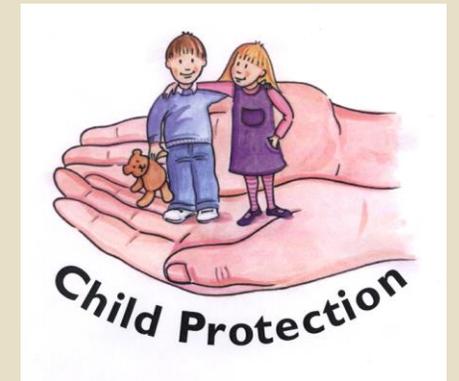# THE POLITICS OF FOOD IN CHILD REMOVAL CASES

SAANZ 2018, University of Wellington, New Zealand
'Disrupting the social work narrative stream'

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Context: UK Child protection & safeguarding: confusion, conflation & correlations

- A general feeling that 'things are not right'. Policies to reduce children coming through the child protection system have failed. Numbers are increasing whilst budgets are threatened.

- The social work community tends to focus on austerity as the 'root of all evil' – an ideological political agenda. Putting more resources into a faulty system is likely to simply increase numbers not solve social problems.

- Recent research uses partial data and epidemiological methods to draw absolute conclusions at an individual level, notably research relying solely on CAFCASS data and FOI applications. For example, conclusions on the number of repeat removals, over-representation of lower socio-economic visibility within social work referrals, cases where the 'toxic trio' is present …..

- Claims are made about rises in applications for care orders and rises in numbers elsewhere in the system, eg austerity and claims of inequalities fuel anxieties, eg 'postcode lottery', demographic factors driving the likelihood of interventions. These form the dominant discourse.
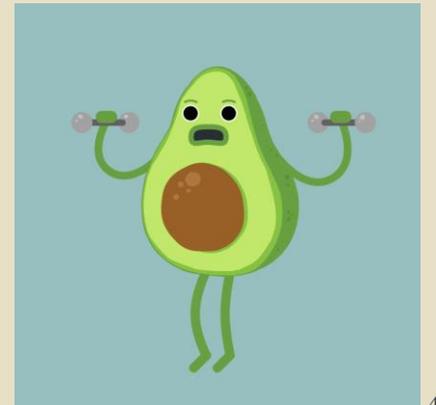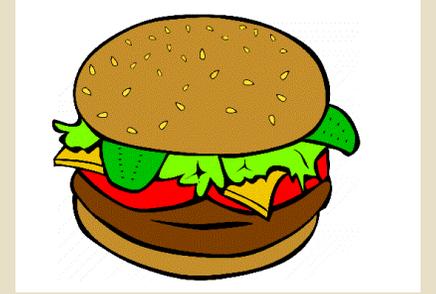
Researching the 'Care Cases Crisis'

Funded by the Nuffield Foundation (JUS/43090)

◦ For our research looking at child removals in England we have access to Ministry of Justice Court files. We are analysing 400 files across seven years and using national data over the past twenty-seven years (all the cases falling under the current legal framework).

◦ We noticed a focus on food in a surprisingly large volume of individual case files. Although relationships with food are noted in research to be problematic for some adults abused in childhood, the role of food in child removal decisions and subsequent State control of childhood eating is less well considered.

◦ In none of the cases we saw was food or a food related issue the initial reason for a family to be assessed by social workers.

◦ During assessment, professional focus formed a judgemental power-base in the relationship between mothers and professionals in supervised parent/child visits during court proceedings to remove children.

◦ Conversely, mothers tried to retain parental identity through providing food during supervised visits, and by complaining about the food provided by foster carers.

◦ The professional response to parental provision of food was critical and confrontational. Parental concerns were ignored. The child's need for food (or otherwise) was not considered.

◦ These adult politics around food are not well understood but may offer additional reasons why for some removed children food retains a powerful hold.

Feeding the neo-liberalist agenda

◦ The recent 'ACE movement' (adverse childhood experience) is founded on a study of obese adults (Felitti, 1998), noting that attrition in weight loss programmes could be explained by childhood abuse in some cases.

◦ The movement's science is founded on the notion of 'toxic stress' (elevated cortisol over a prolonged period) in childhood caused by adverse childhood experiences (measured on pre-set variables), failed to be offset by 'protective factors' (a 'good home', 'attachment' (Svanberg, 1998)) and thus the child does not 'build resilience'.

◦ This opens two avenues for neoliberalism: Interventions to predict and prevent the ACEs, and interventions to build 'resilience' after ACEs have occurred.

◦ Resilience-building is only considered to have occurred once the subject has complied with the theoretical model of engaging with interventions to build community and individual attachment. A model of disempowerment?

Technology solutions: a compliance model

○ The UK's government's focus has been on targeted 'early intervention' since the early millennium (HM Government, 2004). This drives the neoliberalist agenda of private providers offering 'services' to 'service users'.

○ The service providers need a continuing stream of users of their service to survive.

○ Government focus on the UK's political turmoil, there is a move away from social justice. A judgemental 'Othering' is evident.

○ The UK's research funding agenda is prioritising outsourced, 'quick fix' interventions to reduce cost to government of supporting its citizens. Automated systems of human classification and diagnosis via AI are welcomed.

○ Such systems operate a compliance model to reframe citizens from 'Other' to upholder of their social contract (Rousseau, 1762).

○ Resistance is futile …