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## Chapter 6

### 'Life Chances': Thinking with art to generate new understandings of low-income situations

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#### <2>Introduction

In what ways do regulatory regimes enact, delimit and inhibit the progress of families on low incomes across England and Wales? Although they may not explicitly interact, diverse regimes are affectively experienced that include immigration status (including from EU countries) employment assessments and activation, mental health, child protection, structural and overt racism and the non-portability of professional qualifications across national systems. In this chapter, we explore how contemporary, social practice art materialises these intersections and enables disruptions of regulatory regimes in ways not possible using traditional social science approaches. We focus on a research team that included artists Close and Remote and explain how the team co-produced, with community members and academics, a socially engaged artwork — *Life Chances* — that aimed to generate new knowledges about the regulatory regimes that low-income families with children experience. Aiming towards what sociologist Yasmin Gunaratnam describes as a form of improvisational empathy (2012), *Life Chances* worked with Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) and *Utopia as Method* as 'a form of speculative sociology of the future' (Levitas, 2013, 85). By staging and troubling contradictory notions of 'life chances' through art, we specifically ask how the regulatory services that families encounter in two urban settings — the Easton area of Bristol and Butetown, Riverside and Grangetown in Cardiff — shape, constrain and enable the life chances of individual families and communities, or what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as *doxa* (1977), and how these services might be 'otherwise'.

*Life Chances* was co-designed by academics from Bristol and Cardiff Universities, artists Close and Remote, and two community organisations: Single Parent Action Network (SPAN) in Bristol and South Riverside Community Development Centre (SRCDC) in Cardiff. From the outset, there was an intention to work with social practice art. In addition to its emphasis on collaborative working closely reflecting the principles of co-production, we wanted to work

with the everyday materials that families on low incomes encounter. Moreover, we were interested in working with a creative practice that would manifest the distributed, entangled and durational relationships across diverse regulatory regimes. For the purposes of this chapter, a definition of socially engaged art practice might follow Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen's sense of:

Art that leaves the art institution and performs different kinds of interventions or artistic social work, often intended to create some kind of dialogue in conflict-ridden urban space (Rasmussen, 2017).

Contemporary participatory, socially engaged art has been inspired by a range of European and North American art movements, including the readymade tradition of Dada; the focus on the everyday and the spectacle found in Guy Debord's Situationist International movement (Plant, 1990); by Fluxus conceptual art events and by performance artworks such as Allan Kaprow's *Happenings* of the 1950s and 60s and Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago's *Womanhouse* (1972). In other words, social practice takes up the materials of consumer culture and seeks to recuperate it — making art with, rather than simply for, communities. In socially engaged art, the social, everyday encounter forms the material, the process and the aesthetics of the work (see text box below, on *Social Practice Methods*).

Vibrant debate concerning the role of art in community-involved projects has focused on the relationships between the aesthetic value of the artwork and what art historian Grant Kester terms a dialogic aesthetic that emerges as part of the process in socially engaged art:

In a dialogical aesthetic... subjectivity is formed through discourse and inter-subjective exchange itself. Discourse is not simply a tool to be used to communicate an a priori 'content' with other already formed subjects, but is itself intended to model subjectivity (Kester, 2005, 5; see also Pool, 2018 and Douglas, 2018).

Central to this dialogic aesthetic is 'empathetic identification', which Kester suggests can be achieved along a series of counter-hegemonic axes: the rapport between artists and collaborators, within the collaborators themselves where a form of solidarity can emerge,

and across the collaborators and other communities. In contrast, art historian Claire Bishop argues that the ways in which ‘the intersubjective space created through these projects becomes the focus — and medium — of artistic investigation’, leads:

To a situation in which such collaborative practices are automatically perceived to be equally important artistic gestures of resistance: there can be no failed, unsuccessful, unresolved, or boring works of collaborative art because all are equally essential to the task of strengthening the social bond (Bishop, 2006, 179-180).

In *Life Chances*, we aimed to address equally the artistic significance, aesthetics and rigour of the multiple elements of the work and the quality of the collaborative relationships and processes that were at the heart of its production.

Between December 2015 and July 2016, 22 workshops were undertaken separately in Bristol and Cardiff and with both groups together twice in Chepstow. The workshops involved jewellery-making, field trips, novel-writing, game design, and writing and performing music and poetry. Most workshop participants (n=17) were mothers of dependent children and in receipt of asylum support, or benefits and/or tax credits. Two of the original participants were male, the rest female; most were from a Black or minority ethnic background, including Black British (of Jamaican heritage), Asian or African heritage. Five had arrived in the UK from another EU country, having left countries in Africa and Asia; four of these had been asylum seekers when they arrived in that EU country.

The workshop methods (see text box) were geared towards producing what we describe as a work of sociological fiction (see Leavy, 2015). We deliberately adopted this term to evoke sociology’s contested aims of producing broad-based change through society-level engagement with justice agendas. Sociological fiction, documentary fiction and creative nonfiction methodologically resonate with the production of verbatim and documentary theatre (Forsyth and Megson, 2009), experimental performative and reflexive documentary (Renov, 2004; Minh-Ha, 1990), and the ethnographic and fictional turns in contemporary art more broadly (Rutten et al, 2013). Fictionalised accounts of real events aspire to present people’s lives in ways that offer aspects of identity protection, enable ethical encounters

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with people's testimonies and aim to present testimony and experience in order to critique and transform structures of power. These accounts have a long history that stretches to the late nineteenth century with Étienne Lantier's journey in Emile Zola's novel *Germinal* (1885), which fictionalises conversations Zola had with Turgenev. In film, Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), Georges Rouquier's *Farrebique* (1946) and Jean Rouch's participatory ethnographic fiction *Jaguar* (1967) all use fiction and participation in order to evoke the drama of everyday life, challenge structures of power and critically frame the ethical and creative relationship between artist and collaborator. In anthropology, a turn towards fiction was initially driven by an acknowledgement of the 'literariness' of ethnography (Clifford and Marcus 1986, 4). While art historian Hal Foster critiqued the 'realist assumption...in quasi-anthropological art, in particular with its siting of political truth in a projected alterity' (1995, 303-304), our specific mix of sociological fiction, making workshops, and game design plays in the spaces of entrepreneurial ideology and critical art practice to trouble any stable siting of political truth in projected alterity.

### <2> Life Chances as a concept

*Life Chances* is a widely-used phrase, adopted by UK governments to headline their policies on children, families and poverty but with different ideological foci depending on which political party has championed the concept. In particular, the UK's Coalition and Conservative governments' (2010-2016) use of the concept placed responsibility on individuals to explain their claims of denigration of 'society', rather than on the State. The ideological work of the use of this concept has been to emphasise the role of individuals 'actualising' their life chances through, for example, some form of entrepreneurial economic activity to lift them out of poverty — an agenda we were keen to avoid replicating in the making and selling of jewellery that the project encouraged.

This is however not the only use of the concept, as several governments and think tanks (New Labour, Coalition and Conservative governments, the Centre for Social Justice, the Fabian Society) have used the term 'life chances' performatively to produce different effects. The Conservative government's *Life Chances* strategy did not define the concept of *Life Chances* but linked it to tackling poverty and disadvantage and making opportunities more equal, emphasising the 'family' and parenting strategies and capabilities (Lister, 2016).

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This located successful life chances in the two-parent heterosexual family, the cornerstone of a strategy aiming to ensure that parents stay together. Announcing this strategy, the former Prime Minister, David Cameron, stated that:

Families are the best anti-poverty measure ever invented. They are a welfare, education and counselling system all wrapped up into one. Children in families that break apart are more than twice as likely to experience poverty as those whose families stay together. That's why strengthening families is at the heart of our agenda (Cameron, 2016).

The very notion of *Life Chances* can, however, be traced back to the sociologist Max Weber who first framed the concept when expanding on Marx's analysis of the socio/economic factors that inhibit/enable the advancement of different class-based groups (Weber, 1978). Weber believed people's life chances were conditioned by economic and structural determinants and that members of a class (where there is a shared likelihood of obtaining goods and a position in society) shared common life chances. Some believe Weber's concepts have been mistranslated (Abel and Cockerham, 1993), with *Lebensführung* (life conduct) and *Lebensstil* (lifestyles) conflated into 'lifestyles', emphasising choice. Arguably Weber saw lifestyles as in part economically conditioned. In a commentary on Weber's ideas, Dahrendorf (1979) explains that life chances are the (logical) probabilities of certain events happening which in turn depend on structural conditions such as income, property, norms, and rights — not the attributes of individuals.

Weber's concept of lifestyles draws together structural conditions (life chances) and personal choices (life conduct) as its basic determinants. *Lebensführung* and *Lebenschancen* are the two components of *Lebensstil*. *Lebensführung* refers to the choices that people have in the lifestyles they wish to adopt, but the potential for realising these choices are influenced by their *Lebenschancen* (Abel and Cockerham, 1993, 554). This interaction of lifestyle choice (conduct) and potential for influencing choice (chances) is essential to appreciate in the way we chose to utilise the concept, where the inherent irony in this inversion from Weber's original concept by the UK Conservative government is unravelled in this co-produced research project. The project name operates as a reification of the

concept, exploring individual and collective agency and participatory resistance to regulatory injustices and controls on low income families, from the perspectives of those families involved in the research and through a deep understanding of life chances in the Weberian sense, rather than with a focus on individual conduct or lifestyle choices.

### <2> The semiotics of political propaganda

In workshops with participants, artists Close and Remote focused on the Government's *Life Chances* posters that were tweeted and circulated in social media as part of their *Life Chances* agenda. These posters presented heteronormative, mostly white family groups with no more than two children accompanied by slogans outlining the Government's pledges to improve life chances through the provision of relationship support, mental health provision, careers advice, housing regeneration and investment in health. The imagery was idealised and lacked any sense of diversity apropos family structures. Close and Remote used these posters in workshops and invited people to participate in a semiotic — specifically a Barthesian — analysis of the rhetoric of the image.

Drawing on the linguistic analyses of Ferdinand de Saussure, Roland Barthes attempted to wrestle with the problem of whether images were semiotic in a linguistic sense. His sense of the total meaning of the image relied on a mix of the fascination with story and diegesis with the intelligibility of 'culture' as a series of symbols (Barthes, 1977). One of the *Life Chances* posters showed a family of three — a white mother, father and child — hand-in-hand in the foreground, walking towards the viewer. They are standing on a horizontal band of white. Behind them in the mid-ground is a band of light green. In the background, constituting the landscape up to the horizon line is a band of darker green. There are a few trees, simply rendered as blocks of either white or green. On the horizon line stand two tower blocks, side-by-side. The sky is a plain, pale blue. The workshops explored these images as graphic components, as a narrative of a white, heteronormative family realising their 'life chances' and as a series of signs: the tower block in the background signifies the family's socio-economic status; the blue-sky signifies hope; the green grass signifies nature). With these individual components identified, workshop participants replaced visual elements with alternatives to explore how the poster's rhetorical force could be transformed. The white family was alternately replaced with a Black family, with a Muslim

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woman in hijab with a child, with a single father and his children and other similar images. The landscape was transformed by replacing the tower blocks and green grass with a sandy desert, mosque and an olive tree. Importantly, the people in these images are faceless. It is perhaps an unintended outcome of the mannerisms of illustration trends, but this suggests a uniformity and anonymity of despair as the people remain part of a 'faceless society'. Close and Remote introduced participants to a reflexive visual literacy that enabled them to re-think and re-work the rhetorics of the political image into powerful and effective counter-propaganda images.

<Insert Figure 6.1 here>

Figure 6.1: Re-configuring 'family' in Life Chances imagery. Image: Close and Remote

<Insert Figure 6.2 here>

Figure 6.2: Changing the landscape. Image: Close and Remote

The poster workshops led into further discussion of participants' experiences as families on low incomes. The women who participated in the workshops had a range of craft skills, specifically jewellery-making. Engaging in skills and cultural technique sharing through jewellery-making produced a series of pieces that combined motifs from home countries in Asia and North Africa. Close and Remote had introduced a design of concentric circles made from copper strips in initial workshops, which developed repeatedly in a range of jewellery shapes and was eventually used to structure the process of the *Life Chances* game (see below), which was based on characters developed out of the stories told in the workshops, separated into constituent parts, fictionalised and combined into new narratives.

Overall, the semiotic analyses that drove new poster designs and the jewellery workshops evidence a conceptual and aesthetic rigour as each element informed the development of subsequent aspects. Sharing methods of image deconstruction with the research volunteers was an important moment in the workshops as the methods enabled a move out from critique towards creative production and was a new process and experience for the artists themselves. Specifically, using the same aesthetic palette as the original *Life Chances* poster ensured that critique in the form of new posters and jewellery would be recognisable to



participants. French philosopher Jacques Rancière usefully discusses the relationships between visibility, aesthetics and politics:

[A]n aesthetic politics always defines itself by a certain recasting of the distribution of the sensible, a reconfiguration of the given perceptual forms. The dream of a suitable political work of art is in fact the dream of disrupting the relationship between the visible, the sayable, and the thinkable without having to use the terms of a message as a vehicle. ... Suitable political art would...[produce] a double effect: the readability of a political signification and a sensible or perceptual shock caused, conversely, by the uncanny, by that which resists signification (2004, 63).

The workshops acknowledged the necessity of the double effect of the readability of political signification and the shock of the new offered through the remixing of visual elements.

<Insert Figure 6.3 here>

Figure 6.3: The Life Chances logo and jewellery material. Image: Close and Remote

<Insert Figure 6.4 here>

Figure 6.4: Examples of jewellery made in workshops. Image: Close and Remote

### <2> The 'Game' of Life Chances: *Lebenschancen*

The initial workshops produced new posters, jewellery and were used to workshop hybrid characters to be used in the collaborative writing of a novel. Moreover, this work generated the necessary elements of the *Life Chances* game, the aim of which was to enable people to experience character stories as both an embodied experience and as a dynamic, performance-based art. Designed for the AHRC Connected Communities Community Utopias festival in 2016 (to coincide with the 500-year anniversary of *Utopia*) (More, 1516) the game was designed to disrupt everyday knowledge of life on low-incomes from the perspective of interrogating what *Life Chances* meant in the context of welfare reform, punitive regulatory measures and, in particular the intersectional experiences of nationality, citizenship, education, and access to capital and resources in all their forms.

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<Insert Figure 6.5 here>

Figure 6.5: The original Life Chances game mat. Image: Close and Remote

In the game, players quickly find that some characters have greater access to capital and are physically more mobile on the board than others. For example, Mona Ali, a non-EU asylum seeker from Somalia with a secondary school education (Figure 6.6) is unable to move from the starting position in most scenarios played, while other characters have greater economic capital to draw upon, or the ability to increase earnings as they have the right to work in the UK (a right denied to asylum seekers such as Mona).

<Insert Figure 6.6 here>

Figure 6.6: Example of one of the Life Chances game cards. Image: Close and Remote

Here it is possible to see multiple regulatory impacts on Mona and her daughter which start with her asylum status but are then experienced through an inability to work and better her situation, and asylum housing processes which move her from Bristol where she has family support to substandard housing in Cardiff where she feels completely isolated, which exacerbates her already poor mental health.

While we started with the language of transactions between people who have different 'starting points' in the game, it became evident as the game developed that there were alternative analyses that could be used to understand what was happening. Transactions are not solely at individual levels or purely concerned with economic capital but are reliant on the regulatory systems and societal structures within which people transact. To understand what the game play was enabling in respect of understanding the nuanced interactions of people in different regulatory regimes we have utilised concepts from Pierre Bourdieu. The game mechanics operate across a 'field', that is a:

Configuration of relations between positions objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon the occupants, agents or institutions (Bourdieu, 1992, 72-73).

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For players in the *Life Chances field* the:

Medium of these relations, these determinations, is capital, which is hence both product and process within a field. All capital-economic, social and cultural-is symbolic, and the prevailing configurations of it shape social practice (Grenfell and James, 2004, 510).

This is illustrated as players experience the nuances of *Life Chances*: some have little income, others have substantial income and wealth. However, in some cases income is offset by possible debt as in some contexts, the poorest characters can progress (albeit fleetingly) as they do not have the means to borrow money in the first place, while those with high income potential are limited by poor health and the experience of Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) work assessments, or by caring responsibilities and the burden of childcare costs. Other characters illustrate the challenge of being highly skilled and educated in one country, only to find that the capital (economic, social and cultural) they understood they had in one national context is either not recognised or cannot be exchanged in a new regulatory state when people migrate to the UK.

Bourdieu's theories have significantly informed our understandings of how the *Life Chances* game has operated in the project and has similarly deepened our understanding of *life chances* as a concept when lived stories are played out in the game field. *Habitus* operates as the organising structure within which individual actions and dispositions reside and is: power of adaptation. It constantly performs an adaptation to the outside world which only occasionally takes the form of radical conversion' (Bourdieu, 1993, 88). Some of the characters in the game experience *Hysteresis*, that is Bourdieu's concept of being as a 'fish out of water' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979) where the structures of their habitus and dispositions remain the same, but conflict with the environment in which they find themselves: 'Innocence is the privilege of those who move in their field of activity like fish in water' (Bourdieu, 1986, p.257). This is particularly the case for recently migrated characters such as Nadjma Murabit, the qualified doctor from North Africa, who finds herself unable to practice medicine in the UK as she cannot afford £700 to take her English language tests, or for Asha Silano, whose teaching qualifications from Somalia are not recognised in the UK.

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They are both qualified professionals but are in new national regulatory systems where they become 'fish out of water' and dependent on state financial assistance. The intersectional experiences of regulation and the impacts of multiple systems on individuals are also revealed. For example, Asha, unable to work in the UK as a teacher and reliant on benefits and her husband's minimal income as a bus driver, experiences further hardship as the novel outlines the impact of the Universal Credit system roll out where they had to wait for six weeks for their first payment. The result of this error is played out in the fiction as Asha is forced to access a food bank and is unable to pay for her youngest two children to attend a school trip. She is also worried about Brexit as she and her family claimed asylum in the Netherlands, resulting in some of her family having Dutch passports and some having UK passports.

For other characters, the taken-for-granted power, the ability to progress their life chances and their potential for capital accumulation also become visible in the game as they progress exponentially, whilst observing others that remain fixed in (literal) positions on the floor mat. This is exemplified by fictional characters such as Barry Hamilton, the chief executive of the fictional security firm G4N, who develop and manage the roll out of the Universal Credit system in the novel; and Sir Newton Abbotsley, the owner of the *Daily Saliva* newspaper - both of whose social, cultural and economic capital enable them to navigate regulatory systems and avoid financial ruin and political scandal. This is what Bourdieu describes as an experience of *doxa* where:

The systems of classification imposed by the group to which an individual belongs, and the power relations within the group — is taken for granted and experienced as natural (Dumenden and English, 2013, 1080).

Observing the game in action it is interesting to note that even when embodying other people's characters and life narratives, players start to associate with 'people like me' (in the game world) and those who advance socially and economically start to compare income, education, career and family. Bourdieu claims that dispositions, habits and behaviours mark out people as belonging in certain groups and located in certain habitus:

It is each individual's habitus that determines the true nature of the interaction — that is, the habitus defines the social distance between social agents brought together in physical space because each individual carries with him/her forms of dispositions that are markers of his/her social position within social space (Bourdieu, 1977, 82).

This relates to Rancière's ideas of what is 'sensible' to some, and it is exactly this 'social distance' that engenders the 'insensible' that the game challenges (2004). People can play different characters from different walks of life and physically stand in the same small space and together experience the injustices of an unequal society. Players are confronted in intense ways with questions of institutional racism, paternalism, social networks that enable progression in life chances and the role of the state in wealth redistribution.

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### <1>**SOCIAL PRACTICE METHODS**

We used co-production methods throughout the *Life Chances* project. In its initial stages, we worked with project participants to co-write a call for artists to join the project and participate in the research. We considered art as knowledge-producing in itself (see (Allegue et al, 2009) rather than as a way to communicate research, to engage different publics in research, or as an instrument of well-being (Matarasso, 1997). The call for artists was initially drafted by working group members with experience of producing art. It was then circulated to the wider working group and core participants for comment. We then co-designed the shortlisting and selection process to ensure that community participants felt that they owned the process and criteria. This mixed an initial pitch and trial-run workshop with community participants from Cardiff and Bristol with an interview with the core working group team. As part of their pitch, Close and Remote stated that the aim of art should be to make work that is of long-standing value, where value is understood as involving, but not be limited to, social benefit and is expressed through both process and outcome (see Simoniti, 2018).

Key social practice methods were:

**Semiotic analysis:** In Saussurian semiotics (as opposed to Peircian) the sign is composed of a signifier (the form which the sign takes) and a signified (the concept it represents). Roland Barthes (1977) applied this to analysing images to argue that they work to 'naturalise' cultural forms. The goal in semiotic analysis is to establish underlying conventions by identifying significant differences and oppositions in an attempt to model a system of categories, relations, connotations, distinctions and rules of combination. By analysing the constituent elements of the Government's *Life Chances* posters (colour, setting, representations of family, race, sexuality, ability) participants developed an understanding of the creation of their affective experiences of regulation vis a vis cultural signs.

**Stimulus-response and devising:** Through repeated performative signposting by the lead artists, participants and researchers were ‘located’ in the novel during the sessions: ‘We are now in the jewellery business inside the novel – what happens next?’. This created a fictional and playful space in which participants could explore what running a business might mean outside of the apparent confines of everyday regulated experience. Workshop encounters created a setting in which to begin imagining a fictional narrative where people came together to participate in jewellery-making workshops and to share their experiences of living on low incomes. Actual participants first shared their lived experiences and then extracted aspects of these to begin devising characters comprised of disparate elements of testimonies from multiple people. This method of ‘making and talking’ (Watson et al, 2016) acted as a prompt for people from very different experiences and cultural heritages to collaborate.

**Developing fictional characters:** The group used their analytical and conversational encounters to begin developing their fictional characters. They used drawing and writing on flip charts and using Google Docs to support a collaborative process. Sessions enabled co-authoring by bringing together participant experiences of regulation through characterisation and narrative. Participants amended and edited aspects of their characters and plotlines all the way through the writing process. Remixing aspects of different people’s experiences allowed us to create hybrid collective-individuals and to re-imagine systems in ways that participants believed would better support their families in contexts of state intervention. Later in the process, the collaborative writing was supported by a scriptwriter who sought to ensure that fiction followed narrative conventions in terms of setting, character, conflict, resolution.

**Transactional analysis:** Drawing loosely on transactional analysis, we designed an approach derived from the therapeutic work of Berne (1958) and ideas from psychoanalysts such as Sigmund Freud in order to understand and map transactions and ego states between adults and children in family therapy. We did not have any intention to adopt this approach in its technical, disciplinary sense. Rather we adapted the approach to focus on the content of transactions between people in a physical interactive space, trying to expose and explore the transactions that are implicit in life systems (i.e. benefits). This enabled participants to take characters from the book and develop them into playable actors in the floor-based game where, depending on the detail of your character you can move to different parts of the *Life Chances* mat denoted by points on interlocking circles modelled on the project logo and jewellery motif.

Key to the successful use of mixed methods in a social practice artwork was the aesthetic and conceptual rigour with which they were employed as intersecting. Each method, encounter and outcome was in a conversation with the other and was focused on the goal of creating a coherent, if distributed, artwork.

### <2> Exploring Regulatory Terrain: Social work

In the course of the workshops in Bristol, four participants spoke about their different experiences of social work, especially in children’s services. One workshop included developing a fictional social work character which raised questions such as: “Who tells a social worker what to do?” “Do social workers get training about parents from a range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds?” “How do you complain about a social worker?” To

develop a better understanding of the children's services field whilst providing a backdrop to the novel's storylines, a social work academic with a long history as a practising social worker, together with a family lawyer, were invited to a workshop to answer participants' questions, and discuss problems and solutions. From this we gained some understanding of social workers' *habitus*, their prime concern being the child, in some cases infused with a different idea of parenting than that of the participants'. The *doxa*, or 'rules of the game', in children's services were not obvious to participants. These included what is legally possible concerning looking after someone else's child (such as private adoption, parental responsibility) and giving up the care of one child to another family member (subsequently the lawyer sent in information about delegating parental responsibility). Significantly there was concern about not knowing the 'rules of the game' in relation to child care procedures. Parents felt there was a lack of transparency about what was happening and why, and what their role was or could be.

There was lack of clarity identified in the group about whether a parent could obtain or query minutes of case conference meetings — the workshop experts advised that whilst minutes cannot be changed, a parent could send in a correction and ask for this to be circulated. Discussion in the workshop particularly focused on an incident reported to the group by one mother who was being audio recorded in an interview with a social worker but was told that she could not make her own recording. This led to several participants endorsing that they had also experienced this and the social worker expressed her concern that this should not happen, but that she was not aware of any practice or legal guidance that would indicate to social workers that it was acceptable for parents to make their own recording.

The lawyer subsequently sent a report from the *Transparency Project*<sup>1</sup> outlining when this can be done to equip parents with the knowledge to challenge practitioners if this situation arose again for individuals (Transparency Project, 2016). This report emphasises the lack of research on this issue and maps why, and in what circumstances, parents may want to have their own audio record of meetings with social workers. Interestingly the report notes that it is unusual for courts to consider recordings from parents and that there are accounts of recordings presented by parents to courts that are of very poor audibility and deemed

inadmissible. The report authors do, however, cite legal cases where parental recordings were considered, although only in one case presented did this influence the court outcome:

In *Medway Council v A & Ors (Learning Disability; Foster Placement)* [2015] EWFC B66 a mother made covert recordings of the abusive and racially insensitive foster carer who she was living with along with her baby, and until the recordings were played she had been disbelieved. The court relied on the recordings and made findings against the foster carer who was clearly heard verbally abusing the mother (Transparency Project, 2016, 6).

The *Transparency Project* report pre-dates the introduction of the *General Data Protection Regulation* (GDPR) of 2018, but it clearly explains to parents and practitioners the legal situation in respect of the *Data Protection Act* (1998) and how parental recordings can be considered in the light of this legislation. At the time of the workshop this guidance was valid and provided assurance to workshop participants that it was legal and possible to ask to record meetings with social workers, and indeed court proceedings, as long as permission was sought in advance. Although in the case of court recordings the report notes that: 'A court is unlikely to give permission unless it is clear that the recording is both relevant and reliable' (Transparency Project, 2016, 14).

The development of storylines in the novel highlights tensions between presenting a sufficiently realistic scenario of social work intervention and giving participants a voice in shaping the narrative. Two issues from the workshop with the lawyer and social worker that were used in the published novel included the right of parents to audio record social work interviews and the legalities of parental responsibility. In both instances scenarios were 'negotiated' between participants whose 'characters' embodied these issues and with those with knowledge of the system, to keep the integrity of characters and narratives while also being realistic. This representation of emotionally difficult experiences was made possible through the fictionalisation processes and through real life negotiations between participants who had devised the characters concerned including the social work student



(developed by one of the community development workers) who is seen to challenge the practicing social worker Debra, in one scene in the novel:

*[The Scene] Debra (social worker) is visiting the home of Shireen, mother of Marlon who she claims is being racially bullied at school. Debra is accompanied by Secnach (visiting social work student from the fictional island of Zantonica, off the coast of Somalia). SHE, Shireen's friend is also present. Debra has sat down and put her digi-recorder on the table ready to record the discussion when.....*

"Hang on," Shireen takes her phone out of her pocket, presses record and puts the phone on the table. "I'm sorry but you can't really do that..." Debra reaches over for the phone.

"Yes she can," replies SHE.

"This is a confidential meeting about a child's welfare so I'm afraid due to data protection, I must ask you..." SHE interrupts Debra. "Shireen can record this meeting, it's within her legal rights."

"This is true," Secnach agrees, "I was reading about this subject in preparation for this meeting. A parent can record a social work meeting if it is for their personal use."

"Yes, well, thank you Seeknatch. I was about to say, before the interruption, that if you are recording the meeting, I must ask you to keep the recording for your personal use only. No sharing on Facebook or whatever," Debra frowns at Secnach and reaches for a biscuit.

"Why would you think Shireen would post personal information about Marlon and her family on social media for all the world to see?" SHE narrows her eyes and shakes her head at Debra. Debra takes off her glasses and smiles. "Yes. Sorry. I meant no offence. Shall we start again?"

"I suggest we do" says SHE.

"Have a seat, please," Debra gestures towards the sofa.

"Thank you for offering me a seat in my own yard," SHE sits down on the edge of the sofa.

Secnach catches SHE murmuring, this woman is a real eediat. Secnach looks over at Debra and can see by the tightness of her lips that she heard it too. (Poulter et al, 2016, 73-74)

The scene then moves to a discussion of parental responsibility for Marlon, as Debra mistakenly assumes that Shireen and SHE are in a same-sex relationship and co-parent the child. This illustrates the lack of sensitivity and knowledge that the social worker has in engaging with the friends who support each other with the care of their children. When Debra realises her mistake she then tries to remove SHE from the discussion as she cannot understand the relevance of her being there if she does not have parental responsibility.

As a piece of fictional writing this provided a space for participants to make public the real situations that they felt were discriminatory, with practitioners who were ill informed of their situation. Leavy (2015) suggests that empathy is created in fictional writing through *Interiority* — which allows readers to access the inner lives and emotions of the characters and through a process of; and *Interpretive gaps*, that is, writing in such a way that: ‘readers have to use their imaginations to fill in gaps that can sensitise them to emotional complexity’ (Leavy, 2015, 57). She claims that these processes are not dissimilar to social science research practice, as both are in the pursuit of *Verisimilitude*: the ‘creation of a realistic, authentic and lifelike portrayal’ (Leavy, 2015, 57). Debra is characterised as a white, middle class, middle-aged social worker who lives in a cottage with a cat. It is this characterisation which prompted us to organise for a Black Jamaican social worker to talk to workshop participants and this felt important at the time to challenge the stereotype portrayed. Yet the embodiment of Debra is symbolic of the white oppression, lack of cultural sensitivity and institutional racism perpetrated by regulatory workers towards them and their families that participants were determined to convey throughout the project process. It was unnecessary to tell the reader how participants *felt* about their experiences of social workers - Debra embodies these experiences and Secnach provides a foil, and an alternative reality within the realm of social work regulation.

Yet in writing the novel, we also leave many things unsaid. These are the ‘*interpretive gaps*’ that Leavy (2015) describes and that are possible in a speculative fiction such as this. We

had no privileged access to any form of 'truth' and these gaps allowed honesty about this and the incorporation of hesitancy and uncertainty about what was known of people's stories, including those of the fictional Debra, who we discover is distracted by her own health concerns and caring for her mother who has dementia. The focus on producing a novel provides opportunities for readers 'to explore meanings rather than truth, existence as opposed to reality' (Tierney, 2004, 162). This is particularly the approach taken as we point to the layering of regulatory systems that impact individuals and the cumulative impact of injustices. In the scene above, SHE is seen challenging social work practices and supporting her friend Shireen. Yet the novel also reveals her own challenges with racism in the workplace and the ways in which she attempts to address this — ultimately resulting in her resignation and increased concern for her family's economic stability.

### <2> Conclusion

In this chapter we argue that a social practice arts approach can enable examination of what are often a dizzying and alienating range of regulations and regulators. *Life Chances* has created a number of obvious tensions and lived contradictions. By supporting an engagement with 'the means of production', we manifested and materialised the agency that collaborators already had but were perhaps not facilitated to act out. Fictional spaces were complemented by real-world spaces in which a creative and critical use of the reified materials and languages of *Life Chances* as Government ideology were reflexively enacted through the creative production of empowered, economically active individuals engaged in creative-entrepreneurial endeavour. This was never intended to represent the neoliberal antidote to poverty. Rather it was a playful exploration of the means of production which confronted the political ideologies embedded in notions of entrepreneurialism. Making and selling jewellery became possible for participants but was never going to be a means out of low income, and we discussed this conflict throughout the project. Ironically, the entrepreneurial agenda has continued in unplanned ways as participants have set up a Community Interest Company focused on supporting young people in impoverished Black communities to develop economic skills through the vehicle of socially engaged art. This focus defies Government agendas of entrepreneurial art as a means of income generation and continues our reification of *Life Chances* through participant's motivations to enable

## Life Chances

young people at the margins access to knowledge and skills to support their economic growth.

The project provides a novel perspective on the role of fiction, in that fiction of this kind can link real people and their lives to the power system and therefore create commentary. Whilst the 'characters' presented have been utilised to illustrate the impact of individual regulatory regimes: asylum processes (Mona); portability of qualifications (Nadjma and Asha) and child protection social work processes (Shireen and SHE), the socially engaged arts methods have also shed important insights on the intersectionality of people's experiences and the spiralling impact of multiple and often punitive regulatory systems on individual families. These insights are essential to social science understandings of the lived realities of regulation and became possible through the methodological approach adopted.

Overall, *Life Chances* has created autonomous artworks that disrupt and force the spectator to question the status quo using utopian thinking to re-imagine the welfare regulatory systems that currently delimit people's lives. This socio-political art practice has both resulted in *objects* of arts practice identified as art and tentative, and as yet precarious *processes* of empowerment, education, participation and democratisation. Importantly *Life Chances* also has unmet potential to affect *spectators*, and it is this potential that continues to be tested in new contexts and with new audiences through engagement with regulators, policy makers and politicians as we explore the potential of the artwork to develop societal capacities to understand the experiences of families in low-income situations in more socially just ways.

**<2>Endnotes**

1 They are a registered charity: 'We explain and discuss family law and family courts in England & Wales, and signpost to useful resources to help people understand the system and the law better'. <http://www.transparencyproject.org.uk/>