networks. Indeed, participants considered the feedback provided amongst parents at the family centres to generate and transmit evidence of service performance, and as beneficial for service users in its own right. Georgia described this:

if the mothers see me here when I had my son, they used to give me positive feedback all the time … A lot of the time it’s things that I haven’t noticed that I’ve changed, so yeah, which is really funny sometimes because you stop and you think ‘oh have I changed that about myself?’. And then you start thinking about it, ‘Yeah I have haven’t I?’ (Georgia, western Sydney)

Sandra found that she knew services had helped her to become more sociable by observing how other people interacted with her:

when people actually meet me now, the new mums that come in here, they don’t run. [laughter] I’m serious! A lot of them – my body language was so bad they would go to Vicky because they wouldn’t talk to me, they were scared. But now mums are actually – aren’t they? Isn’t that true? [nods from others] Mums can actually come up and not know about me and feel comfortable talking to me. (Sandra, outer-western Sydney)

Simon understood the exchange of evaluative data within the groups to be a kind of accountability that helped strengthen their bonds:

I think with this group there’s sort of an accountability factor where we get feedback from each other on basically how we’re going, and I think that’s important, because
sometimes you just don’t know how you’re going, until you get feedback from other people.  (Simon, mid-north coast)

Others used their networks outside the service to draw such evidence. For example, Adrian, in outer-western Sydney, knew services were working because:

Friends and associates that don’t go to the group say there’s something different about you, you’re a lot calmer, a lot more relaxed.  (Adrian, outer-western Sydney)

Karina in south-west Sydney expressed a similar sentiment:

our friends can see the difference in us, you know, and they sorta say, ‘how come you can do this?’  (Karina, south-west Sydney)

These responses suggest that, not only does the development of solidarity generate evidence for evaluation, evaluation systems actually require the extraction of data that is embedded in these networks, such as the feedback communicated amongst peers using the service.

9.2.4 Difficulties in evaluating performance: Saleema’s perspective

A different perspective on evaluation emerged from Saleema, a recent migrant in Western Sydney. She highlighted the difficulties that people who don’t speak fluent English face in attempting to evaluate the parenting education and support groups they attended. Saleema’s comments about the parenting groups show that she did feel that the groups were good and gave out useful information, although she could not fully understand the content of the material the workers imparted. Through a translator she said:

I’m sure that they – that the talks they have on Thursday morning are very useful because they talk about children and they give a lot of information, but the way they speak English I don’t understand. If my English was better or there was a way to understand what was going on, I’m sure that I would have been able to pick up a lot of information and learn something. I think that they give a lot of good advice to mothers but I don’t understand.  (Saleema, western Sydney)

However, when probed, Saleema did reveal some of the ways that she evaluated family support despite having limited information about performance. Importantly, she
evaluated the service in terms of how she felt she was treated in relation to the other mothers. However, she also felt that hers were only surface judgments, and that her lack of English skills did not allow her to access the evidence necessary to fully evaluate performance:

I can see on the surface how they treat me and I can see that they treat the Australians the same and there’s no difference of it, but my English knowledge is not deep enough to really dig out and understand what’s going on inside. We can only see, we can only have a short contact with them with a short period of time because we have very limited English. But in reality deep down inside them what’s happening – if they are really sticking to what they’re supposed to do, if they’re really performing as they are supposed to do, that I can say, because I am not within them and when they’re talking I don’t understand all they’re saying to each other and so forth, so I can’t be a good judge in regards to evaluating their performance. Because of my lack of English basically. (Saleema, western Sydney)

When the question was rephrased a final time, Saleema revealed that, as well as judging her treatment in relation to Australian mothers, she also rested on her faith in the service’s compliance with legal standards:

Natasha: How do you know when the advice that they give you is helpful?
Saleema: Because it is their own country I am sure the advice they give is all legal. I know that they wouldn’t mislead me.

Saleema’s responses are pertinent as a window onto the difficulties service users who don’t speak fluent English experience in accessing services and judging their quality and effectiveness. Importantly, her comments take debate beyond the problem of ameliorating the difficulties for culturally and linguistically diverse service users in participating in formal data collection processes with evaluators. Instead, Saleema’s comments focus on the difficulties stemming from her marginalisation from the service, as she felt her language difficulties made it difficult in each service interaction to ‘dig out’ the information she thought would be necessary for making an adequately informed judgement of performance.
9.2.5 Workers’ ways of knowing

Worker interviewees drew evaluative evidence from different sources, but relied primarily on feedback from service users. The helping relationships they formed with service users were the basic medium through which they evaluated frontline service delivery, with relationships providing a ‘natural’ way to gather users’ spontaneous feedback, whilst also providing a means to administer more structured evaluations. Workers also drew evidence of service performance from monitoring users’ attendance patterns, and described how their relationships with users allowed them to gain additional qualitative evidence with which to accurately interpret such data.

- Evidence and the helping relationship

Workers’ evaluations of service effectiveness were mediated through their relationships with service users, to the extent that they even relied on service users sharing their private assessments. This is reflected in Celia’s understanding that:

the true indicator is [short pause] from the service users. (Celia, mid-north coast)

Carol agreed that service users’ positions in the service delivery relationship made them the key to evidence of performance, and described staff as being effectively ‘reliant’ on users’ evaluations:

Well I guess really we’re reliant on the evaluation that the person doing the group provides. (Carol, western Sydney)

Staff described gathering users’ evaluations both with and without a structured evaluation process, but in either case, collected evidence via pre-existing relationships. Firstly, workers gathered feedback in the process of delivering family support. Celia, for example, described regularly eliciting verbal feedback from service users to inform her how she should adjust the intervention. She also used written evaluations although less often and in a more structured way (at the end of each term). She said:

I always at the end of every group do a verbal evaluation, and say ‘well how’d you enjoy the group today? How did you like the information, was it helpful?’ So that is one way of evaluating what’s going on. And an evaluation form is done at the end of every term. If there’s stuff they don’t like I’m always open to change (Celia, mid-north coast)
Nerida did the same, pointing out how she and her colleagues used informal verbal styles of evaluation instead of written forms where service users had difficulties reading and writing:

we give them evaluation forms at the end of each group, and we also like do informal evaluation like asking how they went. Cos some people aren't comfortable reading and writing either. (Nerida, southwest Sydney)

Carol made the point that feedback at the end of service interactions didn’t provide sufficient proof of outcomes. Instead, she argued, the best evidence was that which reflected service users’ attempts, not only to think about their learning, but also to apply it. This kind of evidence was not available until some time after the intervention had taken place. She said:

they might say ‘yeah I’ve had a good time, I’ve found it useful’, but has that then led to meaningful change in what they do? I mean, that’s nothing to scoff at, someone saying ‘hey I found this useful’, but the next step would be: do they actually start applying that? (Carol, western Sydney)

Indeed, as Carol suggested, staff did use evidence of users actually applying strategies, describing how they made space in service interactions for users to spontaneously offer such feedback. Hannah, for example, gave evidence that parenting strategies had worked, although this was based on users’ accounts:

I think feedback when people come back and say, ‘Look I've tried that, you know like, instead of having the big, the big afternoon argument, you know, or the terrible kind of shouting match, or the screaming rage I’ve – I decided to try turning it into a game and having a bit of fun’. Or, y’know, ‘I tried some rewards rather than punishing when my child did something I really didn't like’. Or ‘I didn't hit her I sent her for some time out in her room and talked to her about why I was doing that‘ … they’ll come back and tell us that they tried that. (Hannah, mid-north coast)

Similarly, Margaret described how she knew services were working:

when people come back the next week – having a look at how it went for them and trying to smooth it out, or work out if there were any hitches or any blocks, what were they, what they could’ve tried differently, and also just getting that
encouragement that they’ve actually had a go at trying something different, and that is very powerful. (Margaret, western Sydney)

Like Hannah and Margaret, Nerida also gathered and used the feedback offered by users. However, she pointed out that not all service users were likely to have access to evidence, as not all could be expected to implement and try new strategies at home:

I guess in a perfect world, like in the parenting groups and stuff, that every parent would go away and at least give it a try. Like absorb the information and give it a try and see if it works, but there’s always like – there’ll be a few that do, and a couple that won’t, and some that just, for some reason, its just too hard to. (Nerida, southwest Sydney)

Importantly, relationships were the key to getting meaningful evaluative data from service users, and the ‘helping relationships’ formed between workers and staff offered space for users to articulate evidence of outcomes and transmit this information from the sphere of intimate relationships into evaluation. With this in mind, involving professionals is a legitimate strategy for feeding service users’ perspectives into performance measurement (as in the outcome measures for the Community Services Grants Program, for example).

However, worker-client relationships were not maintained over enough time to fully capture users’ evaluations of outcomes. This is reflected in Jeffrey’s accounts of gaining useful feedback from incidental meetings with former service users in the community, which led him to realise that he often could not see the results of his work. He said:

the main thing that means a group’s successful is when I meet a guy a year or so after doing the group who actually says to me, ‘Your group did blah for me’, and identifies a behaviour that he recognised and has changed. And it might only be one thing, but he’s still got that and he’s recognised it. He says ‘I’m closer to the kids, I’ve made some decisions about my partner’, or whatever. So it’s that real – I guess a lot of times I don’t see the results. (Jeffrey, mid-north coast)

Overall, these accounts show the importance of service users’ perspectives in the evaluative evidence used by frontline workers. Workers’ reliance on service users’ perspectives means their views can act as proxies for those of the service users.
However, such a strategy for measuring outcomes is limited by the quality and duration of the helping relationship.

- **Observation as evaluation**

  To obtain evidence for evaluation, staff used observational data from users’ behaviour and their interactions in the groups. Often, this gave workers opportunities to observe and assess privately service users’ achievement of the love dimensions of recognition, such as their changing relationships to themselves and to other people. While the workers did so from outside the service users’ primary relationships, they used their ‘helping relationship’ with the users as the medium within which to form judgments. The types of evidence they described are well captured in the following excerpts from Mandy’s interview:

  I think in the self-esteem group especially, there’s been huge changes that the people in the group have made in themselves. We started off working on their own self-esteem and working on communication with others, things like you know, using ‘I’ statements, like ‘I feel like this because whatever’, not saying ‘you make me feel this way’, which is good. And they’re doing that more with their children now, doing it with their partners or with their other relationships in their life …

  I can see them when they talk to each other in the group, that like they don’t often get upset with each other but they’re more focused on like how this makes me feel with this. It’s not ‘you make me feel this way’, it’s ‘I feel like this because people don’t treat me with respect’, or whatever. (Mandy, southwest Sydney)

  Further, Mandy pointed out how observational strategies helped her to intervene early to address emerging issues in the group:

  we’re kind of constantly assessing how we interact with the group and how the group interacts with each other, and what they’re actually getting out of the group. So if there’s a problem we do address it right there, we don’t wait until it gets to be a big problem. (Mandy, southwest Sydney)

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142 This is similar to a finding of Healy and Meagher (2001). However, in that study this related to workers’ ‘self-evaluation’ rather than to observation, and it was conceptualised more widely than it is here to include feedback from interactions with other professionals. In contrast, workers in this study did not mention that they obtained data from other professionals for evaluation.
In this way, evaluation was implicit in the intervention, and built on respectful relationships with service users. Like Mandy, Margaret also looked to the group dynamic, assessing service performance according to whether:

the group itself is actually working, so that there’s a reasonably high energy level, ability to co-operate, ability to try out new things, to do the behavioural rehearsals, those kinds of stuff. (Margaret, western Sydney)

Carol also saw the group dynamic as a way to evaluate services. For her, the inclusiveness of the group was important, to ensure people could participate in their own way. Signs that groups were working well were that:

there’ll be a certain level of respect and space so that people can contribute, and so that yeah, you can feel that everyone in the group, in their own styles, whether that’s to be boisterous or to be sitting back, being able to have that sense that people in their own ways are there and being involved and feeling comfortable to be involved and yeah, the level of interest. (Carol, western Sydney)

In Carol’s account, evidence was drawn from the group dynamic, expressing the mutual recognition nurtured in the service-delivery environment. Debbie also assessed service performance by observing the interactions of group participants and making sure core values were being practised. She described how she knew when services were not working well:

if people don’t respect each other’s space, or if one person takes over the show … if there’s gossipy stuff going on between group members, bitchiness, dishonesty, people saying they’ll turn up and not coming. (Debbie, mid-north coast)

Like Carol and Debbie, Celia gathered evidence from the group dynamic, but also from the minutiae of participants’ facial expressions and body language, capturing the foundation of her evaluations in the personal knowledge of service users characteristic of quality helping relationships. She said she could tell how well services were working in:

people’s faces, I think the whole time you’re working with people you’re checking out [sigh] their expression, their body language, umm the energy that’s in the group or the lack of energy that’s in the group, and you can only work from that and I guess if things aren’t working it’s very obvious. (Celia, mid-north coast)
In these ways, worker interviewees showed how they collect data for their own evaluations through their relationships with individuals and the family support groups they provided, using techniques of observation to complement the direct feedback of service users.

- **Attendance data**

Staff also described using a source of evidence that is not necessarily drawn directly through their helping relationships with service users: attendance patterns. However, the way staff assessed this evidence was embedded in their helping relationships, with many pointing to the lack of meaning in these figures without a qualitative understanding of the broader context of individual service users’ lives. For Carol, people attending groups showed her they were getting *something* out of the service, though this didn’t tell her *what* they were getting. She said that she could tell whether outcomes were being achieved:

> by people turning up. If they weren’t finding something useful they wouldn’t keep turning up, and what they find useful might be different to what the program’s set up to do. But the fact that they’re turning up and choosing to continue to turn up to me would be saying they’re getting something of value out of it. (Carol, western Sydney)

Similarly, Nerida used evidence of people not attending, or not participating while they were there, as indicators of whether or not services were working:

> With the women it might be they stop coming as regularly, or they’re just like you know, talking to each other, not listening. (Nerida, south-west Sydney)

Jeffrey also used attendance data as indicators of how services were working, and explained how he took responsibility for attendance and adapted the groups directly in response to instances of non-attendance. He said he knew services were not working when there was:

> No one there. They vote with their feet. And so my – I’ve had groups where I’ve sort of been the only one, and that’s not bad, that just means I’ve learnt a new way of not doing a group, and so I mean they didn’t walk out while I was doing the group, they just didn’t turn up. And so what I had to look at then was re-reflect the
way the group was presented the week before, look at any mistakes I had to make, and apologise really, and that’s what I did, and it worked. (Jeffrey, mid-north coast)

Susan also saw that people leaving the group could be an indicator that services were not working. However, she emphasised the importance of understanding this in context rather than attributing it to service-related factors, as service users’ changing needs could sometimes explain poor attendance better than a failure of services to perform:

so if the same people keep coming back every week if one leaves you can ring up and ask them why. If they don’t need the group any more that’s fine. (Susan, southwest Sydney)

Staff strongly articulated the necessity to look beyond the surface of attendance data and through their personal knowledge of service users’ lives to interpret attendance data accurately as evidence of performance. Mandy, for example, stressed the importance of the influence on attendance figures of other demands on service users’ time, such as requirements to attend court:

you’ve got to remember that some people have different lifestyles and you’ve got to take that into account. Like I’ve got a lot of people who attend court on a regular basis kind of thing. (Mandy, southwest Sydney)

However, not all workers adopted a ‘defensive’ interpretation of service performance. Unlike Susan and Mandy, Celia found attendance data useful evidence for evaluating her work, but emphasised how high levels of attendance could indicate factors other than good performance. She emphasised the need to understand attendance in the context of users’ other opportunities rather than simply of service quality and effectiveness.

That [attendance] would have to be an indicator because they keep coming back, but there could be things that are biasing that too you know. It could be – you know things like – ok I’ve got no opportunity to do anything else, I’ve got no transport and the bus picks me up outside and I come to the group. So there could be a lot of factors influencing that. (Celia, mid-north coast)

In these ways, workers used knowledge derived from their relationships with service users to accurately interpret data such as attendance figures, although these figures were
drawn from administrative systems rather than through helping relationships specifically. Workers in the study relied on their relationships with service users for other evidence to inform their evaluations, which they gathered via direct observation, by opening a space for users to provide feedback spontaneously in the service delivery process, and less often, through more structured written evaluations. Together, this shows that much of the information workers gathered was derived from service users’ accounts. This positions the relationships between workers and service users as central to the collection of evidence for evaluation.

9.3 Users’ and workers’ visions for evaluation systems

Whereas Section 9.2 detailed how users and workers draw evidence to privately assess the performance of family support services, in this section I present the views of these stakeholders as to how managers and evaluators should assess service performance.

9.3.1 Users’ view of how services should be evaluated

When asked how they thought managers or evaluators should evaluate services, service users most frequently identified data collected from themselves and their peers, and reiterated the sources of evidence outlined in Section 9.2. However, users also thought formal evaluation process could use secondary evidence such as attendance data, and measures of abuse and neglect. Craig, for example, endorsed the use of administrative child protection data in evaluating service performance, calling for evaluators to look to evidence of the incidence of notifications of suspected abuse or neglect, and the numbers of children being restored to the care of parents. With optimism, he answered that the strongest source of evidence about service performance came from:

the amount of children coming back to parents. Through the work that parents are doing, how many children come back to parents from DoCS. And that’s figures you can show. (Craig, southwest Sydney)

Yet overall, users’ accounts embody strong beliefs that evaluation processes should be informal, personal, and respectful. Users believed evaluators should personally participate in the service delivery process so as to obtain data through observation, and
should solicit verbal, face-to-face evaluative feedback from service users. Significantly, service-user participants were averse to consultation by (what they imagined to be) a distanced, external, non-involved evaluator. Instead, users’ expressed their desire for inclusive methods that involved personal interaction and participation. These perspectives position evaluation within users’ struggles for recognition, seeing the data collection process as an organisational opportunity for the expression of respect.

- **Service performance as elusive**

Some parents perceived difficulties in fully capturing the contribution of family support in evaluation. The following exchange between Craig and Phillip in southwest Sydney shows their belief that some service results could not be measured by an outsider, such as ‘improvements within themselves’ like their attitudes and feelings. Although they could be personally known by friends and co-workers, they could not be ‘put down on paper’ with the richness they would like evaluation to capture:

Craig: you really need to physically see a person to see the improvements within themselves
Phillip: you can’t put feelings on [inaudible]
Craig: y’know, those things they’re not measurable, y’know, not measurable in that sort of sense, in that evaluation sort of sense.
Natasha: So which kinds of things?
Craig: the improvement within a person themselves, in their attitude in their outlook on life, their self-esteem that sort of stuff, that’s stuff that can only be judged by the person themselves, and their co-workers and friends, it’s not something that you can put down on paper.

In the same focus group, Karina said she felt it was easier to capture the impact of services in her children’s lives than in her own:

you can show how your kids’ self esteem is going up by their reports and stuff from school, like I can say this is what my kids were like before, this is what they’re like now. That’s actually looking at their school reports. But we don’t get reports on us.

(Karina, south-west Sydney)

Kimberley’s comments suggest that, although service outcomes are elusive, some could be captured but they would need to be elicited in a personal and verbal way,
requiring a degree of confidence amongst service users, as well as personal contact with evaluators:

Sometimes it’s not as obvious as everyone thinks. So it’s verbally being able to tell whoever what you’ve learnt here and how you’ve learnt it and where you’ve come from. (Kimberley, western Sydney)

Similarly, Amber believed evaluation would require service users to explain personally their experience of change. She said that ideally she would:

Tell them [the evaluator] where we were when we started here, what we were up to. The challenges we faced, and then tell them a bit about the programs and the support. And then the core values, and tell them what we’ve done since then. (Amber, outer-western Sydney)

Karina raised observation as the appropriate method, when she said quite simply:

well look at us now, and look at our kids. (Karina, south-west Sydney)

She went on to say that watching services in action would provide this information:

one-on-one or a group, and actually going and watching. Watching is actually the best way of doing it. (Karina, southwest Sydney)

Indeed, at all service sites, participants perceived observational methods as the key to the capacity of evaluators to capture evidence of outcomes. Like Karina, Julia saw observation as appropriate for capturing the improvements in service users’ communication, commenting that:

you can just see if it’s gotten through by the way they communicate with other people or by the way they communicate with their child. (Julia, western Sydney)

On the mid-north coast, Lindy believed that valuable feedback could be observed in the behaviour of parents and children at the service, and in the group dynamic. She saw that evaluators could pick this up by considering whether:

the children are happy, the parents are content and they can mingle with one another, they’re not sort of nitpicking or judging or anything like that. They’re prepared to, willing to say their views – you know what I mean? (Lindy, mid-north coast)

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Amber, also described how evaluators might use observation to capture evidence of service outcomes:

with time they have grown into themselves, they’ve blossomed, and its almost a physical thing that you can see them growing and changing, that their facial expressions are brighter, their body language is not so rigid. Um, you can just see the change. (Amber, outer-western Sydney)

Similarly, Isabel also believed that service users’ personal growth over time could be observed. She said:

It’s just watching the mums, do they grow in front of your eyes? It’s amazing.
(Isabel, outer-western Sydney)

Indeed, while Isabel believed that statistics on attendance and service users’ progress could be collected, on reflection she thought these were easy enough simply to observe, to the extent that she didn’t think formal guides or measures were even necessary. She said:

You would look at the statistics that are collected on attendance and interaction between the mums and what progress that they’re actually making. In that interaction with the kids and other people and life in general – you just see – you don’t have to have a guide or a measure, you just see it. (Isabel, outer-western Sydney)

Implicit in the emphasis these service users placed on observation is the idea that those observing how family support contributes to individual and family change would have some knowledge of the service users and their families. In this way, they seemed to assume that a person with an established relationship with them (such as a service worker) would involve them in evaluation. Indeed, Rose positioned the group worker as the key to service evaluation, describing how parenting-group participants actively provided evaluative data to workers in the service delivery process. Pretending she was the worker she said:

They [the service users] come back and tell you the week after ‘Oh that worked’, and you’ll hear that quite a lot, and everyone’s got their hand up trying to fight ‘Oh listen I’ve got to tell you Valerie what you said last week …’ ‘Oh no! Valerie I wanna tell
you about what happened, it worked’, and they’re all fighting over that part and then you know that it did work. (Rose, western Sydney)

- Evaluation as respect

Not only was evaluation seen as something involving personal exchanges and relationship, users believed evaluation processes should foster the values of respect and justice that they experienced in these Burnside services. When asked what she would like evaluators to look at, Olivia expressed how she would:

actually show her the respect that we’ve found in the centre … And sort of reciprocate it, sort of thing. Show her what we’ve learnt by the way we are and the way we think about things and the way we work. And what we could’ve been like and how we’ve learnt to see that, basically. It’s vision, sort of seeing a different vision. Showing her that without this kind of centre you would be so limited. And it doesn’t matter how much exposure you had to TV or whatever, you’d never have had the confidence to even try to achieve anything. (Olivia, western Sydney)

In this way, Olivia articulated vision for the evaluation process to reproduce and extend the experience of respect and recognition, in order to capture the change in the users’ perceptions of themselves and their potential. Phillip also saw evaluation as a process ideally involving respect and justice. He treated social inequality and cultural prejudice as impediments to social service evaluation. His perception was that:

the hardest thing is to prove to government and people in that boat because they’re like the people I said that have been raised in, or most of them, have been raised in private schools, everything like that, and wouldn’t have a clue about this community, and probably think, ‘oh it’s a pack of bludgers that can’t make it on their own so they’re dependent on somebody else’. (Phillip, southwest Sydney)

Instead, Phillip saw that evaluation should be personal and done by people with the life experience to understand the service process, commenting that:

if you’re asking somebody else to evaluate something that they haven’t been through themselves, then I think it’s virtually impossible (Phillip, southwest Sydney)

Similarly, Karina also believed that evaluators should go out of their way to personally understand the context and difficulties faced by service users before forming judgements about their progress:
get them to come out here. Get them to actually come out and live on what we get, live our life and let them show us. (Karina, southwest Sydney)

The importance of ensuring evaluation resulted in a fair understanding was also reflected in Patricia’s comments about the need to convey service effects by putting them into a format that evaluators and others could relate to on a personal level. She saw that evidence would be more convincing:

if they can relate to what you’re saying, and if they can relate to, ‘hey well hang on, what the centre’s doing here, instead of another fifteen-year-old running off the tracks, getting into drugs whatever, we’ve got this mother who will work with her daughter, and she’s making significant positive progress, we might have another you know, another kid that’s back on the track … here’s a centre that is now showing her and guiding her ways to have brought her back on track’, you know. (Patricia, western Sydney)

Indeed, service users saw evaluation to be a process that should ideally be face-to-face and comfortable for service users. Craig strongly felt that conventional evaluation strategies such as questionnaires were not, on their own, the best way evaluators could get information from service users. Instead, he recommended that evaluators become personally immersed in the process, and ensure informality and service users’ comfort:

get out and do things, listen to people, watch people, inform discussions, personally I find the formal interview tends to put people off. You get involved in what they’re doing and just have a good chitchat around the barbeque – you’ll pick up more feedback that way than a formal interview, which can be very off-putting for some people. Some people seem to open up more in a casual atmosphere, to me. And admittedly, when we do have the odd interview here and you do sit down and work or something like that, it isn’t very formal, it’s very casual, down to earth, so you can relate. You are made to feel very comfortable, and that’s how any interviewer should work. You should be made to feel comfortable. (Craig, south-west Sydney)

Lindy also recommended that evaluators actually visit services informally to observe them in action. She suggested that they:

invite them to come and visit and join us for a morning tea or something. Just a couple of hours or an hour or so of their time – and just to see for themselves I suppose. (Lindy, mid-north coast)
Olivia recommended that evaluations be done in a similar way to the research instrument – the focus group itself – in which service users were free to participate as respected, intelligent people:

like have a forum like we’re doing here, and just discuss it like people, like intelligent people who’ve all got the same aim in life y’know, and we’re all here positively, we’re not forced here, we come of our own free will. Y’know what I mean, so to sit here and hear it freely is much better than being captive. (Olivia, western Sydney)

Julia and Rose in Western Sydney pointed out how in evaluating services in this way, personal, verbal, methods were most appropriate, given the difficulties many of the parents had with reading and writing:

Julia: a lot of people might not know how to put it down in words, so you might be better off to talk
Rose: Cos I find that here, you need to talk because they can’t write as well
Julia: I must admit, I’ll be one of those, if you asked me to write all this down I wouldn’t know how to write it into words, I’d just end up with a whole jumbled bloody crap and I’d just go round and round in circles

In these ways, service users expressed strong preferences for data collection methods that involved personal contact with them, and which treated them respectfully.

- **Users’ perspectives on administrative data**

Although service users preferred data to be collected in personal interactions, they also discussed the use of secondary administrative data collected about their behaviour rather than directly from them, in the form of attendance data and measures of child abuse and neglect. Service users saw attendance data as something that evaluators could use as objective indicators of service performance, although this data was not evidence they used themselves to assess service performance. Nonetheless, they saw it as something useful for others:

If your service sucks, you’re not gonna have anyone here are you?  (Isabel, outer-western Sydney)
If you weren’t happy, you wouldn’t stay.  (Allen, southwest Sydney)

However, some service users pointed out that attendance data was not so straightforward, as the numbers of people in the group didn’t necessarily reflect quality.
Phillip explained how too many people attending could actually make the service impersonal and could deplete the space available for people to ‘come out of their shell’:

you can’t have too many people or it does get impersonal, well then you don’t know everybody and um you know, new people turning up every week and then it’s, ‘oh, I don’t want to come out of my shell this week and tell them something I would’ve in the group we already had’, and I mean sometimes you get too many people. (Phillip, southwest Sydney)

As well as attendance data, service users in the study also saw measures of abuse and neglect to be relevant data that external evaluators should draw on. Karina saw this data to indicate improved parental functioning, and implied that this was something that would be easy for governments to collect:

the government can see for themselves anyway, because all the kids that are involved in this centre find that they might be notified to DoCS in the past but the number of them’s gone down. Because the parents are happier because they can actually function better as people, they can actually offload instead of keeping all this stuff inside not knowing what to do, they can actually go somewhere and ask for help, get the help, they get the help with the parenting of the kids, the teens, feeding your kids, schooling, whatever. The kids are happier. Because all their needs are being met more through structure. (Karina, south-west Sydney)

Finally, Julia expressed the perspective that, aside from the issue of how data was collected, evaluation should be respectful in that it should lead to service learning and improvement.

There’s no point in just evaluating and seeing how it’s all going and everything still goes the same way. Because what’s that? We haven’t learnt anything then have we? And we’re not gonna try and get better. And as far as I’m concerned you evaluate to get better. (Julia, western Sydney)

Overall, the themes emerging from service users’ perspectives on how services should be evaluated together reflect service users’ aspirations for evaluation to be an informal, personal, face-to-face process in which evaluators engaged with them on service users’ own terms. They also saw evaluation as a process which should help them to become more fully ‘understood’, and in doing so, should accurately capture the richness of their
experiences of self-respect, self-esteem, and self-confidence that came from using family support.

**9.3.2 Workers’ views on service evaluation**

When asked how they thought managers and funding agencies should evaluate services, staff participants reasserted the importance of the kind of data they themselves looked to in making routine evaluations of service performance, based on service users’ changes over time, especially in terms of parenting skills and self-esteem. Observational data, measures of abuse and neglect, and measures of service users’ connections were also perceived as issues which formal evaluation processes should pick up. Importantly, staff participants were overwhelmingly critical of evaluation approaches based on quantified measures of output, preferring measures that captured the changes service users personally achieved. Indeed, workers in the study were highly critical of evaluating services by counting ‘bottoms on seats’. For example, when asked how managers should evaluate services, Jeffrey answered:

> Never by numbers. Never by numbers, never by the amount of people in the group. I think that’s – well they don’t anyway. But it’s more a – a group’s success should be measured on any change that we can see in a service user as a result of attending a group. (Jeffrey, mid-north coast)

Also on the mid-north coast, Celia argued that:

> I think that we really have to move away from the idea that numbers are a good indicator of how well groups are running. I don’t think you can measure what’s happening in a group from a quantitative aspect, it has to be qualitative and what’s happening for those people … Bottoms in seats doesn’t necessarily mean you’re getting value for your money. (Celia, mid-north coast)

Instead, staff thought evaluation should privilege methods that captured service users’ own perceptions of change, and their progress toward the goals I have described in previous Chapters in the categories of ‘love’, ‘legal status’ and ‘solidarity’. Workers’ emphasised the ways in which evaluation systems should focus on the factors which were the focus of their own practice and which they saw as evidence of change at the front line, emphasising client change and connection, and those kinds of evaluation methods that involved service users directly.
Hannah emphasised the need for evaluation systems to capture outcomes of ‘love’, emphasising data showing whether:

clients judge themselves as more able or you know a better parent, a more able, caring, supportive parent, a parent whose relationship with their child or children is much healthier or better or richer or whatever words you want to use. (Hannah, mid-north coast)

Jeffrey also thought that evaluation should capture service users’ experiences of personal growth, emphasising evidence of changes in their perceptions of themselves over time. He would like evaluators to:

allow them [service users] to identify when they’ve had wins and when they’ve had changes. And again not making it such huge changes that they sort of will never get there … and again that’s part of strengths-based practice, it’s allowing the client to identify a strength to be able to grow (Jeffrey, mid-north coast)

In this way, Jeffrey’s visions for evaluation systems embody direct participation by service users, embedding evaluation in strengths-based helping relationships. Jeffrey went on to recommend that evaluation capture the changes users experienced through a ‘before’ and ‘after’ comparison, focused on changes discernible to the users themselves:

they’re moving to where they can see that there’s a discernible change in their own lives, and the only way they can do that is to look at where they were, and compare where they are now. (Jeffrey, mid-north coast)

Celia would like to see evaluators collect information relating to ‘love’, such as:

indicators of maybe less abuse happening with children who are coming to group, those types of things. Less yelling. (Celia, mid-north coast)

Mandy’s suggested measures were more specific. She identified particular aspects of parenting skill to be measured, including:

how strong family relationships are, and the kinds of methods that parents use to discipline kids, or how often they talk to their children and how often they play with their children, stuff like that. (Mandy, southwest Sydney)
At the same time, she defended the effectiveness of parenting groups by pointing out that even seemingly small steps had significance for parents’ lives:

measuring how many new skills they learnt, like even if they only learnt one new skill per term, that’s better than they would have learnt anyway. I think that like you can’t change people’s whole parenting style in one term. So learning one skill is a big step. (Mandy, southwest Sydney)

Margaret pointed out that ideally, children should also play a role in evaluation, especially in evaluating changes in parenting skills and strategies:

It would be nice as well to talk to the children as well ‘have you noticed any differences with mummy that you…?’ [laughs] (Margaret, western Sydney)

As well as highlighting the need for formal evaluation systems to capture outcomes of ‘love’, workers also suggested evaluators capture changes in users’ experience of ‘solidarity’, such as their acceptance by and esteem in the community of parents at the service. Susan suggested this in her description of one service user who gradually claimed her place in the group:

I’d say with our playgroup you can see the individual changes. Um, for example, one lady who used to come was really low self-esteem, not very assertive, you know, quite the scared bilby, and now she practically is the leader, so to say, with that group; she welcomes new parents, the changes in her self-esteem have just been incredible to watch. Like it’s taken till February to make these changes. (Susan, southwest Sydney)

Mandy suggested specific ways such changes could be tracked, although she wasn’t aware of the plethora of instruments available for psychological measurement.

you can see, you can look at them when they first come, and then you look at them a bit later, and you can see the changes that they’ve made … I think even just measuring someone’s self-esteem, like in the self-esteem group, it might start off being you know, 3 and it might go up to 7 on a scale of 1 to 10. You know, that could be a good measurement but I don’t know how you’d measure it. (Mandy, southwest Sydney)

As well as their self-esteem, Mandy also envisaged measuring the connection service users felt to the centre, and their ability to ask for help. She thought that managers and
funding agencies should be concerned with this, as it meant service users had a source of help at hand. She said:

I think also measuring their connection to this centre as well, or to their ability to ask for help from people, if they’re connected to this centre enough to know that they can ring you, you know. (Mandy, south-west Sydney)\textsuperscript{143}

Carol saw attendance data as an indicator of connection with the service, but also thought connections service users had to each other was an important indicator. She said:

that would be an indicator of success, the fact that people feel comfortable to keep coming back, but also that they are making connections with other group members that also go beyond the actual group itself. (Carol, western Sydney)

- **Workers and the evaluation process**

  Like service users, staff in the study also believed evaluation should capture evidence generated from service users’ self-knowledge and self-reports. Further, like service users, some staff expressed the view that evaluation should be a process that brought evaluators personally into contact with the cultures of services and their users. Workers’ accounts demonstrated a high degree of confidence in service users’ self-reports of service-related changes. This is reflected in Margaret’s perception that service users were straightforward enough to self-report accurately:

  They’re so up front there – if it didn’t work, it didn’t work, and they’d tell you! [laughs] and if it did work, they’d tell you as well. (Margaret, western Sydney)

  Similarly, Celia understood that service users would accurately self-report:

  Natasha: Do you think that your clients would self-report fairly accurately?
  Celia: Yeah I do. Because I think they’re proud. They’re proud of the changes they’ve been able to make. It’s like ‘hey I can do this’, ‘this happened the other day and I didn’t react the way I used to’. So they’re proud of what they’re doing. (Celia, mid-north coast)

\textsuperscript{143} Indeed, the ‘connection’ Mandy points to could also be treated as a measure of service quality, if it is treated as a measure of the strength of the helping relationship between service users and the service.
Like service users, staff also saw that evaluation (especially that done by funding agencies) should be a personal, face-to-face process. Jeffrey, for example, suggested that evaluators:

come in and actually see what we do and sit in on the groups and understand what’s happening, even to talk to the clients about where they’re at rather than isolate themselves from the clients. I mean the clients are a bunch of people who are faceless and really nameless as well, and the only time they might encounter them is if they’re coming in if they’re really cross about something. So the best way would be to come in and to participate in the evaluation in the group. (Jeffrey, mid-north coast)

Indeed, Jeffrey asserted that he would like evaluators to participate in the services being delivered, so as to observe the services in action independently and ensure that their judgments were not just reflecting his position in the service delivery system.

I’d like to see them participate in the group. I really would like to see them not rely on any report that I write, which is really going to be biased. I am going to write a report and even though I can be quite transparent and say what worked and what didn’t work in the group, essentially my reports are going to say 'well I’m seeing the guys changing slowly', and I’m saying that because I am seeing that, not because that’s what they want to hear, I don’t believe people want their ears tickled about anything, but if the agencies were to come in and I guess even come in to family support itself and come in to Burnside itself to see what we exactly do as an organisation, rather than make decisions based on what they think we do. (Jeffrey, mid-north coast)

Similarly, Mandy thought evaluators should observe and participate in practical activities with service users. She gave her ideas about how evaluation should be:

they could come and get service users to show them around the centre. That could be useful. And they’d say ‘oh and this is the group we had Self-esteem in, and this is what we do here’, and they’d get that sort of sense of how they really feel about it. Because I think that sometimes with our clients, sometimes interviews aren’t the best way to do things, they’re not used to sitting down and chatting like this with people,

\[144\] Note how Jeffrey focused on the importance of evaluator participation in services rather than users’ or workers’ participation in evaluation.
but maybe more practical stuff like ‘come and walk around my centre and have a look’. (Mandy, south-west Sydney)

Overall, workers perceived that the most valuable data was based on measures of service users’ changes over time, especially in terms of parenting skills and self-esteem, and users’ connections. Observation was seen as an important data collection tool, and staff participants were critical of quantified measures of output, preferring measures that captured the changes service users personally achieved.

This is similar to the ways service users emphasised how important it was that evaluation captured data generated from themselves and their peers, and the ways both service users and staff pointed to the usefulness of secondary evidence such as attendance data. Service users were alone in discussing measures of abuse and neglect, although they believed this shouldn’t necessarily be taken at face value. Like staff, service users expressed strong beliefs that evaluation processes should be informal, personal, and respectful, and that evaluators should personally participate in the service delivery process so as to obtain data through observation, and face-to-face evaluative feedback. Indeed, both service users and staff were averse to being judged by what they imagined to be external, non-involved evaluators. Instead, users aspired for inclusive methods that they believed would attribute to them a degree of power and respect. These perspectives position evaluation within users’ struggles for recognition, seeing the data collection process as an organisational opportunity for the expression of respect. Such a position reinforces the insights of ‘democratic’ and ‘empowerment’ approaches to evaluation (e.g. House and Howe, 2000; Fetterman, 1996), approaches that respond to the aspirations of those at the frontline to be afforded a role in assessing performance.

9.4 Conclusions

In this Chapter, I have shown how service users’ perspectives reframe the evaluation of family support as part of users’ struggles for recognition. I have shown how users see evaluation processes to potentially facilitate struggles for recognition at two levels. Firstly, by capturing and articulating evidence of the love, legal status and solidarity
users experienced in using family support, evaluation offers an opportunity through which to make visible the contribution these services make to the pursuit of social justice. Secondly, the process of evaluation offers service users a forum in which to experience respect and be taken seriously, further facilitating their struggles for recognition. In this way, the findings show the potential role of evaluation in the pursuit of users’ justice goals, and call for reconsideration of the conventional understandings of the meaning and purpose of performance measurement.

In terms of the evidence with which service users assess performance and how they believe evaluators should do so, I showed how service users’ alternative discourse of performance measurement privileges their ‘insider’ knowledge about service-generated changes in their own lives, giving it priority over the judgment of any external ‘expert’ evaluator who lacks experience-based insight into the specific program or community. Further, the service users in the study valued the ‘personal immersion’ of evaluators in programs, and the democratisation of data collection in ways consistent with their aspirations for respect and social justice. By emphasising the role of relationship in evaluation, users’ perspectives challenge existing ways of measuring the performance of welfare services, such as those examined in Chapter Three. Indeed, the ideals of evaluation of both service users and staff depart in important ways from the rational-technical ‘ways of knowing’ that, as Everitt and Hardiker (1996) point out, are implicit in dominant approaches to performance evaluation.

Nonetheless, there are some points of overlap between users’ priorities for evaluation and those of existing performance measurement systems. In section 9.2 I showed how those service users aiming for outcomes relating to child protection or family law proceedings drew strongly on changes in their legal status with regards to their children as indicators of outcome. In doing so, these service users endorsed measures of children’s status in the statutory child protection system, such as numbers of child removals or restorations, as indicators of the performance of these family services. This represents a point of congruence with the indicators most commonly used to assess the performance of child and family service systems (although this did not emerge as a theme in workers’ accounts). Importantly however, the parenting groups were aimed at preventing the need for protective interventions, and the majority of
service users in the study were not in situations where this evidence was available. Instead, these service users drew on a combination of evidence to assess service performance, drawing of evidence emanating primarily from their experience of ‘love’ and ‘solidarity’.

The significance of these findings is in the way they challenge emphasis on users’ deficits in relation to their role in evaluation (as discussed in Chapter Four). The findings propel debate about service users’ role in evaluation beyond the factors precluding their participation. The data captures how users’ views both contrast with and overlap with the views of other stakeholders. This challenges the unhelpful dualism in the politics of consumer participation, identified by Healy (1998), in which practitioners are portrayed as wholly powerful and service users as wholly powerless. In contrast, the findings show that in this case practitioners rely on evaluative data derived from service users, attributing to users a position as custodians of information that is critical to assessing service performance.

However, the findings also reinforce the marginalisation that some service users experience in relation to family support evaluation, especially those, such as Saleema, who don’t speak fluent English. This exclusion was expressed not as a difficulty in participating in evaluations per se, but in terms of their difficulty in accessing basic information about services in the depth they felt was necessary to constitute evidence with which to make informed judgments about service performance.

The following (concluding) Chapter summarises these and other findings emerging from the study. It explores their significance in more detail, highlighting the implications for understanding the role of service users in the evaluation of care services, and identifying issues for further research.
Chapter Ten

Users’ perspectives: Challenging the ‘new accountability’?

10.1 Service users and performance measurement in family support

In recent years, public management reforms have made family support increasingly significant in the pursuit of child welfare outcomes in New South Wales. Government agencies have sought to manage and expand family support by boosting funds to non-government service providers, helping develop these services into mainstream strategies for achieving policy objectives of child abuse prevention.

As in other public and social services, performance measurement in family support arises from the need to ensure purchaser-provider arrangements are accountable. Performance reporting requires service providers to channel information about quality and effectiveness to government agencies that purchase services, helping them to exert control over service delivery without being directly involved. As shown in Chapter Two, the main purchaser of family support in NSW, the Department of Community Services, enhanced performance-reporting requirements for family support by gradually adapting the detail of its contracts with non-government service providers. Such reforms have shaped recent developments in the political economy of family support, to the extent that the description of performance measurement as the ‘new accountability’ (Martin and Kettner, 1997) applies aptly to this service sector.
Performance measurement and reporting purports to strengthen government’s capacity to manage service provision across the purchaser-provider divide, to support service improvement and ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of government spending. However, there are well-documented difficulties in measuring performance in child and family services. Outcomes are difficult to conceptualise and measure where services aim to prevent and ameliorate risk and build relationships, and outcomes may not be evident for months or even years after interventions begin. Proving that programs directly produce outcomes is also difficult where a range of individual, social, economic and other factors interact in service delivery processes (Fischer, 2001: 566).

In practice, the indeterminacy of social services compared with other more physical production processes makes it difficult to directly attribute outcomes to service inputs and outputs (Nocon and Qureshi, 1996). Characterising service delivery using easily accessible evidence of financial or bureaucratic achievement (such as counts of client throughput) is also problematic. Such indicators may miss critical information about how services contribute to personal wellbeing and social justice, and so risk maintaining the invisibility of the moral and relational dimensions of care that are critical to quality at the front line (Qureshi, 1998:140-1; Meagher, 2002b). Notwithstanding the implicit political and epistemological difficulties, however, ideals of performance measurement and evidence-based practice remain central to social service management and administration.

Given the documented difficulties of measuring performance, it is not surprising that existing indicators do not fully capture all the relevant characteristics or contributions of family support. As shown in Chapter Three, indicators for family support in NSW draw evidence primarily from administrative data and, at the program level, from professional reports. While program level performance indicators (for the Community Services Grants Program) draw evidence of outcome from family support professionals, the recipients of this kind of care—service users—play little direct role in these official routines of evaluation and accountability in NSW. Importantly, Chapter Three showed that while the perspectives of professionals who have direct contact with service users are considered in program level performance indicators, they do not
feature in the higher level indicators monitored and reported by state and national oversight agencies.

Users’ marginal position in evaluation is reflected in evaluation practice and research more broadly. As shown in Chapter Four, service users are often considered to be deficient with respect to evaluation, given the social and economic difficulties they face (and which have brought them into contact with welfare services). Yet constructions of users as deficient in evaluation can be challenged from a range of theoretical positions. From perspectives as diverse as managerialism and feminism, welfare service users (and other care recipients) are understood to offer essential information about service performance that will be lost from evaluation without their involvement. From some theoretical positions (including feminism and professionalism), users are also considered to have fundamental rights to participate in evaluation. By engaging with these theoretical debates, the thesis has explored how service users are constructed and treated in performance measurement systems, and has contributed empirical data about how users see their own role in evaluation. In doing so, the research contributes new insights into the implications of the ‘new accountability’ for social services and social policy.

The Burnside study is unique in exploring users’ own perspectives on performance measurement. The study was premised on the idea that service users have rights to participate in evaluation, and that they occupy positions in service delivery systems that give them access to critical information about service performance. I collected qualitative data from family support service users (and their workers) to help establish the scope for user involvement in performance measurement. The findings contribute evidence of how adult service users define service quality and outcomes; which evaluation methods they prefer; and how they see their own role in assessing the performance of the services they use. The modified grounded theory approach developed in Chapter Six helped show how these service users construct their perspectives on service quality and outcomes around their visions of, and aspirations for, self realisation, personal wellbeing, relationships, and social justice.
To understand the intricacies of users’ responses, in Chapter Six I explored how their aspirations for service-led change intersect with ideals of justice as ‘inclusion’; justice as ‘capabilities’; and justice as ‘recognition’. I then adapted Axel Honneth’s framework of recognition to understand findings from the Burnside case study. This framework contends that overcoming humiliation and disrespect represents both personal development and social progress. Adapting Honneth’s concept of recognition revealed how service users in the study positioned family support services, welfare professionals, and evaluation systems within their struggles for personal integrity, relationship, status and respect. Users emphasised the need for evaluation systems to capture evidence of the ‘love’, ‘legal status’ and ‘solidarity’ they experienced by using family support, and treated performance measurement processes as opportunities to achieve their justice goals.

In the remainder of this concluding chapter I reflect upon these findings, discuss the theoretical and empirical contribution they make, and identify the questions they raise for further research. The findings have significant implications for how policy makers, managers, evaluators and service providers might think about the quality and purpose of family support, and how they might design and implement evaluation systems that constructively engage service users. Considering the implications of the findings helps establish how service users’ perspectives challenge the ‘new accountability’ of performance measurement, and how their inclusion might overcome some of the documented difficulties in measuring family support quality and outcomes. The following sections discuss the main contributions of the thesis. I explore how the work extends theories of recognition to social services (Section 10.2); questions managerial understandings of outcomes and quality in family support (Section 10.3 and 10.4); and challenges the evaluation methods and approaches implicit in the ‘new accountability’ of performance measurement (Section 10.5). In each section I highlight the implications of the research for how social service information systems might capture evidence of the meaning and value of care in users’ lives, and issues arising for further research.
10.2 Family support as a case study in the politics of recognition

The thesis has shown how service users’ perspectives challenge managerial understandings of the goals of social services and social policy, and offer criteria for assessing progress toward them. The Burnside Study shows how service users experienced the value of these services primarily in terms of how they helped them to achieve social justice, by overcoming harms associated with humiliation and disrespect. These users’ perspectives frame family support as a case study in the politics of recognition, challenging the appropriateness of current performance indicator systems shaped solely around priorities of economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

Informed by debates about the nature of social justice as recognition (Fraser and Honneth, 2003), I captured the deeper themes emerging from participants’ accounts using an interpretive framework drawn primarily, but not exclusively, from Axel Honneth’s theoretical framework (1995, 2001). Adapting Fraser’s distinction between redistribution and recognition helped to show that service users did experiences both types of outcomes from using family support, but showed the primacy of their experiences of recognition. Despite the usefulness of this aspect of Fraser’s framework, Axel Honneth’s exposition of recognition as comprised of ‘love’, ‘legal status’ and ‘solidarity’ best resonated with the harms that parents in the study described, as well as the processes through which they overcame them. Parents described forms of suffering in their families and intimate lives, which exist beyond the ambit of organised social movements, in what Honneth terms ‘the shadows of the political public sphere’ (2003a: 122). Further, the process of developing caring relationships and a sense of community while using these family services were essential to achieving the outcomes of recognition and respect these users experienced.

The theoretical framework developed in the thesis draws from and develops understandings of redistribution and recognition. Adapting these concepts to the empirical study of service users’ perspectives highlights the usefulness of extending redistribution-recognition debates beyond organised social movements to understand the range of injustices experienced in personal and family life that social policies and social services aim to remedy. Indeed, redistribution and recognition have not
previously been used to understand how people who use family support services experience these interventions and define their outcomes, nor to question and explore the purpose of social services and how their performance should be measured. However, the thesis reframes the experience of using family services within users’ struggles for justice. This highlights new ways to understand the meaning and value of these services, using the perspectives of those who most closely experience their impact.

Reframing family support as part of users’ struggles for recognition helps highlight user-defined ideals for family and community life, to which policies, organisations and welfare professionals can aim. Users articulated standards for assessing how welfare resources assist their families, directing attention away from the technical concerns of measuring service outputs and assessing efficiency and effectiveness in the service purchasing process, and towards underlying problems of conceptualising and addressing social disadvantage and valuing social services. Ultimately, the thesis shows how service users’ perspectives reframe the purpose of family support – and indeed, social policy – in terms of the pursuit of respect, highlighting elements missing in the managerial discourses currently underpinning welfare service evaluation and funding.

Using this conceptual framework, research could continue to explore the role of social services in the pursuit of recognition and respect. A priority is to conduct research with children, to explore the role social services and relationships with welfare professionals play in their lives. Future research should also explore similarities and differences in the types of social justice pursued and experienced by adult and child service users, and the extent to which both find family support to achieve social justice outcomes compared to other kinds of social assistance and other social services.

### 10.3 Rethinking outcomes in family support

In reframing family support as a case study in the politics of recognition, the thesis has revealed details of the outcomes against which users routinely assess service quality and effectiveness. Parents in the Burnside study described how family support helped them overcome feelings of shame and stigma associated with the difficulties of parenting in poverty. They defined outcomes in terms of a level of dignity they felt in
their personal lives and relationships with others. While self-realisation, relationship and recognition are critical elements defining outcomes for users in family support, such factors have not been visible in the wider managerial discourse that has dominated social service policy and evaluation over the last decade. Users’ perspectives are therefore reason to question which aspects of family support services are meaningfully monitored and which are missed in the performance indicators that constitute the ‘new accountability’ in human service management.

As Chapter Three has shown, government data collections for family support capture only basic information about the efficiency of service purchasing, leaving the quality and impact of service delivery for users (and their communities) only partially discernible. Existing collections include basic volume measures, such as the amount spent to purchase family support services, the numbers of services provided, and the numbers of people using family support. Such indicators prioritise goals of service efficiency and value for money for government purchasers, which are easy to measure using the simple counts drawn from financial and administrative datasets. In NSW, information about outcomes for clients (based primarily on staff assessment) feed into program-level indicators (for the CSGP), and DoCS plans to report outcome data in future corporate reports. However, the research reported here suggests that while the participation of service practitioners can feed information about outcomes for users into evaluation, drawing service users into performance indicator systems offers more direct and meaningful data about the impact of services, while implementing users’ right to define their own needs and to shape service delivery.

The service users in the Burnside Study highlighted alternative criteria for measuring performance, and pointed to practical sources of evidence with which to assess services against their preferred criteria. In contrast to the sources of evidence upon which performance information is conventionally based, these service users routinely assess quality and outcomes by measuring their direct experience against their ideals for justice and ‘a good life’. As shown in Chapter Seven, Honneth’s framework of recognition helps to discern and understand users’ goals of self-confidence and authentic experience of love; their aspirations for self-respect that come with assuming rights in service bureaucracies and society; and the solidarity they experienced and hoped for (associated
with the connections of community, the transgression of difference, and the recognition of achievement).

However, while users’ perspectives show alternative priorities to those institutionalised in performance indicators, it is important to note that users and government approaches to performance measurement are not altogether irreconcilable. Indeed, the findings should not be interpreted to advocate uncritically adopting users’ definitions of service performance or measurement methods, or for doing so without regard to the perspectives of other stakeholders. Rather, users’ perspectives provide food for thought about which measures and tools might best capture users’ experiences of change, and which can most fruitfully involve service users.

Indeed, parents’ perspectives on outcomes should not be considered the only framework relevant for guiding the development of user-defined outcome measures. Adult service users’ perspectives should be understood in light of children’s experiences of service outcomes, for which further research is required. Research should explore how children whose parents use family support services experience service outcomes, in order to establish the definitions and criteria with which they assess how services are achieving outcomes for themselves, their families, and society. As well as their parents’ definitions, children’s own definitions of service outcomes could be usefully compared with workers’ and managers’ perspectives, to best establish user-defined strategies for measuring service outcomes. Further research into children’s perspectives would strengthen understandings of how social services contribute to justice, while recognising children as active participants in social and economic life and placing them at the centre of social inquiry, welfare management and service evaluation.

10.4 Rethinking quality in family support

As well as establishing social justice criteria for measuring service outcomes, users in the Burnside Study also defined service quality in terms of the degree of recognition they experienced in the relationships they formed while using family support. Drawing on the broad categories constituting ‘therapeutic relationships’ across the helping services (bonding and collaboration), the findings show how users identified quality primarily in
the socio-emotional or bonding dimensions of their direct relationships with staff. Indeed, the problem of capturing relationship quality in performance measurement represents a critical tension between ‘frontline’ and managerial discourses of performance.

Service users’ and workers’ accounts of quality highlight how the supposedly ‘soft’ and ‘feminine’ dimensions of helping relationships – in essence the caring in family support – form the heart of service quality. The role of caring relationships in quality service delivery has critical implications for the capacity of family support services to effectively achieve objectives of strengthening families and communities. If ‘what gets measured gets managed’ then the blindness of performance indicators to the complexity of care risks maintaining the invisibility of relationship quality in deliberations over service purchasing, planning, and management. The failure to capture care exchanged between workers and clients (as in the performance indicators for family support examined in Chapter Three) skews the information that services can use to promote and manage relationship quality, ultimately compromising how service users experience and benefit from service interventions. Failing to monitor and support the quality of client-worker relationships also limits the ability of government agencies to purchase services that can most effectively prevent child abuse and neglect, and therefore to make purchasing decisions that offer value for money.

Usefully however, service users in the Burnside study used their own experience to define quality relationships, and outlined criteria with which to include care quality in the performance measures applied in this social service context. These users saw good relationships to involve genuine liking and warmth between workers and clients, and feelings of moral equality akin to ‘friendship’ in which stigma was lacking and status boundaries were fluid (so that workers weren’t seen as ‘the experts’ on clients’ personal lives). Interestingly, service users felt that workers sharing their personal experiences of parenting and family life indicated this moral equality. However, as discussed in Chapter Eight, the use of such disclosures, and the development of genuine friendships with service users, was more controversial amongst staff. The controversy this factor generated amongst staff suggests that evaluation should aim to capture the feeling or
experience of moral equality in worker-client helping relationships rather than any particular technique used to achieve it (such as self-disclosure).

By defining the characteristics of good helping relationships, users established the criteria with which relationships can be captured in evaluation. Users, for example, claimed it was important that workers demonstrated that they were authentic people, affirming the insights of wider research that associates poor quality (in commercial as well as social service exchanges) with forced, formulaic, cynical or over-prescribed emotional displays (Hochschild, 1983; James, 1989). Adequate time and appropriate space for workers and clients to discover likeable characteristics in each other is thus a critical organisational support for quality, and one that evaluation systems can seek to capture.

As well as authenticity, users in this study saw flexibility in the status boundaries between themselves and workers to be critical to quality services. Fluid status boundaries allowed family support workers to create a family, home-like atmosphere in which to provide support and to respond flexibly to users’ needs. Indeed, service users saw strict boundaries around the rationing and type of care offered to represent poor service quality, feeling it restricted their options and circumscribed their own ability to influence service delivery to cater for their personal needs. Such views reinforce the importance of organisational arrangements that support discretion in determining interventions within each service relationship. Comfortable premises, flexible time management, program development that responds to user-defined needs, and professional ethics premised on moral engagement rather than strictly codified boundaries are paramount.

However, while service users highlight the importance of relationships in the family support service process and help to define some aspects of the quality of care, their perspectives are necessarily partial, and should not be accepted uncritically. One tension is in their perceptions that quality results primarily from workers’ natural attributes and their personal experiences of hardship and family life, rather than from acquired skill. In doing so, these participants mistook purposeful, professional practice for displays of ‘natural’ friendship, reflecting Daniels’ (1987) point that:
the closer the work to the activities of nurturing, comforting, encouraging, or facilitating interaction, the more closely associated it is with women’s ‘natural’ or ‘feminine’ proclivities. Such activity is not seen as learned, skilled, required, but only the expression of the character or style of women in general… (Daniels, 1987: 408)

In this respect, services users’ perspectives can be understood as contradictory. Users highlight the importance of relationships and care in family service provision, but by seeing quality care to result from individual character traits, users can simultaneously reinforce assumptions that these aspects of services are natural and unskilled. Although users emphasise the importance of reciprocity and equality in service bonds, some indicators of quality helping they envisage risk undermining the complexity of the deliberation through which workers negotiate their social position as caregivers and shape the relationship building process.

Compared with service users’ perspectives, family workers’ accounts reinforce the purposeful nature of their interventions and highlight the use of deliberate communication and emotion management techniques such as demonstrating ‘unconditional positive regard’ for clients. Indeed, family workers’ perspectives reinforce why we should not uncritically accept users’ perspectives on the characteristics of service quality. Family worker interviewees were divided about the importance of certain techniques in the care process— including personal experience (and self-disclosure of it) in bonding with clients. Some treated the sharing of their personal life experiences with service users as an indicator of quality bonds. Others considered this to be a practice that indicated poor quality helping. As such, service users’ views that workers’ personal experiences were prerequisites for quality bonding should not be adopted as a basis against which to measure service quality in family support. Rather, establishing the precise characteristics of quality relationships in family support requires further ethnographic research and more focused examination of the perspectives of professionals on relationship quality in family support and other social service contexts.

Notwithstanding, service users and workers largely agreed on the characteristics of good quality relationships in family support. However, capturing these dimensions of quality in performance indicators, and the organisational arrangements that support
them, remains a challenging exercise. By highlighting how helping relationships facilitate their struggles for recognition, users in the Burnside Study highlight the inappropriateness of measuring care in discrete, value-free, quantifiable and interchangeable units like duration or frequency of contact (Folbre, 2006; Schluter, 1996).

Users’ perspectives thus reflect some fundamental difficulties in revaluing care work in the public sphere. Counting the time spent in forming bonds (an input), the number of relationships formed in a service (an output) or the unit cost of ’good enough’ relationship formation fails to account for the value-adding capacity of the moral and caring dimensions of relationships. By assisting service users to relate to others, the helping relationships in family support have effects that ripple throughout their social networks. Although capturing relationships as inputs, outputs or costs can make relationships a visible part of service delivery, the simple counts of input and output characteristic of performance measurement can be counterproductive as strategies for capturing the quality of relationships, and the overall value of this type of caring work.

The development of techniques for monitoring and assuring the quality of relationships in social services is a critical theme for further research. Studies should more closely attend to the various processes through which workers build relationships, to help develop appropriate instruments for measuring the quality of bonding and collaboration. Although some instruments do exist for this purpose, such as the generic inventory for measuring counselling alliances (based on self-reported data) (Horvath and Greenberg, 1989), the validity of such an instrument has not been tested in family support group contexts. Further research could also explore how existing instruments might apply to evaluating relationship quality in family support.

However, because relationships are highly personal and variable, and because relationships are sensitive to the intervention of researchers and evaluators, studies should also explore the implications of alternative evaluation approaches to directly measuring users’ and workers’ perceptions of their relationships. One alternative is to monitor organisational proxies for quality bonding. Such proxies could be based on whether services have arrangements in place that are known to accommodate and
promote quality bond formation. This could involve developing an inventory or audit type instrument to capture the existence of factors known to impact on relationships, such as the absence of time pressures for workers, adequate staff numbers and working conditions, ‘homely’ facilities, and worker training (to ensure workers have full repertoires of practice options). Measuring these factors would reinforce the idea that the onus is on organisations to support relationship building, regardless of the strategies individual workers see fit to employ in various circumstances. Measuring performance in terms of the organisational context that supports the exchange of care has the advantage of not ascribing particular techniques for quality bonding, or setting evaluation criteria that could stifle the spontaneity of relationship building.

However, the use of organisational proxies or any other approach to evaluating relationship quality should be premised on more detailed studies of bond-formation between workers and family service users, and the organisational arrangements and skills that promote it in family support and other contexts. Other issues for further research include children’s experiences of helping relationships; differences in the ways in which both workers and clients form and perceive helping relationships in smaller regional areas compared with urban areas (given contrasts in the perspectives on worker-client bond presented by staff in the regional and urban sites); and the extent to which broader professional factors (such as training) and community characteristics (such as patterns of social capital) influence how social service workers engage with clients.

10.5 Rethinking performance evaluation

As well as challenging the ‘new accountability’ by presenting alternative criteria for family support outcomes and quality, service users’ perspectives, as they emerged in the study, also challenge the evaluation methods implicit in performance measurement. It is important to note that service users have been positioned largely outside the core administrative and economic concerns of this phase of public management reform in family support, as discussed in Chapter Two. Performance measurement systems have sought to resolve tensions in accountability between service providers and service
purchasers, and so have not evolved in ways that treat users’ participation or perspectives as priorities.

Notwithstanding their positioning outside mainstream public management concerns, service users in this study assumed a role for themselves in defining and measuring service performance. The finding that service users assumed they had a role in performance measurement challenges ideological constructions of them as inherently disengaged and deficient with respect to evaluation. Rather, like other stakeholders, these service users actively used the evaluation process to pursue their own political and economic goals. Users articulated the ways in which they evaluated the services they used, and called for evaluators to make visible the role they felt family support played in their struggles for recognition and respect. Further, these users saw a role for themselves in sharing experiences of service quality and effectiveness with evaluators, and some assumed evaluators would actively seek their perspectives.

Interestingly, users’ accounts show how they understand performance evaluation in the context of their visions and aspirations for personal wellbeing and justice. These service users saw evaluation processes and methods to be opportunities for achieving their social justice goals. Service users saw evaluation processes as potential strategies for making visible the contribution of family support in achieving recognition and respect and further, as something that could facilitate recognition by expressing and building respect through participatory, interpersonal and informal data collection processes. Such perspectives highlight evaluation as a site for contestation over economic resources, as service users (like other stakeholders) compete to use evaluation for different social and political ends (Taylor, 2005). The study thus shows how representations of program quality and effectiveness are part of larger conversations about the purpose of social investments and social policy, conversations to which, I have argued, service users can usefully contribute.

Arguing that evaluation models should be more strongly grounded in service users’ experiences and definitions loosely parallels arguments by others for the development of evaluation models grounded in practitioners’ accounts (Shaw and Shaw, 1997). Shaw and Shaw (1997) found that practitioners articulated a model of evaluation in practice
which was qualitative, informal, subjective, and incremental, and which stood in tension with management systems that valued quantifiable evidence. The evaluation model that service users in this study articulated was similarly qualitative and informal, reflecting a wider clash between collaborative, democratic and empowerment evaluation on the one hand and, on the other, more established rational, technical and managerial traditions which emphasise expert, impartial, and experiment-based knowledge.

However, service users’ perspectives, in some ways overlap with conventional performance measurement approaches, and service users in this study validated the use of some administrative data for assessing service performance. While users did not consider attendance data when they were personally assessing service quality or outcomes, they identified this was a source of evidence for evaluators to use. In doing so, users’ perspectives went behind simple counts of attendance as an output measure, instead treating attendance as a proxy for engagement with services, and hence for service quality and outcomes. Further, users outlined the range of factors impacting on attendance, highlighting how these (and other measures) result from a variety of intersecting personal and social factors, and are open to interpretation.

Some service users also considered measures of abuse and neglect to be relevant data for external evaluators to consider – especially those who were pursuing outcomes relating directly to their status with respect to their children. Interestingly, these service users assumed that counting reports of child abuse and neglect or child removals would be linked to particular family support (or other) services, and to individual service users (and not treated only in the aggregate terms currently reported publicly by state child protection authorities). This means that users understood statutory child protection data as potentially useful for exposing the role of particular services in reducing maltreatment in service user families.

Of course, such data is not reported publicly in New South Wales, if indeed it is compiled, and measuring service performance in this way opens sensitive privacy issues. Further, those defending the independence of the non-government sector might criticise indicators of notifications, investigations and child removals, for example, for measuring family support against goals defined by statutory child protection agencies.
rather than against the context-specific goals of service providers and families. Further, measuring performance in terms of reducing reports relating to client families could conflict with the child abuse prevention goals of the service, by providing a disincentive for family service workers to themselves report suspected maltreatment (as reports of current users would portray the service as a poor performer). Such indicators also risk introducing perverse incentives to ‘cream off’ client families where child abuse and neglect may be easiest to address, because serving multi-problem families for whom abuse and neglect is most difficult to prevent would also risk representing services as poor performers. Nonetheless, the implications of linking the child protection data for individuals to the services they use should be considered in more detail in further research, to inform the development of performance indicators in child and family services.

10.6 Conclusion

To conclude, this thesis helps establish the scope and limits of performance measurement in child and family services. By exploring adult family support service users’ perspectives on quality and outcomes, the Burnside Study revealed marginalised discourses of performance that challenge the performance measurement approaches currently institutionalised in public administration systems. Together, the findings help show how service users’ participation in evaluation can overcome some of the key difficulties in measuring care quality and outcomes, and in doing so, can promote help construct evidence that supports development of a dignified, respectful welfare state.

Critically, the research has reframed family support as a case study in the politics of recognition. It has shown how user perspectives offer alternative criteria for assessing quality and outcomes in family support, and how they challenge the evaluation approaches and measurement methods implicit in the ‘new accountability’ of performance measurement. Together, these findings point to new directions, and further challenges, for conceptualising— and evaluating— social services.
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## APPENDIX A  

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<th>Source of outcome data</th>
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<td>No outcome measures for family support</td>
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<td>No. children in IFSS (by living circumstance)</td>
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<tr>
<td>DoCS grants for family support services ($m)</td>
<td>Data about the number of children receiving family support were reported in the 1990s (see NSW CCG, 1998: 30)</td>
<td>No outcome measures for family support</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data about the number of projects funded were reported in the 1990s (see NSW CCG, 1998: 30)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DoCS Corporate Plan 2004/05 to 2008/09</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual real recurrent expenditure per child admitted to the early intervention program</td>
<td>No output measures proposed for family support</td>
<td>% children receiving early intervention who reach appropriate developmental milestones by school entry age (e.g., school readiness; physical and mental health)</td>
<td>Data source unclear. Probably professionally administered standardised test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CSGP (Objective 1)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of children/ cases with child protection or domestic violence issues</td>
<td>No. occasions of service</td>
<td>% clients who are requesting information that are referred to services or the service system</td>
<td>Administrative data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ratio of clients visited at home to clients attending centre</td>
<td>No. clients assisted</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. requests not able to be met</td>
<td>No. referrals made and received (by service type)</td>
<td>% cases where risk of crisis is reduced or prevented</td>
<td>Staff assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of clients /cases by average number of sessions</td>
<td>No. of groups by sessions and by average clients</td>
<td>% families or individuals with improved self-esteem, independence, safety or quality of life</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of service /referral requests not able to be met</td>
<td>No. of case closures</td>
<td>% of clients where safety and wellbeing improved</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of case closures</td>
<td></td>
<td>% participants satisfied with activity or service</td>
<td>Service user self assessment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B  Invitation to Parents

What makes good services for parents?

How do we know when services are making an impact?

Dear

I am writing to invite you to come to a focus group to discuss these issues.

The discussion groups are part of a research partnership between the University of Sydney and UnitingCare Burnside called 'Currencies of Care'. The project is attempting to find ways to help organisations like Burnside determine how well they are strengthening families and communities. Of course, talking with parents about how services help is an essential part of this!

I have enclosed some information about the project to help you decide whether you wish to take part (of course you don't have to!). As well as contributing to the research, these groups are an opportunity for you to share your opinions and ideas in a supportive, constructive and enjoyable way. The researchers will also provide light snacks and $20 in cash to each participant as a way of saying thanks. The groups on October 16 are for English speakers. People whose first language is not English will be contacted by the researchers later in the year.

If you would like to participate, please contact the [redacted] Centre to reserve a place. If there is anything you would like to discuss or clarify about the project, please phone me on 9326 7631 (home) or 0413 889 034 (I can phone you back).

Thanks and I hope to see you on the 16th!

Natasha Cortis (PhD research student, University of Sydney)

Where?  Burnside [redacted] Centre
When?  Thursday October 16

There are 2 sessions
10am sharp: For those with a child aged under 5
11.30am sharp: For those with school aged children

Please plan to arrive early. Latecomers cannot be admitted.
What are performance indicators?

Organisations use performance indicators to assess how efficiently and effectively they are achieving their objectives. Managers decide on particular aspects of their activities to monitor, and use the results to help plan and improve services. Indicators are also reported to show governments and the community how well organisations are doing their job.

Most businesses measure their performance according how much money they make, how many customers they serve, or how fast they grow.

But organisations that deliver human services need to find other ways to judge the quality and effectiveness of their activities—ways that acknowledge the unique social value of caring and relationship building.

Currencies of Care aims to help with this difficult task!
About the project

The University of Sydney and UnitingCare Burnside are carrying out a three year research project about how the performance of child and family welfare services is measured.

The study is called:

"Currencies of Care: Examining the scope of performance indicators in child and family welfare services"

The project started in early 2002. It is jointly supported by an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant, and UnitingCare Burnside.

Aims of the study

Currencies of Care aims to develop practical ways that child and family welfare organisations can identify and measure how their services help to strengthen relationships and communities.

The project intends to:

- Help give child and family service organisations greater certainty about how well they achieve their objectives;
- Improve how agencies identify their strengths so they can improve services and attract funding; and
- Find better ways to report the social as well as economic value of human services.

Research Methods

The study uses a combination of research methods. These include studies of service delivery processes as well as focus groups and interviews to discuss how different stakeholders think about quality, effectiveness and outcomes of the services they are involved with.

The research is being carried out with service users and staff at UnitingCare Burnside services around NSW.

The research team will also consult with people who develop policies that affect how social services are evaluated and funded.

Conducting research in this way engages a range of different stakeholders. This ensures that the results reflect a variety of perspectives, and allows everyone to have their say!