ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The moral, the political and social licence in digitally-driven family policy and intervention: Parents negotiating experiential knowledge and 'other' families

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Abstract

The article provides a conceptually informed empirical critique of the pursuit of social licence as a warrant for data linkage and predictive analytics in the field of family policy intervention. It draws on research focusing on parental views of digitally-driven family governance in the United Kingdom. We identify the notion of consensus that undergirds the concept of social licence that acts to obscure inequalities and silence conflict, and to reframe digital surveillance and prediction as a moral rather than political issue. Using focus group and individual interview material, we show how parents assert professional or lay experiential knowledges in making judgements about the legitimacy of and trust in operational data technologies, involving struggles between positionings as parents like 'us' and 'other' parents. We demonstrate how parents have different leverages from these unequal and morally charged social locations. Inevitably, the application of social licence in the domain of digital family policy and intervention is fractured by entrenched social divisions and inequalities.

KEYWORDS
data linkage, family policy, parenting, predictive analytics, social licence

1 | INTRODUCTION

The governance of families has always revolved around the recording and categorisation of their lives (Horsley et al., 2020), but digital technology has transformed exponentially the way that families can be understood and targeted by government agencies. In the United Kingdom and more widely (e.g. Eubanks, 2018; Jørgensen et al., 2021; Leonard, 2018), ambitions for digitally driven governance extend far into welfare policy realms: health, education, social care, housing, taxation, social security, policing, immigration, and so on. Increasingly, electronic linkage of public administrative records and application of predictive analytics for the operational purpose of identifying families for service intervention is promoted (e.g. Department for Digital Culture, Media and Sport, 2020; NL Digitaal Government, 2019; Privy Council Office Canada, 2018; Stats, 2018). The impact on family service delivery, and the shift in how families are related to by the state, has been significant (Horsley et al., 2020), and yet how data is being shared, linked and subject to algorithmic analysis as part of data-steered social policy, and by whom for what purposes, remains opaque (e.g. Dencik, 2022; Edwards & Ugwudike, 2023).

This raises questions about the extent to which transitions to such data use occur without a democratic mandate and transgress legal and ethical norms (van Zoonen, 2020). Advocates for operational data linkage and analytics argue for establishing a 'social licence' mandate for these processes – basically, to be perceived as legitimate and hold the trust of citizens. In the United Kingdom, for example, the Office for Statistics Regulation (2018) devoted a statistics systems report into data linkage to discussing the importance of social licence for such data use, while the Chief Data Officer for the Office for National Statistics has championed efforts to assess and build social licence within the Government's Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (James, 2022). In the case of family policy and services, the linkage and predictive analytics practices involved lie outside of automatic social acceptance norms, trust and consensus, so exhortations for social licence seemingly would apply. All parents are stakeholders in the use of their administrative records but they appear to have played no part in assessments of the legitimacy of the application of digital technologies to information about them and their families for policy planning and service delivery purposes.

In this article we explore social licence for digitally driven governance in family policy fields, raising conceptual and empirical questions about the idea and its feasibility. We begin by noting the societal moral emphasis put on parenting, the 'datafication' of families for application of digital technologies, and the differential social positioning of parents in relation to these issues. We outline the nature of social licence to frame our critical consideration of the concept and our empirical exploration of whether social licence can be negotiated and established among parents for data linking and risk modelling. After outlining our methods for studying parental views on data linkage and predictive analytics, we explore the cleavages between groups of parents in assessing legitimate reasons for digital data processes and asserting authoritative claims. In particular, we uncover how knowledges grounded in parents' professional or lay experiences shape what they regard as warrants for their judgements, and how they position themselves in relation to digitally-steered family policy interventions. The different leverages available to parents from unequal and morally charged social locations is evident, raising serious obstacles for adopting social licence as the policy 'answer' to concerns about implementing digital data practices in family policy planning and service delivery.

2 | DATA LINKING AND RISK MODELLING OF FAMILY DATA

Childrearing has become a highly charged issue and policy field in contemporary Western societies, positioning family and parenting as moral endeavours. Inadequate, harmful parenting is positioned as the root of social problems and as an individual moral failure, while intensive parenting is regarded as foundational to the sustenance of a functional society, and a moral achievement. Mothers are expected to be selflessly committed to their children, held morally responsible for all aspects of their children's lives (see discussions in Gillies et al., 2017;

Lee et al., 2014; Shirani et al., 2012; Wall, 2001). Minimizing risks to children and optimising their development are embedded as defining features of ideal parenting, especially mothering, practices. These notions are part of everyday judgements about parenting/mothering standards and the upbringing of children, manifest for example in the unchallengeable assertion that 'children come first.' And they imbue and justify policies directed towards knowing about families through data and interventions to govern the lives of parents and children, with parents subject to service intervention regarded as stigmatised and morally shamed (Buckley et al., 2011; Edwards & Ugwudike, 2023).

Joining together the separate sources of nationally and locally held information about citizens and their families, and operationalizing this data through algorithmic data analytics, is championed as offering efficient public service delivery and as enabling predictive risk modelling to pre-empt problems of family dysfunction, improving outcomes for children. In the United Kingdom, the Government's National Data Strategy exhorts public services to 'unlock the power of data' and share their administrative records (Department for Digital Culture, Media and Sport, 2020), with an emphasis on data linking for public services working with children and families (House of Lords Select Committee, 2020). Unlocking the power of data involves extensive profiling of families through the mass collection and analysis of administrative records and other digital data, not only to identify those who may require intervention but also in an effort to pre-empt future risks before transgression has occurred. Administrative data can be 'warehoused' electronically by local authorities and subjected to analysis by artificial intelligence to classify and target families. In the United Kingdom one study identified 53 councils who were using predictive analytic systems (Dencik et al., 2019). The accumulated data can also be used to search for identifiable patterns with the intention of generating predictive algorithms to guide policy and service decision making. Merged data is used to score and 'flag' families predicted to be at risk of falling into debt, homelessness, ill health or future mistreatment of children (Gillies & Edwards, 2024; Jørgensen et al., 2021; Redden et al., 2020, 2022). These risk predictions are treated as factual projections of future family problems. Flagged families have been targeted for anticipatory interventions that range from, for example, referrals to healthy eating advice through to alerting social services and the police (e.g. Cook, 2020; Gillies & Edwards, 2024).

Profile extraction through integration and analysis of administrative records is based on whole populations. Digital administrative records on all families are joined up across service sources and subject to predictive analytics to flag up families. Concerns are growing, however, about the impact on families and the potential for such technologies to generate erroneous and discriminatory categorisations. Profiling and risk scoring amplify and perpetuate gendered, classed and racialised family stereotypes and inequalities (Edwards & Ugwudike, 2023; Eubanks, 2018; Redden et al., 2022). With predictive modelling, disadvantaged and marginalised families in particular become positioned in a pre-dysfunctional space (Edwards & Ugwudike, 2023). An administrative 'datafication' of households occurs. Family policy becomes driven by a logic in which families are regarded as data, and data is regarded as enabling knowledge about families and the ability to estimate risk and predict their future (Keddell, 2019). This fundamental shift in family – state relations, involving extensive whole population monitoring and pre-emptive targeted intervention, goes beyond previous accepted practice. As noted in the introduction, internationally and in the United Kingdom, advocates of data linkage and predictive analytics for policy-making and operational service intervention have been turning to the concept of social licence as offering a way forward (e.g. Gulliver et al., 2018; Leonard, 2018; Office for Statistics Regulation, 2018; Paprica et al., 2019).

3 | WHAT IS SOCIAL LICENCE?

Broaching of social licence as a fix for any digitally driven governance concerns about public acceptance often proceeds as if the idea is entirely benign conceptually and empirically. Here we put forward a counter view. We outline the thrust of ideas about the constitution of social licence before raising a set of critical considerations regarding the

role that it plays for policy-making in relation to morally charged issues of parenting involving judgements of good and bad, and where mothers are regarded as having an individualised responsibility to society as a whole for raising their children.

Discussions of social licence generally concur that it concerns social legitimacy and acceptance of policies and practices that lie outside predominant norms, and that it is founded on trust in agencies, transparent provision of information, and evidence of public good. To these, with respect to administrative data linkage, has been added assurance about good governance (Paprica et al., 2019). The concept of social licence has its roots in the mining of physical resources carried out by extraction industries, (e.g. Gehman et al., 2017) but also in sociological theorizing about everyday public affordance of permission for practices that lie beyond normative conventions without incurring social sanction (e.g. Hughes, 1958). Both strands focus on the building and maintaining of social licence among relevant stakeholders. This sort of approach can be seen in definitions mooted in policy documents such the UK Office for Statistics Regulation's description of social licence as 'Building public acceptance and approval for something – in this case data sharing and linkage – beyond relying on legal powers' (2018: 36), and in literature such as Pauline Gulliver and colleagues' discussion of integrated data infrastructure: '(social licence) is the result of an ongoing process of negotiating terms,' and reference to 'the social norms establishing the terms of engagement between state and individual' (2018: 59, 67). But if social licence is to be continuously maintained for a practice, this raises the philosophical knot that the practice will then become a normative convention and thus no longer in need of social licence. Arguments that while social licence acceptance dissolves once not maintained, as against normative acceptance as continuous, have led to calls for a definition of social licence that is not founded on being contrary to general norms (Dare, 2022).

A lack of social licence for data uses outside the norm has been attributed to the absence of the foundational features of legitimacy, trust, informative transparency and demonstrable public good, in backlashes in the United Kingdom, Australia and the US over plans to share personal health records and to link across multiple largescale administrative data sources (e.g. Carter et al., 2015; Easton, 2017; Wachter & Cassel, 2020). In this vein, most investigations of social licence start from a concern with utilizing these assumed bases so as to persuade the public to accept data linkage as legitimate, trustworthy and a public good[1] (e.g. Ford et al., 2019; Stephenson et al., 2022). The withholding or losing of social licence is not on the agenda as a valid outcome (Parsons & Moffat, 2014). Yet research into public attitudes to data uses in the United Kingdom shows that clear information to improve public understanding does not necessarily result in positivity but rather can make people more critical and wary (Kennedy et al., 2022). Perhaps this is why some data linkage proponents assert that dissent needs to be managed (Ballantyne & Stewart, 2019; Butcher, 2019), which moves us on to the critical question of what role social licence plays in governance?

Undergirding the concept of social licence is the notion of consensus, of achieving general agreement. Consensus is integral to ideas about social licence: proponents across various fields of application posit that in order to grant social licence, stakeholders will negotiate and achieve agreement as to the social legitimacy of the non-normative practices at issue and trust in their being for the public good (e.g. Stephenson et al., 2022; Thomson & Boutilier, 2020; White et al., 2021). Social consensus, however, has been argued to function as a means of suppressing debate and obscuring conflict and plurality in liberal society. Mouffe (2015) points to the way that liberal government systems seeking after consensus act to neutralise conflict and block debate. If we apply this analysis to social licence for digital data practices in the family policy sphere, it raises the prospect that the consensus-centred, good governance approach conceals authoritarian practices of rule that occur within liberal-democratic states. 'Knowledges' of its citizens enables state authoritarian practices (Dean, 2002), here governance of families through data surveillance and categorisation. Indeed, social licence has been argued to represent a site of struggle in which power inequalities are played out, with governments setting the parameters within which the public are consulted or involved (Parsons & Moffat, 2014). Illustrating

the authoritarian vein, the idea has been mooted that what professionals and governments consider the collective public good of data linkage and predictive analytics should weigh more heavily than liberalised individual and citizenship rights (Ballantyne & Schaefer, 2018; Ford et al., 2019).

The burying of power relations, for Mouffe, is achieved by removing antagonisms from the democratic political sphere and reframing them as the moral, thereby generating an 'us' (good) which can exist only by demarcation from a 'them' (bad). In the context of family policy then, recognition of the political context of societal inequalities and discrimination in which parents raise their children is obscured (Dorling, 2023; Edmiston, 2018; Finney et al., 2023), replaced by the moral framing of good parents who take individual responsibility for their children's behaviour and outcomes. In the morally charged field of parenting, one mechanism by which there is a shift from attention to the political to a stress on the moral is through a a process of 'Othering,' where the notion of who and what 'others' are and the lives they lead is integral to notions of who and what 'we' are, in which the Other is silenced and delegitimised. Later in this article we will see how distinctions between 'parents like us' and 'other parents' are conjured up, and which intersect with parental negotiations around legitimacy for and trust in digitally-driven governance.

Efforts to generate social licence in the digitally-driven family policy and intervention field would involve negotiation between social actors who are not necessarily equal in terms of their authority to impose meaning. Research into public attitudes to data governance, linkage and use tends to be on a general population (e.g. see Ada Lovelace Institute review, 2022) rather than those who are affected by particular purposes – such as parents in the case of linking and analysis of digital data from and for services working with children and families. As Kennedy et al. (2022), there is no singular public attitude towards data uses (see also Jakesch et al., 2022). This fragmentation is also the case for parents as a sub-population of the public – the group that are key stakeholders in the use of electronic data linkage and preventive analytics for service intervention in families. Systematic socio-economic and racialised divisions will shape parents' life experiences and experiential knowledges, and in turn these will shape perspectives on uses of their own and other families' data. What does this mean for the feasibility of negotiating social licence for this practice, for asserting the legitimacy of and trust in data linkage and analytics, or for raising suspicions and harms? In the context of rapidly growing implementation of digitally driven governance in the field of family policy, where information about all families is pulled into the net, we undertook an investigation of understandings and assessments of these practices among parents of dependent children.

4 | METHODS

We pursued a mixed methods approach to investigating legitimacy and trust for electronic linking and prediction to target service intervention among parents for our overall project, involving a survey, focus groups and individual interviews.[2] In our subsequent discussion we concentrate on analyses of the group and individual material since we are concerned with intensive and in-depth meaning rather than extensive overview (details of the survey are available in Edwards et al., 2021). The study received ethical approval.[3] We have used pseudonyms and obscured identificatory details in discussing focus group and individual interview participants.

We held discussions with homogenous groups of parents for a deep understanding of how they articulated and negotiated their perspectives on digital data governance practices. We held nine online focus groups with an average of four participants in each: respectively, parents of disabled children ($\times$1), home-maker mothers ($\times$1), parents in professional occupations ($\times$2), fathers ($\times$1), black mothers ($\times$2), and lone mothers ($\times$2). Participants were recruited through social media and support organizations. The group participants were self-selecting but nonetheless are drawn from a range of social and economic sub-populations. The topic-based discussions

intended to hear parents' views on the acceptability of operational data linkage rather than lived experiences, but as we will see group participants drew on their experiential knowledges to assert views. The composition of our focus groups allowed us to identify key points of consensus and challenge for parents in similar circumstances, and the warrants used for these.

We also considered how perceptions of operational data linkage may be shaped where parents have experience of engaging with family support and intervention. We conducted online interviews with 23 mothers and fathers of dependent children who used or were subject to such services, recruited through services and support organizations. Again, this is a self-selecting group of parents, but their accounts are indicative. The interviews covered the parents' views of the type of data held about them by services they access, and their bases for trust or distrust in operational data linkage and predictive analytics.

We treated explanations of data linkage and predictive analytics as processes in our data generation. We initially described administrative data records and the application of digital technologies and then reinforced this as the group discussions and individual interviews progressed through vignette type examples. We undertook a reflexive thematic analysis of our group and individual data (Braun & Clarke, 2019) to generate our interpretive analysis of the exchanges in the group discussions and individual interviews. Such an analysis aims for generalizability as recognition, and contextual and analytic transferability within a qualitative paradigm (Smith, 2018).

The following discussion brings our group and individual sources into dialogue, to provide an understanding of some of the knotty issues at play when considering parental social licence as a way forward for concerns about operational data linkage and predictive modelling. Ultimately, the analysis points up the moralistic constructions of us and them rooted in parents' social positioning and lived experience. These constructions, and their roots in social divisions, call into serious question the empirical feasibility of pursuing social licence as a solution to unease with digitally driven governance in family policy fields.

5 | DYNAMICS OF EXPERIENTIAL KNOWLEDGES IN NEGOTIATING SOCIAL LICENCE

The socially located dynamics involved in authoritative warrants for interventions that optimise children's upbringing, and in views on the joining up administrative records and application of predictive analytics was evident in our analysis of the survey data, as we have discussed in detail elsewhere (Edwards et al., 2021). Predictive algorithms are less likely to flag up affluent families as potential risks and more likely to target disadvantaged parents for intervention. This skewing was also the case for parents' assessments of legitimacy and trust in the application of digital technologies obtained via the survey (elaborated in Edwards et al., 2021). There was a consensus across the parent survey participants at the generalised level about the acceptability of identifying families that might need support and intervening pre-emptively in any risk of child abuse. Further questions about the specifics threw a different light, however. Social positioning and lived experience mean that different groups of parents can see the relationship between trust and fairness in divergent ways, with these divisions forming the wider backdrop in which parents and others judge digitally driven governance (e.g. Jakesch et al., 2022; Leonard, 2018). In Edwards et al. (2021) we discuss our finding that parents from professional/managerial and more affluent groups[4] in our survey were far more likely to trust various agencies to join up data for operational purposes and regard data analytics processes as unbiased. In contrast, parents from marginalised social groups, such as Black parents and lone parents, could regard operational data linkage and analytics for intervention as inaccurate and discriminatory, and were far less likely to see it as legitimate and trustworthy.

We were able to explore these indicative fissures through the group and individual interviews with parents discussed here. The focus groups especially provided insights into claims and challenges during discussion. Social

divisions in views on data linkage and analytics were illuminated in the power dynamics between the professional and lay experiential knowledges asserted as recurrent sources of authority. Their concomitant 'us' and 'them' positioning in relation to families in need of intervention meant that, as we shall see, they acted as a mechanism for a moral rather than political framing.

Parents currently or recently employed in professional occupations often referenced their employment experiences as sources of authority for their views. In most cases this was to establish a legitimate warrant for the linking and predictive processes, but professional experience sometimes also was invoked as a knowledgeable position from which to complicate any clear-cut trust. As might be expected, a group of White fathers working in the voluntary family support sector evinced a consensus about data linkage being a public good in the best interests of families. Nonetheless there were concerns raised from a professional positioning too, indicating the issue as a potential site of struggle:

> Kevin: I worked for [a family support service] about 15 years ago and they were talking then about having one point of access for information for services … we need more services so that people can get the right kind of services or the right support at the right time … if we had a central place for records, then they would all be linked, and that would definitely help those services and ultimately help [parents] I think…
>
> Lionel: … I'm coming from 23 years of working within [family support] services, so I've come from a point of view particularly in the extreme end where there are safeguarding concerns or developmental concerns … so on the one hand there's clear benefits for society. On the other, which is one of the – you know, I'm not entirely sure that we have the infrastructure.
>
> Nigel: Yeah, I think I'm kind of the same as Lionel there as well. So my background is working in [education] and knowing how especially the working together to safeguard children, to share information … I think it's great in one sense definitely to assess and see how families could benefit in certain things, or to predict what might happen, but also I think it's the other side of who can get access to the information …
>
> Martin: … If you're a service-user crossing services, and particularly if you're in a mindset where you just need help [data linking means] you don't need to ask for the help again and again and again … So yeah, there's definitely loads of benefits for it and, from my point of view, not much negative …
>
> Lionel: … I can absolutely see the benefit but again it's how it's used, what are the safeguards around it … I'm sounding really cynical today. I wasn't expecting to be like this. This is terrible.
>
> Kevin: I think I'm leaning towards what Lionel was saying there …
>
> Martin: … I'm with the old adage of if you've got nothing to hide, what's the problem … if you've got nothing to hide then there shouldn't be an issue with it …
>
> Lionel: … I was just going to make one really quick point and it kind of links into something that Kevin said before. It's about safeguards … And something that Martin said, if you've not got something to hide. It might not be that because you've not got something to hide, it might be because you don't necessarily trust the people that have access to that information.

The shared source of authoritative professional knowledge that the fathers expressed meant that they were negotiating the pros and cons of electronic linkage and analytics from an equal footing. And, as was the case for other parents in professional occupations in other groups whether they worked in family relevant fields or not, they were also asserting moral legitimacy for these data processes in relation to 'others' – the (other) families in need of support who would benefit from intervention.

Lay experiential knowledge could also be used to confer legitimacy on operational data linkage because of the supportive benefits, but also to challenge them. A group of White mothers of disabled children, all home-based and

with little in the way of professional backgrounds, built a consensus about data linkage as useful for parents so that they do not have to keep repeating information to different services (the lay version of Martin's professional point above). Once this benefit of data linkage for parents was established however, other elements of lay experiential knowledge came into play that challenged the assumptions underpinning the data that was joined up for predictive risk assessment, positioning the issue politically, as in the purview of democratic liberalism:

> Hattie: … [But] we've found because of our status as home educators, this information is being shared with people. And we're automatically being categorized as at-risk families purely because we're home educating our children … So there are wild assumptions being made about people that are just simply not true and absolutely unacceptable from my point of view.
>
> Heidi: Obviously GDPR principles. But information that you possibly share when they're six doesn't apply when they're 14 and there's nothing – because you're not in control of the information you don't know where it's shared to, when it could be shared to a lot of different agencies. Then you don't know what's out there

Like the professional fathers' group, the mothers of disabled children were negotiating whether or not electronic linking and analysis of administrative records was legitimate and trustworthy from an equal footing, a shared base of lay experiential knowledge. An aspect of that knowledge was that they could be the families judged as potential risks that the professionals cited as social licence for data linkage and predictive analytics.

Further insight into the assertions of professional and lay experiential knowledges and who is the focus of data linkage and predictive analytics is provided by a comparison of two focus groups, both involving lone mothers. One group consisted of mothers who were at home full time on low incomes. All were lone parents apart from one, and the group comprised a mix of ethnicities: White, Black and Asian. In contrast, participants in the other group were all White lone mothers who were employed mainly in professional occupations in agriculture, public and commerce sectors. The thrust of assertions concerning operational digital technologies in each group was distinct.

The first group negotiated their understanding of the legitimacy of data linkage and predictive analytics around lay experiential knowledge:

> Jasmine: I think it's acceptable for stuff like domestic violence or anything along the lines of child protection and that sort of thing …
>
> Delilah: Yeah …
>
> Evie: … Well to be honest I had a situation where information was shared and unfortunately the information wasn't accurate, it was actually not true … it was to do with one of my children to be honest, and I became aware of this information when a report was done on him, on one of my kids, and I was like 'woah' … I mean I'm not being funny but I'm thinking about myself and my reputation here, and the reputation of my child … I had sought help from a solicitor … it wasn't the most desired result, because of the law they weren't able to actually omit that entry that they put in about my child, okay, which wasn't true, but they were certainly able to update it … I was like 'We're not having that because that's not us. We're people of good character and it's not fair' …
>
> Jasmine: … I was just completely agreeing …
>
> Delilah: I totally agree with that. Obviously I did say that I would be fine with it [data linkage] but then I look at it from that perspective, it's different …
>
> Naok: … No, there are circumstances [for data linking]. [But] I think the circumstances always change and you cannot predict on the basis of past information …
>
> Evie: … there's always room sadly for bias I believe as well from the person recording the data. I was very very hurt, to be honest, and very aggrieved. With the greatest respect, especially being

somebody who can, you know, I consider myself as being of good character. I feel that we were stereotyped you know. I am conscious that we were … I know race is a sensitive subject, especially at the moment, in the media but unfortunately, you know, I was a victim of it, you know, and I'm just being honest and just speaking my truth. Yeah. So there is always error, there is always areas for the person recording the data to sadly, you know, act on their preconceived or biases that they already have, underlying biases.

Jasmine: It's sad, you know, you get the judgmental ones, and it'll be one thing and they'll make it out to be something big.

The mothers were considering the electronic linkage of administrative data from a largely shared lay experiential knowledge rooted in familial and racialised locations that might position them as in need of intervention – and that did in Evie's case. Faced with the legitimacy of Evie's lay experiential knowledge, the mothers who had initially agreed the public good of these processes then related to the concerns about data inaccuracies and analytic discrimination. Data linkage and predictive analytics had shifted from being relevant to 'other' families, where violence and abuse may be occurring, to families 'of good character' who could be and indeed were one of them. Applying Mouffe's ideas, the discussion also shifts from the moral field of good and bad character families to the political field of race and discrimination.

In contrast, discussion in the second group demonstrates the leverage of professional knowledge as a source of authority. This group of lone mothers initially considered drawbacks concerning inaccurate assumptions raised by participants: Reese, Mary and Edith. These caveats were over-ridden in the face of Lena's and Vana's professional experiential knowledge establishing that data linkage and predictive analytics was for the public good, enabling support for the sort of families who are deprived and vulnerable, and safeguarding children at risk:

Reese: Obviously child protection is really important. But I think my concern would be that they would be flagging families to social services when based on almost certain presumptions which may or may not be accurate …

Mary: … yeah, I tend to agree a little bit with that …

Lena: … if there is an ongoing health need or there's an issue with social care, with a family in a deprived area, to have just a little bit of fencing around the family, so when something does happen it can get rolling a bit quicker, is advantageous … and I suppose you're predicting what will happen in the future, having areas that are slightly deprived when you know that people are below the poverty line or anything like that …

Edith: … there are some neighbourhoods that, yeah, you were talking about this, not so privileged, like with council flats and low income. And the authorities just presume that crime is higher there and children are not taken good care of or they are at risk … Because the risk might not be as high as the authorities, we assume it is. And children can be taken when another solution can be found here …

Vana: … Within my job, because I [work in the health service] we do rely on people allowing their information shared. And I find my job much harder if people don't share their information. It does streamline things. And I also think that collating information about people's backgrounds, poverty, whether the children are in school, home-schooled, all the things like that, I think can be beneficial … it helps identify the people that could be vulnerable, could be at need …

Lena: … I can't think who said it earlier, that there's the concern of children being taken away. Well actually that doesn't happen and I know this. I'm a magistrate and I deal with family. This is so, so way down the list of things unless it's an immediate safeguarding issue where it's sort of sexual or life or a real risk …

> *Vana*: ... I think there are certain things that need to be shared without a doubt that you shouldn't even be able to opt out of. For instance, anything to do with child protection, healthcare. If you don't share that kind of information then it's putting people at risk, vulnerable people at risk ...
>
> *Edith*: ... [in education] it's just required with safeguarding because that's the most important thing in taking care of children, yeah, that's the most you write about in your [education] courses. Every year you're sort of required by law to do a refreshment in safeguarding.

Professional experiential knowledge was not always prioritised as a source of authority for parents in professional occupations, however. The concerns about inaccurate data in administrative records and discriminatory assumptions that would likely infuse application of digital technologies which became muted issues for the group of White lone mother professionals, could be primary for Black parents in professional occupations. This assessment was indicated in the survey findings for Black parents overall, including those in managerial and professional occupations (Edwards et al., 2021). In their group discussion, Dina who worked for a voluntary agency supporting families, and Eve, employed in retail, agreed that data linking might serve some public good principle. But they built upon each others' accounts to assert authoritative lay knowledge of racial discrimination in administrative data and how an algorithmic analysis would be understood, based on their own and others' experience of institutional racial discrimination:

> *Dina*: I think it's [joining up administrative records] a good idea but with everything to do with data it can be misinterpreted by the persons who is going to access that information. So that's my biggest concern is that in theory it's a great idea, but having people with their own agendas, maybe their own biases and expectations, their own projections, that in itself could then be dangers for that family where they are perhaps put into an intervention based upon a person's expectations of the family rather than actual proof, it that makes any sense.
>
> *Eve*: As Dina said, who is using it, how? It can have an advantage and it may have some negative impact as well ...
>
> *Dina*: ... my own experiences as a mother, as a sister to a young man who found himself in trouble with the police, not through any fault of his own but because of the stereotypes that people have ...
>
> *Eve*: ... as Dina said, from the friends, there's families, from everybody of my colour, you hear that type of story ...

6 | 'OTHER' FAMILIES AS A MORAL WARRANT FOR SOCIAL LICENCE

Earlier we noted the issue of othering in the logic of social licence, with its undergirding politics of consensus, and its separation into an 'us' of child protection agencies and a 'them' of families in need of support and preventive intervention (Butcher, 2019). As we have seen in our discussion of groups of parents discussing data linkage and predictive analytics, experiential knowledge could also involve differential 'us and them.' These were positioning around whether parents asserted the need to intervene in 'other' families as a moral warrant, providing a mandate through claims about the good that would be done and harms avoided by intervening in others' lives, or whether they might see a situation where they could fall into that 'other,' harmful parenting categorisation.

The homogeneity of each focus groups lent itself to the assertion of either professional or lay experiential knowledges as sources of authority in considering legitimacy of and trust in data linkage and predictive analytics. It begs the question of what may happen when contradictory professional and lay knowledges meet. The parents who participated in individual interviews for our research all had some form of service intervention in their family lives. Although most were from disadvantaged social groups, several had backgrounds in a professional occupation. This dual experience could invoke an internal negotiation or struggle between professional and lay knowledges over electronic linking and analysis of administrative records. Lisa, for example, had previously worked as a professional in

family service provision but was now bringing up her children fulltime and in receipt of support services for one of them. Lisa raised her prior work experience several times throughout her interview, invoking this authoritative source of professional experiential knowledge to legitimise data linkage processes as a public good and not acknowledging her own 'personal level' lay experiences. At one point however, a lay perspective was evident, where the sharing all previous data on her family did seem concerning to her:

> I have got a bit of an insight, but not on a personal level just through supporting other families … I think it (data linking) is a positive thing. I think there are a lot of gaps that people and families can fall through and opportunities can be missed, information can be missed. Particularly I am thinking more of the vulnerable side of things … I think it is good to look at a more prevention side of things than when things have got to a crisis point … I don't think it is our (family's) entire history that has been joined together, but I know parts of care and support needs for my (child) have been shared amongst different agencies. But I probably wouldn't feel comfortable with them knowing from start to now because it is not relevant, it is not needed.

For the greater part, Lisa's account avoided professional and lay conflict by positioning herself on the professional side, pointing to 'these' other, vulnerable families who are not her family as the warrant for data linkage. Given the morally charged nature of parenting, where parents in need of intervention are stigmatised (Buckley et al., 2011), Lisa relied on a moral warrant as a professional to dissolve the conflictual discomfort of being the 'other.'

Parents who were subject to intervention in their parenting could see operational data linkage and analytics as legitimate on the basis of their lay experience. Susie worked in education and was subject to multi-agency safeguarding intervention. She used both her experience as in a professional occupation to assert her trust in data linkage and her lay experience as a moral warrant for its implementation. But she nonetheless struggled with where her family was positioned in relation to the other 'sort' of families who were in need of involvement. She was concerned that intervention meant her family could be perceived as indistinguishable from those whose parenting was inadequate, not doing a 'good' job in raising children:

> I mean I've always worked (in education services) so I know that that is how it (data linkage) happens because if you've got a concern about a child or a family, there's no point in keeping it within the (service) because it's not getting them the help and support that they might need … I'll always do anything that I can to help (with my problems), like support or whatever, but at the same time you sort of think, 'Oh am I not doing a good enough job?' and 'Oh I don't like all these people suddenly being involved.' But I also know it can only help and it has helped. It just seems like we're not the sort of family that need people involved because we are not, but obviously we have and it has helped … I suppose like in my case, it (data linkage) doesn't bother me, like I've got nothing to hide.

Susie's reference to having 'nothing to hide' raises another mechanism of distinguishing from those 'other' sort of families, one where any resistance to digital surveillance is delegitimised morally; silencing political debate about dissent as Mouffe identifies. The assertion of having 'nothing to hide' for data surveillance to uncover was a recurrent theme in our group and individual discussions. Parents who were worried about or would not cooperate with data linkage were regarded as having something bad to hide, rendering their resistance suspect and invalid. Parents subject to various forms of intervention could also see data linkage and predictive analytics as justified because it is 'other,' vulnerable and risky families who require intervention. In the highly charged, culturally judged, context of parenting, having 'nothing to hide' was a means of parents positioning themselves morally apart from those 'other' parents who did have something to hide, despite themselves having interventions in their family lives. For example, Rahina who used family support services referred to her family as 'normal people' and thus not subject to any risks in having information about their family linked up. We also saw that the moral positioning of having nothing to hide

was raised by one of the fathers in the professional focus group, Martin, and then challenged by Lionel as a political issue of trust in those accessing and using the data.

7 | CONCLUSION

Our discussion of parents' views on data linkage and predictive analytics raises conceptual and empirical questions about the pursuit of social licence to provide a warrant for these digital data processes in the morally charged field of family policy intervention. Conceptually we highlighted how the idea of consensus that undergirds social licence silences conflict and debate in a liberal society. In the field of digitally driven data governance adopting the concept of social licence attempts to neutralise operational electronic surveillance of families and prediction risk modelling, obscuring these data technologies as a site of power inequalities and struggle, and moving these practices from the realm of political decisions into the sphere of the moral.

Empirically, we drew out the power dynamics between parents' assertions of professional knowledge and experience, and of lay experiential knowledge, and the unequal interaction between them in considering legitimacy for and trust in data linkage and predictive analytics. We explored how these experiential knowledges involve struggles between positionings as parents like 'us' and 'other' parents. Those other parents are vulnerable, deprived, in need, and have things to hide about their family life. The demarcation acts as an integral contrast to the parental 'us,' who are none of these things. In the process the 'other' parents are silenced and delegitimised morally, unable even to consent let alone dissent to the profiling use that their and other parents' administrative records are put. But we also saw that where parents were positioned or pulled into the 'other' category themselves, as parents to a disabled child, as racialised, as in receipt of family services intervention, the politics of discrimination and surveillance became more evident.

Clearly, parents have different experiences, knowledges and leverages from unequal and morally charged social locations, bringing both the feasibility and desirability of building and maintaining parental social licence as a warrant for implementing digital data practices into serious question. Our analysis provides a critique of any efforts to pursue social licence as a mandate for legitimizing data-driven governance and surveillance of families. Consensual endorsement of digitally-driven family policy and intervention is not possible where there are cleavages and fractures in parents' experiences and judgements that are shaped by entrenched social divisions and embedded inequalities in wider society (Dorling, 2023; Edmiston, 2018; Finney et al., 2023). Inevitably utilizing social licence for digitally-driven family policy and service delivery is a flawed project, where moral distinctions act to obscure the politics of underlying antagonistic power struggles.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data that support the findings of this study is archived with the UK Data Service and available on registration.

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ENDNOTES
[1] Discussions about public acceptance of data linkage can relate either to research or to operational use. It is the latter that concerns us here.

[2] Data from the survey, focus groups and individual interviews are archived and available at https://reshare.ukdataservice.ac.uk/856334/.

[3] Ethical approval for the focus group and individual interviews reported here was given by the University of Southampton ERGO ID 61621.

[4] The survey was commissioned from NatCen, and used the UK Registrar General's socio-economic groupings: https://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/classificationsandstandards/otherclassifications/thenationalstatisticssocioeconomicclassificationnssecrebasedonsoc2010#conceptual-basis.

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