

**PERCEPTIONS, EXPERIENCES AND CHALLENGES OF PARENTS  
WHOSE CHILDREN ARE REMOVED THROUGH A STATUTORY  
PROCESS**

by

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A full thesis for the fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Masters in  
Child and Family Studies at the Department of Social Work,  
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## DECLARATION STATEMENT

I, Alfred Harris, declare that the study entitled, 'Perceptions, experiences and challenges of parents whose children are removed through a statutory process' is a result of my own research. All the sources used in this study, have been indicated and fully acknowledged, by means of complete references.

**Name:** Alfred Harris

**Date:** 22 November 2019



**Signed:**



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## ABSTRACT

The 2009 Save the Children, United Kingdom report indicated that eight million children worldwide find themselves in alternative placement. In terms of the statutory process, alternative placement of a child is when a child is placed in foster care or in a child and youth care center. The removal of children from the care of their parents is a statutory process that is driven by issues that put the child's safety and development at risk. Although children are removed due to a risk factor, Chapter 2 section 28 (1)(b) of the South African Constitution, known as the Bill of Rights, states that children have the right to family or parental care, or appropriate alternative care when removed from the family environment. The risks that children are exposed to often take place in the family context. This creates enormous conflict for the social workers that are responsible for their removal. Due to this conflict, parents become less involved in the process and mistrust develops on the side of the parents as well as social workers. Research indicates that the removal process is an adversarial process, which is linked to the fact that the social workers' concern is for the safety of the child. This often leads to mistrust. This mistrust, in turn, affects the manner in which the social workers interact with the parents through the removal process of their children. This study focused on the perceptions, challenges and experiences of twelve parents residing in the Delft and Goodwood area whose children were removed from their care through a statutory process. The study found that in addition to encountering a number of challenges, the parents experienced the removal process negatively, they did not fully participate in the removal process, and the removal process did not fully meet their expectations. Based on the research findings, a number of recommendations were made to professionals in the field to improve the overall removal process and thereby address the parents' experiences, expectations and challenges.

## KEYWORDS

Parents

Child

Vulnerable children

Family

Attachment

Children's Act

Statutory process

Removal

Parent-child relationships

Professional practitioners



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACRWAC	African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the child in Africa
DSD	Department of Social Development
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNICEF	United Nations International Children Emergency Fund



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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

### 1.1 Background/Rationale

Save the Children UK, is a global children's charity dedicated to keeping children around the world safe and healthy. In 2009 they declared that eight million children worldwide are living in alternative placements, such as orphanages and other childcare institutions. For various reasons, children sometimes find themselves in desperate and dire situations. It is one such situation that this study will focus on. The phenomenon of removing children from the care of their parents is not something unique to South Africa. However, in the South African context, this intervention has become a significant challenge for both parents and professionals. The removal of children from the care of their biological parents is to protect them against abuse and maltreatment (Smithson & Gibson, 2017). They are removed to an alternative care placement, such as foster care or a child and youth care centre. A study conducted in 2015 by the Children's Institute (De Lannoy, Swartz, Lake and Smith (eds.) 2015) on the placement of children removed from the care of their parents shows that in South Africa 499 744 children were placed in foster care and 306 child and youth care centers provide bed space for only 17 426 children. The number of children placed in foster care fluctuates because children are placed in foster care on a regular basis, while the number of children in residential programmes is a bit more static (De Lannoy et al., 2015).

Buckley, Whelan, Carer and Murphy (2008) and Chambers, Saunders, New, Williams and Stachurska (2010) indicate that the removal of children from the care of their parents is a stressful experience for parents. Removal of children from parental households is linked to a number of social issues, such as poverty, abuse, unemployment, and inadequate housing in communities, which in turn affects the functioning of families as well as the parents' ability to

cope and optimally provide for their children. Slettebø (2013) states that parents whose children are removed and placed into care remain mostly unheard of in child protection services. Kriz, Slyter, Iannicelli and Lourie (2012) mention that although child protection agencies attempt to minimize the trauma inflicted on parents, they nevertheless remain fearful of the removal process. The focus of this study was therefore to explore the perceptions, experiences and challenges of parents whose children were removed from their care. The research population was drawn from Delft, a suburb of the Western Cape. It is a low-income area with a high level of unemployment. Delft falls within the Goodwood magisterial district and under the presiding officer of the Children's Court where most of the cases that took part in this study reside.

The legislation that provides the legal framework for the removal of children from the care of their parents is the Children's Act (Act 38 of 2005), which provides social workers with the statutory responsibility to ensure the best interest of children when maltreatment, abuse, and neglect of any sort of a child is brought to their attention. The Act is very clear that the removal of children from the care of their parents must be the last resort. The intention of the Act is to ensure that the issues of the removal of children must only take place when it is absolutely necessary and should not be used as the first intervention option. This coincides with the South African Constitution's Section 28(b) which indicates that every child has the right to parental care. However, circumstances beyond the control of parents, in certain instances, can lead to children being removed from their care. Kojan (2010) identified various reasons that can lead to a child protection intervention, namely: multiple chronic stressors such as poverty, marginality, family problems, housing instability, and social isolation. These factors can contribute towards child abuse, neglect, maltreatment and exploitation, which may compromise the well-being of children (Children's Act 38 of 2005). These identified circumstances can lead to children being removed from the care of their biological parents to ensure and to protect their well-being and development. The "best interest principle"

(Children's Act 38 of 2005) is at play here and the removal must take into consideration preserving the continuous relationship between the child and the biological parents.

Removal of children from their biological parents leads to alternative care in the form of foster care or care in a child and youth care center. When the well-being of children is threatened, it might require intervention by child protection services, resulting in the child removal process (Children's Act 38 of 2005). Child protection services are overly intrusive in their approach to child protection as agency workers investigate the lives of families. Part of the intrusion is that the family is exposed to the process of assessment, which could lead to the removal process (Harris, 2012), which has a negative impact on the family who has kinship or blood relations with the child (Harries, 2008). With the removal, parents experience a sense of loss, grief and anger; stigma and judgment by the local community further compounds the issue, creating a feeling of "being bad" (Schofield, Moldestad, Höjer, Ward, Skilbred, Young & Havik, 2010; Broadhurst & Mason, 2017; Kenny, 2018). Based on what Schofield et al., (2010) have discerned, the removal of children placed in alternative care has an adverse effect on biological parents. Kenny (2018) also discovered in her study that some mothers whose children are removed from their care experience high levels of substance abuse and many suffer from depression.

The involvement of parents in the removal process is important (Geurts, Boddy, Noom & Knorth, 2012), as it can contribute positively to the services that are offered to both the child and family, and can help ensure that the child can return to the family in the shortest time possible (Geurts et al., 2012). There are reasons, however, that contribute towards non-involvement of parents during the removal process. Lee (2016) discovered that the welfare system blames the parents for the problems that children are experiencing and deals punitively with the parents. Lee (2016) is also of the opinion that the complexity of the challenges parents face is not taken into account by welfare agencies when reports of abuse and neglect are

brought to their attention. The removal of children from their home is a decision that must be based on the best interest of the children and must also consider the risk and benefits of living at home in familiar surroundings (DeRoma, Kessler, McDaniel & Soto, 2006). Removal of the child does not only include removal from the family home, but also removal from his/her school, separation from friends, one's culture, and other familiar environments (DeRoma et al., 2006; Ross, Cocks, Johnston & Stokers, 2017; Sankaran, Church & Mitchell, 2019). Even though some parents experience the removal of their children as negative, Davidson-Arad, Englechin-Segal, Arieli and Wozner (2005) explain that the removal is a difficult and complex decision for welfare agencies to make, because it does not only affect the child, but also the broader family unit. This difficulty of the removal process is exacerbated by the problems that families face and is characterized by a high level of uncertainty surrounding the process (Arnkil & Seikkula, 2015). The removal of children from the care of their families not only creates uncertainty, but also causes confusion, unpredictability, and unfamiliarity (Sankaran et al, 2019). A number of authors, including Dumbrill (2006), Harris (2012) and Davidson-Arad et al., (2005), to mention a few, indicate that parents experience strong emotions when their child is placed in care, more especially if this decision is taken against their will. Furthermore, the removal of children changes the dynamics between the parents and the children, in that parents take on a new role as a "visiting parent" when visiting their children in care (Bie, 2017).

## **1.2 Theoretical Framework**

Bowlby's attachment theory (1982) was used in this study to explain and establish the attachment relationship between parents and their children. One of the first relationships that children form with their biological parents is that of attachment. Waters, Corcoran and Anafarta (2005) describe attachment theory as a psychological model attempting to define the dynamics of continuous and temporary interpersonal relationships between humans. A relationship starts

early in the development of a child and it is predominately between the child and the primary caregiver (Waters et al., 2005). John Bowlby (1980), the father of attachment theory, suggests that all human beings possess the inborn capacity to develop caregiving behaviors directed at offering protection and care to others in need. This is linked directly to how a person has and continues to experience attachment. Over a person's lifespan, attachment is influenced by the interactions people have with those whom one has close relations (Bowlby, 1982). The parent-child relationship and the relationship between the parents are attachment relationships that contribute towards important functions for regulating grief and keeping a sense of felt security (Bowlby, 1969). A well-developed attachment relationship between the parents and child provides the child with a solid base from which to explore their world (Bowlby, 1980). Although attachment is formed in the early developmental stages of children, Bowlby (1982) describes attachment theory as a lifespan developmental theory, as there is a need for all humans to form close and affectional bonds from childhood into adulthood. Attachment theory indicates that unresolved attachment relates to previous trauma in attachment relationships stemming from loss, abuse, separation, severe inconsistency, as well as rejection (Bowlby, 1988).

Bowlby (1988) furthermore indicates that unresponsiveness or unpredictable attachment relationships lead to high levels of anxiety and worry, which are further heightened when children experience separation from their parents. Attachment in early life forms the blueprint of how people relate to significant others throughout their lives, which is activated in times of danger or the loss or separation from caregivers/parents (Bowlby, 1988). The attachment system, when activated, means there is threat of loss, separation, or rejection. Melinder, Baugerud, Ovenstad and Goodman (2013) are of the opinion that the removal of children from the care of their parents is often traumatic and the reaction of the child to the trauma depends largely on the attachment between child and parent. If this attachment is

destroyed through the removal of children from the care of their parents, it will affect the relationship between the parents and children (Melinder et al., 2013).

### **1.3 Problem Statement**

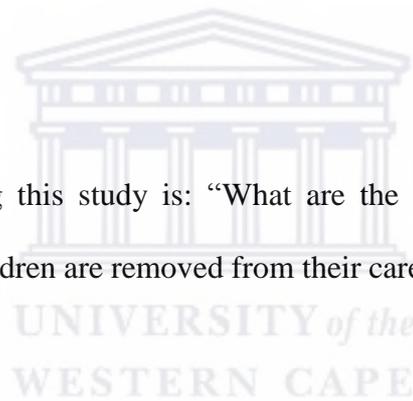
Removal of children from the care of their parents can be linked to abuse, neglect, maltreatment, or exploitation (Downs, Moore & McFadden, 2009). Furthermore, Maupin, Brophy-Herb, Schiffman and Bockek (2009) discovered that poorly resourced families are at a high risk for child abuse and neglect, which could also lead to the child removal process. Studies that address the circumstances of parents who are considered at risk for child abuse and neglect can be linked to income, housing, food, and other factors that offer stability to families (Zhang & Anderson, 2010; Pelton, 2015). These circumstances create tremendous anxiety for parents, which may lead to child abuse and neglect (Mersky, Berger, Reynolds & Gromoke, 2009; Zhang & Anderson, 2010; Anderson & Fallesen, 2010; Pelton, 2015). According to Downs et al., (2009), removal of children is 75 % of the time due to abuse and 25 % the result of neglect. Gourdine, Smith and Brown (2013) ascertained that neglect is often linked with the poverty that the family experiences. Sankaran et al., (2019) opine that removal often takes place more frequently among impoverished families due to the significant social and environmental stressors they face. This is reverberated by Maupin et al., (2009) who state that poorly resourced families are at a high risk for child abuse and neglect. In South Africa, 499 744 children have been placed in foster care and 17,426 bed spaces are available for children in 306 child and youth care centers (De Lannoy et al., 2015) This indicates that 517 170 children are living in an environment outside of parental care (De Lannoy et al., 2015)

The process of the removal of children should ideally include the participation of the biological parents of the children. However, child protection workers experience a number of challenges in their attempts to include parents in the removal process. Engaging parents is

complicated due to individual and organisational challenges that exist prior to the child removal process (Kemp, Marcenko, Hoagwood & Vesneski, 2009). Ghaffar, Manby and Race (2012) found that where parents are involved in the removal process it lessens the feelings of anger and resentment towards the professionals and the process in its entirety. Schreiber, Fuller and Pacey (2013) and Berrick, Dickens, Pösö and Skivenes (2017) agree that the participation of parents in the removal process adds value. This is due to the fact that the opinion of the parents is taken into account when decisions are made and the parents become partners with the social workers in the removal process. This research therefore focused on the perceptions, experiences and challenges parents experienced concerning the removal of their children through a statutory process.

#### **1.4 Research Question**

The research question guiding this study is: “What are the perceptions, experiences, and challenges of parents when children are removed from their care through a statutory process?”



## **1.5 Aim and Objectives of the Study**

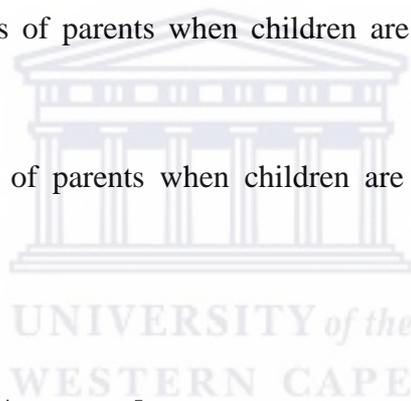
### **1.5.1. Aim of the Study**

The aim of this study was to explore the perceptions, experiences, and challenges of parents whose children were removed from their care through a statutory process.

### **1.5.2. Objectives**

The objectives of this study were to:

- Explore the perceptions of parents when children are removed through a statutory process.
- Explore the experiences of parents when children are removed through a statutory process
- Explore the challenges of parents when children are removed through a statutory process.



## **1.6 Research Design and Approach**

The researcher utilized a qualitative research approach which is “a form of systematic empirical inquiry into meaning” where systematic means “planned, ordered and public”, following rules agreed upon by members of the qualitative research community (Creswell, 2009). A qualitative methodology enables the researcher to obtain information on people's attitudes, behaviors, accepted value systems, experiences, motivations, aspirations, culture and lifestyles (Creswell, 2009). Patton (2014) explains that a qualitative approach is an approach that gives a voice to the voiceless and helps researchers to understand the world as seen through the eyes of the respondents. The research aim was to study a social phenomenon from the perspective of the ‘social actors’ (Babbie & Mouton, 2011:270). In order to study the social phenomenon, the

researcher employed an exploratory and descriptive research design. By utilizing an exploratory approach, the researcher gained a deeper understanding of and insight into the perspectives of the parents in terms of the challenges, perceptions and experiences of the removal of their children (Babbie & Mouton, 2015). The descriptive approach answers the *how* and *why* questions (De Vos, Strydom, Fouche & Delpont, 2005; Yin, 2003). A descriptive design also allows the events and situations that led to the removal of the children to be described in greater detail (Babbie & Mouton, 2015).

A more detailed description of the research methodology employed during the execution of this study is presented in Chapter 4. In the section that follows, the significance of this study is highlighted.

## **1.7 Significance of the Study**

The removal of children is a legal process contained in the Children's Act (Act 38 of 2005). This study's findings certainly added to a deeper understanding of parents' perceptions, experiences, and challenges regarding the removal of their children through this process. The new knowledge obtained will inform practices and strategies of child protection workers in dealing with such parents, to ensure an improved working relationship between themselves and these families. A better understanding of the experiences of these parents may also lead to the development of alternative approaches when confronted with a family whose child is in need of being removed. Although the Children's Act indicates that the removal must be in the best interest of the child, no reference is made to the role that parents should play in this process. The importance of this study cannot be overstated, in that the treatment of parents through this process might be a factor that leads to the return of the child to the family.

## **1.8 Definition of Terms and Concepts**

### **1.8.1 Parents**

Parents - in relation to a child, includes the adoptive parent of a child, but excludes:

- a) The biological father of a child conceived through the rape of or incest with the child's mother
- b) Any person who is biologically related to a child by reason only of being a gamete donor for the purposes of artificial fertilization, and
- c) A parent whose parental responsibilities and rights in respect of a child have been terminated (Children's Act, Act 38 of 2005).

### **1.8.2 Child**

Child - a person under the age of 18 years (Children's Act, Act 38 of 2005).

### **1.8.3 Vulnerable Children**

Vulnerable children - children who are unlikely to achieve or have the opportunity of access to reasonable standards of health and development without the provision of social care from their community (Omukunyi, 2015).

### **1.8.4 Family**

Family - societal groups related by blood (kinship), marriage, adoption, or affiliation with close emotional attachments to each other that endure over time (Amoateng & Heaton (eds.), 2007).

### **1.8.5 Attachment**

Attachment - a behavioral system that promotes infant survival by promoting proximity to and protection by the caregiver (Bowlby, 1969).

### **1.8.6 Children's Act**

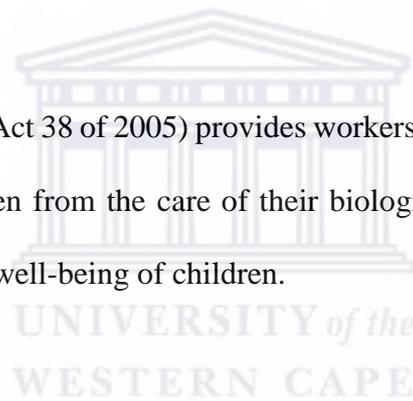
Children's Act - to give effect to certain rights of children as contained in the Constitution and set out principles relating to the care and protection of children (Act 38 of 2005).

### **1.8.7 Statutory Process**

Statutory process - a particular level of intervention and a period of time during which families are waiting for the outcome of a legal/court procedure (Department of Social Development (DSD), 2010).

### **1.8.8 Removal**

Removal - the Children's Act (Act 38 of 2005) provides workers from child protection services the authority to remove children from the care of their biological parents for situations that could negatively influence the well-being of children.



### **1.8.9 Parent–Child Relationship**

Parent–child Relationship - quality of the emotional bond between child and parents (mother and father) and the degree to which this bond is mutual and sustained over time (Lezin, Roller, Bean & Taylor, 2004).

### **1.8.10 Professional Practitioners**

Professional practitioners - persons who perform professional or official duties with respect to a child, including who, in the course of that person's professional or official duties, has reasonable grounds to suspect that a child is or may be suffering or may have suffered abuse

shall forthwith report the suspicion and the information upon which it is based to an agency (Children and Family Services Act, 1990).

## **1.9 Outline of Chapters**

**Chapter 1** introduces this study that looks at the experiences, challenges, and perceptions of parents whose children have been removed from their care through a statutory process. This chapter provides the context and background to the study, and locates the theoretical underpinning of the study. It also presents the research methodology employed, and describes the research question, aim, and objectives. Key concepts used in the study are also defined, and the significance of the study is explained next, followed by a description of the outline of the chapters.

**Chapter 2** outlines the theoretical framework and expands on the choice and relevance of this theory in this study. Attachment theory underpins this study in order to provide an understanding of attachment between parents and their children.

**Chapter 3** provides an in-depth discussion of relevant literature, which explained the statutory process, removal of children, and the experiences of parents when their child/children were removed through a statutory process.

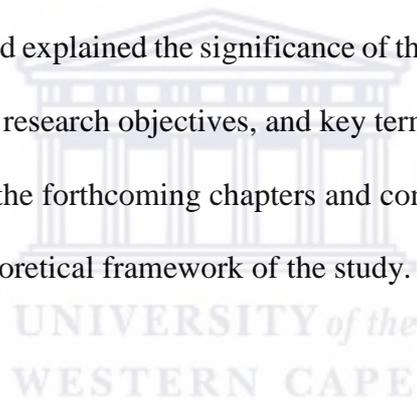
**Chapter 4** presents a detailed description of the methodology employed to conduct the study. It elaborates on the study design and approach, the study population, data collection and process of data analysis. The chapter also outlines the data verification, limitations of the study, and ethical considerations.

**Chapter 5** presents the results, as well as a discussion of the main findings, integrated with previous research identified in Chapter 3, and linking them with the theoretical framework guiding this study, as discussed in Chapter 2.

**Chapter 6** summarizes the preceding chapters, makes a few recommendations for future research and concludes the study.

## **1.10 Conclusion**

In this chapter the researcher provided the background and rationale for the study. Furthermore, the researcher also established the theoretical framework, noted the problem statement, introduced the methodology, and explained the significance of the study. The research question was formulated, along with the research objectives, and key terms and concepts were defined. Lastly, the researcher outlined the forthcoming chapters and concluded this chapter. Next, the researcher will focus on the theoretical framework of the study.



## **CHAPTER 2**

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

Chapter 1 laid the foundation for this study that seeks to explore the experiences, challenges, and perceptions of parents whose children have been removed from their care through a statutory process. The first chapter briefly sketched the background, theoretical framework, problem statement, research question, aim, objectives, and methodology. Key terms were also defined, and the importance of the study was clearly indicated.

In the current chapter, the focus of attention now shifts to the theoretical framework of this study, underpinned by Bowlby's attachment theory. The structure of Chapter 2 is as follows: The first section will provide an overview of the origin and history of Bowlby's attachment theory; the second part will discuss the significance of this theory, and the final section will review its application to this study. Attachment theory merits further exploration, to which I now turn.

#### **2.2 Attachment Theory**

John Bowlby (1907–990), a British psychoanalyst, developed the theory of attachment (Fraley, 2010) when trying to understand the intense anguish infants experience when they are separated from their parents (Bowlby, 1982). He noticed that infants, when away from their primary caregiver, would go to extraordinary lengths (e.g., crying, clinging, searching) to prevent separation, to the extent that they would even try re-establish closeness (Bowlby, 1982). The relationship with the primary caregiver is the most important predictor of the child's future personality development (Hardy, 2007). Schaffer (2007) proposes that attachment theory needs to be central in the understanding of early social development in children and the

attachment relationship must be taken into account whenever a removal process is underway. Schaffer (2007) concurs with Bowlby (1982) who concluded that long-term separation from parents during early childhood leads to long-term negative behaviors and also adversely affects the child's emotional development. Developing a positive attachment relationship or close bond with a parent or primary caregiver has long-term benefits for the child/children, as it impacts on their later adaptation, for instance, through the development of emotion regulation (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999).

In the development of his theory, Bowlby (1951) began by studying orphaned children placed in institutional care. After observing these children for some time, Bowlby (1951) concluded that the deprivation of constant care had a negative effect on their social development. Consequently, due to the lack of quality caregiving relationships, they are unable to develop appropriate attachment relationships with others. The basic premise of attachment theory, according to Bowlby (1980), is that individuals experience the emotional availability of attachment figures in their lives, and this in turn shapes their feelings of security and trust in others. Bowlby (1980) concluded that where caregivers are consistent and emotionally available children experience themselves as being cared for, and in turn view intimate relationships as positive. Conversely, when children experience their caregivers as unresponsive and unavailable, they perceive themselves as unloved and enter intimate relationships with ambivalent or negative feelings. This type of attachment could negatively influence how children form and maintain relationships in their own lives. Thus, interactions with caregivers lead to the child developing feelings about him-/herself and others in intimate relationships. Furthermore, when children experience caregivers as available and responsive, the child is reassured that the caregiver will be available when needed (Waters & Cummings 2000). In the beginning stages of the development of the attachment theory, Bowlby focused

on young children. The focus, however, was extended in the 1980's to include relationships over a lifespan.

In order to obtain a deeper understanding of the attachment relationship, Bowlby (1982) conducted interviews with the children and families of those who attended the London Guidance Clinic for disturbed children. After concluding his observations and interviews, Bowlby presented his first statement on the attachment theory to the British Psychoanalytic Society in London in 3 classic papers, namely: 'The Nature of the Child's Tie to His Mother' (1958), 'Separation Anxiety' (1960), and 'Grief and Mourning in Infancy and Early Childhood' (1960) (Bretherton, 1992). Bowlby (1982) described attachment as seeking to reestablish close proximity to a specific person in certain situations, e.g. when frightened, tired, or ill. Bretherton (1992) describes attachment as being an affectional bond or tie between an individual and an attachment figure, normally the mother. When a child is removed from his/her parents, the affectional bond with the mother is disrupted, as close proximity is normally associated with the mother of a child (Bowlby, 1982). Bowlby recognized that attachment is a complex behavioral system that serves to protect young children in times of danger and is one of the most important developmental tasks in infancy, as the primary need of children during the first year is to become attached (Altenhofen, Clyman, Little, Baker & Biringen, 2013). Waters et al., (2005) confirm that attachment theory is a psychological model attempting to define the dynamics of continuous and temporary interpersonal relationships between humans.

Bowlby (1982) further states that attachment theory offers a useful perspective on support-seeking (from the child) and support-provision (from the parents). The role of the parents is to provide the support in the solidifying of the attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982). When children are in care, this provision of support from the parents is missing, as attachment requires a contribution from both the parent and the child. If there is no need for the child to seek attention, there will not be a need for the parent to provide the required attention. Bowlby

studied children placed in alternative care and discovered that such children were deprived of the kind of care necessary for healthy emotional development. Bowlby (1951) indicated that separation from and lack of maternal care was a factor called psychological deprivation which is a condition that is present in children who are deprived of warm and responsive parenting (Fox, Nelson & Zeanah, 2017). Karen (1994) concluded that attachment is an organized, self-regulated, and mutually interacting behavior system between parent and child.

Bowlby (1982) further theorized that the attachment relationship between the child and the caregiver changes over time as the child matures. He explains that attachment past the infancy stage changes into what is called internal working models. In terms of Bowlby's explanation, an internal working model is a framework through which the child judges their relationship with their primary attachment figure (Bowlby, 1969). The quality of individuals' internal working models of attachment can predict and explain how individuals will process a wide array of social information (Dykes & Cassidy, 2011). The internal working model consists of expectations concerning the availability of the caregiver when the child needs support from the primary caregiver. Waters and Waters (2006) also conclude that parent-child attachment indicates the level to which children have trust or confidence that they can depend on primary caregivers (e.g. parents, other family members, foster parents, adoption parents, teachers, or caregivers in residential centers) as a support during stressful times.

When children experience themselves as being cared for and protected, they develop what Bowlby terms secure attachment. Children, who developed a secure attachment relationship with their parents, have a solid base from which to explore their world (Bowlby, 1980). Sukys, Lisinskiene and Tilindiene (2015) state that, on the one hand, children who develop trust in their parents are able to develop mutual friendships, relationships, and experience understanding and interaction. On the other hand, when children experience their parents as distant or rejecting, an insecure avoidant attachment is likely to develop. They in

turn regulate their emotions in such a way as to minimize future rejection (Parrigon, Kerns, Abtahi & Koehn, 2015). These children will find it difficult to trust people and form lasting relationships. Similarly, Bell (2009) found that children who experienced attachment difficulties would fear entering new relationships due to insecurity caused by their previous experience of the unavailability of the attachment figure.

Although John Bowlby is seen as the father of attachment, he did receive support from Mary Ainsworth (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). Ainsworth used innovation to test the attachment theory developed by Bowlby (Bretherton, 1992). She worked with Bowlby on the effect on personality development of separation from the mother in early childhood (Bretherton, 1992). Prior to working with Bowlby, she worked with William Blatz (1940) who introduced her to security theory, which proposes that infants and young children need to develop a secure dependence on their parents before launching out into unfamiliar situations. For Van Rosmalen, van der Horst and Van der Veer (2016), security theory is similar to attachment theory, as stated by Blatz (1940), in that infants need to know that their caregivers will be available in all situations. This, then, creates the dependence the child requires from the caregiver. Attachment styles are discussed next.

### **2.2.1 Attachment Styles**

In working with Bowlby, Ainsworth advanced the attachment framework as a system for evaluating parent-child relationships (Ainsworth, 1973). In order to develop the attachment framework, Ainsworth and her colleagues conducted extensive research on the child and mother relationship in Uganda. The research was known as the Strange Situation. Through the Strange Situation, Ainsworth identified 3 distinctive attachment patterns, namely: secure, insecure, and resistant (Bretherton, 1992). Secure attachment is observed when infants are distressed upon the unavailability of primary caregivers but comforted when they are in close

proximity to them. Secondly, insecure attachment is demonstrated when infants become distressed upon the departure and return of their primary caregivers. The resistant attachment pattern is displayed when infants are unbothered about the unavailability or availability of their primary caregivers. Children with resistant attachment will continue with an activity without noticing the caregiver being around (Counted, 2017). Main (1986) discovered a fourth type of attachment style known as disorganized attachment, which is observed when infants seem disoriented and confused about attachment seeking, and display tendencies of both insecure and resistant styles. Table 2.1 below reflects the various attachment styles identified by Ainsworth and the different behaviors associated with these styles.

**Table 2.1. A Schematic Analysis of the Different Attachment Styles**

(Source: Adapted from Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Wall, 1978)

Attachment pattern	Child	Caregiver
Child and caregiver behavior patterns before the age of 18 month		
<b>Secure</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uses caregiver as a secure base for exploration.</li> <li>• Protests caregiver's departure and seeks proximity and is comforted on return, returning to exploration.</li> <li>• May be comforted by the stranger but shows clear preference for the caregiver.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Responds appropriately, promptly and consistently to needs.</li> </ul>
<b>Insecure</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Little affective sharing in play. Little or no distress on departure, little or no visible response to return, ignoring or turning away with no effort to maintain contact if picked up.</li> <li>• Treats the stranger similarly to the caregiver.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Little or no response to distressed child.</li> <li>• Discourages crying and encourages independence.</li> </ul>
<b>Resistant</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unable to use caregiver as a secure base, seeking proximity before separation occurs.</li> <li>• Distressed on separation with ambivalence, anger, reluctance to warm to caregiver and return to play on return.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inconsistent between appropriate and neglectful responses.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preoccupied with caregiver's availability, seeking contact but resisting angrily when it is achieved.</li> <li>• Not easily calmed by stranger.</li> </ul>	
<b>Disorganized</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stereotypies on return such as freezing or rocking.</li> <li>• Lack of coherent attachment strategy shown by contradictory, disoriented behaviors such as approaching but with the back turned.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frightened or frightening behavior, intrusiveness, withdrawal, negativity, role confusion, affective communication errors and maltreatment.</li> </ul>

The attachment styles are also link to the response of the caregiver. In understanding the importance of the attachment relationship between the child and parents, the removal of children into alternative care must take place with the utmost care. Utmost care refers to taking the attachment relationship into account and how that can be maintained while the child is in alternative placement (Melinder, Baugerud, Ovenstad, & Goodman, 2013). The idea is to minimize the break in the attachment relationship. It must be noted that in alternative care, more especially child and youth care centers, children are exposed to various caregivers and form multiple attachment relationships, which cannot be good for their own social development (Bowlby, 1951). These different attachment relationships influence the social development of children, and they also have different expectations. In addition, children still need to maintain the attachment relationship with their biological parents in the midst of these different relationships while in alternative care. These different attachment relationships can therefore have an influence on the relationship between the parents and their child.

Attachment theory is informed primarily by the relationship between the child and the primary caregiver. However, Hughes and Baylin (2012) have identified 5 areas of parenting that relates to the development of the brain activity of the child, and describes how the attachment process functions. Understanding how this brain activity works gives an understanding of the level of the attachment, whether it is secure or otherwise. The level of attachment in terms of brain activity is measured in the following areas:

- The parents must feel comfortable when a child seeks attention;

- Whether the interaction between the child and parents is experienced by both as pleasurable;
- The parents' ability to read the emotions of the child and whether their response matches the child's emotions;
- The parents' ability to make the child understand diverse circumstances. This prepares children how to respond in similar circumstances; and
- The parental managerial system, or the ability to regulate internal states (emotions), and monitor the parent–child connection.

Hughes and Baylin (2012) highlight the link between parental functioning and emotion regulation, which is important in developing a secure attachment relationship. A good attachment relationship with the caregiver satisfies the emotional needs of infants, adolescents, and adults (Counted, 2017). How parents respond to children on an emotional level influences the level of attachment in the attachment relationship. When parents are not available, i.e. due to being separated through a removal process, they will not be able to satisfy the emotional needs of their children. This highlights the importance of attachment theory, to which we now turn.

### **2.3 Significance of Attachment Theory**

Karen (1998) is of the opinion that insecure attachment is a liability for the child if the parent's inconsistent behavior continues throughout their childhood. As already determined, the attachment relationship between the child and the parents plays an important role in the development of the child, including their social development. Schaffer (2007) thus notes that the social development of any human being is influenced by their social interaction with the people closest to them. The social development of children with insecure attachment is

therefore influenced by how they experience their social interaction with their parents as this can have a direct impact on how they relate to their peers throughout their lives. What this implies is that insecure parent–child attachment may potentially lead to problematic relationships in the child’s later life.

Schaffer (2007) further indicated that children with insecure attachment patterns, particularly avoidant children, are especially vulnerable to family risk. This risk, coupled with other identified risks, could result in the possibility of being removed from the care of their parents. This links to the experiences of parental neglect that can be a precursor of insecure (ambivalent) attachments, as identified by Egeland and Sroufe (1981); Finzi, Ram, Har-Even, Shnit and Weizman (2001), and Youngblade and Belsky (1990). On the other hand, Berlin, Cassidy and Appleyard (2008) discovered that securely attached children experience a protective environment due to the attachment to their caregivers. Secure infants are therefore more likely to become more socially competent than their insecure peers (Ludolph & Dale, 2012). These children also form relationships easier than insecure attached children. Bowlby (1982) concluded that the attachment of children to their parents is linked to the manner in which the parent responds to the needs of the child. This can either be in the form of nourishment, comfort, or protection.

Weiss (1986) maintains that infants remember their attachment to their primary caregiver. For adults that were securely attached as an infant, the primary caregiver is an irreplaceable caregiver. This view is reiterated by De Winter, Salemink and Bosmans (2018) in their study on the role of the primary caregiver in attachment. Raby and Dozier (2019) also affirm that the memory of attachment in early life is carried forward into adulthood. This submission is aligned with Ainsworth (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Campbell, Adams and Dobson, 1984) who states that as infants develop in life into adulthood, attachments may be formed with other substitute caregivers, thus satisfying their basic attachment needs and contributing to the

development of identity. However, Cicirelli (1991) claims that separation from their primary caregiver over long periods of time leads to adults looking for an attachment figure that will represent their attachment figure. Counted (2017) explains that the attachment figure can also be an object that satisfies the emotional needs of infants, adolescents, or adults. Now that a basic understanding of attachment theory has been established, the researcher will move on to discuss the application of attachment theory in different settings and life stages.

## **2.4 Application of Attachment Theory**

Attachment theory is not only used in the development of children in relation to their parents or other significant people in their lives, but is also recognized as influencing many different areas of practice from clinical work in infant mental health to parent education and family policy (Palm, 2014).

Thompson and Raikes (2003) state that since the development of attachment theory, it has become indispensable to the understanding of human development. When Bowlby developed this theory, his focus was mainly on the parent–child relationship, and no other aspects of development. Nowadays, the theory is applied in settings other than the field of human relationships, which focuses not only on the relationship between a child and his/her primary caregiver, but is also applicable across the lifespan. Although the social development of children is linked to the attachment relationship, it is generally thought that many developmental outcomes are influenced by attachment, and the early parent–child relationship functions as a guide for future relationships over the lifespan (Sukys et al., 2015).

In terms of the removal of children, attachment is an important aspect of holistic human development. Bowlby (1982) described attachment as the invincible umbilical cord between a child and the parents, particularly the mother. In instances where children are removed from the care of their parents, this umbilical cord is broken, which influences the attachment between

the child and the parents. Research indicates a connection between insecure/unresolved attachments that can be traced back to a child living apart from their family (van Ecke, Chope & Emmelkamp, 2006). In their study, Shechory and Sommerfeld (2007) found that children who experienced inappropriate care might form an insecure attachment pattern, which will manifest itself in the avoidance of contact or in an attachment pattern with high levels of anxiety and ambivalence.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

This chapter looked at attachment, or the affective bond of the child to their parents, and the pivotal role it plays in the social and emotional development of the child. Attachment is not only relevant for the relationship between the child and his/her parents, but also for relationships over the lifespan of the person. According to attachment theory, a break in the attachment relationship, for example, due to the removal or separation of a child from his/her parents for a long period of time, negatively influences the child's future relationships, as well as impacts his/her social development. This chapter thus sought to highlight that negative attachment experiences in the early development of the child can adversely affect the development of their future relationships. The next chapter will focus on the research methodology that is applied in this study.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

Chapter 2 established the theoretical framework underpinning this study, the centerpiece of which was Bowlby's attachment theory. This chapter reviews the literature that focuses on the perceptions, experiences and challenges of parents whose child/children were removed through a statutory process. The structure of the chapter is as follows: It begins by providing the context of child protection, followed by a discussion of the legislation that pertains to the legal framework for child protection and a review of the literature pertaining to the removal of children. Next, the chapter looks at parents' perceptions, experiences and challenges related to the removal of their children, and also considers the role of professionals involved in the removal process.

The section below will now look at child protection, including the various international conventions ratified by South Africa.

#### **3.2 Child Protection**

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children (UNCRC) defines child protection as "to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s), or any other person who has the care of the child" (Landgren, 2005). UNICEF (2012) describes child protection as efforts that aim to keep children safe from harm and a system that responds when violence, exploitation and abuse are perpetrated against children. In 2008, UNICEF defined child protection as 'preventing and responding to violence,

exploitation and abuse against children’, which ‘is essential to ensuring children’s rights to survival, development and well-being’ (Barrientos, Byrne, Villa & Peña, 2013:14).

A child protection system is designed to protect children. It covers a broad range of interventions that include: prevention, identification, reporting, referral, investigation, treatment, follow-up, the statutory process, and effective procedures that takes into account the different and unique national perspective and historical context, resources available, and the cultural and societal factors for such a system (European Commission, 2015). Fernandez (2014) indicates that a child protection system not only focuses attention on children whose circumstances can lead to abuse, but on children in general. Thus, the understanding is that the child protection system must protect all children under the age of 18 years, whether at risk or not. The family is the first and most important people to ensure that children are protected (Wulczyn, Daro, Fluke, Feldman, Glodek & Lifanda, 2010). However, when this is not possible, then organs of State must take responsibility to protect the child. In section 28(1)(b) of the Constitution of South Africa (1996), children have an inherent right to “family care or parental care” or to appropriate alternative care when removed from the family environment.

### **3.2.1 Removal of Children**

Exposure to any form of abuse by parents, guardians or other adult figures in the child’s life space can lead to the removal of the child/children from the care of their parents, especially once a statutory process is undertaken, and placed in alternative care. Factors that contribute towards the removal of children from the care of their parents have been identified as parental characteristics, income, housing, and other factors that could destabilize the family (Zhang & Anderson, 2010; Berger, 2006; Anderson & Fallesen, 2010). In addition, Bolen, McWey and Schlee (2008) add parental stressors, the mental health of the parents, poverty, single parenthood, and the parents’ education to the list of factors. Moreover, Toros (2011) maintains

that the majority of children removed from the care of families come from unfavorable situations perpetuated by parental unemployment, poverty, and alcohol abuse.

Child Welfare Information Gateway (2016) also identifies a range of factors that contribute to the removal of children. These include incidences such as when children engage in inappropriate sexual activities that may include prostitution and the production of pornography; emotional abuse relates to incidences where children's psychological capacity or emotional stability is affected by the treatment of others and the abandonment of children. Furthermore, Buchbinder and Bareqet-Moshe (2011) indicate that the removal of children is also influenced by families with multiple problems, families experiencing extreme economic hardships, crowded and meager conditions, and single parent families where one parent is absent due to death, divorce, separation, or abandonment. Additional factors that can lead to the removal of children are children coming from families experiencing poverty, social isolation, addiction, disability, and/or minority status (McConnell, Llewellyn & Ferronato, 2006). Sankaran et al., (2019) concur with McConnell, Llewellyn and Ferronato that a high number of children removed are from families living in poverty and who are more likely to experience social stressors.

Furthermore, most of the children who are removed from their families have problematic relationships with their family (Buchbinder & Bareqet-Moshe, 2011). McConnell, Feldman, Aunos and Prasad (2011) agree that parents involved in child abuse investigations are people who live on the edge of the norms of society and are parents to children who often are not afforded the opportunities that are available to them in terms of their own development. In cases where incidences of abuse occur that could possibly lead to the removal of a child, a social worker, who has the legal responsibility to protect children, will intervene (Jedwab, Benbenishty, Chen, Glasser, Siegal & Lerner-Geva, 2015).

### 3.2.2 Statutory Process

The removal process of children, as described in the Children's Act, is also referred to as a statutory process. Social workers from child protection services are provided with the necessary authority and framework to remove children from the care of their biological parents in situations that could negatively influence the well-being of children (Children's Act 38 of 2005).

The Children's Act, section 110 (1) and (2) identifies those people who are mandated to report any allegations of any form of child abuse, neglect, maltreatment, or exploitation. The process of lodging a complaint of possible child abuse, neglect, or maltreatment is when a person completes the prescribed form, known as a form 22. This form must then be submitted to the Department of Social Development (DSD) or a designated child protection organization. Once the form (form 22) is accepted, either by the DSD or a designated child protection organization, it is mandatory to respond to the complaint with a visit to, in most cases, the home of the child and family concerned.

Section 150 (1) (a)–(i) and (3) of the Children's Act (Act 38 of 2005) indicates the reasons why a child could be found to be in need of care and protection as well as what should happen if the child is not found to be in need of care and protection. Section 151 of the Act outlines the process to be followed if enough initial evidence is available that suggests that a child could be in need of care and protection. By order of the Children's Court, a visit is conducted in response to the complaint and to confirm whether the allegation is true or not. If the allegation is confirmed, the child protection worker assesses the family's circumstances. While this is happening, the child can be placed in temporary safe care depending on the circumstances the child finds him/herself in. After the assessment, the child protection worker presents the report to the presiding officer in the Children's Court, as confirmed in section 155 of the Act. The presiding officer will consider the recommendations presented in the report in

order to reach a final decision in terms of the best possible alternative placement for the child. Part of the investigation contemplated in section 155 requires the child protection worker to indicate which type of services (counseling, mediation, family reconstruction, and problem-solving skills, etc.) the family will be exposed to.

The following different types of orders can be issued by the Children's Court when a child is found in need of care and protection:

- a) An *alternative care order*, which includes an order placing a child –
  - i) in the care of a person designated by the court to be the foster parent of the child;
  - ii) in the care of a child and youth care center; or
  - iii) in temporary safe care;
- b) an order placing a child in a child-headed household in the care of the child heading the household under the supervision of an adult person designated by the court;
- c) an adoption order, which includes an inter-country adoption order;
- d) a partial care order instructing the parent or care-giver of the child to make arrangements with a partial care facility to take care of the child during specific hours of the day or night or for a specific period;
- e) a shared care order instructing different care-givers or child and youth care centers to take responsibility for the care of the child at different times or periods;
- f) A *supervision order*, placing a child, or the parent or care-giver of a child, or both the child and the parent or care-giver, under the supervision of a social worker or other person designated by the court; an order subjecting a child, a parent or care-giver of a child, or any person holding parental responsibilities and rights in respect of a child, to –
  - i) early intervention services;
  - ii) a family preservation programme; or
  - iii) both early intervention services and a family preservation programme;

- h) a child protection order, which includes an order–
- i) that a child remains in, be released from, or returned to the care of a person, subject to conditions imposed by the court;
  - ii) giving consent to medical treatment of, or to an operation to be performed on, a child;
  - iii) instructing a parent or care-giver of a child to undergo professional counselling, or to participate in mediation, a family group conference, or other appropriate problem-solving forum;
  - iv) holding parental responsibilities and rights in respect of a child, to- instructing a child or other person involved in the matter concerning the child to participate in a professional assessment;
  - v) instructing a hospital to retain a child who on reasonable grounds is suspected of having been subjected to abuse or deliberate neglect,
  - vi) instructing a person to undergo a specified skills development, training, treatment or rehabilitation programme where this is necessary for the protection or well-being of a child;
  - vii) instructing a person who has failed to fulfill a statutory duty towards a instructing an organ of state to assist a child in obtaining access to a public service to which the child is entitled, failing which, to appear through its representative before the court and to give reasons for the failure;
  - viii) limiting access of a person to a child or prohibiting a person from contacting a child; or allowing a person to contact a child on the conditions specified in the court order; pending further inquiry; child to appear before the court and to give reasons for the failure; instructing that a person be removed from a child's home;
  - ix) a contribution order in terms of this Act;

- x) an order instructing a person to carry out an investigation in terms of section 50; and any other order which a children's court may make in terms of any other provision of this Act.
- (2) A children's court may withdraw, suspend or amend an order made in terms of 25 subsection (1), or replace such an order with a new order.

The section above presented the statutory process undertaken for children to be placed in alternative care as well as the various orders that a Children's Court can issue to ensure the well-being of children.

The Children's Act (Act 38 of 2005) provides the process to be followed when a removal process is undertaken. The professional group who has the responsibility and authority to undertake this process of removal of children are social workers. The removal of children entails the removal of a child from the care of their biological parents through a statutory process. Once children are removed, they will then be placed in alternative care, which is described in the Act as being placed either in foster care or in a residential facility (Children's Act, Act 38 of 2005).

### **3.3. Parents and the Removal Process**

It is a given that when it comes to protecting a child/children, the family, including kin, play a significant role, particularly during the child's earliest days (Wulczyn et al., 2010; Berrick et al., 2016). However, for a wide variety of reasons, children are not always protected sufficiently. The risks they face are sometimes within the family sphere, when parents and other family members are either unwilling or unable to protect their children (Wulczyn et al., 2010).

Although a statutory intervention may lead to the child being removed from the care of their parents, the parents continue to be part of the family (Buchbinder & Bareqet-Moshe, 2011).

However, the role that parents can play in the removal process can contribute positively to the process and the outcomes. In this regard, Connolly (2008) explains that parents can make a valuable contribution to the child protection process and acquire an understanding of the services they require. Furthermore, Vålba, Toros and Tiko (2017) established that family involvement in the process also allows the social worker to identify the strengths and challenges of the family. Family involvement in the removal and placement of the child, according to Geurts et al., (2012), contributes significantly to the outcomes of the placement; for instance, a smooth transition for the children from the residential care setting back home.

A study conducted in the United Kingdom highlights that the involvement of parents in the process is also beneficial to prevent the reoccurrence of the removal after the child has been placed back home (Geurts et al., 2012). Darlington, Healy and Feeney (2010) concurs with Geurts et al., (2012) that the participation of parents in the process is beneficial for the process and the outcomes. Battle, Bendit and Gray (2014) further states that the relationship between the child and parents should be maintained. Although it is difficult to involve parents in child protection investigations, policy makers in child welfare have acknowledged the benefits of involving parents (Schreiber et al., 2013). Ivec (2013) says that social workers and other professionals involved in the removal process of children understand the bond that exists between children and their families. Thorp (2008) is of the opinion that parental participation is beneficial, as they can provide the alternative caregivers of their children with valuable information. However, on the other hand, when parents are not involved, this increases the trauma of the separation between the child and the family (Thorp, 2008). Parental involvement recognizes the importance of the attachment relationship between the child and parents (Thorp,

2008). Hinton and Hinton (2012) says that the removal of children influences the attachment relationship. Furthermore, Killian, Forrester, Westlake and Antonopoulo (2017) are of the opinion that a positive relationship with parents leads to positive outcomes for children.

Fargion (2014) indicates that when a child protection intervention is undertaken, the focus is on the suspicion of abuse and not on providing support to the family. Families can become part of the removal process that lead to the protection of their child (Sharrock, 2013). One of the ways to ensure the participation of families in child protection is through family group conferencing, as indicated by Sharrock (2013). A study by Ghaffar et al., (2012) established that most parents found family group conferencing helpful as it allows the family to be part of the planning and execution of decisions made. It is a multi-disciplinary approach that allows for open and transparent communication, shared decision-making, as well as participation and accountability of all team members (Ghaffar et al., 2012).

Current experience with the participation of parents in the removal process is limited; however, there is a growing realization of the importance of the participation of parents (Darlington et al., 2010; O'Mahony et al., 2016). The participation of parents in the removal process has a number of benefits. A study conducted by Cudjoe and Abdullah (2018) determined that when parents are involved in the removal process it strengthens their ownership and they are also eager to get the necessary help from welfare agencies. In the same study, participation by parents also changed their perception of the social workers conducting the removal. Furthermore, parental participation contributes to lowering the level of hostility by the parents when the intervention is involuntary (Kettle, 2015).

### **3.3.1 Parental Participation in the Removal Process**

The idea that parents should participate in child protection issues started in New Zealand in 1989. The format of the participation of parents is known as family group conferences where

a child is deemed to be in need of care and protection (Conolly, 2009). Although there is legislation encouraging the participation of parents, there are also prevailing challenges with this concept. McLaughlin (2007) explains that during a child protection investigation parents present as citizens with basic rights, carers of their children, and also as subjects in the child protection allegations. Keddeh (2014) further states that families and children expect their rights to be protected during statutory interventions. This, therefore, adds complexities to the participation of parents in the removal process. A study by Buckley et al., (2011) focused on the participation of parents in meetings with the social worker while the removal process was undertaken. These meetings are planned to ensure that the voice of the parents is heard during the removal process. However, the parents in the above-mentioned study indicated that they experienced these meetings as humiliating, nerve wrecking, daunting, embarrassing, intimidating, annoying, and frightening. Additionally, the study by Ghaffar et al., (2012) reveals the negative experiences of parents participating in child protection processes and does not consider the family's participation in the process as valuable. Furthermore, commenting on parental participation, Tilbury and Ramsay (2018) found that when parents participated their opinions were usually dismissed by the social workers.

There are more reasons that influence the participation of parents in the removal process. Buckley et al., (2011) established that parents were given a number of tasks to complete. In some instances, they did not fully understand these tasks, yet complied in order to avoid the consequences, including the removal of their child. Munro (2011) also discovered that child protection services has an imbalance in their approach, as the focus is on technical solutions, rules, and procedures, rather than recognition of the importance of the skills to engage with families. This, then, indicates a skills shortage amongst social workers, which can inhibit the participation of parents. Schreiber et al., (2013) and Tilbury and Ramsay (2018) in their studies identified a number of skills parents found to be lacking in social workers. These

included: being able to relate to parents on their level; remaining calm, to keep the parents calm; having a non-judgmental attitude; not forthcoming with information, and disempowering parents by not asking before doing anything. The failure of social workers to consult with parents before they take action, says Platt (2008), creates a barrier to engaging parents in the removal process.

Fargion (2014) goes further and states that another factor that could lead to parents not fully participating is the legal responsibility of social workers. The social worker is responsible for conducting an assessment in order to detect possible harmful situations for a child within their current environment, and by focusing on the legal process, social workers tend to ignore the family, particularly the parents. For Toros and LaSala (2018), although assessments are conducted, it is deficit based and does not include the views of the families and children.

### **3.3.2. Parents' Perceptions and Experiences of, and Challenges with, the Removal Process**

Limited literature is available on parental experience following the involuntary removal of their children from their care (Mayes & Llewellyn, 2012; Cudjoe & Abdullah, 2018). Most of the research studies conducted on the removal of children focuses on the children, with very few focusing on the parents (Baum & Negbi, 2013). The court ordered removal of children has an impact on and implications for the family as a whole (Baum & Negbi, 2013). Faircloth, Hoffman and Layne (2013) state that parents have a significant influence on the development of their children and, therefore, the parental home should be the best place for the development of children. Alpert (2005) substantiates the importance of considering the experiences of parents in the process of the removal of their children. He states that parents feel underserved and overlooked by the system; this is experienced when the social workers do not communicate with the parents about the well-being of their children who are already placed in care, not

valuing and incorporating parents' perspectives. The social workers are focused on the case, not the entire family; and, for this reason, the family feels excluded. Furthermore, mandated services are not always available to parents in a timely and accessible manner. Sankaran et al., (2018), in their study, found that statutory interventions that could lead to a child being removed is a drastic intervention for families that can cause irreparable damage to the family and child. Hinton and Hinton (2012) assert that once parents enter into the statutory process through the removal of their children, their needs are overlooked.

Parents have particular perceptions around the removal of children from their care. Due to the nature of child protection work, the first impression that parents have of a social worker is that they are someone who is coming to remove their child (Schreiber et al., 2013). However, a study by Platt (2008) also discovered that in situations where the social worker relationship is emphasized, and the importance of being sensitive, honest, and clear about social work procedures is acknowledged, the rejection parents tend to feel diminishes. Likewise, Toros and LaSala (2018) support the finding that stresses the importance of building trust in the social worker–parent relationship.

Often, as Walker and Anderson (2019) discovered, these parents tend to perceive themselves as being a failure as a parent. Coupled with this perception and their experiences with a social worker might lead them to experience the social worker as not being on their side. However, due to the urgency of the matter, as Maiter, Palmer and Manji (2006) explain, social workers need to complete their child protection investigations timeously. As a result, parents may perceive the social workers as authoritative and powerful in order to complete their work. Acknowledging the high workloads of social workers, Toros and LaSala (2018) confirm and explain the pressure under which social workers have to work. In Mandell's (2008) view, the power cannot be removed from the relationship, despite the social worker's attempts to do so by being kind, careful, or self-aware. Tilbury and Ramsay (2018) concur with Mandell that the

relationship between the parents and the social worker is imbalanced in the favor of the social worker. A further perception of parents is that social workers are unresponsive to their needs and the emotional pain they experience due to the removal of their children (Forrester McCambridge, Waissbein & Rollnick, 2008). Llewellyn and Ferronato (2011) note that the statutory authority that social workers have through legislation is perceived by parents to be used to coerce them to cooperate rather than mediating to resolve the challenges faced by the family.

Dumbrill (2006) discovered that the parents' experiences with social workers are also an important contributing factor in how they experience the removal process. In his study, Dumbrill (2006) found that parents' experience with social workers were not positive. In addition, parents saw social workers as tyrannical, frightening, and as having absolute power which makes the parents feel inadequate, without a voice in terms of the intervention. Gallagher, Smith, Wosu, Stewart, Hunter and Cree (2011) discovered that the family perceives social workers negatively, possibly due to the lack of relationship building on the part of the social worker. In their study, Gallagher et al., (2011) found that parents expected social workers to build trust with them, have clear communication, be honest, and provide regular feedback on the process.

Buckley et al., (2008) and Buchbinder and Bareqet-Moshe (2011) discovered that parents experience high levels of stress, trauma, and grief during the investigation by child protection workers that could lead to the removal process. Hinton and Hinton (2012) indicated that some parents experience shock, emotional turmoil, and the lack of support in dealing with the situation. A study conducted by Wells (2011) established that some parents, particularly the mother as the parental figure, also displayed signs of depression, guilt, anxiety, and anger, and engaged in self-destructive behavior after the removal process was complete. Although most parents have a negative experience about the removal of their children, a study conducted

by Buchbinder and Bareqet-Moshe (2011) had positive key findings. In their study, parents found the placement positive as they experienced a change in their children's behavior upon returning home. What this study did not highlight was what the contributing factors were that led to the positive outcome for the parents.

Maiter et al., (2006), Fusco (2015), and Jackson, Beadnell and Pecora (2015) in their research discovered that most of the parents involved in a child protection investigation also experienced abuse and rejection as a child. Thus, the experience of having their child removed could bring back memories of their own experience. Similarly, Buckley, Carr and Whelan (2011) found that the views of people involved in child protection investigations are shaped by their own previous experiences they had with child protection. Feelings expressed by the parents can be linked to the attachment mothers, in particular, have with their children removed from their care. This could also relate to parents who were placed in alternative care as a child.

The removal of children from the care of their parents is based on the fact that children experience some sort of abuse, neglect, or maltreatment in the care of their biological parents. Removal is not purely based on the intellectual capacity of the parents. In a study focusing on parents with intellectual disabilities, Llewellyn and Ferronato (2006) and Rice and Sigurjónsdóttir (2018) raised concerns in their studies on the high number of children moved to alternative care from parents with intellectual disabilities. In their study, the question was raised whether children are removed on the assumption that parents with intellectual disabilities are not capable of caring for and protecting their children. Gur and Stein (2018) discovered that social workers have a negative perception of the parenting abilities of parents with intellectual disabilities. Mayes and Llewellyn (2012) established that mothers with intellectual disabilities experience negative emotions such as sadness, grief, loss, and anger when their children are removed. However, Wells (2011) observed that parents without any form of intellectual disability express similar emotions.

Baum and Burns (2007) and Tilbury and Ramsay (2018) note that parents experience a sense of powerlessness and lack of support prior to the removal as well as after the completion of the removal. The feelings of powerlessness can be linked to being marginalized during the removal process (Buckley et al., 2011). Mayes and Llewellyn (2012) also discovered that some parents were thankful for the removal for their own physical well-being. Schofield et al., (2010) described parents as having feelings of parental disenfranchised grief and loss of parental identity after their children were removed.

Forrester, Kershaw, Moss and Hughes (2008) suggest that part of the challenge for families can be the manner in which social workers asked questions. These authors discovered that social workers tend to ask closed questions, which allows very little space for them to identify the positive aspects of the families. Cossar, Brandon and Jordan (2013) acknowledge that child protection is complex in that professionals have to balance the partnership with the parents and exercise power to protect the child. What can also contribute towards the parents' perception of power is what Munro (2008) discovered in her research, that social workers work under conditions that are not always conducive, which includes high numbers of investigations that must be completed, lack of adequate resources, as well as unsupportive work environments. These challenges mentioned by Munro (2008) are affirmed by Darlington et al., (2010) who echo that social workers' statutory obligation to ensure child protection plays a role in them being supportive of parents. The work environment, high caseloads, and the statutory responsibilities of social workers make it challenging to engage positively with parents. Platt (2012) reverberates that for social workers policies and procedures place heavy demands on paperwork instead of relationships with parents. Munro (2011) suggests that the focus in child protection should be for social workers to build compassionate relationships with parents.

### **3.4 Professionals Involved in the Removal Process**

As the removal of children from the care of their parents is a statutory process, social workers are mandated to undertake the removal process (Children's Act, Act 38 of 2005). Another professional involved in the removal process is the presiding officer of the Children's Court, whose role is to ensure that the prescripts of the laws governing children, as prescribed in the Act (Children's Act, Act 38 of 2005), is applied appropriately and in the best interest of the child.

#### **3.4.1. The Role of Social Workers and Presiding Officers in the Removal Process**

The role of the social worker in the process of the removal of children, as clearly stated in the Children's Act (Act 38 of 2005), is to respond when a complaint is received from the community members, schools, clinics, hospitals, or other social welfare agencies. After a complaint has been received, the social worker will make an unplanned house visit to the family in question to investigate the allegations that were reported (i.e. of abuse or neglect), without notifying the family beforehand (Schreiber et al., 2013). The purpose of this visit, as Schreiber et al., (2013) notes, is to gather sensitive information from the child and parents. The social worker thereby starts the investigation that could lead to the removal of the child. During the investigation, the social worker will speak to the child and the parents. Ferguson (2016) calls the first visit an initial assessment that consists of inspecting the entire environment of the child and the parents. The collection of information and evidence by the social worker forms part of the risk assessment (Forrester et al., 2008). Their role, says Forrester et al., (2008), is to focus on the needs of the child, rather than the parents. Correspondingly, Pösö & Laakso (2016) explain that the investigation is focused on the danger that the child finds him/herself in, and not the parents. After conducting the initial assessment, which includes a risk assessment, the social worker will compile a report on the findings. The report will contain the social worker's

recommendations. In the case of a child being removed, this will be the first step. The report is then presented in the Children's Court. The judge officiating in the Children's Court is called a presiding officer. The presiding officer must review the report submitted by the social worker and consider the recommendations made by the social worker. If the presiding officer agrees with the social worker that removal is in the best interest of the child, he/she will then endorse the recommendations (Children's Act, 2005).

### **3.4.2. Perceptions, Experiences and Challenges of Professionals**

The decision by caseworkers to remove a child from the care of his/her parents is not an easy decision to make, as the complexities of the decision has consequences for both the child and the parents (Davidson-Arad & Benbenishty, 2009; McConnell et al., 2011). Most unfortunately, as Munro (2008) states, the decision to remove children is mostly made under less than ideal circumstances. The type of circumstances in which child protection workers make decisions to remove children are usually influenced by strong time pressures; inadequate resources for ensuring the child's well-being, whether to allow the child to remain at home or in placement; and lastly, it is based on insufficient available information (Munro, 2008). These facts are confirmed by Quick and Scott (2018), who in agreement with Munro (2008) state that statutory social work does not always have all the required resources to conduct their work.

Maiter et al., (2006) says that social workers are expected to resolve child protection issues as soon as possible. This can lead to social workers not having ample opportunity to relate and build positive relationships with parents. Schreiber et al., (2013) are of the opinion that social workers are conflicted by their dual role of protecting the well-being of the child, which can include removal, while at the same time supporting the family (i.e. by providing skills) to assist them to overcome their challenges. Sæbjørnsen and Willumsen (2017) further state that social workers can build emotional and supportive relationships with clients who find

themselves in difficult and vulnerable positions. For this reason, Trotter (2006) indicates that it is better for social workers to focus on the reported incident, rather than assist families with services to improve their behavior. Hunt, Goddard, Cooper, Littlechild and Wild (2016) note the importance of this, as most incidents of abuse take place in the family context. These authors also reiterate that social workers need to be aware of the circumstances in which they work.

Benbenishty and Arad-Davidson (2012) have established that most removals are influenced by the social workers' personal characteristics as well as their agency's guidelines and policies on removal. If this approach is used, it places the family outside the process and the family will have a negative experience of the removal. Tham (2017), in his study, discovered that social workers spend less time with the families whose children were removed from their care. This is linked to the organizational policies and guidelines. Horwitz and Marshall (2015) posit that data-driven case management also impacts on the attention that social workers give to families. Darlington et al., (2010) state that social workers have to play a dual role. However, their priority is to act in the best interest of the child and therefore take an accusatorial stand against parents. Berrick et al., (2017) indicate that there are also structural reasons for the poor involvement of families in the removal process. These structural reasons can be the organizational routines and beliefs that focus on the view of professionals over parental views.

Forrester, Westlake and Glynn (2012) discovered that social workers experience resistance and non-cooperation from parents, including apparent cooperation that masks issues of concern, such as not engaging, violent or threatening behavior, and other manifestations of non-engagement from parents during child protection investigations. Damman (2014) describes resistant parents as parents who are opposed to any form of involvement by social workers, even when it relates to the safety of their children. She further states that these parents

will also avoid any participation and remain inactive, thereby resisting even positive changes to their situation. The reasons for resistance, as suggested by Horwitz and Marshall (2015), is because their participation is not voluntary, and because the overall removal process is intrusive into the family members' lives. Social workers are also confronted with disguised compliance. This is when parents or carers appear to co-operate with social workers as a way to conceal reality and get the case closed. It is characterized by the same uncooperative behaviors of hostility and avoidance but is linked with a short period of cooperation, which seeks to draw attention away from the concerns (Brandon, Belderson, Warren, Howe, Gardner, Dodsworth & Black, 2008; Ainsworth and Hansen, 2015; Quick & Scott, 2019). Social workers also experience non-cooperation from parents and caregivers of children, as they want to portray a positive image in order to escape negative judgment; however, this can result in an attempt to hide the abuse, which makes it difficult for the social worker to engage productively with the family (Ferguson, 2009). Darlington et al., (2010) conducted a study to determine the challenges social workers face when engaging parents in the child protection investigations. They found that parents were willing to change their behaviors that put their children at risk, that parents do not fully participate in family group conferences, and that parents are unable to link their risky behavior to the protection of their children.

The reporting of abuse is not confined to any particular group of care worker, i.e. a social worker. Anyone who has direct contact with a child can report any suspicion of abuse (Children's Act, 2005). Suspected abuse can be reported to a social worker. This is illustrated by Arruabarrena and De Paul (2012), Cross and Casanueva (2009), as well as Trocmé, Fallon, MacLaurin and Neves (2005) and Kokaliari, Roy and Taylor (2019), who have established that certain professionals, such as pediatricians, nurses, educators, child care providers, and community members will report suspected child abuse to a social work agency. Due to the nature of protecting children, parents can find the work of social workers highly intrusive

(Schreiber, Fuller & Pacey, 2013). Consequently, as these authors found, parents tend to avoid co-operating with the social worker conducting the investigation. The social worker can coerce parents into participating and/or even threaten parents with court orders, should they not participate. Loman and Siegel (2015) note that in instances where family engagement is encouraged, involvement increases, facilitating openness between the family and social worker. Ferguson (2016) acknowledges that although parents have the right to raise their own children, this has to be balanced against the right of the state to intervene when parents fail to appropriately care for their children.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

This chapter described the legislation that governs the process of removing children from of the care of their families when such an intervention is required. It also explained how the process must be implemented and identified all the relevant parties involved in the process. The national legislation that is linked to the removal of children was reflected on in detail, and finally, the experiences of parents and professionals involved in the removal process were considered. The following chapter will focus on the research methodology that the researcher will utilize to undertake this research.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

The previous chapter identified and discussed relevant literature and scholarly research pertaining to the current thesis topic. This chapter provides a detailed description of the research design and methodology used to conduct this study. It also identifies the target population, and presents the method and instruments used to identify, collect, and analyze the data needed to investigate the research problem and achieve the specific aim and objectives of the study. This is followed by a description of the rigor and ethical considerations applied, as well as explanation of the limitations encountered, and a brief conclusion that sums up the main points of the chapter. The first element of the research methodology is to establish the research approach and design that will be used in this research project.

#### **4.2 Research Approach and Design**

A qualitative research methodology was employed in this study. A qualitative approach allows for a rich description of a phenomenon that not much is known about. As this study sought to investigate a phenomenon that occurs in the natural setting of the participants (Creswell, 2009), a qualitative methodology was found to be a suitable approach for this study.

In the natural setting of the participants, their view of the phenomenon is important. This approach, therefore, attempts to make sense of and understand the phenomenon in its natural setting. It also tries to make sense of the participants' interpretations of the phenomenon under investigation, with the aim of understanding the social challenge in their context (Babbie & Mouton, 2015; Denzin & Lincoln (ed.), 2000).

As the research aimed to study a social phenomenon from the perspective of the “social actors” (Babbie & Mouton, 2011:270), an exploratory and descriptive research design was considered appropriate for this study.

Blaikie (2000) explains that exploratory studies are used to better understand a situation or phenomenon, and to investigate unfamiliar issues (Babbie & Mouton, 2006; Wellman, Kruger & Mitchell, 2008). As Babbie (2015) reports, exploratory studies are undertaken to satisfy the curiosity of the researcher, to obtain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, to test the possibility of conducting further research, and to develop methods that can be used in other studies. This study chose a descriptive research design, as it provides an in-depth description of a particular phenomenon by collecting information about it, and generally answers the *how* and *why* questions (De Vos et al., 2005; Yin, 2003). Rubin and Babbie (2005) point out that descriptive studies provide a thorough description and explanation of a phenomenon. This means that the employment of this approach will provide a greater understanding of parents’ perceptions, experiences and challenges of the removal process. Having established the research approach and design that will be used, the researcher will now move on to discuss how the design will assist him in selecting the population, the procedures for sampling, and the method and plan for data collection, as well as pilot test the study.

## 4.3 Research Methodology

### 4.3.1. Population and Sampling

The research **population** refers to a group of people who possess specific qualities of particular interest to the researcher. The use of the term ‘population’ also sets the boundaries of the population; in other words, which units (people) are to be included in the study (De Vos et al., 2005). The population of this study consist of parents whose child/children have been removed through a statutory process, are currently residing in Delft, and are either married or living in a cohabiting relationship. Furthermore, the child or children removed must be their biological child(ren). Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009) state that the selection of a study population assists the researcher to have a group of people on whom to focus the study. Furthermore, professional practitioners (social workers and presiding officer) involved in the removal process will also form part of the population. Delft, a suburb of the greater Cape Town Metropolitan area, which consists of 152,030 people (Statistics SA, 2011), formed the research setting. According to the 2011 Census, the population demographics consists of 52% Coloured and 46% black residents. The unemployment rate in the Delft area was indicated to be at 41.3%, and 69% of households survive on an income of R3 200.00 per month. These circumstances place anxiety on parents, which may lead to child abuse and neglect (Mersky et al., 2009; Zhang & Anderson, 2010; Anderson & Fallesen, 2010). Likewise, Bromfield, Lamont, Parker and Horsfall (2010), Buchbinder and Bareqet-Moshe (2011), Butler, McArthur, Thompson and Winkworth (2012) and Mathews and Burton (2013), along with Mersky et al., (2009) indicate that families experiencing poverty, social disadvantage, problematic drug and alcohol use, mental health issues, as well as domestic and family violence are prone to child abuse investigations. This geographical area with its high prevalence of unemployment fosters an environment of child abuse, neglect, and exploitation. In order to answer the research question,

the researcher had to identify the relevant persons to participate in the study. This is achieved through a process of sampling.

**Sampling** is taking any portion of a population or universe as representative of the population or universe (De Vos et al., 2005; Bless & Higson-Smith, 2000). Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, which is the selection of participants who have the characteristics or attributes of the people who will contribute to the purpose of the study (Grinnel & Unrau, 2008). Creswell (2007) states that the research site and participants are selected in order to contribute positively to the phenomenon being studied. In order for parents to be considered for the study, the investigation by a social worker must have been completed, the child found in need of care and protection, and placed in alternative care by a presiding officer. The child still had to be in alternative care by the time the study commenced. Participants for the study were selected from the case files of social workers who work on statutory cases in the Delft area. One of the criteria for participation was that parents had to be married or living together at the time of the removal. However, when the sampling was concluded, the parents were single, cohabiting, and/or divorced. Twenty parents, consisting of both mother and father, two social workers working in the Delft area, and the presiding officer within the Goodwood Magisterial district, were selected to participate in this study. Participants were recruited with the support of social workers from the DSD who are involved in statutory work in Delft. Interviews were conducted until the point of data saturation—the point where no new information is presented by the participants for the study (Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2011). In order to test the process and the instrument that will be utilized, the researcher undertook a pilot study. This is described next.

### **4.3.2 Pilot Study**

The initial assessment of the interview schedule took place with a small group of participants (De Vos et al., 2011; Bless, Higson-Smith & Kagee, 2006) prior to the main research study. This pilot (or preliminary) study provided a pre-testing of the researcher's observations and the data collection methods that would be employed (Glesne, 2006). It further provided the researcher with the opportunity to clarify or change questions in the interview schedule in order to ensure that the correct information would be collected. The pilot study was performed on one set of parents who met the relevant criteria for the research, but were excluded from the main study. The participation of and manner in which the parents responded was positive. This reassured the researcher that the questions were indeed appropriate and would generate information relevant to the research problem concerned. .

### **4.3.3 Data Collection**

Permission was obtained from the University of the Western Cape's Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee as well as from the Department of Social Development's Research Ethics Committee. The researcher submitted written applications with the research proposal to both institutions. Once the researcher received ethical clearance from the UWC and DSD, the process of identifying participants started. The recruitment of the participants started with a meeting with a social work team at the Metro North regional office. A social work manager, a social work supervisor, and three social workers who work in the Delft area, attended the initial meeting. At this meeting, the researcher was requested to share the research proposal with the team present, whereafter a recruitment plan was discussed and designed. The plan was for each of the social workers to identify parents who fit the criteria of the population. Each social worker identified 10 parents and at the follow-up meeting a selection of parents took place. From the 30 parents identified, the responsible social worker arranged visits to the

parents. This was followed up with the researcher accompanying the social workers to the parents to inform them about the study and arrange a suitable day for the interview.

Qualitative interviews are “attempts to understand the world from the participant’s point of view, to unfold the meaning of people’s expression, [and] to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations” (De Vos et al., 2005:287). One-on-one semi-structured interviews were used to obtain the data, as they are flexible and provide the opportunity to explore the participants’ answers, and thereby gain a deeper understanding of what they are communicating (De Vos et al., 2011). Smith, Harré and Van Langenhoven (1995) and Donalek (2005) explain that the use of one-on-one semi-structured interviews allows the participants to tell their story in their own words and from their own understanding, as they are the experts of the phenomenon under investigation.

Two different interview schedules, a guide developed with predetermined open-ended questions (Babbie & Mouton, 2008)—one for the parents (Appendix A), and one for the professional participants (Appendix B)—was used as the main data collection instrument to engage the participants and navigate the narrative terrain (Holstein & Gubrium 1995; Monnette, Sullivan & Dejong, 2005). Babbie (2007) states that field notes should be taken immediately after the interview as the researcher should not rely on his/her memory. In this regard, Morse and Field (1995) explain that note taking minimizes data loss. In clarifying the process, Babbie (2007) avows that the process of taking notes starts off rather sketchy, but is later written in more detail. During the data collection process, the researcher also observed the parents’ reactions (both verbal and non-verbal). The researcher made sure that prior to the data-collection process, the participants were well prepared.

#### 4.3.3.1 Preparation of the participants

Babbie and Mouton (2007) note the importance of sharing some of the information with potential participants prior to conducting interviews. This will ensure that the participants have an idea of the research project. De Vos et al., (2011) indicate that once barriers are removed the interviews become more intimate and information will be more valid. The one-on-one semi-structured interviews with the participants took place in their own homes. Access to the parents was arranged by the local Social Development office. A social worker was assigned to introduce the researcher to the potential participants. At the meeting, the participants were individually informed about the purpose of the study. Using the information sheet (Appendix C), it was explained why they were chosen; additional ethical issues were also discussed, i.e. confidentiality and anonymity was made clear to all participants. They were informed that their participation was completely voluntary and that if they felt uncomfortable, they could withdraw from the study at any stage without any negative consequences. The participants were then presented with a consent form to read and sign if they agreed to participate (Appendix D). Arrangements for the final interview were finalized and the participants received a reminder prior to the interview. This was to ensure that the participants were prepared for the visit as well as the interview (De Vos et al., 2011). Permission to audio-record the interviews was also obtained at this meeting. Audio-recording the interviews would benefit the researcher in two ways: Firstly, it would provide a full record of the interview, and secondly, it would allow him to focus his attention on the interview (Smith et al., 1995). Once the participants were prepared to participate, the individual interview sessions could be planned.

#### 4.3.3.2 Individual interview sessions

One of the fundamentals of interviewing, says Marshall and Rossman (2011), is that the researcher must acknowledge that the participants' views are both valuable and useful. The

researcher thus familiarized himself with the questions to focus on the responses from the participants (Smith et al., 1995). The researcher perceived the participants to be the experts on the subject and therefore allowed the maximum opportunity to tell their story without being interrupted (Smith et al., 1995). The participants could communicate in a language that suits them and each interview lasted between 40–60 minutes. Most of the interviews took place at the residence of the participants, with the exception of three that took place at an alternative venue. For these, one took place at the workplace of a participant and the other at a local restaurant. The structure of the interview schedule ensured that the difficult questions were asked towards the end of the interview. The interviews started off cautiously, as the researcher was aware of the emotive topic being investigated. At the end of each interview, the researcher asked the participants if they required any assistance. This was to ensure that the participant was not harmed in any way or experienced any negative trauma during the interview. Holstein and Gubrium (1995) point out that in an interview, both parties—the researcher and the participant—are active and involved in the interview. Therefore, in order to ensure that the interview is more of a conversation than an interview, the researcher made use of the following interviewing techniques: minimal interference when the participant spoke, nodding of the head, and making eye contact with the participant.

The interviews with the social workers and the presiding officer took place at their respective offices and lasted between 40–60 minutes. The researcher made use of an audio recording device to record all interviews with the permission of the participants. Once the researcher completed the interviews, the recordings were assigned a code, e.g. P1 (Parent 1). Soon after the interviews were concluded, the data was transferred onto a computer for safekeeping. Apart from conducting the individual interviews, the researcher also kept field notes of his experience and observations.

#### 4.3.3.3 Field notes

Field notes were used to record the researcher's observations, feelings, impressions, and interpretations (Mason, 2007). Field notes are minutes that the researcher takes, while observing the behavior and activities of the participants at the research site (Creswell, 2009). Grinnel and Unrau (2008) says that the field notes must provide a chronological description of what occurs in the setting and as well as with the participants. The field notes assisted the researcher to reflect on the interviews and to evaluate the feelings experienced throughout the interview. Biklen and Bogdan (2007) says that field notes provide some reflection on the data in terms of emerging themes, patterns that are present, links between the data collected, and any other ideas and thoughts identified by the researcher. These field notes can also assist with the data analysis.

#### 4.4. Data Analysis

- Data analysis is the process of bringing order to the mass of collected data; it is a continuous process that runs parallel to the process of collecting data (Creswell, 2003). During this process, patterns and themes will start to emerge (De Vos et al., 2005). The study embraced the qualitative data analysis steps, as described by Marshall and Rossman (1999).
- **Planning and recording data** – data was collected and recorded in a systematic manner. The planning and recording of the data did not interfere with the everyday life events in the research setting. After clarifying how the data would be collected, the researcher planned the coding of the data in order to make retrieval a lot easier. Following that, the researcher went ahead and arranged appointments with the selected participants.
- **Data collection and preliminary analysis:** This part is a twofold process that includes managing the data, and reading and writing memos. After completing a field visit, the

researcher listened to the recordings and started to identify preliminary themes that started to emerge. The transcribing of the data only followed later.

- a) **Managing the data:** After listening to the recorded interviews, the researcher created a secure file on a laptop computer to assist with the managing and securing of the data. After the researcher came back from the field, the collected data was stored in this file. Each segment of the data was given a unique code.
- b) **Reading and writing memos** – After the data was transcribed, the researcher became familiar with the data by reading through and listening to the data, and making notes while reading and playing the recordings. Krueger and Neuman (2006) specify that the writing of memos is for analytical purposes and suggests that this should start shortly after data collection and continue until the research report is written.

- **Generating categories, themes and patterns:**

This process is the start of reducing the amount of data in order for the data to reflect an answer to the research question and objectives. The researcher began this process by repeatedly listening to the recordings and reading through the transcribed notes. This led to the identification of recurring themes present in the data (Terre Blanche et al., (2011). The researcher continued to read through the data to make sure that it does reflect the understanding of the participants (De Vos et al., 2011) and relates to the overall objectives of the study.

Coding the data is a technique that qualitative researchers use to recognize sections of text by underlining or highlighting and allocating a code that describes the meaning of the segment (Cresswell & Clark, 2017). Coding data therefore summarizes the main attributes of a portion of qualitative data (Saldaña, 2009; Babbie, 2015). During the process of making sense of the data, the researcher used color codes to identify related segments that occurred more than once and grouped similar data after meaning was generated from them. During the process

of grouping the related segments together, themes started to emerge. Once the themes were identified, the researcher also checked the identified themes with the co-supervisor for further input. The co-supervisor assisted the researcher to organize the identified themes in a structured manner and agreed on the themes that were identified.

## **4.5. Trustworthiness, Rigor & Reflexivity**

### **4.5.1 Trustworthiness and Rigor**

Trustworthiness in qualitative research is achieved by applying neutrality. Neutrality was achieved by respecting the participants' individuality, and refraining from stereotyping and labeling (Cho & Trent, 2006). In addition to the above, neutrality was also achieved by respecting the opinions and views of the participants, and not trying to influence their responses in any way. Trustworthiness and rigor were ensured through the following:

- **Credibility** was confirmed when the participants' views were accurately recorded and the information they provided was checked and rechecked for correctness and accuracy. Throughout the data collection process, the researcher rephrased the information back to the participants to ensure he understood the information. In some cases, the researcher had to go back to the participants and ask the same question differently to make sure the information is correct. Credibility was further enhanced by clearly stating the parameters of the study in terms of population, setting and theoretical framework (De Vos et al., 2011). Credibility was further verified when data saturation was achieved. Furthermore, according to Babbie and Mouton (2015), debriefing with a colleague who understands the context of the study also contributes towards the credibility of the study. The researcher had regular discussions with a work colleague who, as these authors say, asked questions about the researcher's own understanding of the topic. This process was to ensure that the information does not reflect the views of the

researcher, but those of the participants. The added role of the colleague here, says Babbie and Mouton (2015:277), is to act as “devil’s advocate”.

- **Dependability** refers to the fact that if the study was repeated with the same or similar participants in the same or similar contexts, the results of the study would be similar or exactly the same (Babbie & Mouton, 2015). The researcher made use of the same interview schedule for the same category of participants (parents and professionals). The design of the interview schedule ensured that the researcher gather the most appropriate information from the participants. The researcher made use of an audio recorder with permission of the participants (Smith et al., 1995). The utilization of an audio recorder allows for more comprehensive data gathering and enables the researcher to focus his attention on the interview (De Vos, et al, 2011). Babbie and Mouton (2008) highlight the importance of field notes, as they give the researcher the opportunity to write down what happens during an interview. The field notes reflect what transpired during the interview, but also include what the researcher sees, hears, and observes during the interview (De Vos et al., 2011). The above also assists the researcher with dependability. De Vos et al., (2011) indicate that dependability is achieved when the research is conducted in a logical, well-documented manner that can be audited. The recordings and field notes are representative of this.

- **Transferability** is how the findings of a particular study can be used in another setting and with other respondents (Babbie & Mouton, 2015; De Vos et al., 2011). To ensure transferability, it is important to provide thick descriptions of the data, including precise and detailed information. Lincoln and Guba (1986) indicate that purposive sampling also contributes to transferability. In this regard, the researcher identified a specific theoretical framework, and clearly stated the data collection method and analysis that guided this research project (De Vos et al., 2011).

- **Conformability** refers to the links between the data and findings, and indicates whether the findings of the study are derived from the research project, or whether they are the researcher's imposed preconceived ideas (Babbie & Mouton, 2015). Lincoln and Guba (1994) state that conformability is key to the question of whether the findings of the study can be confirmed by someone else. They also state that the understanding of qualitative research should be transparent to others, thus increasing the strength of the statements. Conformability was achieved when the researcher maintained a neutral position throughout the research project. The researcher also made sure that the parents interviewed were those whose children were removed through a statutory process.

#### 4.5.2 Reflexivity

Nightingale and Cromby (1999) explain that reflexivity requires an awareness of the researcher's contribution to the construction of meanings throughout the research process, and an acknowledgement of the impossible task of remaining outside of one's subject matter, while conducting research. Bradbury-Jones, (2007); Guillemin and Gillam, (2004) indicated that self-reflexivity is a continuous process by the researcher of internal dialogue, self-evaluation in order to recognise his/her position in terms of the research being undertaken. Reflexivity therefore encourages individuals to explore ways in which the researcher's involvement with a particular study influences, acts upon, and informs the research. As the information shared by the participants was very sensitive and personal, the researcher showed the necessary empathy and respected their views. Before the interview commenced the researcher informed the participant that they have the opportunity to exit from the interview at any point and that they are under no obligation to continue even though they have signed the consent form. The researcher also had to be mindful of the gender of the participants. Most of the participants were female and this could lead to the participants feeling uncomfortable in talking about this

sensitive topic to a male. The researcher as far as possible enquired from the participants if they are comfortable to speak to him. No objections were raised from any of the female participants. Furthermore, the interviews were undertaken in an area where the female participants felt at ease. Throughout the data collection process, irrespective of the information being shared, the researcher remained impartial and sensitive. This ensured that the researcher remained objective.

It also happened that the field notes taken assisted the researcher to do self-reflection (Cho & Trent, 2006). Berger (2013) says that the researcher's own experience with the topic, give the researcher better insight into the challenges of the participants. This researcher did not personally experience the removal of children from his care. However, the researcher worked in an official capacity in field of child protection as a child and youth care worker, it was important for the researcher to ensure that the responses to the parents do not come across as being judgmental. The researcher regularly consulted his study supervisor on the progress of the research, and was debriefed when needed.

## **4.6 Ethical Considerations**

### **4.6.1 Permission to Conduct the Study**

Permission to obtain the current study and ethical clearance was obtained from the University of the Western Cape Senate Research and Ethics Committee as well as Western Cape Department of Social Development. The Department of Justice gave verbal instruction that the researcher should approach the identified presiding officer for an interview. De Vos et al., (2011) and Babbie & Mouton (2011) state that the researcher must inform the participants of the research goals and outcomes, and explain the overall process. To this end, the researcher furnished all the participants with the necessary information in the privacy of their own homes before commencing with the research (Appendix A).

### **4.6.2 Informed Consent**

In order to ensure that the research was conducted within ethical boundaries, the researcher first obtained consent from the participants. Informed consent (Appendix B) was obtained after an explanation of the purpose of the study. Terre Blanche et al., (2011) explain the process as follows: The researcher must provide the participants with sufficient information about the study; to be able to provide informed consent, the researcher must assess the competence and understanding of the participants, and ensure that they have the mental capacity to understand the information provided regarding the process, as well as indicate that their participation is voluntary. Finally, consent must be obtained in written form.

### **4.6.3 Voluntary Participation**

Participants were informed that their participation in the research is voluntary. Rubin and Babbie (2005) proclaim that no one should be forced to participate in any research project. De Vos et al., (2011) point out that although participants are informed that their participation is voluntary, they might still think that they have to participate. During the first initial contact with the participants, the researcher made it clear that participation is voluntary. One of the participants actually withdrew after she had agreed to participate in the research project. On the day that the researcher conducted the interview, the participants were reminded that they could withdraw from the interview at any time.

### **4.6.4 Confidentiality and Right to Anonymity**

One of the most important elements contributing to the ethical behavior of a researcher is to ensure the privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality of the participants. De Vos et al., (2011) assert that all people have the right to privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality. To safeguard

the anonymity, confidentiality, and identity of the participants, the researcher removed all the details that could reveal their identities from the information sheets, and replaced them with a code. Only the researcher will be aware of the participants' personal details. The researcher conducted the interviews in private and first obtained permission before audio-recording the interviews. The participants were informed that only the researcher would have access to the recordings.

#### **4.6.5 No Harm Done**

As a form of ethics, beneficence refers to gaining the participants' trust that they will not be harmed or deceived in any way during the research process. Neuman (2000) explains that deception occurs when the researcher withholds information from the participants. De Vos et al., (2011) further state that vigilance is required on the part of the researcher to observe any signs of distress or potential harm and, if appropriate or necessary, exclude further participation in the study. Arrangements and referrals were made where additional assistance was needed. Babbie (2007) maintains that people participating in research can be harmed. It is therefore the responsibility of researchers to ensure that any form of unwarranted harm is minimized.

#### **4.6.6 Debriefing of Participants**

Debriefing of participants is an important component in conducting research (De Vos et al., 2011). McBurney (2001) says that participants must be debriefed in order for them to share their experiences, provide the opportunity for their questions to be answered, as well as to eliminate any form of misconception. After conclusion of the interviews, the researcher allowed the participants to share their experiences about the interview. It was during the debriefing stage of the interview that two participants indicated the need to speak to a social

worker relating to the removal of their children, whereafter they were referred to the DSD for a follow up.

#### **4.7 Limitations of the Study**

This study acknowledges that limitations are inherent in qualitative research (Creswell, 2009). These may include weaknesses and situations beyond the researcher's control that place constraints on the research methodology and conclusions (De Vos et al., 2011). The following limitations were encountered in this study:

- First, obtaining consent from the DSD was a challenge as the Ethical Research Unit of the Department had set meetings for the year, and my application was submitted in between the planned meetings.
- The second challenge encountered was identifying the participants. The social workers who were tasked with the role, identified the incorrect participants, even though a meeting was held to explain the inclusion criteria. This had an influence on the start of the data collection process. Understanding that the process of participation is voluntary, some participants initially agreed, but on the day of the interview changed their mind. This meant that the researcher had to identify other participants and start the process all over. One participant chose to rather beg at a robot as she saw that as more important than sitting in an interview for 45 minutes.
- A third challenge was obtaining information. This research topic has not been widely researched before, and thus obtaining information from previous research was a challenge. At one stage, the researcher wrote an e-mail to an author who has done some work on this topic, but this was met without success.
- Finally, the process of obtaining information from the Department of Justice also proved to be a challenge. The researcher used his relationship with a presiding officer to obtain an interview.

## 4.8 Conclusion

This chapter detailed the research design and methodology used to execute this study. It also provided insight into the research process, identified the target population, and described the method of data collection and analysis. In addition to establishing the trustworthiness and rigor of the study, the ethical considerations that reviewed the process of obtaining permission to conduct the study, gaining informed consent, ensuring voluntary and not coerced participation, safeguarding confidentiality and anonymity, and avoiding unwarranted harm, were justified. The chapter concluded with an explanation of the limitations encountered during the research process.

A discussion of the research results and findings will be presented in the next chapter.



## **CHAPTER 5**

### **PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions, experiences and challenges of parents whose children were removed through a statutory process in the Delft and Goodwood areas. As was described in the previous chapter, a qualitative methodological approach was used to collect the data, which focused on the individual participant's perceptions, experiences and challenges regarding the stated aim. The objectives of the study were to: (1) Explore the perceptions of parents when children are removed through a statutory process, (2) explore the experiences of parents when children are removed through a statutory process, and (3) explore the challenges of parents when children are removed through a statutory process. Thematic data analysis, a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes within data, was used to analyze the data, and make sense of and assign meaning to the information supplied by the participants. Through this process, four major themes were identified, namely: (i) parental involvement in the removal process, (ii) parents' perceptions and understanding of the removal process, (iii) parents' experiences and challenges with the removal process, and (iv) professionals' involvement in the removal process. The participants' demographic data is presented in Table 5.1 and Table 5.2, respectively, and are subsequently discussed in the paragraphs that follow.

## 5.2 Demographic Data of Participants

Although 20 potential participants were identified, only seventeen participants participated in the study. Twelve were parents and five were professionals, which included one presiding officer and four social workers. The social workers were from the Goodwood regional office and the parents were from the areas of Delft and Goodwood in the Western Cape region. Interviews with nine of the parents took place at their homes, while three occurred at an alternative venue identified by the participants.

**Table 5.1. Demographic Data for the Parents**

Participant	Gender	Ethnicity	Marital status	Education level	Employment status	Children in family
1	Female	Coloured	Cohabiting relationship. Partner passed on	N3 in Management	Unemployed	2
2	Male	Coloured	Split from mother when he went to incarcerated	Grade 9	Unemployed	1
3	Male	Coloured	Cohabiting	Grade 5	Unemployed	1
4	Female	Coloured	Married	Grade 8	Unemployed	4
5	Female	Coloured	Cohabiting	Grade 11	Unemployed	3
6	Female	White	Married	Grade 10	Employed	2
7	Male	White	Married	Grade 10	Employed	2
8	Female	Coloured	Divorced/ currently cohabiting	Grade 9	Unemployed	4
9	Female	Coloured	Single	Grade 10	Employed	1
10	Female	Black	Single	Grade 11	Employed	1
11	Female	Coloured	Divorced	Matric	Full-time student	2

12	Female	White	Divorced, widowed after second husband died	Matric	Beauty Therapist	3
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### 5.2.1 Gender

Of the biological parents that participated in this study, nine were female (mothers) and three were male (fathers) of the children who were removed.

### 5.2.2 Ethnicity

The participants represented three ethnic groups, with the majority being Coloured, representative of the majority ethnic group in the Western Cape. There were also three White and one Black (Zulu) participant.

### 5.2.3 Marital Status

This demographic data indicated a mixture of single, cohabiting, and as well as divorced parents. The representation of single parents was less than those who were married or in a cohabiting relationship. One relationship between the mother and father broke down when the father went to prison.

### 5.2.4 Level of Qualification

The level of education between the participants ranged from Grade 5 to a parent with a N3 qualification. However, most of the participants had obtained a high school qualification.

### 5.2.5 Employment Status

Half of the participants were unemployed during the data collection process, and one of the participants was busy studying for a social work qualification.

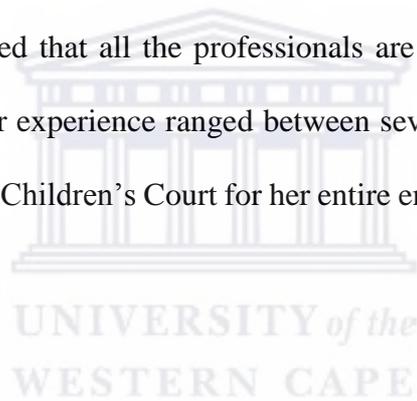
### **5.2.6 Number of Children in the family**

The number of children per family ranged between one to four children.

### **5.2.7 Professionals Participating in the Research**

All the professionals who participated in the research have the appropriate qualification for the position they hold. The professionals who participated in this process were those who are linked to the removal process of children as indicated in the Children's Act (Act 38 of 2005).

As the research focused on the statutory removal of children, most of the professionals were social workers, with one being a presiding officer of the Children's Court. The analysis of the information provided established that all the professionals are experienced workers in their respective professions and their experience ranged between seven to 32 years. The presiding officer has been working in the Children's Court for her entire employment, which is 32 years.



**Table 5.2. Demographic Data of Professionals**

Participant	Designation	Qualification	Length of Employment	Experience in statutory social work	Working in this area
1	Social worker	Bachelor in Social Work	7 years	2 years	5 months
2	Social worker	Bachelor in Social Work	7 years	6 years	6 months
3	Social work Supervisor	Bachelor in Social Work	26 years	16 years	10 years as a supervisor
4	Presiding officer	B Juris	32 years	32 years	21 years

The social workers that conducted the removals had a very short history in the area where most of the removals took place. One worked in the area before as a social worker, but in another capacity. This social worker was very helpful, as she knew the area quite well, and was known to some of the parents. The presiding officer was from another magisterial district; however, the application of the legislation is the same across magisterial districts.

### **5.3 Presentation and Discussion of the Findings**

The collected data (verbatim transcripts of the interviews, semi-structured interviews from the parents and professionals, and observation notes that were taken) were analyzed and emerged as the results of the study. From the collected data, codes, themes, and sub-themes were developed which transpired into the results. This section will present the results, which are discussed and supported by direct quotes from the transcribed data. Literature and theoretical references are used to validate the findings.

The themes and sub-themes that emerged from the analyzed, transcribed, and collected data are presented in Table 5.3, followed by a discussion of the identified themes.

**Table 5.3. Themes and Sub-themes**

THEME	SUB-THEME
<b>Theme 1</b> Parental involvement in the removal process	Professional involvement in the statutory process Parental involvement
<b>Theme 2</b> Parents' perceptions and understanding of the removal process	
<b>Theme 3</b> Experiences and challenges with the removal process	Parents' experiences of the removal process Parents' challenges with the removal process Professionals' experiences of the removal process

### 5.3.1. Theme 1: Parental Involvement in the Removal Process

In South Africa, the process of the removal of children from the care of their biological parents is outlined in the Children's Act (Act 38 of 2005). The Act also stipulates that parents should be involved throughout the removal process. Section 151 of the Act further stipulates that the social worker must inform the parents of the necessary steps to be taken, and if it is of a more serious nature, to explain the removal process of the child. A further statutory responsibility is that the social worker must undertake an assessment of the family and child's circumstances. The Children's Act (38 of 2005) describes the assessment process as "a process of investigating the developmental needs of a child, including his/her family environment or any other

circumstances that may have a bearing on the child's need for protection and therapeutic services" (Act 38 of 2005). Assessment is also described as a "purposeful gathering and structured analysis of available information to inform evidence-based decision-making" (Health Service Executive, 2011:4). Thus, a legislative procedure must be undertaken prior to making a decision to remove a child, and it must include the participation of the parents.

#### 5.3.1.1 Sub-Theme 1.1 Professional involvement in the statutory process

The professionals primarily involved in the statutory removal process of children are the social workers and the presiding officer at the Children's Court (Wessells, 2012). Social workers have a mandated responsibility to remove children from environments that could have a negative impact on the safety and development of the child (Children's Act, Act 38 of 2005). The role of the social worker is to conduct an investigation upon receiving a report of any allegation of abuse, neglect, exploitation, or maltreatment of a child/children (Children's Act 38 of 2005). Social workers initially receive a report of alleged abuse or neglect through either the police or from community members, as indicated in legislation (Children's Act, Act 38 of 2005). After receiving a report of any form of abuse, the social worker is then legally compelled to conduct a formal investigation. Once the investigation has been conducted, the social worker will complete the report on a Form 38 (Children's Act 38 of 2005) and present the report with recommendations to the presiding officer in the Children's Court. The social worker will then present the report with a recommendation for ratification by the presiding officer. However, the presiding officer can reject the report if the proper process, in terms of completing Form 38, has not been followed.

*"When it comes to the removal of children, the removal should be done within the framework of legislation, it is in terms of the Children's Act." (Social worker 3)*

The findings clearly show that the social workers involved in the removal process understand the legislation that authorizes the work that they do, in terms of the removal of children. However, even though they are aware of the legislation, it does not appear to be fully implemented. The Children's Act (Act 38 of 2005) is clear that the removal of children from the care of their parents is the last resort. In addition, Tham (2017) states that social workers should provide parents with support in order to avoid the removal of children from their homes. Yet, the findings reveal that this is not always the case.

In this study it was observed that, due to the manner of implementation, parents are often excluded from the process of the removal of their children. This was supported by comments made during the data collection process, when parents were asked if there was any way that they could provide input through any sort of process.

*"No." (Parent 1)*

*"All the decisions were made without asking me anything." (Parent 2)*

The above responses confirm that parents were not part of the process of obtaining any information that could have placed the social workers in a better position to make the decisions of whether or not to remove the child/children. Cortis, Smyth, Wade and Katz (2019) note that engagement between the social worker and the parents forms the foundation of a helping relationship in terms of social work intervention. Once a good relationship has been established this will lead to the social worker obtaining a better understanding of the challenges of the family. If no relationship exists between the parents or if there is constant shifting of social workers, it affects the relationship between the parents and the social worker.

*“I’ve asked them. Up to now, four different social workers came to me. Not one of them can tell me - two of them could not even respond to the question.” (Parent 1)*

In his research, Tham (2017) discovered that social workers work under extremely stressful conditions. Hussein, Moriarty, Stevens, Sharpe and Manthorpe (2014) and Travis, Lizano, and Mor Barak (2016) further established that these stressful situations lead to high staff turnover amongst social workers. As a result of the high turnover of social workers, parents often have to retell their stories.

The social workers involved in the removal process have an important decision to make when it comes to the removal of children from the care of their parents. The literature pertaining to the removal of children indicates that parents and children should be involved in the process so that their perspectives can be made known (Berrick et al., 2016). However, Storhaug and Kojan (2016) explain that in some instances social workers have to act swiftly and remove children in an emergency situation. In situations such as these, the social worker does not have the opportunity to prepare the family or conduct a formal assessment of the circumstances of the child and family. According to Havik and Christiansen (2009), a possible reason for the response of social workers in the removal of children, is that it is a reaction to a situation and not an action to address a situation.

*“There are times where parents are obstructive and out of control. Then I must do what I have to do.” (Social worker 1)*

*“In some cases, I had to remove due to substance abuse, neglect, and major neglect; the children were left alone and parents are in the shebeen.” (Social worker 2)*

The removal of a child from the care of his/her parents is a negative experience; however, one of the parents responded to the same question providing a balanced view of the role of the social worker.

*“I suppose that there are circumstances for each family, not all families have got the same issues. I just feel that in my own opinion, obviously I just feel that the social worker got to take the children’s best interest at first, but I think that they are sometimes a bit too quick to just remove instead of really doing an investigation and try and help the parents or child while they are still united.” (Parent 6)*

Although this parent could understand the reason for the removal, they still indicated the need for support from the social worker. The importance of understanding the parents was echoed by another participant:

*“You see a lot of the social workers; they did not understand that certain things that you go through gets you to that point. Taking and removing a person’s child at the end of the day and sometimes they get this, they give you nasty comments and this affects you at the end of the day.” (Parent 9)*

In the removal of the children from the care of their parents, it is imperative that parents are clear about their role. In their respective studies, Horwitz and Marshall (2015) and Vålba et al., (2017) concluded that a positive relationship between the parents and the social worker has a positive effect on the participation of the parents. In such a relationship, parents are clearly informed about the role of the social worker in the removal process. In addition, the removal of children from the care of the parents should include the involvement of the parents.

### 5.3.1.2 Sub-Theme 1.2 Parental involvement

Parental involvement in the removal process is pertinent; it is therefore important that the perspectives of the parents are heard (Berrick et al., 2016). It became apparent through the data collection process that no assessments were conducted that would have assisted the social workers to make an informed decision regarding the necessity to remove the child from the care of his/her parents.

*“No. You know I remember that day of the court going through the court proceedings and the judge saying that the child was going to be removed.” (Parent 5)*

*“No, actually not.” (Parent 9)*

*“Not really.” (Parent 12)*



The above excerpts verify that parents were not involved in the removal process. However, in their interviews the social workers indicated that the circumstances were not always conducive for them to conduct an assessment. For example, situations where children are abandoned or living in unsafe environments could lead to their removal and placement in alternative care. There are also some instances where particularly vulnerable children might not be removed from the care of their parents. For example, abandoned children or children living on the streets.

*“There are a large percentage of cases where we are not able to remove or to inform the parents that their child/children will be removed out of their care or*

*custody. The reasons for that could be that the child has been abandoned by the biological parent or parents.” (Social worker 3)*

A social worker indicated that there were attempts to engage the parents but it was not a formal assessment that took place, although social workers are aware of the importance of assessments.

*“You first have to assess, assess.” (Social worker 2)*

The reason why assessments do not occur in some cases is because the focus is first and foremost on the safety of the child. Schreiber, Fuller and Pacey (2013) established that social workers at times find themselves in situations where the safety of the children is the primary concern and, as a result, no assessment or engagement with parents occurs.

*“If a removal is inevitable and is in the best interest of the child and there are risk issues that are involved, I will inform those parents, unfortunately I will have to remove.” (Social worker 3)*

The manner in which the social worker responded gave the impression that parents were not afforded the opportunity to provide input into the removal process. Research conducted by Hall and Slembrouck (2011), Höjer (2011), Lietz (2011), Virokannas (2011), Gladstone, Dumbrill, Leslie, Koster, Young and Ismaila (2014), and Memarnia, Nolte, Norris and Harborne (2015) demonstrate that many parents are not always given the opportunity to provide input in the removal process of their children. Based on the findings of the above-mentioned research, the

parents interviewed in this study were asked if they were provided the opportunity to take part in the decision-making of the removal process of their children. Their responses are as follows:

*“No not that I can remember. No not at all.” (Parent 11)*

*“Everything has been very unfair in the sense that I feel like I have no say.*

*“Absolutely no say. “(Parent 10)*

*“They don’t take the time to listen to the parents’ side.” (Parent 6)*

The participation of the parents is clearly indicated in legislation (cf. Children’s Act, Act 38 of 2005). However, this study arrived at the same conclusion as the studies by Hall and Slembrouck (2011), Höjer (2011), Lietz (2011), Virokannas (2011), Gladstone et al., (2014) and Nolte et al., (2015), that parents are often removed from the decision-making process and are basically informed of a predetermined decision.

*“Just one day I got a call that I must be at Goodwood court. That same day I was told that my son was being removed, only once to court and that was it.” (Parent 11)*

Ross et al., (2017) in their study also confirmed that parents are not involved in the removal process. In addition to this, they discovered that parents are often excluded from the legal and administrative proceedings as well. For Tilbury and Ramsay (2018), parents’ non-involvement could be due to social workers not being forthcoming with information or their use of professional language when communicating with parents. Consequently, the parents feel neglected in the process. Broadhurst and Mason (2017) conclude that parents are neglected throughout the removal process. This is especially because the attention of child protection

agencies is focused on the health and safety of the child (Parton, 2011), and not the parents. Similarly, the presiding officer provided another reason thus confirming the parents' exclusion from the removal process:

*“So, I think sometimes the social workers because of the pressure of the moment sometimes they don't explain to the parents carefully. Social workers just barge in remove the child, because of what other people have told the social worker.” (Presiding officer)*

As indicated by the presiding officer, social workers respond to the pressure of the moment; it is also their statutory responsibility and the nature of their work to ensure the safety of the child/children after receiving a report or allegation of abuse (Harris, 2012). The participants agree that the social workers' primary focus is on the best interest of the child; however, they state that parents should not be forgotten.

*“Like I have said, help the mothers as well, not just forget about them.” (Parent 9)*

*“They (social workers) can support us and help us.” (Parent 1)*

In their research, Smithson and Gibson (2015) discovered that parents are not involved in the removal process out of fear of being attacked by the professionals. They found that, on the one hand, professionals made use of their authority and shared their views about the family, but the parents, on the other hand, were not afforded the same courtesy and were therefore unable to share their experiences/difficulties. In the study by Nolte et al., (2015), the participants expressed the frustration they experienced by not being allowed to tell their stories. Ultimately, not being afforded the opportunity to participate led to their non-involvement in the process.

Likewise, the parents that participated in this study also expressed the lack of priority given to their stories.

*“Why I say that is that when I come, [this was at the Children’s Court] (then they have already made a decision what is going to happen with him, without asking my opinion.”*  
*(Parent 2)*

*“You know I remember that day of the court going through the court proceedings and the judge saying that the child was going to be removed.” (Parent 5)*

Another difficulty experienced by the parents concerned the social workers’ approach to the decision-making process. This study confirmed that social workers were not willing to listen to the parents.

*“The social worker was there most of the time. For me is like I don’t have a say regarding what is going to happen to him, understand? (Parent 2)*

*“They just told me that my children will go and stay with my aunty (Parent 1)*

Furthermore, parents’ refusal to participate can also be attributed to the stress and complexity of the process, and the anxiety it creates for them (Buckley et al., 2011). The stress of having their child/children removed can lead to parents taking drastic action that could further place the child and parent in other danger. In this case, the mother ran away from home to avoid her children from being removed. This is what the social worker said:

*“The mother did not want to give the child. I had to go and get the police and then she ran away. We had to look for her for three weeks.” (Social worker 1)*

In order for the parents to feel part of the process, the role of social workers would be to engage with parents in order to establish a trusting relationship (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2010). The benefit of such a relationship is that it helps the parents to understand and recognize the important role of the social worker in the removal process of their children. Darlington, Healy and Feeney (2010) in their study recognized the importance of involving parents in the removal process; however, it must also be understood that social workers have an ethical and legal responsibility to ensure the safety of the child/children. Social workers always act in the best interest of the child (Wells & Marcenko, 2011; Gilbert, Parton & Skivenes, 2011). The focus of the removal, as indicated in the literature, is concerned with the needs of the children and not that of the parents. This was confirmed by one of the social workers in an interview when they stated:

*“It is not easy to make that decision to remove children. For me as a social worker I first assess the situation before that can occurs.” (Social worker 2)*

Although this was indicated by the social worker as the proper process to follow, it was not how the parents who participated in this study experienced it. Sankaran et al., (2018) note that although social workers remove children out of concern for their safety, the impact of the removal on the attachment relationship is seldom taken into account. One of the participants reported a positive experience of the removal process. When asked what she thought contributed to her situation, she replied:

*“Parents must be allowed to give input, then it makes it easier.” (Parent 10)*

As her response indicates, it is clear from this parent’s statement that she was fully involved in the removal process. However, this was not the case for all the parents; many of them indicated that they were not fully involved in the removal process. The study by Valba et al., (2017) discovered that respecting parents in the initial stages of the removal process assured their participation in the process. The notion of parental participation is one of the key elements of the social work value of self-determination, which is central to ensuring that service users make their own choices and decisions for themselves (Kirst-Ashman, 2012). In this study, it was found that the social workers that facilitated the removal of the children often failed to communicate the process or procedure to the parents. In most of the cases the parents had to follow-up themselves.

*“I always followed up. I go and ask all the time.” (Parent 1)*

*“No. I had to go repeatedly to the office.” (Parent 5)*

Based on their reported experiences, it seems that the social workers did not show the parents the necessary respect by responding to their enquiries and keeping them informed about the process. Schreiber et al., (2013) and Tilbury and Ramsay (2018) found information sharing with parents during an intervention that could lead to the removal of a child a challenge. In this study, the parents indicated that information sharing would keep them informed of the process as it develops, and thereby provide them with the necessary feedback they required.

It is clear that legislation is in place to safeguard parental participation in the removal process of their children from their care. According to Darlington et al., (2010) and O’Mahony, Burns, Parkes and Shore (2016), parental involvement and participation in the removal process

is currently receiving worldwide attention. Ten Brummelaar, Knorth, Post, Harder and Kalverboer (2018) also confirmed that the participation of parents is contained in international treaties like the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children (UNCRC). South Africa is a signatory to the UNCRC, which seeks to ensure that this is implemented. The training that social workers undergo links with the legislation on this matter. However, the experience of the parents who participated in the research project does not reflect either what the legislation or the training indicates. The notion of the non-involvement of parents seems therefore that it is not only happening in isolation of what has been happening over time. The challenge with parents not being involved in the process of the removal of their child/children easily inculcates negative or inaccurate perceptions of the removal process.

### **5.3.2 Theme 2: Parents' Perceptions and Understanding of the Removal Process**

The parents revealed a number of reasons that contributed to the removal of their children. In some cases, the parents felt it was necessary for the child/children to be removed, which they expressed as follows:

*“None of us was working.” (Parent 5)*

*“Well my own understanding is that the child is removed until such time that the parents are either settled or whatever the circumstances was or rehabilitated or able to take care of their child.” (Parent 6)*

*“The place where I stay is small.” (Parent 8)*

Baumann, Fluke, Dalglish and Kern (2014) affirm that the decision of whether or not to remove a child/child from the home is a complex one. They further promulgate that social

workers are not always able to explain their reasons for removing a child. Sometimes the uncertainty surrounding the removal is based on the short-time frame that social workers have to respond to safety concerns that prompted their initial involvement, as Dettlaff, Graham, Holzman, Baumann and Fluke (2015) found in their study. The quotations below by the parents indicate that they had some understanding of the reasons for the removal of their children. However, the parents also had some expectations of the professionals, particularly the social workers, conducting the removal of their children.

*“The previous social worker who did not explained to us the process.” (Parent 5)*

*“The judge said to us as soon as you get a place you can get your girls back.” (Parent 5)*

*“What I was told and what was done was completely two different things.” (Parent 6)*

*“Prepare the parents properly for what was going to happen.” (Parent 6)*

The above extracts show that the parents had certain expectations and preconceived notions of the role of the professional and how the process was supposed to unfold. When these expectations were not met, they came to their own conclusions.

Featherstone, Morris and White (2014) and Gilbert et al., (2011) state that the removal of children from the care of their parents is tension laden. This tension is linked to the statutory role of the social worker around the protection of the children. Verhallen, Hall and Slembrouck (2017) maintain that the tension that exists between providing child protection and family

support can be linked to the rights of the parents to care for their own children and therefore gives rise to the parents having certain perceptions of the removal process.

*“I’ve gone to find out about my rights.” (Parent 6)*

*“She did not tell us what our rights were.” (Parent 5)*

Mirick (2014) ascertained that social workers make difficult decisions that influence both the family and the child. In the current study, however, the parents viewed the social workers’ decision and the removal process as biased, which is evident in the excerpt below:

*“The one thing that I cannot understand is that there are so many kids living on the streets with their parents, but those kids are not taken into care.” (Parent 9)*

Although this parent cannot fully understand the reasons, even if it appears biased, the social worker has a statutory responsibility to safeguard and promote the well-being of the children. In this regard, Serbati (2017) states that the professionals involved in child protection will direct all their efforts to ensure the child’s protection and safety, even if this means they have to use the powers vested in them through legislation. In their study, Ross et al., (2017) discovered that the power social workers wrote concerning themselves and their situation carried more weight than what the parents said. Tilbury and Ramsay (2018) confirmed a power imbalance between the social worker and the parents.

Another perception that emerged was related to the inconsistency of social workers in the removal process. This was expressed by one participant as follows:

*“Lots of people out there who abuses alcohol, their children never get taken away.”*

*(Parent 6)*

Parents’ perceptions in some cases can be justified. Benbenishty, Davidson-Arad, López, Devaney, Spratt, Koopmans, ... Hayes (2015) in their study established that there are some clear cases that warrant removal; however, there are also areas of uncertainty, where even seasoned professionals decide to remove the child in order to act in the best interest of the child. This kind of removal can lead to inconsistencies in the removal process. In support of this view, Platt and Turney (2014), Saltiel (2016) and Doherty (2017) too recognize that the decision-making surrounding the placement of children in alternative care has not been done in a consistent manner.

*“I saw mothers with their children every week walking in the middle of the night here up and down the street, even now still. People staying on the streets with their kids, but their kids are not taken into care at the end of the day.” (Parent 9)*

The inconsistency in the removal of children could be linked to the fact that social workers face a number of challenges and therefore do not conduct the necessary assessments to ensure that the removal is in the best interest of the child/children. Although, in this study, it was established that no formal assessments took place, the removals were conducted based on the situation that the social worker experienced. Inconsistencies in the removal of a child can also be linked to the practitioners’ values, beliefs, and experience (Platt & Turney, 2014; Fleming, Biggart & Beckett, 2015; Bywaters, Brady, Bunting, Daniel, Featherstone, Jones, ... Webb, 2017). As one social worker indicated:

*“I would be looking at the identifying problem that was brought to my attention.”*

*(Social worker 3)*

The social worker confirmed that they would often only look for what was reported to them and not take the entire environment (family and child) into account. Another study by Tilbury and Ramsay (2018) established that in cases where assessments were conducted, the parents felt that these only focused on their weaknesses, and did not accurately portray the family's situation. However, another reason for inconsistency in the removal of the child could be that social workers exert the authority that is given to them through the legislation. Jackson, Kelly and Leslie (2016) indicated that the parents in their study reported that social workers removed children due to the power that they have. If this is the case, then the removal of children will be conducted inconsistently.

Another identified perception is that parents found themselves excluded from the process. It did not allow for active participation and decision-making on the part of the parents:

*“I still feel that we could have made another plan.” (Parent 5)*

The “we” in the above statement refers to the parents and the social worker that was involved in the removal process. The phrase “could have made another plan” highlights the parents' desire to be involved in finding solutions to their situation. Serbati and Gioga (2017) state that participation in the removal process is often challenging because the parents feel they are being blamed by the professionals, they are excluded from decisions that are made, and furthermore, they feel that everyone is against them. Parents' negative experiences can be linked to the social workers not understanding the perspectives of the parents, as this would lead to the social workers providing targeted support to the parents (Berger & Font, 2015).

A further perception that was created is that the removal process portrays the parents as inadequate:

*“Yet they want me to feel bad when I was just trying to do what was best for them.”*

*(Parent 5)*

Evident from the above passage, the parent in this situation was willing to ensure that the best interest of the children were upheld, but was seemingly not given the opportunity to do so. Major and Schmader (2018) maintain that the stigma of being seen as a bad parent due to the removal of their children is a reality for these parents.

*“Being substance abuser, I don’t know if you are labeled for the rest of your life or whatever.” (Parent 6)*

Ross et al., (2017) confirms that parents whose children are removed are often judged and stigmatized as a result. Another perception is that when decisions of the removal are made, the socio-economic realities of many of these families are not carefully considered.

*“No. You know that if I think about that time in our days when the houses were small then cousins use to sleep here and there but we survived. I mean if you look in the black areas people live in shacks and so on.” (Parent 8)*

The study done by Gladstone et al., (2014) revealed that parents expected the social workers to understand the challenges they are facing. The above situation is a reflection of the lived realities of many families in South Africa. Even though families often do not have access to proper housing, many of them are able to adequately raise their children, despite their

challenging circumstances. Social workers must also take into account that the removal of children raises social justice issues, particularly the situation of poverty in families (Ross et al., 2017). Social workers have the difficult task of balancing the safety of the children and ensuring that the family remains together (Merkel-Holguin, Hollinshead, Hahn, Casillas & Fluke, 2015).

Another parental perception is that the social worker just decides and then removes the children.

*“The social worker just arrived and told me to pack the children’s clothes because they are going to stay with my aunty.” (Parent 1)*

A study conducted by Smithson and Gibson (2015) concluded that parents felt prejudged by the social worker. This happens without the social worker understanding the situation of the parents. In the cited example, the children were promptly removed and no plausible reason was given to the mother. As mentioned previously, the social workers did not formally assess the parents’ situation prior to the removal. Ross et al., (2017) established in their study that even when assessments were carried out, the social workers focused mostly on parents’ weaknesses and deficits, and overlooked their strengths. This is detrimental to the trust relationship, and causes parents to view the social workers as unsympathetic:

*“A bit more sympathetic. If you are a parent yourself, put yourself in our shoes, take a day and walk in my shoes.” (Parent 5)*

The parents in Hamilton, Cleland and Braithwaite’s (2019) study described social workers as heartless government officials that simply do not care. Kokaliari et al., (2019) concur with

Hamilton Cleland and Braithwaite's (2019) finding that in their service delivery to such families, the parents do not view the social workers as respectful, genuine, and empathetic. In one of the interviews, a parent indicated a deep-seated hatred towards the social worker they dealt with. Although this parent expressed her feelings in an interview with one of the social workers that participated in the study, it is evident that the removal of a child is as painful for the social worker as it is for the parent.

*“For me it is not easy as I said for a social worker to remove kids, but you also have to look at the side of the parents.” (Social worker 2)*

The removal of children from the care of his/her family is the social workers statutory responsibility to ensure that the best interest of the children is safeguarded. Due to the nature of the process, parents have an expectation to participate in the removal process. One of the ways that parents can be included in the removal process is through the assessment process. Most of the parents in the present study did not indicate any form of participation in the process. It is clear that parents, whose children are removed from their care, develop perceptions regarding the removal of their children. In light of the above, it is clear that parents subject to the removal process face many challenges throughout the process.

### **5.3.3 Theme 3: Parents' Experiences and Challenges with the Removal Process**

Although the participants attempted to articulate their understanding of the removal process, the parents, however, indicated that it was not their experience of the removal process. In Tilbury and Ramsay's (2018) study that investigated parents' satisfaction with child protection services upon the removal of their children found the parents' overall experiences to be negative. Similarly, Gladstone et al., (2014) were made aware that social workers did not meet

the parents' expectations, as they lacked empathy and understanding regarding the challenges they faced. Likewise, families' expectations are that social workers get to know them and understand their situation (Smithson & Gibson, 2015). However, the challenges that the parents shared during this research revealed something different. Notwithstanding, even in cases where parents do participate, as Berrick et al., (2016) confirm, the decisions made may be contrary to their expectations. Consequently, parents experience the removal process as negative and challenging. .

### 5.3.3.1 Sub-Theme 3.1 Parents' experiences of the removal process

The overall experiences of the parents in this study were negative. One aspect of this is related to the social workers not understanding the perspectives of the parents, as this would lead to providing targeted support (Berger & Font, 2015). There are contributing factors that creates/adds to the negative experiences of the parents. One of these factors is attributed to the high turnover of social workers. This is reverberated in the study by Kokaliari et al., (2019) who indicate that parents experienced a high turnover of social workers. One of the participants confirmed this experience.

*“Terribly painful, very frustrating because I had in the process probably about 6-8 different social workers and which causes everything to delay.” (Parent 12)*

Due to the high turnover of social workers, parents have to retell their story each time a new social worker is appointed to their case. For one participant, this meant that the removal process was never-ending, until recently. The constant change also frustrated her, making her angry. Her challenge was therefore twofold: not only was her case constantly delayed, she also had to retell the same story multiple times.

*“Every time all over again. Every time I have a new social worker.” (Parent 12)*

According to Smithson and Gibson (2015), parents feel dejected by the constant turnover of social workers, and are consequently less engaged when the new replacement social worker arrives. Inevitably, they relive their traumatic experience alongside a social worker that is unfamiliar with their situation (Smithson & Gibson, 2015). Resulting from the negative experience of engaging with the professionals during the removal process, parents experience a myriad of negative emotions, such as sadness, grief, loss, and anger, both during and after the removal process, leaving them overwhelmed (Mayes & Llewellyn, 2012). The emotions experienced by parents relates to despair, guilt, helplessness (Höjer, 2011), feelings of grief (Schofield Moldestad, Höjer, Ward, Skilbred, Young, & Havik, 2010), and a lingering sense of responsibility for the removal of their children (Baum & Negbi, 2013). Participants alluded to this by saying:

*“It is a difficult situation. If I think even now. It is painful.” (Parent 10)*

*“I wanted to literally kill myself that is how I felt because of my child being taken away.” (Parent 11)*

*“I would say that it made me feel worthless as a parent that I cannot even control him.” (Parent 2)*

*“I was standing there and crying.” (Parent 5)*

*“It is very, very sad.” (Parent 1)*

One of the fathers could only find one word to describe his experience:

*“Bad.” (Parent 7)*

One of the mothers described her experience as:

*“Horrible. There is not a day that goes by that I don’t miss my girls.” (Parent 5)*

Another mother relayed her experience:

*“Because I sent them away basically. I felt like I gave up everything, I have given all rights to them.” (Parent 5)*

Memarnia, Nolte, Norris and Harborne (2015) discovered that parents experienced disenfranchised grief, as they were left to their own devices to deal with their negative feelings, without any additional support. In addition to the above, the parents also felt they were judged, stranded, attacked, and belittled (Smithson & Gibson, 2015). One of the reasons the parents experienced such intense feelings is possibly linked to the attachment they have to their children. The removal of children from the care of their parents has implications for the parent–child attachment relationship (Bowlby, 1969). Ludolph and Dale (2012) point out that professionals do not seem to understand the role and importance of this attachment relationship. It is therefore imperative that the professionals remain cognizant of the attachment relationship throughout the removal process (Shahinyan, 2014).

One of the mothers had a different opinion of the experience she endured during the removal process.

*“It was a nightmare. I had to go to places this never happened before to me. And to see myself in court was terrible.” (Parent 10)*

The above quote is from a mother who when she found out that she was pregnant did not want to raise the child. Even in this case, the mother still experienced the emotion of loss. Broadhurst and Mason (2017) point out that the adversarial court proceeding leaves the parents with a legal record. If the court adopts a particular view of the parents, then the parents will not find the court a comfortable place to be. Another factor that contributes to parents’ negative experiences of the court is because they feel disempowered and alone (Ross et al., 2017). In most cases, as in the case described above, it will only be the mother that is present; she finds herself alone in court without any support, other than the social worker.

An interesting experience was of a mother who described herself as being emotionally detached and could therefore not describe her experience in the removal process. Memarnia et al., (2015) in their study refer to parents whose children were removed from their care as being emotionally disconnected. These authors also discovered that the disconnectedness of the parent is a coping mechanism employed by the mother so that she does not have to deal with her emotions. The mother, in this study, responded as follows:

*“To be honest with you, I am an emotionally detached person. I don’t know how that works, but with my history of drugs and everything that has happened it has no emotional attachment to my memory.” (Parent 9)*

Parents whose children were removed also expressed anger towards the social workers.

*“I told my boyfriend that one day I will get a gun, lay down on the stairs and throw a gas bomb in here and they will all run out I will just aim for her.” (Parent 5)*

*“I was very, very disappointed and very upset.” (Parent 6)*

Parents whose children were removed were probably not provided with the necessary support to help them cope with the events that took place. As a result, they developed feelings of anger towards the social workers (Memarnia et al., 2015). In addition to having their children removed, and parents’ negative experiences thereof, they also experienced emotional pain after the removal process. The findings in this research study correlates with the literature and findings of other similar studies. This, therefore, confirms the experiences of parents who had a child removed from their care through a statutory process. These experiences in turn exacerbated the challenges they experienced with the removal process.

#### 5.3.2.2 Sub-Theme 3.2 Parents’ challenges with the removal process

Baum and Negbi (2013) in their study concluded that the removal of children from the care of their parents has implications for both the parents and the children. One such implication is mentioned in the study by Baum and Negbi (2013) that the parents are viewed as a failure and their children can no longer live with them.

*“I found myself in a hole in a deep pit where I wanted to come out but I couldn’t.”  
(Parent 11)*

*“They say we have to take her away because you’re an abusive mother or you not a good mother.” (Parent 12)*

The parents indicated that one of the challenges they faced was that they had no control over the removal process.

*“Then my family took them. There was no paperwork that we had to sign, which we found strange, we did not go to court or nothing like that.” (Parent 5)*

In a study by Smithson and Gibson (2015), the parents indicated that they had little influence over the removal process. This was ascribed to the power imbalance in the relationship between the parents and the social workers. This power imbalance creates a situation where parents feel they have no control over the situation. The challenge for the parent is that they could not influence the placement of their children. This is mainly due to the power that the social workers have through the statutory removal process. Serbati (2017) states that professionals use this power imbalance in order to ensure the safety and protection of the children.

Due to parents' lack of control over the removal process, they also faced the challenges of being disregarded as the parent of their own children and being excluded from decisions that concerned their children. The implication is that parents' parental responsibilities are transferred to the people in whose care the child is placed (Ross et al., 2017). Memarnia et al., (2015) indicates that parents do not have any influence over the upbringing of their child. Memarnia et al., (2015) also established that parents, particularly mothers, lose a sense of meaning and question their responsibility of being a good mother.

*“My daughter's hair get's cut without consulting me. They just do whatever. As the biological mother, hell man I got the right to be asked “do you mind if we cut her hair?” (Parent 12)*

*“They just did what they wanted to do without really considering the parents.” (Parent 6)*

*“I remember they would not let me breastfeed as I was still breastfeeding.” (Parent 5)*

Parents also faced the challenge of not being part of daily activities. Ross et al., (2017) determined in their study that carers have more control over the everyday life events of the children, which excludes the parents. Baker and Schneiderman (2015), with reference to attachment, indicated that children have a need for nurturance and proximity to their primary caregiver. Although the experience of the parents is about playing a more active role in their children’s lives. Bowlby (1969) says that by means of the attachment relationship parents teach children empathy. The attachment relationship can be enhanced through parental involvement with the removed child/children. Memarnia, et al., (2015) indicated that a tug of war ensued between the biological parents and the carer in whose care the child was placed.

Parents also faced the challenge of not having regular contact with their children while in foster care. Broadhurst and Mason (2017) state that restrictions are placed on visitations or that visits are sometimes supervised. The families in this research study experienced the following challenges:

*“Every time we try and see him, they block him from us.” (Parent 7)*

*“They cut down our visits to one day a week.” (Parent 5)*

*The foster mother will tell me oh no we are going away that weekend and then I am like it’s my weekend with my daughter.” (Parent 12)*

As indicated above, parents’ role to parent is minimized through the removal of their children.

The normal procedure that could lead to children being removed from the care of their parents is when a social worker receives a report about possible abuse, neglect, or maltreatment of a child/children. It is therefore rare that biological parents decide to place their children in care through the DSD. Due to their living conditions, one of the participants that were living on the streets with their children voluntarily decided to take their children to the DSD. Although they acted in the best interest of their children, their experience was no different from the other parents in this study whose children were officially removed. This is what the mother said:

*“He suggested that we take them to social services—the worst thing that I ever did, because the social worker that handled us, she was so cold, you know. There was no empathy or sympathy on their part. It was like we are the bad ones.” (Parent 5)*

The challenge for these parents is that they were still perceived as being “bad parents”. The sense of being seen as bad parents could be linked to the social worker pre-judging the parents and not fully understanding their particular situation (Smithson & Gibson, 2015). Similarly, Smithson and Gibson (2015) also state that the parents feel belittled by the social workers.

*“She [social worker] asked me did I go to school.” (Parent 5)*

Another challenge that a parent experienced with the process is that it seems their child no longer belongs to them and that the government is now in total control of the child.

*“You can take a child away from the parents but you cannot take their rights away, yet our government feels they can do. You can’t sign them away.” (Parent 5)*

Smithson and Gibson (2015) state that good communication is linked to having a positive relationship with the social worker. In this study, however, the contrary was found. The participants were asked about their relationship with the social worker handling their case, they responded as follows:

*“Not good at all.” (Parent 5)*

*“There was hardly any relationship with anyone.” (Parent 12)*

As the statements by the parents above reveal, the social workers and the parents had poor communication, and consequently, a poor relationship. Schreiber et al., (2013) in their study affirmed the importance of honest, open, and clear communication, which is what the parents expected. They further added that if professionals have an attitude it would be detrimental to the professional–parent relationship, which in turn would have a negative impact on the removal process.

*“To me is like she got an attitude tells me I’m better than you type of thing.”*

*(Parent 5)*

Poor communication contributes to a lack of cooperation on the part of the parents and also gives rise to the challenge they experience of not being listened to. As a result, they feel they are not heard or understood (Storhaug & Kojan, 2017). However, not all the parents had a negative experience with the removal process.

In this study, some parents did report a positive relationship with the social worker. Schreiber et al., (2013) found that where parents are supported and made to feel part of the process, there is enhanced cooperation between the parents and professionals. Smithson and

Gibson (2015) discovered that where social workers were available, receptive, and forthcoming with information, a positive relationship was fostered.

*“The social worker was kind, she was friendly.” (Parent 10)*

*“The social worker was very good. I had no problems with the social worker from Goodwood.” (Parents 8)*

In general, the social worker–parent relationship in this study was not good. Ross et al., (2017) observed that parents with children removed from their care found that many of the services were dishonest and not trustworthy. The challenge experienced by these parents was that information was not shared in an open and transparent manner. One parent reported that although the social worker communicated with them, the communication was not honest.

*“I was very disappointed and very upset because I was lied to and I don't like to be lied to.” (Parent 6)*

The above excerpt highlights the lack of integrity on the part of the social worker, who was also not forthright and honest in his/her dealings with the parent. Ross et al., (2017) in their study discovered that parents whose children were removed from their care found that social workers were not always truthful in their disclosures about the parents during court proceedings. This reportedly took place even when there was a good working relationship between the parents and social workers. Ferguson (2016) points out that social workers predominantly focus on the legislative processes rather than trying to establish rapport with the parents.

Another challenge with the removal process is the implication it has on the parent–child attachment relationship. Shahinyan (2014) emphasizes that social workers must take the parent–child attachment relationship into account when engaging with parents about the possible removal of their children. Ludolph and Dale (2012) claims that the role and importance of attachment is often overlooked when the child is removed from his/her immediate family. One of the parents who participated in this study felt that she did not have the opportunity to bond with her youngest child that was removed.

*“ ...but I understand he misses the girls. The one was a year old when they took her, she is now 4 years. I don't know what she likes, don't know, but with the older one if I go to the shop, I know what to buy her but with the younger one, I don't know with her. So, I have not, that bond is not so strong as with the older one. That needs to be worked on again.” (Parent 5)*

For the child, attachment and the development of a relationship with the parents are disrupted when they are removed from their care. The reason for this, as stated by Ainsworth et al., (1978), is that it contributes towards their development of identity. Ross et al., (2017) reiterates that the manner in which the removal process is undertaken does not seem to take the attachment relationship into account. Removal from the care of the parents interrupts the development of such a relationship.

*“And also, we were never apart and then just to take the child away.” (Parent 6)*

In the statement above it is clear that the attachment between the mother and her children were not considered.

Memarnia et al., (2015) further adds that although visits are encouraged, the parents, or in their study, the mothers, were reminded of the pain of the removal process after the conclusion of these visits.

*“Her being so young it was heartbreaking to go there and leave her again”*

*(Parent 9)*

*“It is not a nice thing to be without your own children. My aunty is also getting attached to them.” (Parent 1)*

*“But the traumatic part is you know when I am alone then I miss them the most.”*

*(Parent 5)*

Attachment theorist Bowlby (1969) states that children should have a relationship with their parents. This study clearly observed the challenge parents face with the attachment relationship due to their children no longer being in their care.

The removal process is undertaken by social workers and also involves the presiding officer. Since these professionals are part of the removal process, it is important to establish and review their experience with the removal process.

### 5.3.3.3: Sub-Theme 3.3 Professionals’ experiences of the removal process

Hamilton, Cleland and Braithwaite (2019) highlight some of the difficulties experienced in child protection work. The situation is further compounded when parents are afraid they will lose their children and the social workers are afraid they will have difficulty removing the children (Hamilton, et al., 2019). Adding to the above difficulties, the social worker is also faced with the decision to remove the child from the care of his/her parents (Bérubé, Lafantaisie, Clément, Coutu, Dubeau, Caron & Lacharité, 2017). Social workers must

sometimes make decisions based on the environment where children find themselves in. This can include environments such as poverty (Hearn, 2011), which often lead to children being neglected (Jonson-Reid, Drake & Zhou, 2013).

The experiences that the social workers had in this study correlates with the findings indicated.

*“If I think back of the situation that I have just described to you about the environment where the children were, you could see that it is a dangerous environment for the development of the children.” (Social worker 1)*

Poverty was clearly visible in the environment that the social worker described. The social worker wanted to serve the mother and her children, and arranged to discuss the children's situation with the mother. But the social worker encountered some difficulty, in that upon arrival at the family home, he/she found that the mother had run away with one of the children. Ainsworth and Hansen (2015) and Sykes (2011) also determined that parents sometimes become hostile and violent towards the social workers. Serbati (2017) established that it is sometimes important for social workers to use their authority if it ensures the safety of children. In order to secure the safety of the children, the social worker had to call in the support of the police.

*“When you first remove the child and there is no co-operation, you take some back-up with like other colleagues or and if that is not possible, sometimes and in some cases you have to call in the police.” (Social worker 2)*

The utilization of the police to assist in the removal of children from the care of the parents is legislated in the Children's Act (Act 38 of 2005). Therefore, it is not strange for a social worker to make use of the police in cases where they experience challenges with the removal of a child. This is contained in Section 151(5) of the Children's Act (Act 38 of 2005). Tonmyr and Gonzalez (2015) note that social workers felt safer when accompanied by police officers when they encountered dangerous situations. Furthermore, police officers can also use force in certain high-risk situations.

The literature confirms that social workers who carry out statutory work sometimes have to function under severe and strenuous conditions (Tham, 2017). This, in turn, is linked to high work demands, high staff turnover, and the recruitment of new staff (Pöso & Forsman, 2013; Mänttari-van der Kuip, 2014). In some cases, the decision to remove a child is based on the statutory powers that social workers have. The challenges social workers face during an intervention with families, says Dettlaff et al., (2015), creates uncertainty regarding the decision the social worker needs to make in terms of the statutory intervention of whether or not to remove the child.

*“Firstly, as a social worker I am bound by a code of ethics. When it comes to the removal of children, the removal should be done within the framework of legislation, it is in terms of the children's Act. What we found is that we have a statutory obligation to inform the parent of such a removal. There are a large percentage of cases where we are not able to remove or to inform the parents that their child/children will be removed out of their care or custody.” (Social worker 3)*

From this statement, it is clear that social workers must ensure that their statutory obligations are fulfilled, and that does not seem to include the needs of the family. Ross et al., (2017)

established that the focus of the social workers is on the safety of the children, instead of providing the parents with support.

It is acknowledged that social workers work with families during a challenging time if it involves the removal of their children. The loss of their children can stigmatize the parents (Sykes, 2011). Furthermore, the temporary or permanent loss of their children is stressful and traumatic for parents (Haight, Sugrue, Calhoun & Black, 2017). In this study, one of the social workers explained that it is sometimes necessary to share a personal story to create perspective and help the parents deal with their emotions.

*“So, you have to use examples; have to maybe use your own experience of being a parent and what that child needs as every child need is their parents. Explain to them because at the end of the day you have to also tell them that at the end of the day that child is going to come back you.” (Social worker 2)*

Evident in the interview above, the social worker, when experiencing difficulty with the parents in terms of the removal of their children, used empathy to assist them. Smithson and Gibson (2015) found that parents value it when social workers take an interest in their struggles. They further established that parents feel cared for when social workers take an interest in them and show them empathy.

Another professional group that plays a part in the removal process is the presiding officer. Section 42 of the Children’s Act (Act 38 of 2005) describes the role and functions of the Children’s Court and the presiding officer. Sections 42 (4) and (5) further clarify the Acts under which the presiding officer functions. Presiding officers are assigned to function in a Children’s Court. Section 45 of the Act (Act 38 of 2005) indicates the matters on which the Children’s Court may adjudicate. Section 45 (1)(a) specifically relates to child protection and

the well-being of children. As previously indicated, the social workers present the reports of their investigations of child abuse, neglect, or maltreatment to the presiding officer. The presiding officer in turn reviews the report and makes a finding based on the information in the report. The presiding officer relayed their experience with the removal of children from the care of their parents, as follows

*“They might not co-operate with the removal process because usually it comes with shock to them and they are in denial, but the moment they come to court and things are logically explained to them, after that they usually co-operate. From time to time they don’t. We got cases where the parents have stormed out or we have to call security in because the parent is being violent specially parents who are gangs or involved in gangs or that are on drugs and you can usually read your client.” (Presiding officer)*

It is evident that the presiding officer also faces challenges in the Children’s Court during the proceedings. Challenges faced by the presiding officers are related to the processes that include the interpretation of the Act (Act 38 of 2005) by the social workers (Sibanda & Lombard, 2015). The Children’s Act (Act 38 of 2005) is primarily an Act of the DSD. Furthermore, it seems that there is a lack of uniformity in the interpretation and implementation of the Children’s Act between presiding officers and social workers (Sibanda & Lombard, 2015).

## **5.4 Conclusion**

The research findings were described in terms of themes that emerged from the analyzed collected data. The findings revealed the parents’ reasons for the removal of their child/children. The parents had certain expectations of the professionals involved in the removal process; however, this study showed that these expectations were not met. In turn, the

parents formulated their own perceptions of what the social workers should be doing in terms of assisting them through this process. In addition, it was found that the parents are totally disregarded in the removal process, as information concerning their children and the process is not freely shared with them, leaving them much of the time in the dark. Furthermore, the experiences of the professionals involved in the removal process were also identified and discussed in the chapter. The research study found that the social workers' experience their own challenges with the process and that it is linked to operational requirements and in some instances lack of available resources. Finally, it was found that social workers understand their role and statutory responsibility in the removal of children as described in legislation, the Children's Act (Act 38 of 2005), and intervene strictly in accordance with the Act. The problem with the implementation of the Children's Act is that it expects a set of differential responses from social workers and that their training might not have prepared them to respond as the Children's Act requires. Now that the results of the study have been disseminated and discussed according to the identified themes, the next chapter will summarize the findings and make certain recommendations.

## CHAPTER 6

### SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS & CONCLUSION

#### 6.1 Introduction

The main aim of the study was to explore the perceptions, experiences, and challenges of parents whose children were removed through a statutory process. A qualitative research approach that sought to explore and describe a phenomenon in terms of the meanings brought by people, particularly the parents of the children, was used to achieve this aim. The research question guiding this study was formulated as follows: “What are the perceptions, experiences and challenges of parents whose children are removed through a statutory process?” The research question was answered in Chapter 5, when the research findings were presented and discussed. The objectives of this study were to: (1) Explore the perceptions of parents when children are removed through a statutory process, (2) explore the experiences of parents when children are removed through a statutory process, and (3) explore the challenges of parents when children are removed through a statutory process. These objectives were also achieved in the study.

The data was analyzed and three main themes with six sub-themes were identified. These were comprehensively discussed in Chapter 5. A review of appropriate literature and a theoretical framework was used to substantiate, explain, compare and contrast the findings of this study.

The final chapter of this study provides a brief summary of the preceding chapters, followed by a number of recommendations for future research, as well as to professionals practicing in the field, and a conclusion to close the study.

The subsequent chapters, in various ways, explored the perceptions, experiences and challenges of parents whose children were removed through a statutory process:

## **6.2 Summary of the Chapters**

### **6.2.1 Chapter 1: Introduction**

Chapter 1 served as an introductory chapter. It presented the research topic, background of the study, the research problem, aim, objectives, methodology, and theoretical framework. This chapter outlined the challenges, experiences and perceptions of parents whose children were removed through a statutory process. A qualitative research approach was used to address the research problem and adequately work towards achieving the research aim and objectives.

### **6.2.2 Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework**

Bowlby's (1951) attachment theory, which formed the theoretical framework for the study, was the focus of Chapter 2. Emphasis was placed on the importance of steady and trusting relationships between parents and their biological children. This theory was further used to describe the effect on development if the attachment relationship is disturbed due to the statutory removal of a child.

### **6.2.3 Chapter 3: Literature Review**

Chapter 3 reviewed the literature relevant to the research topic and focused on the subject of the experiences, challenges and perceptions of parents whose child/children were removed through a statutory process. A detailed discussion on the concepts relating to children and the removal process was provided. Furthermore, the literature also reviewed legislation aimed to

provide legal protection and services to children, the statutory process, and parental involvement within this process.

#### **6.2.4 Chapter 4: Research Methodology**

In this chapter, the research methodology applied during the execution of this study was presented. An explorative and descriptive design with a qualitative approach was deemed most suitable for answering the research question. Two sets of participants, parents and professionals involved in the removal process, were purposively selected. Data was collected by means of semi-structured interviews and field notes. Interviews were conducted with professionals and parents whose children were removed from their care through a statutory process. The professionals included 3 social workers and one presiding officer.

After the data was collected, it was analyzed; during the analysis, themes and sub-themes emerged. The themes and sub-themes were discussed in Chapter 5. The following ethical considerations were applied during the data collection process: informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality and anonymity. Trustworthiness was applied to ensure the reliability and validity of the study.

Chapter 4 concluded with a discussion of the limitations that were encountered by the researcher. These included: a delay in receiving ethical approval from the DSD, and further delays resulting from incorrect participants being identified by the social workers.

#### **6.2.5 Chapter 5: Presentation and Discussion of the Findings**

This chapter described the ethnicity, demographics, gender, and educational level of the professionals, as well as the employment status of the parents. A total number of twelve parents whose children were removed participated in the research project. The information that the parents provided led to the identification of three main themes and five sub-themes.

Furthermore, the data collected described the perceptions, experiences and challenges of the parents. The data collected from the professionals described their experiences of the removal process and the application of the legislation. The following is a summary of the themes.

#### 6.2.5.1 Parental involvement in the removal process

This theme describes the participation of the parents in the removal process in terms of the legislation. This theme also identifies the role of the social worker in the removal process and the importance of conducting an assessment before the removal process is undertaken.

A sub-theme within this theme was the description of the role of the professionals—the social workers and the presiding officer—in the removal process. The theme concluded that the participation of the parents in the removal process is limited and that the social workers carry out the removal strictly in accordance with the prescribed legislation. A reoccurring issue within this theme was that the parents felt ignored during the removal process. However, from the perspective of the social workers it was established that they have a statutory responsibility to ensure the safety of the children who are reported to be in an environment that negatively impacts on their development.

The second sub-theme on parental involvement indicated limited involvement on their part. There are a number of reasons for this, including the social workers' statutory responsibility, the removal process was applied as per the legislation, and in most cases no assessments were conducted. The fact that no assessments were conducted meant that social workers did not conduct the removal based on facts, but on information they received, or, in some cases, because of the pressure they find themselves under. This sub-theme also determined that in some cases the removals were based on the social workers' view that the children's safety and well-being were in jeopardy, without having done a proper assessment.

#### 6.2.5.2 Parents' perceptions and understanding of the removal process

This theme considered parents' perceptions of the removal process. This theme established that parents could provide reasons for the removal of their children. As the theme unfolded through the data collection, it became clear that the parents held certain expectations of how the removal process should occur. Some parents perceived the removal of their children to be unfair, because in their view there was other children in similar positions or worse off that were not removed from the care of their parents. Another important point that arose within this theme was that the parents also felt that there were inconsistencies in the removal process. In addition to that, the parents felt that the social workers were not receptive to their needs and did not listen to their points of view; they did not feel respected, and they felt the removal process portrayed them as inadequate. Moreover, the parent's socio-economic situations and struggles were disregarded by the social workers.

#### 6.2.5.3 Parents' experiences and challenges with the removal process

This theme identified parents' experiences and challenges with the removal process. It became clear through this process that all the parents experienced different challenges with regards to the removal process. There was a challenge with the changing of social workers during and after the removal process. The parents experienced negative feelings of grief and loss, but this was not addressed by the social workers. Parents also experienced anger towards the social worker who conducted the removal process. In one case a parent had thoughts of attacking the social worker due to pent-up frustration, anger and rage. The challenge that most parents faced was the fact that they were not actively part of the removal process. This led to them not having any influence over the decisions that were made. The fact that parents did not have any control over the removal process meant that they were not involved in the decisions that were made after the removal process as well. As parents related the challenges that they experienced, it

was established that the attachment relationship between the children and parents were not taken into account in conducting the removal of their children.

Besides the parents experiencing challenges, the professionals, especially the social workers, also had negative experiences with the removal process. The general negative experience is that parents did not co-operate with the social workers during the removal process. In some cases, the social workers had to be accompanied by the police to assist with the removal process.

### **6.2.6 Chapter 6: Summary of Findings, Recommendations & Conclusion**

The final chapter provides the conclusion and recommendations with an overall presentation of a summary of the chapters covered in the study.

### **6.3 Recommendations**

This research was based on the perceptions, experiences and challenges of parents relating to the removal of their children through a statutory process. Through this study it was established that the parents' overall experience of the process is negative. Therefore, these recommendations are geared towards changing the experiences of parents when their child or children are removed from their care. Thus, in the points below, some recommendations are made to the professionals involved in the removal process, with the aim of improving the overall process and experience for parents as far as possible, so as to avoid some of the negative effects and experiences as was reported in this study. Based on the findings and reports of the parents expressed during the data collection process, the following practical suggestions and recommendations are made:

- Communication between professionals and parents needs to be improved. This can be accomplished by being more forthcoming with information, providing information in an

appropriate manner, and using simple language that the parents can understand, without the excessive use of professional jargon, so as to facilitate communication and understanding.

In other words, the parents must be able to understand the message.

- In their investigations and dealings with the parents, the professionals need to maintain integrity, honesty, and excellence, and thereby meet the parents' expectations, which was a shortcoming in this study.
- Professionals need to acknowledge parents' and families' strengths. All families have strengths, no matter their material surroundings. This can improve the effectiveness of the professionals as well as strengthen their caring ability.
- Professionals need to first look at the extended family for placement before considering external caregivers. A family does not only consist of the parents of the children. Therefore, before a removal is undertaken, the extended family must be considered. This will ensure that the child remains within his/her family and culture.
- Professionals need to prioritize the involvement of parents in the removal process. No decision must be made without the participation and guidance of the family.
- Professionals must allow the families to guide the process. To this end, professionals must provide parents with all the necessary information that will assist them with making a decision.
- Professionals, who are knowledgeable of local resources, should assist and support parents where possible. Resources must be made available for parents to address their own shortcomings.
- When children are removed, the court order must include the services and programmes that parents must attend to improve the situation that they find themselves in. Regular reports on the progress of the parents must be submitted to the presiding officer for consideration on the length of the placement.

- Parents must have the right to approach the presiding officer when they feel that they are ready to care for their own child. This means that the placement does not need to be for a period of two years as most alternative placement are.
- Professionals should provide parents with the opportunity to continue to play a parental role in the lives of their children while they are placed in alternative care.
- Professionals must ensure that parents are full partners and drivers of the removal of their children when necessary.
- Professionals are to hold each other accountable in providing the best service to the parents whose children have been removed.
- Professionals, particularly the social workers, must be provided with the necessary support in terms of supervision, debriefing and support from their supervisors.

#### **6.4 Suggestions for Future Research**

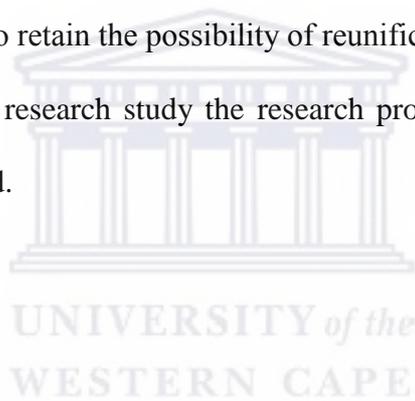
In light of the above, the following suggestions are made for future research:

- Focus on the removal process must be linked to the relationship between the parents and the professionals.
- Research the benefits and challenges of the implementation of legislation when conducting an investigation relating to the possible child removal from intake to the finalization of a case.
- Research on the same topic be conducted in a rural community to establish if those parents have the same perceptions, challenges and experiences or if it is different.

#### **6.5 Conclusion**

The findings of this study indicate that parents feel that their right to parent is interrupted by the removal process, and that their voices are not heard during the removal process. This study

therefore stresses that the subjugated voices of parents, their unique standpoints, and contribution/input needs to be considered in the removal process. It should be a process that combines openness, dialogue, reflection, assessment, and action, while at the same time, keeping in mind the best interests of the children. The social workers, on the other hand, underscore that their responsibility is to ensure the safety and well-being of children in compromised or dangerous environments. This final chapter provided the reader with a comprehensive summary of all the main topics of this chapter, starting with the introduction, proceeding to a discussion of the research methodology and literature review, and ending with the research findings and final recommendations. The latter was proposed to improve the way the removal process is conducted, not only for parents to have a different experience compared to those in this study, but also to retain the possibility of reunification and respect the family's integrity. Finally, through this research study the research problem was addressed, and the research question was answered.



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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR PARENTS

**Research introduction:** This study is conducted in fulfilment for the requirements to obtain a Master's degree in Child and Family Studies at the University of the Western Cape. The study seeks to find out your experience was of having a child remove from your care. Your experiences and suggestions will go a long way to understand parents' experiences regarding a statutory process of removal of children.

Respondent Code .....

Ethnicity.....

How many children in family.....

Parents educational qualification.....

Employment status of parents.....

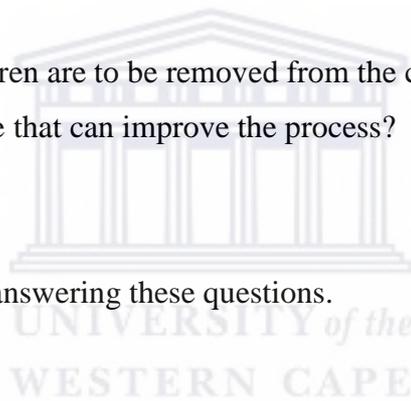
Any history of family violence, substance abuse.....

Married/Cohabiting.....

- 1) Please tell me about your family
- 2) What is your understanding of the removal of children from the care of their parents?
- 3) As parents having a child/children removed, how does that make you feel?
- 4) Is this the first time that you have child/children removed out of your care?
- 5) Describe the reason why you think the child/children were removed out of your care

- 6) What was your experience throughout the removal process of your child/children from your care.
  
- 7) Were you afforded an opportunity to influence the decision that was made to remove the child/children out of your care? If yes how. If no what would you like to have said if afforded an opportunity.
  
- 8) What was the relationship between yourselves and the social worker throughout the process? Eg did the social worker keep you informed every step of the way?
  
- 9) In your opinion what should have been done differently during this process and why?
  
- 10) In your opinion, if children are to be removed from the care of their parents, what suggestions do you have that can improve the process?

Thank you for participating in answering these questions.



## APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR PROFESSIONALS

*NB: ensure written consent form is signed and collected before the interview commences.*

**Research introduction:** This study is conducted in fulfilment for the requirements to obtain a Master's degree in Child and Family Studies at the University of the Western Cape. The study seeks to find out what your experiences was of being involved in the removal of children out of the care of their parents. Your experiences and suggestions will go a long way to understand parents' experiences regarding a statutory process of removal of children.

NAME OF ORGANISATION

RESPONDENT CODE #

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

SEX:  MALE  FEMALE

PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE IN  
STATUTORY SOCIAL

WORK: \_\_\_\_\_

QUALIFICATION: \_\_\_\_\_

DESIGNATION: \_\_\_\_\_

LENGTH OF TIME WORKING FOR SOCIAL

LENGTH OF TIME WORKING IN

DEVELOPMENT : \_\_\_\_\_

THIS AREA: \_\_\_\_\_

1. What has your experiences been when you have to remove children out of the care of their parents.
2. What systems do you put in place that can possibly facilitate participation of the parents?
3. In cases when parents do not co-operate with you, what mechanisms have you put in place
4. How does co-operation from the parents contribute towards easing the removal of their children?
5. What recommendations can you make that would proactively and efficiently address this challenge?

## APPENDIX C: INFORMATION SHEET



# UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE

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### APPENDIX C INFORMATION SHEET

**Project Title:** Perceptions, experiences and challenges of parents whose children are removed through a statutory process.

#### **What is this study about?**

This is a research project being conducted by Alfred Harris at the University of the Western Cape. I am inviting you to participate in this research project because you have experienced the removal of a child from your care through a statutory process. The purpose of this research project is to explore the experiences of parents whose children were removed through a statutory process.

#### **What will I be asked to do if I agree to participate?**

You will be asked to fill in the consent form for the interview and use of audiotape prior to conducting the interview. You will be asked to respond to the interview questions in the way you understand them. The interview will take about 30 to 60 minutes. The interviews will be conducted in your own home. The questions for the interview are exploring how parents experienced the process of having a child removed out of their care.

#### **Would my participation in this study be kept confidential?**

The researcher undertakes to protect your identity and the nature of your contribution. To ensure your anonymity, thus your name will not be included for any purpose in this research project. A code will be used to differentiate different transcriptions of participants. Only the researcher will be able to link your identity and will have access to the identification key especially for the information verification. To ensure your confidentiality, the interviews will be copied to a computer immediately afterwards and deleted from the audiotape. The interviews will be kept in the password protected folder which will be known to the researcher only. The transcriptions will be identified with codes and stored in the lockable filing cabinet, personal to the researcher. If we write a report or article about this research project, your identity will be protected to the highest.

#### **What are the risks of this research?**

There may be some risks from participating in this research study. The risks may include the psychological, social, emotional, and legal risks. There might also be the risks that are currently unforeseeable as: all human interactions and talking about self or others carry some amount of risks. We will nevertheless minimise such risks and act promptly to assist you if you experience

any discomfort, psychological or otherwise during the process of your participation in this study. Where necessary, an appropriate referral will be made to a suitable professional for further assistance or intervention.

**What are the benefits of this research?**

This research is not designed to help you personally, but the results may help the investigator learn more about the experiences of parents when their child is removed through a statutory process. We hope that, in the future, other people might benefit from this study through improved understanding of how parents experience the process when their child is removed out of their care.

**Do I have to be in this research and may I stop participating at any time?**

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.

**Is any assistance available if I am negatively affected by participating in this study?** All possible precautions will be taken to protect you from experiencing any harm from the research process. If however, you are or feel that you are being negatively affected by this research suitable assistance will be sought for you from a social worker working in the Delft area.

**What if I have questions?**

If you have any questions about the research study itself, please contact Alfred Harris on 083 255 8346 or [3522677@myuwc.ac.za](mailto:3522677@myuwc.ac.za). Should you have any questions regarding this study and your rights as a research participant or if you wish to report any problems you have experienced related to the study, please contact:

Head of Department:  
Prof. C Schenck  
Dept of Social Work  
[cschenck@uwc.ac.za](mailto:cschenck@uwc.ac.za)  
021 9592277

Dean of the Faculty of Community and Health Sciences:  
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This research has been approved by the University of the Western Cape's Senate Research and Ethics Committee.



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### INLIGTINGSBLAD

**Projek Titel: Verstandhouding, Ondervindinge en Uitdagings van ouers wie se kinders verwyder is deur n statutere proses.**

#### **Waaroor handel die studie?**

Hierdie is 'n navorsingsprojek wat gedoen word deur Alfred Harris by die Universiteit van Wes-Kaapland. Ek nooi u uit om deel te neem aan die navorsing studie omdat u ervaring het deurdat u kind het wat deur 'n hof proses uit u sorg verwyder is

#### **Wat sal van my verwag word as ek deelneem aan die studie?**

Dit sal verwag word van u om deel te neem aan individuele onderhoude met die navorser en u sal dus vrae moet beantwoord wat die navorser aan u sal stel. Die vrae sal handel oor u ervaring van die proses wat onderneem was om u kind uit u sorg te verwyder

#### **Word my deelname in die studie vertroulik gehou?**

Die navorser onderneem om u identiteit en die aard van u bydrae te beskerm. U sal anoniem gehou word, 'n skuilnaam sal gebruik word en geen dokumentasie sal onder u naam aangeteken word nie. 'n Kode sal ook gebruik word op alle gekollekteerde data. 'n Identifikasie sleutel sal aan u identiteit gekoppel word en sal slegs aan die navorser bekend wees. Om u identiteit te verseker sal alle inligting in 'n geslote kas gehou word en identifikasie kodes sal op die data geplaas word.

Indien 'n verslag of 'n artikel geskryf word, sal u identiteit ook beskerm word. Hierdie navorsingstudie sal gebruik maak van 'n band opname. Toestemming sal van u verkry word om u op te neem en die onderhoude sal beskerm word deur 'n wagwoord te plaas op die rekenaars wat vir die doel gebruik gaan word.

Na aanleiding van die regsvereistes en professionele standaarde word dit verwag dat enige inligting met betrekking to kinderverwaarlosing, mishandeling of moontlike skade aan persone aangemeld word by die toepaslike professionele persone. U sal dan ingelig word dat indien die vertrouens verhouding verbreek sou word, en ook indien hierdie inligting aan die betrokke owerheid gerapporteer word.

#### **Wat is die risikos in die navorsing?**

Daar mag risikos wees in die navorsing. Alle menslike interaksie en gesprekke oor ander en jouself mag sekere risikos inhou. Ons sal egter probeer om die meeste risikos te minimaliseer en sal die nodige ondersteuning aangebied word indien u enige ongemak, hetsy psigologies of andersins gedurende u deelname in die studie ervaar. Indien noodsaaklik, sal 'n verwysing gemaak word na 'n geskikte professionele persoon vir ondersteuning.

#### **Wat is die voordele van die navorsing ?**

Die navorsing is nie ontwikkel om jou persoonlik te bevoordeel nie, maar die resultate sal egter die navorser help om meer inligting in te samel aangaande die ervaring van ouers wie se kind verwyder is. Ons hoop dat ander persone in die toekoms baat sal vind by hierdie studie.

**Moet ek deel wees van die studie en mag ek my enige tyd van die studie onttrek?**

Jou deelname in die navorsing is heeltemal vrywilliglik. Jy mag kies om nie deel te neem aan die studie nie. Indien jy besluit om nie deel te wees nie of om enige tyd jou te onttrek van die studie, sal jy nie gepeenaliseer word nie en sal jy dus nie enige voordele verloor nie.

**Wat indien ek enige vrae het?**

Hierdie navorsing word uitgevoer deur Alfred Harris, by die Universiteit van Wes-Kaapland. Indien u enige vrae het oor die navorsing studie, kontak Alfred Harris by telefoon nr. 083 255 8346.

Indien u enige vrae het met betrekking tot die studie en jou regte as 'n deelnemer of indien u enige probleem ervaar met betrekking tot die studie, kan u die volgende persone kontak:

Hoof van die Departement: Prof Schenk  
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 Tel: 021 09592011

Dekaan van die fakulteit Gemeenskap- en Gesondheids Wetenskappe:  
 Prof José Frantz  
 Universiteit Wes-Kaap  
 Private Bag X17  
 Bellville 7535  
 chs-deansoffice@uwc.ac.za



Hierdie navorsing is goedgekeur deur die Universiteit van Wes-Kaap se Senaat Navorsing en Etiese Komitee.

## APPENDIX D: CONSENT FORM



# UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE

Private Bag X 17, Bellville 7535, South Africa  
 Tel: +27 21-959 2459 Fax: 27 21-959 3686  
 E-mail: [cjerasmus@uwc.ac.za](mailto:cjerasmus@uwc.ac.za) or [3512677@myuwc.ac.za](mailto:3512677@myuwc.ac.za)

## APPENDIX D

### CONSENT FORM

**Title of Research Project: Perceptions, experiences and challenges of parents whose children are removed through a statutory process**

The study has been described to me in language that I understand. My questions about the study have been answered. I understand what my child's participation will involve and I agree to their participation of my own choice and free will. I understand that their identity will not be disclosed to anyone. I understand that my child may withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason and without fear of negative consequences or loss of benefits.

**Participant's name.....**

**Participant's signature.....**

**Date.....**



## UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE

Private Bag X 17, Bellville 7535, South Africa  
 Tel: +27 21-959 2459 Fax: 27 21-959 3686 E-mail: [cjerasmus@uwc.ac.za](mailto:cjerasmus@uwc.ac.za) or  
[3512677@myuwc.ac.za](mailto:3512677@myuwc.ac.za)

### TOESTEMMINGS VORM

**Titel van die Navorsings Projek: Persepsies, uitdagings en ervaringe van ouers wie se kinders verwyder is deur 'n statutêre proses**

Die studie is beskryf in die taal wat ek verstaan. My vrae oor die studie is beantwoord. Ek verstaan wat my deelname sal behels en ek kom ooreen dat ek vrywilliglik en uit eie keuse deel neem aan die studie. Ek verstaan dat my identiteit nie bekend gemaak sal word nie. Ek verstaan dat ek enige tyd mag onttrek van die studie sonder om 'n rede te verskaf en sonder om enige vrees of negatiewe gevolge of skade te lei.

**Deelnemer se naam.....**

**Deelnemer se handtekening.....**

**Datum.....**

## APPENDIX E: ETHICS LETTER – UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE



### OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR: RESEARCH RESEARCH AND INNOVATION DIVISION

Private Bag X17, Bellville 7535  
South Africa  
T: +27 21 959 2988/2948  
F: +27 21 959 3170  
E: [research-ethics@uwc.ac.za](mailto:research-ethics@uwc.ac.za)  
[www.uwc.ac.za](http://www.uwc.ac.za)

27 February 2017

Mr AA Harris  
Social Work  
Faculty of Community and Health Sciences

**Ethics Reference Number:** HS17/1/22

**Project Title:** Perceptions, experiences and challenges of parents whose children are removed through a statutory process.

**Approval Period:** 22 February 2017 – 22 February 2018

I hereby certify that the Humanities and Social Science Research Ethics Committee of the University of the Western Cape approved the methodology and ethics of the above mentioned research project.

Any amendments, extension or other modifications to the protocol must be submitted to the Ethics Committee for approval. Please remember to submit a progress report in good time for annual renewal.

The Committee must be informed of any serious adverse event and/or termination of the study.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Josias'.

*Ms Patricia Josias  
Research Ethics Committee Officer  
University of the Western Cape*

**PROVISIONAL REC NUMBER - 130416-049**

## APPENDIX F: ETHICS LETTER - WESTERN CAPE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT



Research, Population and Knowledge Management

tel: +27 21 483 4512 fax: +27 21 483 5602

48 Queen Victoria Street, Cape Town, 8000

Reference: 12/1/2/4

Enquiries: Clinton Daniels

Tel: 021 483 8658/483 4512

Mr A. Harris

94 Spitz Way

Strandfontein Village

Dear Mr Harris

### RE: APPROVAL TO UNDERTAKE RESEARCH IN THE WESTERN CAPE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

1. Your request for ethical approval to undertake research in respect of *'Perceptions, experiences and challenges of parents whose children are removed through a statutory process'* refers.
2. It is a pleasure to inform you that your request has been approved by the Research Ethics Committee (REC) of the Department, subject to the following conditions:

- That the Secretariat of the Research Ethics Committee be informed in writing of any changes made to your proposal after approval has been granted and be given the opportunity to respond to these changes.
- That ethical standards and practices as contained in the Department's Research Ethics Policy be maintained throughout the research study, in particular that written informed consent be obtained from participants.
- The confidentiality and anonymity of participants, who agree to participate in the research, should be maintained throughout the research process and should not be named in your research report or any other publications that may emanate from your research.
- The Department should have the opportunity to respond to the findings of the research. In view of this, the final draft of your research report should be sent to the Secretariat of the REC for comment before further dissemination.

- That the Department be informed of any publications and presentations (at conferences and otherwise) of the research findings. This should be done in writing to the Secretariat of the REC.
- Please note that the Department supports the undertaking of research in order to contribute to the development of the body of knowledge as well as the publication and dissemination of the results of research. However, the manner in which research is undertaken and the findings of research reported should not result in the stigmatisation, labelling and/or victimisation of beneficiaries of its services.
- The Department should receive a copy of the final research dissertation and any subsequent publications resulting from the research.
- The Department should be acknowledged in all research reports and products that result from the data collected in the Department.
- Please note that the Department cannot guarantee that the intended sample size as described in your proposal will be realised.
- Logistical arrangements for the research must be made through the office of the relevant Regional Manager, subject to the operational requirements and service delivery priorities of the Department.
- Failure to comply with these conditions can result in this approval being revoked.

Yours sincerely



Ms M. Johnson

Chairperson: Research Ethics Committee

Date: 7/7/17



**APPENDIX G: CONFIRMATION OF EDITING LETTER**

*Lee-Anne Roux*

PROFESSIONAL EDITING SERVICES

BTH (Honors) Practical Theology UNISA 2006 • BA Honors (Psychology) UNISA 2009 • MTH (Practical Theology) Stellenbosch University 2013  
PHD (Practical Theology) Stellenbosch University 2019

17 November 2019

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

**RE: LANGUAGE EDITING**

This letter serves to confirm that I have edited the thesis titled:

**PERCEPTIONS, EXPERIENCES AND CHALLENGES OF PARENTS WHOSE  
CHILDREN ARE REMOVED THROUGH A STATUTORY PROCESS**

by

**Alfred Harris**

**3512677**

Please feel free to contact me if you need any further information.

Yours sincerely,  
Dr Lee-Anne Roux  
Email: leanne@proof-reading.co.za  
Cell: 082 825 7325