APPENDIX

Using qualitative document analysis techniques to analyse media and political accounts

The ideas in this book are based largely on qualitative documentary research. The main types of document I analysed were:

• newspaper articles;
• inquiry reports and serious case reviews into the abuse or neglect of children;
• political statements taken mainly from Hansard records (including parliamentary debates and ministerial statements);
• official speeches obtained from government department websites;
• a small number of blogs and published letters.

I selected newspaper reports as the main source of media account because they were, in research terms, the most relevant, meaningful and retrievable documents for analysis (Altheide, 1996). The newspaper article is the medium where hostility towards social work has been particularly vigorous and where the relationship between the media and politics is most readily observable, given the longstanding nature of the relationship between politics and the press in general. This relationship is discussed at length in Chapter Two. While the newspaper accounts were almost all written by journalists, there were also articles written by individual politicians that were published in local and national newspapers and some of these have been analysed in considerable detail. All of the material quoted in the book is publicly available and as such my interpretation of it is open to scrutiny.

I undertook the research over a period of six years between 2008 and 2014 with varying degrees of intensity. While the initial focus was the political and media response in 2008 to the death of Peter Connelly, my focus widened to other cases in Britain and then also encompassed a comparative approach with international case studies, as reported in Chapter Seven. The study therefore shifted from a single case study to a multiple case study. That the research has spanned this length of time has been one of its strengths. As Altheide (1996) argues, patterns and their meaning in documentary research emerge over time through
a process of constant comparison. During this time I used different approaches to analysing large sections of the data, reflecting the fact that I accumulated more material over time and as ideas developed and new cases emerged. For example, the initial focus on categorising the ‘moral talk’ of politicians shifted as I became interested in a more thematic analysis using critical moral panic theory, which informs much of the discussion in Chapter Three. I briefly describe each of these approaches, but first a general note about analysing documents and media texts.

**Analysing documents and media texts**

In terms of their potential use in social research, documents are often viewed as having a clear advantage over other forms of data because they are static and ‘lack reactivity’ (Padgett, 1998). This suggests that the meaning of a document can be regarded as relatively fixed in a way that materials from primary methods of data collection such as face-to-face interviews cannot be. Consequently, documents have traditionally been regarded as potential sources of information for social scientists primarily in terms of what they contain (Prior, 2003). However, interest among social scientists has increasingly shifted away from viewing documents as inert or static records of events towards considering their production and consumption and seeing documents as situated and social products (Prior, 2003, p 26). Through detailed investigation, documents enable understanding of changing meanings and social definitions. In this sense, the study of documents can be a route towards the study of culture ‘or the process and the array of objects, symbols, and meanings that make up social reality shared by members of a society’ (Altheide, 1996, p 2).

In this study, I used methodological techniques that would enable me to discern and make explicit the main themes in the press coverage by locating patterns in the way different aspects of the story were represented. By analysing and comparing newspaper accounts with other documents, such as political statements and serious case reviews, it was possible to trace cross-referencing, the intertextuality of documents and the nature of their relationship to one another, and their activating effects.

**Identifying relevant documents**

I identified relevant newspaper articles by using simple search terms in the LexisNexis database of UK newspapers. As Greer and MacLaughlin
(2012) have observed, LexisNexis needs a ‘methodological health warning’, not least because it is incomplete. I believe I was able to identify and fill any gaps with hard copies of newspaper articles. For the purpose of carrying out qualitative analysis on a discrete topic, and the impressionistic quantitative measures I utilised, this was more than adequate. For example, we do not need to know by exactly how many articles The Sun newspaper’s coverage of Peter Connelly’s death exceeded that of other newspapers to know that its coverage was much greater. I identified key dates for the most intensive periods of media coverage, which normally began on the day that the criminal trial of parents responsible for the death of their child concluded. For example, press restrictions on media reporting of the death of Peter Connelly (then known only as ‘Baby P’) had been in place for the duration of the criminal court proceedings and these were finally lifted on 11 November 2008, when his mother and her boyfriend and their lodger were all convicted. The dataset of newspaper articles about the death of Peter Connelly was by far the largest, but the pattern of intense coverage following the conclusion of the criminal court case was the same for the other cases that were investigated. Cross-referencing of one case to another was also evident in newspaper accounts, for example, references to Victoria Climbié increased in late 2008 compared with the year before, as reports referred back to her death when reporting on Peter Connelly’s in the same London borough.

I identified significant political statements and debates through searching Hansard records online, using multiple search terms, normally using either the name of a child or the name of the politician for references in debates and statements. There was significant cross-referencing from newspaper articles to parliamentary debates or significant statements, which was a key indicator for where to search in Hansard by date where indicated. I collected inquiry reports and serious case reviews in portable document format (pdf), which are searchable using keywords as well as being amenable to thematic analysis.

In addition to the technical approaches to analysis, as described here, I was able to draw on particularly relevant theoretical work as a guide to identify key themes. This included Ahmed’s (2004) work on cultural politics and emotion and Skeggs’ (2004) work on the political rhetoric of class. Also, the more recent theoretical work on the idea of moral panic (Critcher, 2009; Young, 2009, 2011) provided invaluable analytic tools in relation to themes around social class, parenting and social work that were discernible in the documents.
Technical aspects of the data analysis

Analysing moral talk

In this approach, the analysis of data was based broadly on methods for coding moral discourse developed by Lee and Ungar (1989). Rather than formally ‘test’ these methods, the aim was to draw on the categories that Lee and Ungar developed to take their ideas forward in an exploratory way. This approach to data analysis is particularly evident in Chapter Two. The potential value of the approach is that morality is explored as a way of talking – including ‘talking’ in its printed form (Lee and Ungar, 1989, p 693). Moral talk involves the creation of moral categories, such as the categories of ‘pro-life’ and ‘pro-choice’in abortion debates. Crucially, moral talk is conceived of by Lee and Ungar (1989, p 712) as an ‘action-oriented’ medium: ‘Our methods provide systematic categories for the various roles or stances taken by the moralizer seeking to evoke through language the feeling rules and emotion work leading to moral action.’

The methods that Lee and Ungar develop involve coding moral discourse on three levels. In the first level – the analysis of topic and voice – ‘topic’ refers to the ‘moral notion discoursed by the sentence’ while ‘voice’ addresses the question ‘Who is really doing the moral talking?’ (1989, p 696, emphasis in original). In discourses such as media accounts, coding of ‘voice’ includes the speaker of the moral claim even if it is being reported second hand.

In the second level, categories of ‘moral stance’ relate to the way language creates an emotional distance to an event. This distance ranges from ‘a dispassionate statement of “facts” to a ringing call for righteous action’ (1989, p 703). In terms of the moral stance it represents, talk can be coded as ‘giving information’, ‘beating the breastplate of righteousness’ or ‘urging to action’. ‘Giving information’ includes information that is ‘asserted as data’ – as if the information is purely factual. In a moral stance coded under ‘beating the breastplate of righteousness’, there is a category of ‘legitimation’, in which one’s own moral position is presented as going beyond mere opinion to become the position of ‘the good’ (versus ‘the bad’ of the opposing view). There is also ‘challenge and vilification’, in which the moral talk involves insults and an implication of moral dangerousness. In the moral stance of ‘urging to action’, the moral entrepreneur can ‘call’, ‘warn’ or ‘threaten’.

In the third level of coding the focus is on the direction of moral rhetoric appeals. Under this category there are codes for appeals to
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‘logic’, ‘rights’, ‘fairness and goodness’, ‘feelings’ and ‘affinity’. These categories are largely self-explanatory. In ‘appeals to affinity’, moral rhetoric is used in ‘an appeal to act like a member of one’s kin and kind’ (1989, p 711). An ‘appeal to logic’ is where logical reasoning is deployed, and so forth.

Open, axial and selective coding

I analysed material using a three-stage process regarded as providing an appropriate foundation for the rigorous analysis of qualitative data (Neuman, 1997, after Strauss, 1987). I started with ‘open coding’ of a smaller sample of documents, in order that a mass of data could be condensed into initial categories to produce a list of themes. At this stage of coding, I used further word searches and the LexisNexis facility to review the ‘expanded list’ of articles, which shows article headlines and occurrences of the key search terms in context.

The next stage of analysis was ‘axial coding’. I read hard copies of batches of articles around critical dates to code for the theme categories that had been identified in open coding, adding to and amending the coding list where required. I coded mainly at the level of sentence or paragraph and left large amounts of data uncoded. For example, there were extensive, graphic and repetitious descriptions of the injuries sustained by children with chronologies but very little of this material was relevant for the purpose of the study. This approach to coding is consistent with normal practice in qualitative research, where ‘[t]he degree of detail in coding depends on the research question, the “richness” of the data, and the researcher’s purpose’ (Neuman, 1997, p 423).

In the final, ‘selective coding’ phase, I scanned articles again, selecting cases that illustrated key themes and, where necessary, reviewed and amended coding categories. Since I was operating as a sole researcher, the coding was not systematically repeated by another researcher. However, in the qualitative-interpretivist tradition of research, the idea that the interpretation of texts must be directly shared is not assumed (Krippendorff, 2004). Instead, ‘qualitative researchers ... must rely on their ability to present a clear description, offer a convincing analysis, and make a strong argument for their interpretation’ (Manheim et al, 2002, p 317). For Guba and Lincoln (1994), access to data for the reader is also important in establishing ‘trustworthiness’ of analysis. To my knowledge, all of the materials and secondary data that I have utilised in this research remain publicly available. In the event that any reader has difficulty accessing any of it, I would be happy to assist.