

# **Fixing Change – An Ethnographic Study of Child Protection Practice**

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## Abstract

This thesis is concerned with the methods that accomplish a central project of child protection social work, parental self-transformation. Face-to-face practice in child protection has rarely been described in terms of the lived organisational detail of the professional methods in and through which it is accomplished. That this detail is missed is a central analytic matter, but also results in misplaced exhortations to practitioners that fail to incorporate the realities of practice. This thesis recovers the situated detail of 'change methods' in child protection practice by describing the interactional work through which change, or lack thereof, is achieved. 'Change methods' refer to the methodical ways in which social workers, parents and professionals accomplish parental selves as workable objects. These include the interactional forms in which allegations of deviance are produced and dealt with, and those through which institutional trajectories of change, or lack thereof are accomplished. The term 'fixing' here refers to the work that goes into accomplishing a parental identity as workable, or not, by making it appear static, as a basis from which to proceed.

This thesis contributes to rethinking existing approaches to social work research by drawing together ethnographic and ethnomethodological insights. Through ethnomethodological ethnography, it pays close attention to the 'change methods' in and through which parental transformation is accomplished interactionally over time. Shadowing social workers as they worked with five families over the course of ten months made it possible to stay with the phenomenon of child protection change methods. Attending to members' categorisation practices made it possible to show 1. How social workers delimit and enable parental change; 2. How accounts of parental change are achieved in and through normative categorisation practices over time; and 3. Some of the professional methods involved in charting and accounting for such change. Through describing the observable professional logics in action, it is possible to see that the moral work of parental self-transformation, is not simply 'done by' social workers but *is* the very stuff of child protection social work.

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## **Statement of originality**

The research in this thesis is original work produced for the purposes of fulfilling the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. At the time of submission, I have written two papers based on this research. The first is a chapter published in an edited collection that presents data found in Part One of Chapter Seven of the thesis in a discussion of 'facting' (see Sheehan, 2020). The second is a paper for Qualitative Social Work that presents data found in Chapter Six of the thesis to describe the accomplishment of 'moral objects' in social work (see Sheehan and Smith, forthcoming).

## Introduction

This thesis recovers the situated detail of ‘change methods’ in child protection practice. The central way in which social workers achieve child protection is through interactional work to accomplish parental change, yet we know little about how this work takes place. Whilst studies have documented the categorisation practices involved in office based case talk (White, 1997; Pithouse, 1998) and case files (Parton et al., 1997) none have taken an ethnographic approach to describe how change is achieved interactionally beyond the confines of the office. This thesis addresses the lack of attention to change work in social work research by describing the project of parental transformation in child protection practice. Through ethnomethodological ethnography, this thesis pays close attention to the ‘change methods’ in and through which parental transformation is accomplished interactionally over time. ‘Change methods’ refer to the methodical ways in which social workers, parents and professionals accomplish parental selves as workable objects. These include the interactional forms in which allegations of deviance are produced and dealt with, and those through which institutional trajectories of change, or lack thereof are accomplished. Whilst the descriptions of change methods in this thesis are inevitably partial, they provide an understanding of how parental change is accounted for in situ and the interactional and institutional possibilities this affords across practice settings. This in turn enables a description of child protection social work as it is, rather than how we might like it to be, thus avoiding poorly evidenced exhortations to practitioners to ‘improve’ their practice.

My experience as a social worker has been central to this research, both in terms of access to the field site, a local authority child protection team in Wales, and my understanding of professional practice. It also shaped the type of study as I was determined not to engage in research seeking to evaluate and make simplistic recommendations for practice. As a practitioner with experience of working across teams in five local authorities, I had a sense of how ‘new’ ways and models of working that promise shifts in how parents and social workers experience child protection become subsumed within usual ways of working. The most recent shift in Wales has been towards ‘co-production’ in which the values of power sharing and equal partnership are espoused as central to social work and where social workers must ask families ‘what matters’ to them has arguably befallen a similar fate (Welsh

Government, 2019). Whatever the latest formulation of ‘best’ practice, the institutional project of child protection has seemingly enduring requirements that need to be satisfied. I am interested in moving beyond the rhetoric of whether social workers are failing children either through too much or not enough investigative work, and instead charting the methodical ways of working that constitute child protection. By attending to social worker-client<sup>1</sup> interaction, this thesis aims to make the seemingly enduring requirements of child protection observable through the accomplishment of ‘professional vision’ (Goodwin, 1994) as it is of course in repeated interactions over time that any such sense of stability may be gleaned. I make the case that the interactional accomplishment of ‘parental change’ acts as a proxy for child safety. Through the analysis, I show that the primary means through which this is accomplished is interactional work *with* parents and *on* parental selves.

## Shape of the thesis

In Chapter One, I make the argument that a central project of child protection social work is accomplishing individualised parental change. I set out and describe the case of interest to the thesis – child protection practice, before going on to outline the topic of interest – parental self-transformation. I pay particular attention the findings of ethnographic and ethnomethodological studies of practice as these offer detailed accounts of how elements of child protection practice are accomplished. Drawing on these studies I demonstrate the centrality of normative categorisation practices to the project of parental change and make the case for studying interactions between social workers and clients over time as key to understanding how ‘change methods’ are accomplished. I show how a lack of concern with change talk beyond the confines of the office has resulted in a lack of understanding about how ‘change’ is achieved in interactions between social workers and parents and set out key research questions to address this:

- How do social workers engage in efforts to prevent potential abuse through interlinked interactions that delimit or enable parental change?

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the thesis, I use the term ‘client’ rather than ‘service user’ as this is the term used in the literature describing the moral work of child protection practice (de Montigny 2018; Hall et al., 2014). Further, social workers at the field site tended to use the term ‘parent’ or ‘mum’ and ‘dad’ when describing the parent or carer of a child they work with.



- How are accounts of parental change, or lack of change, achieved in and through normative categorisation practices over time?
- What are some of the professional methods involved in charting and accounting for such change?

A local authority child protection team in Wales, 'Salina', provided an ideal setting in which to explore these research questions ethnographically. Spending 10 months shadowing child protection social workers as they worked with five families offered an approach to fieldwork that enabled me to observe child protection 'change methods' as they unfolded over time. I introduce the field site in Chapter Two and offer an account of the team, the families and the particulars of the formal organisation of local practice. I describe how my professional experience as a social worker in child protection enabled me to access this field site with relative ease and provided me the competency required to understand professional life as practitioners themselves comprehend and practice it. Whilst there have been recent shifts for practitioners in responding to the pandemic and in practicing as high-profile child deaths once again make headlines (Townsend, 2021), the fieldwork took place in 2019-2020, prior to these latest changes. Regardless, as I have argued elsewhere, members use existing methods to deal with what have been termed 'unprecedented' times (Smith et al., 2020), meaning the generalisability of the practices described in this thesis remain relevant. As a field site, Salina offered access to rich data through which to describe 'change methods' in child protection social work.

Chapter Three 'A Biography of the Research Methods' takes seriously the 'live' nature of the research and makes explicit the twists, turns and changes that occurred throughout. By refusing to present the research process as smooth, I hope to make clear the evolving nature of research and reassure other doctoral researchers of the value of a flexible approach to methods that actively encourages criticality and deliberation. By charting how I came to the PhD, the evolving research aims and ethical quandaries I experienced, I make explicit the choices and values that underpin this research. Together, these elements chart the type and degree of my own competence in the field, my deliberations over method with reference to key influences, and my argument for ethnomethodological ethnography (Randall et al., 2020). The chapter presents how I came to 'ethnomethodological ethnography' as an approach to studying 'change methods' that retains a resolute focus on members'

practices. It outlines the value of ethnomethodological sensibilities for studies of professional practice, which enable the explication of 'professional vision' (Goodwin, 1994), which here refers to how social workers see and know parental change in practice. I also make the case for taking inspiration from ethnomethodological membership categorisation analysis which offers a way to describe professional vision in action by charting members' inferential reasoning in situ, the reasoning in and through which parental change is accomplished.

Chapter Four outlines the practicalities of 'doing fieldwork' and the approach to analysis. This chapter is more practical in tone than the 'Biography of Methods' chapter as it aims to inform the reader of what this ethnomethodological ethnography looked like in practice, and the specific steps taken in analysis. In it, I deal with practical questions related to field work such as issues of access, how I should be in the field, how I can see and record the detail of practice, and how I can recover a scene through explication. I also deal with practical questions related to the quality of the thesis and make the argument for plausibility to be the central marker of quality assessment, by which I mean that a social worker should be able to read my analysis and recognise the work and the respecification of that work as of the social world of social work. A possible limitation here is the use of ethnomethodological language which can present a barrier to understanding for those not well versed in it. With that in mind, I limit the use of ethnomethodological terms where possible and provide an account of those terms when they are used. I conclude with a discussion of ethnomethodological reflexivity, which means that the sense of a thing and the elements in and through which it is accomplished are internally related and must be understood as a whole (Hester and Eglin, 1997), in relation to my approach to analysis and writing.

Three analysis chapters consider the detailed methods of parental change in child protection. The first two analysis chapters provide detailed description of a central method in child protection, the production of 'moral objects', which are interactional forms that enable the social worker to produce a possible category of deviant parent, and through which they can assess or 'test' whether a parent responds to this as requiring moral work. This analysis draws on fieldnote data of two assessment sessions with different families and describes the role of 'moral objects' in assessing and projecting parental change. The second analysis chapter builds on the first and

draws on fieldnotes from a core group to describe how 'moral objects' are accomplished and how through associated methods the social worker maps rights and responsibilities in situ and in the projection of institutional futures.

Together, these chapters describe the methods through which social workers see and know parental change in practice and how this work is co-accomplished with parents, families and professionals. They describe the expectation of moral work in child protection and the ideal requirement of parental transformation to achieve child safety. They show how this work relies upon the establishment of deviant identities and contribute to a sociological understanding of identity as situated rather than fixed. They also describe how, through the production of moral objects, the institutional context of assessment and core group are accomplished, thus contributing to an ethnomethodological understanding of context as a reflexive accomplishment of situated interaction. These chapters focus on specific scenes of practice rather than a case unfolding over time in order to allow for the detailed description of 'change methods'. Nonetheless, they consider in detail the situated accomplishment of the extended institutional trajectory of the case, and are informed by ethnographic understanding of the case as a whole.

The third analysis chapter, 'Fixing change through finding facts in the court process', is more ethnographic in tone, drawing on data from a series of interactions across the course of a case. This chapter charts how social workers and allied professionals accomplish and re-accomplish the facts of the case to work up accounts of when change is not possible. Part one of this chapter describes social work change methods in court oriented and court based social work in which the accomplishment of 'negative trajectories' allows deviant identities to be 'fixed'. In describing how though the live process of 'facting' (Sheehan, 2021) the facts of the case are accomplished, how they relate to parent identity and to social worker identity, and how through this process possibilities for change are delimited, I show how 'fixing change', or making it static, is central to limiting the possibilities of future parental care of a child. In doing so, I also describe how the relationality of professional and parent identity within an arena of professional scrutiny runs through social workers' situated reasoning. Part two of this chapter shifts the analytic focus to the social organisation of change practices in and through occasioned use of the court, providing descriptive detail of the exclusionary practices of court work. Together, these partial analyses of a case

provide a detailed description of court oriented and court-based social work that has to date been missing from child protection research. They pay particular attention to how possibilities of parental change are delimited through 'facting' and how this is tied to issues of professional accountability within the occasioned use of institutional space.

I draw the analysis chapters together in a discussion of what the particular 'change methods' described in this thesis tell us about child protection practice. I consider the implications for practice, policy and research, and outline how this work contributes to social work research and ethnomethodological research. Whilst child protection practice is the case of interest to this thesis, the analyses hold relevance for work studies concerned with the interactional accomplishment of 'professional' practices. They describe the little understood project of parental transformation in child protection practice and specify certain 'change methods' through which this is achieved, and they contribute to an understanding of the situated accomplishment of institutional work through the description of 'professional vision'.

It is with the aims and the shape of the thesis in mind that I begin the exploration of child protection and the project of parental change.

# **Chapter One**

## **Child Protection and the Project of Parental Change**

### **Introduction**

A central project of child protection social work is accomplishing individualised parental change. This project is co-accomplished with parents and any review of relevant literature necessitates a focus on studies of practice interaction. Here I set out the case of interest to this thesis, child protection social work, before reviewing studies describing how change in child protection practice gets done. A range of studies describe the situated detail of child protection practice, yet none do so with specific consideration of this key professional project – accomplishing parental change. Those that touch on methods of persuasion, asymmetries of talk, and the production of knowledge and identities through talk each describe relevant practices in and through which child protection is accomplished and offer a fascinating point of departure. I make three central claims in setting up this thesis. First, that child protection social workers are in the business of accomplishing parental change, accounts of which serve as proxy evidence for reduced or increased risk to the child. Second, that accounts of parental change are achieved in and through normative categorisation practices. Third, interactions between social workers and clients over time are key sites where such ‘change practices’ are accomplished. I consider what prior child protection and sociological work has to say about the issue of parental change as an institutional work project and discuss the unique contribution of a study that describes situated projects of parental change as they play out.

### **Child protection, child abuse and parental change**

Child protection is a specific ‘field’ of organised action that accomplishes the practical problem of what is considered child abuse for members and how to address it. Those concerned with this problem include social workers and their colleagues, families, policy makers, researchers, and the media. Each of these groups operate in specific yet connected workplaces, with attendant cultures-in-action and *raison d’etres*. Presenting the ‘case’ of child protection without noting the daily interactional and textual work that goes on in producing and sustaining such diverse work would do

injustice to the praxiological approach I am taking. With this in mind, I outline the case of child protection social work self-consciously to meet the requirement of a literature review for a doctoral thesis, whilst attending to the need for a re-specification of many of the lines of analysis and research findings it identifies. Here, I consider what child protection is before going on to discuss what child protection social workers do.

Child protection social work and child abuse are connected through work practices. Since the 1900's child protection practitioners had legal powers and responsibility to enter homes to investigate referrals of child abuse from third parties. Through their practice, social workers brought abuse in the private space of the home out into the public domain. Child abuse is a formative category at the heart of the development of that occupational activity (Hearne 1988). In a detailed account of the history and modern state of child protection social work, Harry Ferguson (2011) describes this as 'intimate child protection practice'. For the next 70 years, child protection practice was primarily investigative, and the concept and practice of inspection became the norm. Social workers occupied the role of moral arbiter with the goal of encouraging the moral reformation of deviant parents and enforcing parenting responsibility (Ferguson, 2011:19). The categorisations employed by social workers to regulate private family space at times served to dehumanise the primarily poor parents receiving services, and records suggest "inspection lacked empathy with the struggles of parents" (Ferguson 2011:31). The methods and the tensions embedded in early social work and child protection practice set the tone for the mobile and intimate child protection practice that exists today.

Given that child abuse is constituted through child protection social work and gives a professional mandate for intervening in family life, it seems worthwhile to consider it here as a phenomenon. Before getting into the complexity of what this means, it is important to note that child abuse occurs. Children are abused and this is a matter of real, material pain and suffering. Child abuse also occurs in socially variable ways. Social workers generally get involved with a particular social group of children who are abused or neglected, whose parents do not have the necessary resources to cope, or to divert attention from it. In recent years there has been renewed criticism of the way in which social work practice individualises structural inequalities (Bywaters et al., 2016). Structural oppression stemming from inequalities such as class, gender and

race are deemed to be passed over by practitioners due to a focus on individual cases rooted in individual deficits (Parton 1985; 2014). Of course, it is in the daily practices of social workers' efforts to understand and curtail abuse that any such individualisation may be seen and understood.

The problem of what child abuse *is* is something social workers grapple with through their daily work and is worthy of further explanation. Formal definitions of child abuse and neglect are found in the legislation that governs social work practice today. The Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014 defines it as: "Abuse means physical, sexual, psychological, emotional or financial abuse (and includes abuse taking place in any setting, whether in a private dwelling, an institution or any other place), and 'financial abuse' includes theft, fraud, pressure about money or misuse of money. Neglect means a failure to meet a person's basic physical, emotional, social or psychological needs, which is likely to result in an impairment of the person's well-being (for example, an impairment of the person's health)". Child abuse has traditionally been seen as taking place in family homes, though this definition suggests the location of abuse has extended to outside the home to include abuse in institutions, and via child sexual exploitation (CSE), child criminal exploitation (CCE) such as county lines, radicalisation, female genital mutilation (FGM), and modern slavery. Nonetheless, the bulk of social work in child protection teams still primarily involves abuse and neglect within family homes.

While the act or acts of abuse that result in social work involvement take place primarily in the family home, the representations developed by social workers and families via the investigation of abuse are fundamentally public. As Hearn (1988) notes, what is called 'child abuse' is rather *about* child abuse. When we talk of child abuse we aren't talking of an unadulterated description of the events that took place in private, but of public accounts of such activity. The shape of this thesis is based on the observation that public accounts of abuse and of efforts to prevent it are the primary work objects of child protection social work. It is concerned with just how social workers engage in efforts to prevent abuse through interlinked interactions that delimit or enable parental change. A key argument is that the bulk of daily practices in social work rest upon formalising past and present accounts to use as proxies for parental behaviour and character, which are tied to a particular risk or danger to the

child, and are utilised to measure and predict future change. This argument rests upon detailed descriptions from research, as I outline in the following section.

Child protection begins with a problem, the problem of the unsafe child and problematic parent<sup>2</sup>. One of the key tasks of a child protection social worker is to support parents to behave in a manner that means their child is safe. This inevitably necessitates professional efforts towards process of parental transformation. The basis of social work involvement rests on accounts through referral, assessment and planning. These accounts may be from children, parents, family members and a range of professionals and are ultimately used by social workers to develop a professional account of child abuse and ways to manage it, with institutional consequences. Oversimplifying here, for a child to be considered safe in their parents' care, these accounts must work to demonstrate change from the issue that caused the abuse in the first place; for a child to be removed, these accounts must demonstrate a lack of change. This is fundamentally moral work as the professional project involves the attribution of 'right' or 'wrong' identities or behaviours that are highly consequential for families. As Leigh and Wilson (2020: 5) note, child protection practice relies upon "society's expectations of what it is to be a parent and their ability to change into the parent professionals want them to be" within the timescales that prescribe professional practice. The notion of improvement, and thus change from problematic to improved, within given timescales, is thus a key task in child protection social work, though we know little about how social workers achieve this. One modest hope is that this thesis contributes to a detailed understanding of 'good' child protection practice necessitating moral work (Gibson, 2020).

### **'Institutional ethnographies' of child protection**

Ethnographic studies detail how child and family social workers establish 'caseness' following a referral (Wattam, 1992), how social workers continue this work in collegial (White, 1997) and supervisory encounters as they 'tell the case' (Pithouse, 1998), the categorisation practices through which social workers work up types of case (Wattam, 1992), parent, and child (White, 1997), and the mobile practices of social workers

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<sup>2</sup> A note on categories. Throughout the thesis, I do not use the terms 'problematic parent' or 'client' uncritically but use them to delineate the moral work of daily child protection practice. The terms used are either those of practice or those that adequately demonstrate the meaning of category work.



during home visits (Ferguson, 2010). Each of these studies holds a similar view as to how best to approach the study of child protection. Social workers become involved in a child's life when they receive a referral about a child at risk that requires them to conduct an assessment. When a child becomes 'open' to children's services they and their family together become a 'case'. That is, interactions do not take as a starting point the varied human identities of those involved but require a highly specific focus on aspects of each person as relevant to the institutional task of risk management and parental change. When working the 'case' social workers need to know what is unsafe for a child; and what unsafe behaviours of parents and other people in a child's life look like. They need to know how to help that parent understand what is unsafe, and the support they, family members, or other agencies can provide to achieve this. They need to know the institutional and legal processes that they must follow to ensure they are meeting their professional requirements. On social work courses, it is hoped that they also understand the power differentials at play as they work, and the inequalities experienced by the families they are tasked with improving and are able to work towards remedying this. Yet, as each of these ethnographic studies argue, it is only through studying social work as it plays out that any sense of knowledge-in-action may be understood.

Wattam's (1992) focus on the 'practical action of decision-taking' in social services offices, the Crown Prosecution Service and the courts, describes how through talk and text, accounts of children's lives are highlighted, categorised and reconstructed as 'a case'. Wattam (1992) takes an ethnomethodological approach to describe the investigative and prosecution processes at play, including the structures of motive, corroboration, specificity, and categorisation. Wattam's (1992) focus on child sexual abuse means that the type of evidence central to social work decision making in her study is the account of the child, whereas this is not always the case, for example, in cases of physical harm where medical evidence may take precedence. Nonetheless, the rules by which an account is deemed to have veracity holds lessons for any occasion in which an account is sought and assessed in child protection. Wattam (1992: 68) notes outlines the following rules based on her detailed analysis: 1. Judgement of the child's account is set against what is normal and expectable. 2. If detail about an allegation is detailed and specific, it lends validity. 3. If motive, other than disinterested concern can be identified, it detracts from validity. 4. If information can be corroborated, by any means, and at any level, it lends validity to that information

– whether it be towards substantiation or against it. 5. Persons and behaviours will be categorised and oriented to according to expected behaviours and events contingent upon that categorisation. Wattam (1992) argues that these pervasive, methodical ways of approaching cases of child sexual abuse make it possible to predict how a case will proceed. She also speaks to practitioners’ record making practices, showing how practitioners second guess the prospective use of records in court, writing them with that audience in mind.

The limited discussion of parental change in Wattam’s (1992) work relates primarily to a parent improving their capacity to protect their child from abuse as she was primarily concerned with the processes of evidencing sexual abuse based on the accounts of children. Nonetheless, her work holds relevance to the approach I take in this thesis. Setting out the unique value of her approach, she notes: “From the first phone call to a long-awaiting court appearance, these structures can help account for the response, whether it be a home visit or a guilty plea. It is these structured assemblages of cultural categories and their ‘rules’ of use which create the relevancies of the facts for the decisions that the social workers, police officers and always and judges have to make. While it is important to know about the quality of parental relationship, the frequency with which a child is hit, the stressful circumstances of a particular client, and so on, it is also important to know how these matters are formatted as information. [...] I have never known it to be asked whether these are the right structures by which to assess information from and about children who have been the victims of adult inflicted harm or injury. It may well be that, whilst they are unavoidable in terms of practical reasoning, their use should, at the very least, be recognised, and their impact compensated for, within any assessment of risk” (Wattam, 1992: 5).

Pithouse’s (1998) ethnography of a children’s social work team office uses the term ‘telling the case’ to show how narrative enables social workers to produce and justify the invisible craftwork of their trade to colleagues and supervisors. Pithouse (1998) argues the supervisory encounter is where the invisible work of home visits is made visible and professionally accountable. In telling the case to a supervisor, the social worker affirms her identity and that of the client by drawing on shared assumptions about doing social work in this setting. This identity work is central to formulating a case and service users with “recognisable, specific and predictable relevances

susceptible to routine management [...]. It is taken for granted that clients are 'clients' because they are inadequate parents and/or have disturbed or delinquent children. They receive a service in which the worker defines the relationship and locates the problem within their domestic network." (Pithouse, 1998: 163). As I argued earlier, the notion of client 'deviance' or the 'problematic parent' forms a background expectancy to child protection social work, but as Pithouse (1998) shows it also forms a resource through which social workers do child protection, as it is the "negotiable nature of clients' identities" that allow social workers to "resolve the uncertain conditions surrounding practice" (Pithouse, 1998: 165). The practical uses of such categorisation practices in getting a handle on shifting terrain is a central concern of this thesis.

Staying with the theme of 'telling the case' and the ethnographic methods of observing office talk and analysing professional texts, White (1997) provides a comprehensive analysis of the routines and linguistic practices through which 'caseness' is accomplished. Of particular interest is how such accounts are accomplished, reproduced, and accounted for through talk and rendered durable in written records. This notion of durability assumes some level of transferability between the moment of writing and subsequent use of written records which I have not observed in the field, rather, records tend to be taken up as situated accounts within new conversational projects. Nonetheless, White's (1997: 10) analytic concern with the 'imported materials' that form the 'backcloth' expectancies of practices allows her to make connections between discourses from law, social and psychological theory as they are taken up as practical, situated tools by social workers. Whilst White (1997) does not focus on practical professional task of accomplishing parental change, she does make explicit that expectation in her detailed critique of developmentalism and the timescales of expected parental change that form predictable modes of ordering child protection practice. In doing so, she outlines the role of categorisation practices in relation to the development of the child, which in turn allow routine plans for parental support to be enacted.

These ethnographies of child protection practice successfully describe what it is to build a 'case' through talk with colleagues and through the production of institutional documents. Each describes an aspect of the artful, moral and practical methods of child protection practice and provides compelling evidence that accounts of child abuse and of parental change are achieved in and through normative categorisation

practices. We see the child as the focal point of social work decision making in line with discourses of developmentalism, law and psychology (White, 1997; Wattam, 1992). We see how particular categorisations of the child as abused or neglected relate to the tied expectation of parental change, from deviant to 'good enough', as seen in collegial discussion and supervision (White, 1997; Pithouse, 1998). We also see how particular forms of evidence are assessed in methodical ways with legal accountability in mind (Wattam, 1992). These case building methods include the practices of evidencing abuse, demonstrating professional accountability, the relationally accomplished identity of social worker-client. Whilst each of these works notes that parental change is a central expectation of child protection practice, and that causal accounts of abuse and of decisions to remove children from their parents' care rely upon evidencing a lack of change, they do not describe the practical methods through which social workers and parents accomplish 'change' or lack thereof. This is in part due to them being 'institutional ethnographies' as they are primarily conducted in office settings and do not seek to understand parent-social worker interaction (Longhofer et al., 2012). It is to their counterparts, 'practice ethnographies', and non-ethnographic studies of practice with families to which I now turn.

### **'Practice ethnographies'**

Conscious of the 'invisibility' of social work practice beyond the confines of the office space, researchers have sought to describe what social workers and parents are up to during home visits, assessment sessions and meetings. 'Practice ethnographies' refer to ethnographies of face-to-face practice as opposed to those bounded by the space of the office (Longhofer et al., 2012), such as those by Harry Ferguson (2011; 2014; 2016; 2017). Ferguson has considered the social worker-parent relationship a central aspect of achieving change and his studies show that interactions between social workers and clients over time are key sites where such 'change practices' are accomplished. In his seminal study (2011) he argues that parental resistance should be assumed as a likelihood when working with involuntary clients in child protection and draws on fieldnotes to demonstrate the challenge of putting the rhetoric of cooperation and partnership working into practice with 'hostile' families. He argues that social workers need to be equipped to manage such interactions and that organisations need to support social workers to do so. I discuss the contributions of these studies and others to our understanding of the lived organisational detail of the professional methods of change in face-to-face practice.

I begin with de Montigny's (1995) work as it is an outlier. de Montigny (1995) produced one of the few ethnographies of front-line practice explicitly shaped by ethnomethodological sensibilities, and one of the few that engages in practice observations in the office and beyond as a practicing social worker. His work is explicitly shaped by the challenges he faced as a social work practitioner and by his critical view of social work. As de Montigny's (1995: 16) research is based on his experiences as a practitioner, he is unable to provide fieldnotes of actual practice, instead providing what he calls "expressions of social work practice" without the particulars. This is perhaps a factor in the descriptions of practice provided taking on a more constructive and even theoretical tone through the analysis. Nonetheless, he offers an analysis of the logic of 'change' in social work: "Workers try to convince clients to change to reduce danger to their children. The professional adage, 'change is often precipitated by crisis,' legitimises their intrusions into clients lives. This adage allows social workers to believe that they can influence clients to change. It affirms the capacity of the social worker to shape and control the client's motivation to work on a problem. It presumes that with the 'right motivation' problems can be resolved. However, from the client's standpoint, the problem may have nothing to do with motivation, parenting abilities, caring, or personality." (de Montigny, 1995: 130). From this we see the centrality of change work in social work and the entitlement of the social worker to define both the problem and its solutions.

Ferguson et al. (2020, 2021) recently published ethnographic work from one of the few studies to consider social workers' management of parental change within a shifting relationship over time. The authors use the term 'therapeutic change' but do not specify what this means in practice. In the only summary of a parent's account of change, they note she feels she has changed— "'the social workers showed me how bad my relationships were.' This has helped her to become a better person, and she has changed so she can fight for her other child in care. Samantha (parent) felt her relationship with Miriam (social worker) had changed, improved, and now 'I haven't got to be so panicky'" (Ferguson et al., 2020: 12). In this account 'therapeutic change' appears to mean three things. One, that that parent accepted the social workers concerns about past relationships. Two, the parent became a 'better person', moving from a problematic category to a mother trying to 'fight' for her children. Three, the parent overcame her fear of the social worker allowing them to work together.

Although this is not what the authors suggest, it is possible to see that ‘therapeutic change’ here, though relationally achieved, is a highly individualised, moral project.

As the first ever ethnographic study charting long term social work and social worker-client relationships Ferguson et al. (2020, 2021) set out to consider types of relationship that had the effect of helping parents to change. In a series of articles, they describe a range of relationship types observed in practice, from therapeutic ‘holding relationships’ (2020) to ‘hostile relationships’ (2021), which support and constrain parental change. In doing so, they provide insights into the relational experience of the change process. The study involved ethnographic shadowing of workers with families over the course of fifteen months in two local authorities, alongside observations of supervision, interviews with families and collation of case file data. Well-funded ethnographic studies are unusual in the field of child protection where approaches with measurable outcomes are favoured. This in part accounts for the unique nature of the findings I describe below.

In two articles Ferguson et al. (2020, 2021) describe typifications of a ‘holding relationship’ and of a ‘hostile relationship’. A ‘holding relationship’ is associated with the ‘therapeutic change’ in parents. Using fieldnote summaries and interview data, the authors describe the practices of the parents, the practices of the social workers, and the relevance of supportive colleagues and therapeutic supervision in developing relationships. A ‘holding relationship’ in which social workers are reliable, immerse themselves in service user’s day-to-day existence and get physically and emotionally close to them, believe in parent’s capacity to change, and practice critically in ethical ways by using good authority, and taking account of power relations and structural inequalities, offered the greatest hope for change. Practically speaking, social workers were careful not to invalidate service users’ past experiences or their successes in present day parenting, they offered touch to children and played with them, they advocated for families in court proceedings, and offered financial support to families where possible. Crucially, and similarly to findings of earlier research studies, creating and sustaining this type of relationship was only possible when parents were willing to be ‘held’. In turn, social workers were only able to be reliable due to manageable caseloads and feeling held and supported through supervision.

'Hostile relationships' by contrast involve parents experiencing 'persecutory anxiety' where they fear moral condemnation and the removal of their children throughout social work involvement. Social workers engage in 'anxious surveillance' and at times treat parents with hostility based on fear, hate and retaliation in the face of tense or frightening encounters with involuntary clients. Parents and social workers became trapped in long term hostile relationships due to the statutory obligation to intervene and missed opportunities to engage differently through the use of 'good authority'. 'Good authority' is a term coined by Ferguson (2011) to describe the constructive use of authority in child protection practice that is skilful, empathetic and forthright, and essential to keeping children safe. 'Good authority' has been expanded upon by other researchers to enable consideration of the unique way in which skills and approaches to practice drawn from individualistic therapeutic disciplines may be used by a profession tasked with intervening in family life to protect children (Forrester et al., 2019, 2020). Ferguson et al. (2021) argue that in the midst of hostile relationships, with the support of clinical supervision as opposed to administrative supervision, social workers would be more able to see how their own defences cloud their capacity to work with good authority and prevent conversations with parents that clear the air.

The notion of holding and hostile relationships as 'types' holds value for practitioners seeking to understand their interactions with particular families. In practice, there are likely to be moments of both experience in social worker-client relationships. Importantly, this research demonstrates that in social work practice, it is primarily the client-social worker relationship through which parental change is made accountable. This ties to the notion of individualised change parental change as a primary project in social work. Collective change or social work as social justice is a secondary project that occupies far less time in practice (Featherstone et al., 2018a, 2018b). In this study, this includes social workers acknowledging a parent's past problems, helping with finances and challenging unfair decisions alongside them. This study highlights that the primary change project in social work is one of individualised parental change. This research gets at the complex, relational nature of supporting therapeutic change in social work, and considers the conditions that make it possible. However, the use of psychotherapeutic theory in the production of general 'types' of relationship misses the detail of the situated practices of social workers and parents tied to these typified categories. Fieldnote and interview data are used as resources to describe decontextualised skills, for example, "field notes recorded how the worker's

‘communication is attuned, they respond thoughtfully, with open-ended questions’” (Ferguson et al., 2020: 10) which obscures the practical accomplishment of the encounter.

The notion of ‘therapeutic change’ encompasses the interactional and relational nature of change talk, though it glosses<sup>3</sup> the processes of identity transformation that appear to underpin it. There was no description of how accepting past mistakes and becoming a ‘better person’ was accomplished in practice and how the subtleties of this moral work that shaped parental accounts was achieved over time (Ferguson et al., 2020). These studies successfully produced insights of social work as a practical activity but gloss the lived realities of practice through recourse to formal theory. They suggest that the practical activity of supporting change in social work is embedded in local conditions that also provide resources for establishing whether good work has been done, but miss the descriptive detail of that activity. They identify ‘parental change’ as a phenomenon central to child protection but show little about what that looks like in practice. Without understanding the detail of the social work methods involved in charting and accounting for such change, we risk making exhortations to practitioners that are not born *of* practice.

### **Studies of talk and text as secondary data**

Whilst my interest is primarily in studies where a researcher has been immersed in the field, those that offer detailed description of talk and text through secondary analysis have been able to achieve a level of detailed understanding of the categorisation practices at play not seen in ‘practice ethnographies’. These studies are broadly influenced by conversation analysis and ethnomethodology and draw upon secondary data such as case files (Parton et al., 1997), transcriptions of recorded sessions of practice (Hall et al., 2014) or interviews with practitioners to detail the interactional practices through which child protection is accomplished. These studies describe the processes identified in ethnographic studies as detailed practices. These

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<sup>3</sup> Glossing is an interactional resource based on the natural reflexivity of language. The term gloss denotes the fact that we cannot ever state in so many words, directly, what we mean to say. Precisely what talk means can only be discovered through the detailed description of interaction and crucially through members own situated understanding. “Talk itself, in that it becomes a part of the selfsame occasion of interaction becomes another contingency of that interaction. It extends and elaborates indefinitely the circumstances it glosses and in this way contributes to its own accountably sensible character.” (Garfinkel and Sacks 1986: 165). I use this term throughout the thesis. Here, it refers to the missing detail of the theoretical term ‘therapeutic change’.



include practices of gleaning, assessing and accounting for evidence of child abuse and parental change, and building relationships with parents to enable change.

Studies concerned with evidential practices consider categorisation in accounts of decision making (Hall and Slembrouck 2010), generalisation practices from specific categorisations to types of case (Hall and Matarese 2014), and the type of evidence social workers rely upon and its consequences (Juhlia et al., 2014b). Each of these studies considers narrative to be a central tool through which social work practice is accomplished. For example, Hall and Materese (2014) show that a key practice for evidence gathering in the social work assessment visits is the accomplishment of a 'storytelling occasion' for personal narratives. Subsequent assessment of these stories is the context in which they are initially invited (Hall and Materese 2014). Social workers' responses to stories engage with how they relate to the overall state of affairs, rather than the particulars of drama, and thus form a generalisation practice of situated assessment. Stories are also drawn upon when social workers account for a case changing formal categories. Whether a case is re-classified as higher or lower risk, categorisations of parental deficiencies form part of the rationale (Hall and Slembrouck 2010).

Juhilia et al. (2014b) show how social workers' reliance on reported speech as an economical way of producing evidence allows them to create accounts of clients and professionals, and therefore accounts of self. They argue that prior talk from reliable sources is treated by social workers as a supporting fact in legitimating certain interventions or decisions. Further, they suggest that reported speech is central to realising social work as a change oriented or process-oriented profession. Remembering and explaining past events at the beginning of clienthood, reasoning and understanding regressions and progresses during clienthood, and orientation to the future necessitate the prior talk of clients and significant others (professionals, relatives, friends etc.) as resources" (Juhila et al., 2014: 171). Prior talk can be highly consequential when drawn upon in working up 'unchangeable identities' as well as drawing clients into the social work project of identity transformation.

Continuing with the theme of tying interactional practices with institutional features, studies concerned with relationship building consider the role of persuasion (Suoninen and Jokinen 2005), trust (Hall et al., 2013), advice giving (Hall and

Slembrouck 2014) and agenda setting (Broadhurst et al., 2012) in practice encounters. Suoninen and Jokinen (2005) describe how social workers use specific techniques to encourage parents to reconstruct their stories. These include persuasive questions, persuasive responses and encouraging responses. Crucially, each is directed towards engaging the client in the right kind of institutional talk, or with the right kind of institutional identity. In an analysis of child protection case files, Parton et al. (1997) describe how social workers insure themselves against risks by providing relevant advice and guidance related to identified risks, specifically what parents can do to reduce them. This in turn results in parents having the resources to transform themselves into an 'ideal' to reduce the concerns of the social worker. These authors argue that institutional interviewing and textual recording of those accounts are not innocent practices of information gathering but are practices that also produce knowledge and create identities tied to client transformation.

In a similar vein, Hall and Slembrouck (2014) respecify 'advice giving' in social worker-parent interactions. They suggest that even in social work encounters where workers use the skill set of 'Motivational Interviewing' during which giving advice is avoided, it remains an inevitable feature of the 'troublestelling encounters' of social work. The authors show how advice giving is frequently tied to social work 'ambitions', to address a dilemma, or to change an attitude (Hall and Slembrouck, (2014: 116). Whilst this form of advice giving need not necessarily require an immediate, specific change or acknowledgment, it may be revisited later and reformulated as part of setting the expectations of ongoing work. Here we see how attempts to improve practitioner skill can be eclipsed by practitioners seeking to accomplish one of their primary work projects, that of parental change. Similarly, attempts to improve practice through policy change fall prey to similar ways of working. For example, policy aspirations for 'partnership working' under the revised Public Law Outline, which aimed to privilege the 'no order principle' and promote consensual practices with parents (Broadhurst and Holt, 2010). A study of pre-proceedings meetings found that unintended issues of what we might call power, with talk heavily circumscribed by tacit but institutionally practiced entitlements to speak, raise topics, agree or dissent, leading to greater resistance from parents rather than greater partnership working (Broadhurst et al., 2012). The authors describe how difficult practice change is to achieve with same social actors, in the same settings, using the same tools.

These studies offer descriptions of the complexity of professional practice in which the relationship between client and worker is the medium through which social workers gather and assess evidence and encourage parental change. 'Relationship based practice' has come to represent a catch all term for approaches to practice that locate social problems within the individual as seen in policy discourse of the past three decades (see Crossley 2018) and those that advocate psychological and therapeutic models to enable individual behaviour change (Forrester et al., 2012, 2018; Hogg and Wheeler, 2004). These include but are not limited to motivational interviewing, cognitive behavioural therapy, and solution focused brief therapy. These models rest upon the ideas of individual agency, capacity to change, capacity to know one's own life and make better choices. These models are not in their own right problematic, but their use in a system that fails to adequately address the causes of the difficulties social work clients' experience has been criticised for placing responsibility for social and structural issues solely with clients tasked with inner work (see Featherstone et al., 2018b). Studies that consider situated social work interaction are able to describe how simple understandings of relationship and partnership play out in practice, and how both practical and procedural changes become subsumed within existing ways of working.

### **The topic of self-transformation**

Parental self-transformation, or more specifically, the methods through which social workers and parents accomplish change talk through interaction over time, are the topic of this thesis. Here I outline sociological studies and associated child protection research of relevance to this topic. First, I consider what 'selves' means for the purposes of this research. Second, I consider how selves are transformed through institutional work, drawing on Goffman (1959a, 1959b, 1990) and Garfinkel (1967). In considering child protection research, I limit my focus to studies of work practices and the accomplishment of identity in child and family social work in the UK that draw upon data from social work practice. This includes recordings of practice, ethnographic fieldnotes, and letters written between a practitioner and client during the course of their work together. I broadened the inclusion criteria from child protection to child and family social work due to the paucity of research on this topic. I conclude that drawing on insights from sociological studies of work offers

opportunities to respecify behaviour change in child protection as the formalisation of identity transformation through the accomplishment of work practices.

### A brief note on 'selves'

The social work project of changing parental selves brings with it the question of how to define the 'self'. Symbolic interactionist and ethnomethodological conceptions of self differ yet both suggest that the self is interactionally accomplished. I outline the implications of this understanding for the type of research findings it is possible to produce.

Symbolic interactionists draw on the notion of the 'social self' proposed by James, Mead and Cooley. A distinction is made between the 'I', the agent of thought and action, and the 'me' the image of oneself seen through the generalised other is seen in the work of James (1890) and Mead (1934/2015). Here, the social self emerges through interaction. The dialectical relationship between self and society has been the focus of symbolic interactionist inquiry, though the focus became the processes of interaction and the implications for social order, rather than the effects of group interaction on the self (Scott, 2009). Nonetheless, this conception of self epistemologically privileges the first person position of the self as something private. It is this conception of a private self that enabled Goffman to make the claims he did about total institutions: "It is only insofar as Goffman retained an unquestioned respect for the first person perspective and the conception of self as private possession, that he retained some basis for critiquing the mortifying and repressive tendencies of total institutions rather than merely noting their efficacy as devices for transforming the self." (Weinberg, 2012: 7).

A conception of inner and outer selves poses problems for an observational study of social work. Elias (1978) argues that it is not possible to draw lines between cultivated binaries: "Where and what is the barrier which separates the human inner self from everything outside, where and what the substance it contains? It is difficult to say, for inside the skull we find only the human brain . . ." (1978, 121). He suggests we overcome this difficulty by replacing the individual person with a view of people in gestalt-like configurations. This view is echoed by Garfinkel (1967) who considers meaning, self, and order as practical accomplishments. Here, any notion of 'self-understanding' preserves members' culturally based, situated reasoning procedures.

In this way he suggests the detailed study of interactionist assumptions about the socially accomplished self. Here then, the epistemological problem of access to 'inner selves' is remedied by considering self-presentation not as calculated but as emergent and accomplished in relation to others.

Each of these research traditions challenges the view of the self as singular, bounded, unified, and the inevitable source of human deliberation and volition (Weinberg 2012). Following symbolic interactionist and ethnomethodological insights, I view the accomplishment of selves, like any other accomplishment, as action. I see the value of basing any statements related to self-transformation on the observability of people's daily practices. The notion of self then does not refer to a detached inner world or developmental processes, but to who people are to each other, moment by moment, through interaction. Selves are visible, accomplished, negotiated, and resisted in through institutional work practices. Crucially for this thesis, they are articulated as objects that can be 'worked' on by social workers and parents.

### Stigma

Two sociological works on stigma are of relevance to any consideration of accounting for parental change in child protection, Goffman's (1986/2009) 'Stigma' and Garfinkel's (1967) 'Passing and Managed Achievement of Sex Status in an Intersexed Person'. Here I offer a brief outline of the understanding of stigma provided by each and consider related work on child protection that has drawn on these studies. Whilst Goffman's work has found favour in social work, studies that draw on ethnomethodological insights offer a more detailed consideration of the situated accomplishment of stigma. In making this argument I draw a distinction between studies that produce findings about what kind of stigmatized identities are produced in and through practice (Morriss, 2018), and those concerned with how they are produced (Gibson 2020). Gibson's exploration of the role stigmatization plays in the management of parent identities in and through 'good' social work practice provides particularly useful insights into the way categorisations are relationally achieved in practice.

Both Goffman (1986) and Garfinkel (1967) consider stigma as interactionally accomplished. Attributes are not creditable or discreditable in themselves but becomes so through interaction. A discreditable attribute maybe readily discernible,

such as body size or physical disability, or may be hidden but revealable, such as being on the sex offender's register or having a criminal record. Goffman (1986: 163) considers that 'stigma management' occurs wherever there are 'identity norms' but a shameful difference only occurs when social actors share a view that difference from the norm is shameful. In this sense, for Goffman stigma doesn't belong to people but to perspectives (Travers, 1994). If discreditable attributes are revealable, they must exist outside of the interaction, residing within the 'actual' self. Garfinkel problematises this notion by drawing on Agnes' methods for 'passing' as female. Here, every achievement, including 'normal' sexuality, "is accomplished through witnessable displays of talk and conduct" (Garfinkel 1967: 180). There is no actual self and social self just Agnes as she is met in interaction. This conception then views the management of stigma as a practical accomplishment. This difference has implications for the type of research that follows.

Parents of children open to child protection teams find themselves categorised as a 'risky parents' by virtue of each institutional encounter. Associated attributes and difficulties bring the possibility of a further problem - the linking of attribute to stereotype to discredit a person through the process of stigmatisation (Goffman, 1963). 'Risky parent' is a label that brings with it attributes to which it might refer, including abusing children, neglecting children, and being unable to provide for children. The particular group of people classed as 'risky parents' are associated with a diverse set of difficulties, including domestic abuse, drug and alcohol misuse, mental health difficulties, lack of family support, unemployment, lack of stable housing, and poverty. This set of attributes and difficulties places this group as a problem, a problem that child protection social work sets out to solve. Thus a 'parent' in conversation with a 'social worker' has arguably already breached conditions of 'normal' parenthood by virtue of the interaction alone. Nonetheless, the process of stigmatisation is only accomplished if and when spoiled identities are worked up in practice. For example, categorisations that may accomplish stigma in a child protection interaction in relation to clienthood include 'not engaging' and 'not trying'.

One social work study that draws on a reconceptualised Goffmanian view of Stigma is Morriss' (2018) 'Haunted Futures: The Stigma of Being a Mother Living Apart from her Child(ren) Following State-Ordered Court Removal'. This offers one of the few accounts of the implications of stigmatisation for mothers who have had children

removed from their care. The focus on stigmatised futures is unique and asks the reader to consider the long-lasting effects on a mother of removing a child from her care. Morris (2018) deals with stigma as an outcome of having a child removed and considers the accomplishment of stigma as a means through which futures are imagined and made, perhaps a result of the constraints on her research or perhaps as a result of an understanding of stigma as silently experienced as opposed to interactionally produced. Had Morriss (2018) explored the accomplishment of stigmatised identities in the archival documents and in the accounts of mothers, she could have described the accomplishment of sigma for particular purposes. Unfortunately, an embargo on reporting on court documents prevented this and instead Morriss (2018) creatively drew upon accounts of mothers from the Mothers Living Apart from their Children project to illustrate analytic points gleaned from her engagement with the archives. In doing so, she drew links between state sanctioned and produced stigma and futures that hold relevance for my findings.

A second author to consider stigma in child protection practice is Gibson. In a series of articles (2016, 2019a, 2020) and a book (2019b) that draw on ethnographic methods and interviews with parents and social workers, Gibson offers an account of stigma in practice and develops a model that theorises its working. The study that bases its claims primarily on ethnographic data is also the study that produces findings relevant to the thesis. In this study, Gibson (2020: 217) clearly articulates the way in which a concern for professional identity can result in social workers shaming parents – “social workers can be considered to be doing a good job at the same time as shaming a parent”. He bases this finding on an analysis of how and why parents experience these emotions, drawing on a constructionist perspective of emotions to do so. In outlining the ‘how’ Gibson (2020) makes clear that the accompanying emotions of shame and humiliation are a process, and a mechanism through which child protection social workers enact control, drawing on fieldnotes that support this argument. Gibson suggests that shame for past behaviour is often the focus of child protection work and that where a parent is not considered to be sufficiently ashamed of their actions, they may be framed as ‘shameless’, and worked with to instil ‘appropriate’ feelings of shame (Gibson 2020: 226). This article begins to unpick the utility of shaming processes in the daily work of social workers. As Gibson draws on ethnographic data as a resource rather than a topic, he does not offer detailed explanation of the actual accounts in which such practices are grounded.

The work of both Morriss (2018) and Gibson (2016) draw on a Goffmanian notion of stigma and offer new insights into the ways in which child protection social work routinely uses shame as a means of social control (Gibson 2016, 2020), how such shaming practices are built in relation to the production of the professional identity of a 'good' social worker, and how the production of stigmatized futures can shape mothers' identities long after they have lost a child to the care system (Morriss 2018). Whilst each author recognises the interactionally accomplished nature of stigma, both gloss the methods through which stigma is produced. This is a reflection of the theoretical orientation taken to the work. For example, Morriss (2018) draws on Tyler's work on structural stigma as static. Gibson draws on an emotional constructionist notion of stigma as internal experience and seeks to access this through accounts. Gibson's body of work makes a sustained attempt at getting at how stigma is produced in practice but in building a conceptual model, he decontextualises the interactional accomplishment of shaming methods. Nonetheless, Gibson's (2020) key insight, that shaming practices are central to setting out institutionally acceptable parent identities, is one that requires further consideration of the situated methods of their production.

Goffman's (1959a) notion 'moral career' offers a useful way to understand the potential trajectory building practices through which stigmatised identities, as described above, are accomplished and transformed. Goffman (1959a) traced the moral career of mental patients by considering the turning points through which they viewed themselves along their induction into and trajectory within the mental health asylum (Goffman, 1959a; Goffman, 1961: 160). He described how the institutional frameworks people enact form patterns of social control as they ascribe normative labels to people in contact with institutional representatives. It is this element of 'moral careers' that holds relevance to this thesis as a whole, concerned as it is with the accomplishment of identities through interaction for institutional purposes. Whilst Goffman considered moral career as an individual' process "composed of progressive changes that occur in the beliefs that he has concerning himself and significant others" (1961: 14), this thesis is concerned with the interactional production of accountable category shifts, or lack thereof, throughout the development of case trajectories.

## **Conclusion**



Drawing findings from practice research together with a practical concern with *how* social workers and parents accomplish and account for parental self-transformation over time offers a way of respecifying approaches to change in social work that tend to draw upon formal notions of behavioural change. Goffman and Garfinkel's work on the situated accomplishment of social identity is key to moving away from a conception of static identity towards the acknowledgement of the fluidity of social selves produced for institutional purposes. As with the ethnographic and ethnomethodologically informed studies described above, the value of attending to situated social work interaction is the resulting understanding of the relational nature of social work practice, the methods through which child protection social work is achieved, and the interactional and institutional consequences of its achievement. The value of this approach can also be seen in policy relevant findings that speak to the methods by which policy changes become subsumed within routines ways of working.

Despite the centrality of parental change projects to the work of child protection, there is little research that takes this as a phenomenon of study. It is possible to see that whilst the sociological concepts I have outlined here offer relevant insights for social work, very few studies have engaged with them in a manner that specifies the detail of practice. We are yet to make a sustained attempt to describe the lived organisational detail of the professional methods of face-to-face child protection practice, and specifically, the professional methods for accounting for and charting parental change. My goal then is not to seek a universal truth but to counter the decontextualising tendencies of formal theory. It is to take seriously the practical wisdom of members in the social world of child protection and avoid making exhortations to practitioners that are not born of practice. In doing so I hope to produce an account of the practical action and practical reasoning of transforming parental selves in child protection social work that is *of* practice. The following research questions are:

- How do social workers engage in efforts to prevent potential abuse through interlinked interactions that delimit or enable parental change?
- How are accounts of parental change achieved in and through normative categorisation practices over time?
- What are some of the professional methods involved in charting and accounting for such change?

## **Chapter Two**

### **Introducing the Field Site**

A local authority child protection team offered a “perspicuous setting” in which to study ‘change methods’ child protection social work (Garfinkel 2002). This term describes a setting that shows a profession’s foundations as oriented to and operationalised by members (Garfinkel 2002), where it is possible to observe naturally organised ordinary activities in situ. Ethnomethodologically informed ethnography (Hughes 2001, 2008; Randall et al., 2020) offered a suitably flexible method with the strong analytic focus required to shadow social workers as they worked whilst attending closely to members’ practices. My professional experience as a social worker in child protection enabled me to access this child protection team with relative ease and provided me the competency required to understand professional life as practitioners themselves comprehend and practice it. I elaborate upon these arguments in the methods chapters. Here, I provide a brief description of the setting to enable comparisons to be drawn with other ethnographic studies. Ethnographers studying the case of child protection may be interested in comparing the setting of this research to other ethnographic studies in child protection, which tend to spend time elaborating on the type of local authority, the type of culture, and type of practice in play (White, 1997; Pithouse 1998). Whilst I offer a summary here, I do so without making claims to its relevance for the data that follows. This summary of the setting is undoubtedly less lively as a result of the requirement for anonymity. I sketch out a picture of the local authority in which the research took place, the child protection team, the models of practice in use, and the law the social workers were required to follow. I then offer an overview of the social workers and families I shadowed over the course of my fieldwork.

#### **The local authority - Salina**

Salina is a local authority in South Wales with a large population. Salina expanded in population and geography during the industrial revolution and the remnants of industry continue to mark the urban landscape. Some of the social workers told stories of generations of their family who grew up on the patches they now work, and made their living in industry, showing me key sites as we drove to family homes. The decline of industry in the twentieth century left swathes of the population employed

and without the skills and training to work in an economy dominated by public administration, education, health and hospitality. A retail centre at the heart of Salina is one of the largest in Wales, though is marked by a weak retail centre as jobs are located out of the centre. Salina has received significant investment from the Welsh Development Agency and now Welsh Government to promote tourism, education and business sectors. Still, Salina has a high proportion of lower super output areas (LSOAs<sup>4</sup>) in the 10% most deprived in Wales. A decline in mortality rates and an increase in migration has altered the demographic served by the local authority and the needs to be met by health and social care services. The local authority is governed by a Council which has in recent years been led by the Labour Party.

### **Children's services**

Children's services are located on the upper level of a grand building in the centre of Salina, not far from the building that houses the Council. The building has over six access points, though only one is for the public and is permanently staffed by a receptionist. To access the building as a member of staff, a swipe card is required, and I was offered one as I began field work. To access the building as a member of the public, an appointment is required and one is asked sit in the waiting area as the receptionist calls up to the relevant team for a worker to come down. The lower floor of the building is occupied by meeting rooms that tend to be booked in advance for meetings with the public. Assessment sessions, Care and Support meetings, Core Groups and Public Law Outline meetings all took place in these rooms. Meetings chaired by an Independent Reviewing Officer, such as Child Protection Conferences and Looked After Children's reviews were held elsewhere in an office a 15 minute drive away.

Salina offices provide the base for social workers in the child protection team. The team shares a floor with the Looked After Children's Team, the Children with Disabilities Team, the Principal Officers in charge of each team, and the Service Manager in charge of the whole of Children's Services. Local Authorities in Wales report annually on requested statistics which can be found at [StatsWales.co.uk](http://StatsWales.co.uk). The figures for the department are middling given the size of and deprivation of the

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<sup>4</sup> LSOA's are spatial designations designed to collect place-based population data for the census. LSOAs have an average population of 1500 people or 650 households.

population it serves. The numbers of children on the child protection register and in local authority care per 10,000 population are average when compared with the other 22 local authorities. A large population results in Salina having relatively high total numbers of children on the child protection register, in local authority care, and subject to pre-birth child protection conferences. Generally, the areas covered by the child protection teams are white-Welsh, low income, high social housing areas. The Child Protection Team is split into four area teams each with responsibility for cases that fall within a specified geographical region, though two teams tended to be referred to as the 'East Team' and two as the 'West Team', all managed by one Team Manager. The West Team covers the suburbs and predominantly works with white, Welsh, working class families, and the East Team covers the town centre and increasingly works with refugees and migrants.

The teams are structured into 'hubs' in a manner influenced by the 'Reclaiming Social Work' (RSW) model (Goodman et al., 2011), with the aim of creating small multi-disciplinary teams headed by a consultant social worker (CSW). In the original RSW model, units included: one CSW; one social worker; one child practitioner; one unit coordinator; and a clinician who tends to work half time across two units. In Salina, units included one practice lead which is equivalent to a CSW; two senior social workers; three social workers; and an administrator. A social work assistant was shared between two units. Whilst there were no clinicians embedded in the units, there were two clinicians including an educational psychologist and a family therapist, who were present to offer consultations with social workers one day per week. Unlike the RSW model, cases were not allocated to CSWs and worked as a shared team, but to individual social workers. However, the practice leads did not have case loads and were available to social workers for informal case consultation when needed, alongside their routine work of supervision, checking assessments were in timescales<sup>5</sup> and assessments were up to date.

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<sup>5</sup> The Practice Lead was tasked with ensuring all of the child protection assessments were 'green', that is that none of them were late according to Wales Safeguarding Procedures (2019). Initial child protection assessments need to be completed within 7 working days of a referral; Core Assessments must be completed within 42 days of the beginning of an initial assessment. Additionally, Child Protection Conferences must be convened within 15 days of Section 47 enquiries, and Core Groups are to be held within 10 working days of the initial conference, and every 6 weeks until the next conference.

Staff at Salina were open about RSW primarily being used as a way to structure teams, with another practice model, Signs of Safety (Turnell and Edwards, 1999), being used to structure practice. Signs of Safety (SoS) was developed by practitioners, for practitioners, as a strengths-based, safety-organised approach to collaborative child protection casework and draws heavily on elements of Solution Focused Brief Therapy, working with family strengths and resources, finding exceptions, goal setting and scaling (De Shazer et al., 1986; Berg, 1994). SoS considers the relationship between the social worker and parents to be central to achieving lasting safety for children (Turnell and Edwards, 1999). The founders claim that it is so effective, it can reduce the numbers of children in care, however a recent review suggests the evidence base for these claims is lacking (Sheehan et al., 2018). Nonetheless, practitioners and families tend to speak positively about this approach as resulting in meaningful work with families. Whilst the tools of SoS practice evidently structured practice in Salina, particularly in assessment, safety planning and organising meetings, this occurred in mundane ways and followed routines of practice. Social workers rarely spoke about SoS or identified it as an intentional way of working in their practice. Consequently, I do not speak to SoS in the analysis that follows, aside from explaining SoS terminology when required.

### **The legislation**

Welsh Government has devolved power in relation to legislation for social welfare, and consequently is governed by different legislation from England. Two exceptions, as set out in Schedule 7A to the Government of Wales Act 2006, are specific parts of the Mental Capacity Act and the Children Act 1989 and the Children Act 2004. The Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014 refers to the Children Acts 1989 and 2004 where they remain in force. Part 7 of the SSW(W)A refers to safeguarding and is accompanied by statutory guidance 'Working Together to Safeguard People'. Of note here is that upon a child being reported to a local authority as 'at risk' under section 130(4) of the SSW(W)A, the local authority must consider whether they are grounds for carrying out an investigation under section 47 of the Children Act 1989. Section 47 requires that if a local authority has reasonable cause to suspect that a child "is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm", it will make enquires to decide whether it should take any action to safeguard or promote the child's welfare. The 'Wales Safeguarding Procedures' detail the roles and responsibilities of practitioners in relation to safeguarding children, including the requirements for assessment, child

protection conferences and core groups. The Public Law Outline (PLO) 2014 is the other primary piece of legislation to which child protection practitioners work which sets out the work to be completed within the 26 week timescales of proceedings. For social workers in Salina, they provided a given of practice, the timescales which must be met and that they would be held accountable for meeting, and the forums in which they must present their work.

### **The workers and the office**

I spent ten months shadowing social workers in a child protection team in 'Salina', South Wales between December 2019 to September 2020. Two months in I changed the way shadowed social workers to move with them as they worked cases rather than through a given day, as it allowed me to stay close to social work change methods as they played out. The decision for shadowing to take this particular form rested upon my knowledge of how social workers organise their work by 'cases', observing this in initial fieldwork encounters (see Pithouse and Atkinson, 1988). This resulted in shadowing three social workers as they worked with five families across different domains of practice. I shadowed for a minimum of three days per week, with some weeks including the first half the week and others the latter half of the week.

The Team Manager had worked in the authority for over 15 years and had extensive knowledge of the connections between families developed over this time. She is a self-confessed 'control freak' and manages her worries about feeling accountable for decision making by being available in the team for discussion and hearing and supporting case discussion on a day-to-day basis. Generally, she was viewed as a safe pair of hands by social workers who felt that she had their backs. The office is designed to be open plan, though the teams have created their own private areas using tall filing cabinets and screens. This means that the four child protection hubs are relatively screened off from the rest of the office. Whilst hot desking is encouraged, the hub arrangement means that social workers each have their own desk. Phone duty and Section 47 duty is staffed on a rota basis. Being on phone duty requires picking up referrals as they come into the team and deciding how to progress them. Section 47 duty requires a worker to have space in their diary to be called out to urgent child protection assessments. Social workers on Section 47 duty hope for a quiet day to catch up with paperwork. The Team Manager for the East and West hubs sits near the duty desk to be on hand should a call come in that requires her input.

This was a useful initial spot for me to position myself as it is in the centre of the office with a view of each of the four hubs, and which social workers frequently visited for informal discussions with the Team Manager. I subsequently moved around the office as much as possible but often found myself in the way and ultimately based myself on a spare desk in East Hub 1, near the duty desk.

I based the decision about which days to do fieldwork on what the social workers had booked into their diaries with the families I was shadowing to ensure I could shadow as much of their work with families as possible. There were a total of 16 social workers, 6 senior practitioners, 2 social work assistants, 4 practice leads and four administrators in the teams. Only two of the 26 qualified social workers were men. 24 of the social workers were white British, 1 black British-African and 1 Asian British-Indian. I have not included demographic information in the data unless it is topicalised as relevant by the people themselves, this means that whilst it will be evident that a social worker is male or female, the ethnicity of the social worker will not as it was not a concern for members themselves. I shadowed 14 of the 26 social workers during the ten months of fieldwork, though as I began to shadow families I found myself shadowing three workers more frequently than others. One of these workers was newly qualified and two were senior practitioners.

Each of the five families I shadowed was identified by the team manager as potentially requiring longer term work when they 'came in' to social services, following which I asked the social workers and then families for their consent to shadow. I discussed with the social worker the feasibility of shadowing their work with this family and the social worker then asked the family for their consent. I spent a considerable amount of time with the three social workers as they worked with these families, getting to know them and how they worked during our shared car journeys to home visits and meetings. It was not my intention to bring a detailed focus to the practice of three social workers, rather, it reflected the changeable nature of social work cases, as those deemed likely to be open long term were closed, the family moved area, or the cases were less high risk with visits frequently rearranged making it difficult for me to shadow. Visits arranged by different social workers frequently overlapped and I prioritised visits where I already had an established relationship with the family. The practicalities of car sharing meant I would often shadow a social worker for half a day, for multiple visits and meetings with different families. This

also meant that I was able to observe practice across a range of different practice settings at different times of the day.

### **The families**

I observed interactions with over 30 families, though I gathered more comprehensive data on the five families I observed over time. My analysis draws upon data from observations of three families and here, I briefly outline each of their case trajectories for reference.

#### **The Clenham family:**

I first heard about Unborn Clenham and his parents to be, Arthur and Amy, when the social worker asked if I could go with her to visit “a crazy dude who carries a machete and hides in cupboards” (140219). I observed office discussions, three assessment sessions, two core groups, a family network meeting, and the social worker would frequently seek me out to give me an ‘update’ about the family. The social worker also provided detailed accounts of the case during our car journeys together. The family came into social services on a ‘Care and Support’ basis and as the social worker believed the risk of domestic abuse to be high, with limited early changes, the case escalated to ‘Child Protection’ and ‘Public Law Outline’<sup>6</sup>. Although it was not clear this would be the case from the start, Baby Clenham now lives with his mother who parents with the support of his paternal and maternal grandparents.

#### **The Slocum family:**

I first heard about Jazz and Ash three months into fieldwork when a practice lead asked if I could go with Angelica, a senior social worker, to an assessment session that required working in twos. The practice lead explained that they received a police report informing them that Asha had severely beaten his pregnant girlfriend, Jazz.

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<sup>6</sup> ‘Care and support plans’ are care plans for children receiving support from the local authority in any capacity. The lowest level of intervention in Salina is ‘child in need’, followed by ‘child protection’, ‘pre-proceedings’, and ‘proceedings’, each with its own set of timescales and procedures. If a child is on the child protection register, they have been identified as being at risk of significant harm, and the family work to a child protection plan, with core groups meeting every 6 weeks to monitor and update the plan. The pre-proceedings process refers to the work completed with families with the intention of preventing court proceedings over the course of a maximum of 16 weeks. In this process, the parents and the local authority each have legal representation and meet regularly to review progress. Care proceedings refer to when a local authority makes an application to the court to establish plans for the long term care of a child. This process aims to conclude within 26 weeks of initial application. These expectations are set out in the Wales Safeguarding Procedures (Welsh Government, 2019b) and Safeguarding Guidance (Welsh Government, 2021).



Because of this, all meetings with Asha had to be in the local authority offices and carried out with two workers. I observed three assessment sessions, a core group, and a legal meeting with the family. Asha and Jazz did not accept that the abuse perpetrated by Asha could result in the harm of their baby and the case was escalated from Care and Support to Child Protection and Public Law Outline. As I left fieldwork, it seemed unlikely that baby Slocum could return to his parents' care.

#### The Davies family:

Parker Davies was taken into care at birth as I began fieldwork. I came to know about Parker and his family as social workers discussed them in the office. I first met Parker's parents, Jacqui and Bob, at a his first Looked After Children's review and they allowed me to observe meetings, assessment sessions and court hearings. I did not meet Parker in the course of my fieldwork. Parker's parents had both had children removed from their care previously. Social services were worried because there had been a finding of fact made in previous proceedings that Jacqui had caused non accidental injuries to one of her older children. They also believed that Jacqui and Bob had 'concealed' this pregnancy as they did not seek support from health services and did not inform social services about it. The social worker, Stella, was newly qualified and described feeling overwhelmed whilst working with the family. Initially, Parker's parents fought for him to return to their care. As they became aware that this would be an unlikely eventuality, they supported the plan for him to live with his paternal Aunt under a Special Guardianship Order.<sup>7</sup>

It is worth noting that two of the cases involve unborn babies and one a very young baby who is not in his parents' care. Consequently, none of the interactions I observed included the children at the centre of these cases. Even in the other 30 families I visited, only four of those involved interactions with children. The only visits in which social workers have a duty to see the child are statutory child protection visits. I only observed three statutory visits during my fieldwork, with social workers preferring to bring me to assessment sessions or to discussions with parents who were risk assessed as requiring a second person. The relative lack of children in the data relates to parents being the primary objects of child protection social work. Although social worker's formulations of a parent are tied to accounts of the harm they have done or

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<sup>7</sup> A Special Guardianship Order places a child permanently with a relative or family friend and gives that person parental responsibility for the child.

may do to their child (Wattam, 1992; White, 1997), the work of parental self-transformation forms the bulk of social worker's interactional work with parents.

### **'Best practice' in Salina**

Ease of access to Salina was possible as I agreed to shadow a team known for 'best practice', as defined by the principal officer for research and development in children's services. Given the phenomenological nature of the study, I did not view observing 'best practice' to be a barrier or worthy of concerns of bias as it one, among a broad set of possible formulations of the team and I was not seeking to make evaluative judgements about the quality of practice. It also presented a number of opportunities for the research. It presented an opportunity to gain insight into the working practices most admired by a worker in the organisation who is tasked with improving strengths-based practice. It also offered the potential to guard against developing research from practice failures, which tend to produce recommendations to social workers to improve their capacity to predict and reduce risks in practice (Munro et al., 2014). Finally, it offered a way in to the team that countered some of the social worker's concerns with the risks of being observed by an outsider in the blame culture of child protection. These possibilities were realised through field work at Salina and allowed me a level of access, for example to court work, that I had not anticipated. I have been fortunate to have access to rich, detailed data through which to describe 'change practices' in child protection social work.

## **Chapter Three**

### **A Biography of the Research**

#### **Introduction**

I demonstrate the live nature of the research by charting the biography of the research, exploring its twists and turns (Silverman, 2010). Coming back to the biography of the research has been an invaluable way of retaining a sense of perspective and clarity about the intentions of the research when in the midst of ethnographic fieldwork and analysis. Producing an account of that biography, with a specific focus on methodological and analytic choices, echoes this approach for the reader, charting the deliberative processes involved throughout the research journey. This follows Silverman's (2010) notion of a 'natural history' of research methods. Silverman (2010) argues this avoids the pitfalls of making a series of blunt assertions in the passive voice, instead making the research come alive (Silverman, 2010: 334-335). A fellow social work PhD, Lisa Morriss, used this approach to great effect, for which I am thankful as it emboldened me to follow suit. This is not only a structural device but also an epistemological choice. In outlining my role in shaping the research, I reflect on research methods as 'work in progress' rather than an abstract and rigid set of technical prescriptions, and eschew an approach seeking to demonstrate a faux objectivity which in turn offers a rationale for writing in the first person. This partial biography offers insights into the choices made as I came to and carried out my PhD. It begins with my journey from social work practice into research before discussing the approach I settled upon to consider how social work gets done - 'ethnomethodologically informed' ethnography (Hughes 2001; Randall et al. 2020).

#### **Coming to the PhD**

Attending to my biography and the biography of the research have been important elements of the PhD process, to stay attuned to the purpose and overall aim of the project, my motivations, my role in shaping the research and the interactions within it, my presence in the data and analysis, and attending to the partiality of the work. This PhD is not about me and I heed the arguments against an overly autoethnographic approach (Atkinson, 2006). Yet, there is balance to be found. I make observable my interpretation of the reflexively organised research process to the

reader when I think it will support their understanding of the decisions I made in the PhD and in relation to the data. How I came to the PhD is one such occasion.

Social work language, psychological concepts, notions of self-actualisation and self-improvement were all familiar to me when I entered the profession. As were notions of institutional and bureaucratic logics and logics of risk management. I knew them, however abstractly, as a child. They were familiar to me because of the conversations I observed family members in the helping professions having, day in, day out. I knew how to be a professional or at least how to pass as one and this was crystallised through my studies for an MA in Social Work at Cardiff University. My first job as a qualified social worker was in a child protection team in South Wales. It was through this work that I became interested in how social workers did it; how they pulled off their daily work. How did they communicate in complex ways about emotive issues with families? How did families experience and cope with such encounters? My practice involved ethical quandaries, interactional troubles, moments of pathos, a racing heart, a sinking stomach, an affronted nose, and an overwhelming sense that however fair one tried to make the process, however heard one helped families to feel, the violence of state intervention in family life was undeniably traumatic for all those involved. Yet, remarkably, it was pulled off, for the most part, through smooth interactions. Embodied emotions were managed, interactional troubles deftly negotiated, by families and social workers, day in day out.

Doing social work in Child Protection Teams and in an Integrated Family Support Team allowed me to experience two different approaches to child and family social work. These differences rested upon the institutionally sanctioned possibilities for a legitimate course of work available to practitioners in each team, and the interactional approaches and ways of working that formed the norms of practice. The Child Protection Team took a more traditionally interventionist approach, whereas the Integrated Family Support Team (IFST) took an approach more aligned to the Social Model of Child Protection<sup>8</sup> as outlined by Featherstone et al. (2018), at least at practitioner level. The model of practice used by IFST had shown promise when

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<sup>8</sup> "A social model acknowledges that what is defined as child abuse is socially constructed and historically changing. Based on research into the social determinants of so many 'family troubles', a social model recognises that structural inequalities, including poverty, sexism and racism, have an impact in interrelated ways on people's lives" (Featherstone et al., 2018).

supporting families with a parent with drug and alcohol issues and was rolled out across Wales on the basis of this research evidence (Forrester et al., 2008). It rested upon an understanding of change and communication methods developed from counselling. As I learned to work in this way with families, I saw that the tensions experienced between these teams as they worked with the same family came at points where these ways of working conflicted, often at moments in which a decision was required about a plan, and the manner in which this decision was reached and communicated. Nonetheless, these tensions were deftly negotiated by the professionals involved, without having to get into the details of their conflicting approaches. With the introduction of the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act inducing more co-productive ways of working, I wondered how possible it would be for social workers in child protection teams to ground their interactions with families in co-productive methods, methods that more closely resembled those used in IFST. These questions were at the forefront of my mind as I applied for the ESRC 1+3 studentship at Cardiff University, where researchers from the IFST study were based. My sense that the relational nature of human interaction is at the core of social work continues in broad focus of this PhD which seeks to explore how change projects in child protection social work get done.

The focus of the research has taken twists and turns along the way yet practice oriented questions have guided my thinking throughout. These questions began to take shape as I moved through positions of inquiring social worker, to social work research associate, to novice sociological researcher. Through my studies on the Social Science Research Methods MSc at Cardiff University, I developed an interest in ethnography and ethnomethodology. These interests were sustained and enlivened by participation in two research groups at the university - The Ethnography Group and CEEIT (Cardiff Ethnography, Ethnomethodology, Interaction and Talk). These approaches offered complementary ways of viewing the world that could grapple with the complexities of human interaction. At the same time, I needed to work alongside the PhD and found employment as a Research Associate with CASCADE (Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre). Working on different research projects opened my eyes to the broader field of social work research, the politicisation of research methods, and the role of funders in shaping the research agenda. These experiences occurred simultaneously and led me to conversations with fellow students and academics of social work and sociology, that helped me to

interrogate and shape how I wanted to research, the kind of research I wanted to produce, and the kind of researcher I wanted to be. The research would not have taken its current shape had it not been for my professional experience of social work and my engagement with these spheres of influence. These experiences guided the methodological choices that follow.

### **Evolving research aims - from decision making to methods to track change**

A series of foreshadowed questions relating to how child and family social workers make sense of their decisions, the knowledge they draw on, the accounts they produce, and the interactional nature and consequences of their decisions, formed the starting point for my research. When beginning to read for this topic as a researcher, it was apparent that much of the literature relating to child protection decision making is based on representations of decision making, through interview, document analysis and observations of formal meetings. As detailed in the literature review, few studies considered how decision making in child protection is experienced and ordered as it plays out. The practicalities of exploring these questions required being able to observe social workers across settings of practice as they went about daily interactions with families and professionals. An ethnographic approach offered a fittingly flexible qualitative methodology that was responsive to the eclectic nature of social workers' methods. It was well suited to an exploration of how social workers understand their work and how they use categories in decision-making (i.e. what to do next, in the short and long term) within different contexts, spaces and relations. It also offered the potential for findings that avoided "repeated exhortations to child protection services to predict and prevent maltreatment" and the associated implications for blame culture (Munro et al., 2014). Rather than make assessments of the quality of social workers' practice, I wanted to explore how child protection gets done, how social workers understand, account for, take action and manage their daily work (Miles and Huberman 1994: 7).

The evolving nature of ethnographic research means the research focus often changes through the course of fieldwork, as different ways to look and see emerge. Originally, the aim of my research was to explore how child protection decisions get done. I planned to focus on decision-making points, for example, the duty desk where decisions are made to do a child protection (S47) assessment and meetings where decisions would be made to change the category of intervention. Early on in the

fieldwork, it became evident that these were not the focal points for decision making activities in social work, rather they acted as the rubber stamp. The work that social workers did to manage uncertainties, ambiguities, and messiness of decisions in child protection that they re-presented into neat formulations to justify particular courses of action formed the bulk of their daily work (see also Atkinson 1995). The ways in which social workers accounted for change, or lack thereof, and fixed these accounts, worked as practical resources for generating consensus or good enough knowledge for particular moments in time. The concept of change and methods used to capture and track change were present in the daily interactions of all of the social workers I observed. This is unsurprising to the extent that social workers are in the business of helping people to change patterns and behaviours to make their parenting safe. Yet, no existing research seemed to have tracked methods for charting change in any detail. Following this, I chose to focus on how social workers and families account for change, or lack of, through their interactions - key methods which form decisions in child protection practice.

### **Ethical approval and access - the tenuous relationship between institutional and situated ethics**

Given the broad focus of my research is how child protection social work gets done, the most suitable way to immerse myself in this work was to situate myself within a child and family social work team. Negotiating initial access was a surprisingly straightforward process though gaining ethical approval proved slightly more difficult and formed a useful point through which to think through the relationship between procedural ethics and situated ethics. Here, I discuss pertinent details relating to procedural and situated ethics as they unfolded through my ethnographic research. I limit my discussion of ethics to the relationship between ethical review and ethics in the field, drawing on divergences between the institutional expectations of the university and the complexities of ethnography in a child protection team. I argue that anticipatory ethical regulation is poorly equipped to deal with the emergent nature of ethnographic fieldwork (Delamont and Atkinson, 2018).

I submitted my application on 29th May 2018 and received a pending letter on 15th June 2018 in response that sought further clarity in relation to issues of consent and in relation to tick box questions about participant characteristics. I took time to consider

the issues raised in the pending letter and responded on 5th July. I received ethical approval on 11th July 2018. The further information requested by the committee is worth considering in relation to the notion of situated and procedural ethics as they played out in the field, particularly in relation to consent.

An example the committee sought clarification on was how I would manage a situation in which a family consented to my presence, but a professional did not. My experience as a social worker led me to think this was a highly unlikely scenario, yet, I dutifully suggested the following approach: "If the family do consent to participate and a professional chooses not to take part, for example, in a multi-agency meeting, I will leave that meeting and ensure all data relating to that professional is destroyed, but the family can still participate in other aspects of the research if they wish." (see Appendix 2). During actual multi-agency meetings in the field this prescription was irrelevant as the rule-like approach of professionals was that if the family are happy to participate, they were too. In multi-agency meetings, consent was sought from and given by the professional collective at the same time. Through their very presence in the meeting, professionals are there to support and shape families, and by showing they will follow a family's lead they reflexively accomplish this work. Of course, this is a decontextualised reading but this happened at every multi-agency meeting I was involved in. This perhaps also relates to the fact that I sought formal consent in a group social setting rather than seeking the formal consent of disconnected individuals when they were alone.

The divergence between the approach sought and accepted by the committee and the approach to negotiating even formal consent in the field is tied to differing understandings of people as individuals or collectives. The ethical approval process assumes that those involved in the research are individuals with individual rights that are equivalent to each other and should be treated identically; conversely, ethnographers tend to work with people on the basis of their membership of a shared social world and thus cannot enrol each member one-by-one (Delamont and Atkinson 2018). In multi-agency meetings the family's choice was privileged by members over any potential individual concerns. The anticipatory regulation required by the committee were a poor fit to the collective nature of situated ethics.



The requirement for abstract, individualistic ethical accounts of research activity runs the risk of obscuring the relationship between institutional principle and practicality. One moment that stayed with me was an interaction with a social worker that followed a particularly tense looked after children's (LAC) review<sup>9</sup>. The social worker came under fire from the independent reviewing officer (IRO) and the children's guardian for a proposed care plan for the children. The IRO told the social worker this in a manner that did not support her to explain her reasoning and used damning language about the quality of the social worker's practice. Following the meeting, I left with the social worker who burst into tears in the car park. Instinctively I gave her a hug until she was calmer and I offered to share what I observed with her team manager. The social worker said she would appreciate this. My motivation was to get support for the social worker who seemed to be struggling and unsupported. I did share what I observed and I did so with very little thought about the consequences for the IRO. My relationship was with the social worker and I had seen her bullied by a more experienced colleague. The realisation that I had potentially crossed boundaries came when the team manager asked if I could write a written account of what I had seen. I agonised over the right thing to do. As fellow social worker I would have given this evidence. As an ethnographer I felt a responsibility to all those in the scene, including the IRO. In the end, the team manager arranged a meeting with the IRO who was able to air her concerns about the care plan and reflect upon how she made a junior colleague feel. A blanket anticipatory statement setting out how I would manage issues of confidentiality was a poor substitute for collegial discussion of ethical quandaries as they arose.

These examples offer an insight into the tenuous relationship between procedural and situated ethics. I am not suggesting that ethnographic research should not be subject to oversight. The complex relationships that develop as a result of a long immersion in the field arguably require greater oversight than other forms of less intensive research. Situated, relational ethics in my fieldwork involved a rejection of critical distance in favour of sharing social experiences (Gilliat-Ray, 2011; Coffey, 1999). This was not always straightforward given the institutional expectations of ethics boards to privilege individualistic notions of rights over the collective. For me,

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<sup>9</sup> A looked after children's review is a statutory meeting for a child in local authority care that brings together key people and professionals who are closely concerned with the care of the child. It's an opportunity to review the child's care plan, discuss the child's progress and make plans for the future.

this involved being helpful, elements of self-disclosure, being present and at times responding as a colleague. It involved getting to know workers beyond their professional selves, and engaging in talk about children, families, life plans, frustrations and worries. Ethnographic researchers would benefit from ethical review via ongoing collegial discussion and debate as opposed to a one-off bureaucratic procedure (Delamont and Atkinson, 2018). I sought this type of support through informal discussion with more experienced colleagues, students and social workers, which proved invaluable.

### **Praxiological focus**

A praxiological focus considers how a given field is produced through everyday practices and how these practices might be witnessable, describable and instructable parts of that field. These two lines of enquiry cannot be separated and consequently praxiological descriptions are part and parcel of what they describe (Eisenmann and Lynch, 2021). This view formed the starting point of my PhD and influenced my reading, fieldwork, analysis, and writing choices throughout. I do not treat philosophical issues as foundational but view them as helpful tools to think about how we can know, how we can warrant what we know, and the kinds of things we can claim to know from research. Having decided upon an ethnographic approach, I tried to heed the warning that lengthy engagement in philosophical discussions can act as distractions from practical questions, and instead, to focus on daily practices as a starting point. Here, you will find an account of how evolving research aims were based on practical considerations and went hand in hand with evolving research methods. Two key elements are of note here. First, a focus on what child protection social workers do in their daily work guided my reading of ethnographies of child protection practice and led me to consider issues of mobility as practical fieldwork issues early on in the research process. Second, an interest in producing empirically and practically grounded ethnographic accounts led to me drawing on ethnomethodology as a strategy to fight familiarity. In turn, this shifted the analytic sensibilities of my research and as I outline here, led me to move towards “ethnomethodologically informed” ethnography.

### Why ethnographic research?

As a research associate on a series of projects that used a variety of qualitative and quasi-qualitative methods, I was able to develop my understanding of the relative

benefits and drawbacks of different approaches to social work research. This included working on projects that used quantitative measurement and statistical testing of social work skills (Forrester et al., 2020), realist evaluation of the effectiveness of models of practice (Sheehan et al., 2021), and qualitative interviews of service user experience (Burrows et al., 2022) and social workers' experiences of co-production. Each of these methods led to analysis that in various ways produced decontextualised research findings, whether that be a statistical measure of the relationship between social work skills and family outcomes, a measure and summary of the effectiveness of a model of practice on family outcomes, or the development of a series of themes about the core issues taken to be representative of the actual experiences of interviewees. Whilst I believe there is a place for varied methodological approaches to research, as a social worker, I knew that I wanted my research to reflect as closely as possible the daily realities of practice, and for any analysis to seriously engage with the troubles negotiated by practitioners through their situated work practice. Ethnography, which primarily involves 'gathering data through participant observation in a natural setting' (Floersch et al., 2014: 5) appeared promising as an approach through which contextualised analysis of face-to-face practice encounters were beginning to emerge.

Child protection social work primarily gets done through a series of interactions between social workers and family members, and at times those interactions include other professionals. Yet, research on child protection practice is only just beginning to get close enough to practice to see how these interactions are pulled off. Ethnographic research in child protection social work traditionally focused on 'institutional ethnographies' in which the researcher is immersed in an office-based setting and studies the occupational culture of social work (see White 1997; Pithouse, 1987; Holland, 1999; Parada et al., 2007; Gillingham and Humphries, 2010; Broadhurst and Mason, 2014). These studies attend to occupational culture, how social workers talk about their work, and how managerialism and bureaucratic tasks limit the time social workers have with children and families. They focus on how the social work organisation structures practice and organises daily experience (Floersch et al., 2014). Yet research bounded by the space of the office setting inevitably neglects practice beyond the office, in traditionally 'invisible'<sup>10</sup> spaces of informal interaction (Pithouse,

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<sup>10</sup> The term 'invisible' refers to the fact that practice beyond the confines of the office takes place between parents and social workers, beyond the observability of colleague and managers.

1987). As outlined in the literature review, more recently, ethnographic research in social work has begun to consider what Floersch et al. (2014) call 'practice ethnographies', that is, ethnographies of face-to-face practice. These ethnographic studies have shed light on practice encounters, specifically what social workers do between the office and the home visit, and where services users live (Ferguson, 2004; 2008; 2010; 2014; 2016). Arguably, ethnography has always been 'mobile' but through bringing analytic attention to how mobilities present practical problems and possibilities for participants, mobile ethnographies new ways of seeing members' practices. I attend to such mobile practices in the final analysis chapter.

Ethnography is a semantically fuzzy term (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019), as the diversity of the cases, topics and methods drawn upon within mobile ethnographic research highlights (Ferguson 2011; Moles, 2020; Gilliat-Ray, 2011; Fincham, 2007; Smith and Hall, 2017). Nonetheless, they share similarities in terms of what researchers actually do, the sorts of data they collect, and the kinds of analyses they use to handle that data. These studies consider people's mobile actions and accounts in everyday contexts, rather than solely under conditions created by the researcher; data collection takes shape throughout the fieldwork process; and the categories used to interpret what people say emerge through analysis. Mobility as a research practice extends analytic mobility as it results in the capacity to follow phenomena as they are produced, attend to perception-in-action or moving-as-knowing, and produce situated research findings. This offers the analytic mobility required to study how 'change' in social work gets done.

### A shifting form of ethnographic research

From the early stages of my research, I took an ethnographic approach that drew on methodological insights from the mobilities paradigm and I tentatively made my way into a social work team to 'do' ethnography. It was through movement with and discussion with social workers themselves that the specific form this took emerged and shifted.

At the beginning of my field work I drew upon a particular mobile method, 'work shadowing', which meant shadowing a worker wherever they went throughout a day (Gilliat-Ray 2011; Wollcott, 2003). I did this with the intention of getting a sense of the rhythms of practice. Work-shadowing requires "focusing attention on what occurs as

interlocutors move among settings and situations” (Trouille and Tavoury, 2019), rather than zooming in on one particular situation, such as the assessment session (Holland, 1999) or pre-proceedings meeting (Broadhurst and Holt, 2010). Gilliat-Ray (2011) explains that participant observation generally involves the focusing on the daily practices of a group of people over time, whereas work-shadowing focuses attention on a single individual. Though, it does not always involve only a single individual. For example, Quinlan (2008) work shadowed three nurse practitioners in different institutional settings over a period of several weeks. For the first month of my fieldwork, I shadowed each worker from the team for a whole day at a time, which allowed me to get to know them, some of the families on their caseload, rhythms of practice, spaces of practice, and the geography of the local community. As time went on, I found social workers talking to me about families they thought I visit with them again, and ones they needed a second body to accompany them on. Whilst I was getting a sense of the shape of daily work for social workers, this approach did not enable me to stay with the phenomenon of change methods in child protection practice as social workers perceived it. I was going with social workers from the office, to family homes, to meetings, for lunch, and to court, and as I discussed earlier, social work practices of tracking change in each of these settings was evident. Yet, I was not getting a sense of how this played out over time in individual cases.

By the second month of field work, I began having conversations with the social workers about the relative merits of shadowing them as they worked with specific families over time. Given that social workers in locality teams tend to work with families from referral, through to assessment, through to case closure or transfer, and that their central task is to support and assess parents’ capacity to change to a degree that reduces risks to their child, shadowing social workers as they worked with specific families appeared to be a better approach to staying with the phenomenon of child protection change methods. I spoke with the team manager, practice lead and social workers so they could keep me informed of cases that were coming in that were likely to require assessment and support over a period of months. Perhaps naively I believed this would allow me to observe practice with families with a range of needs, and a range of risk categories. The research strategy thus became shadowing social workers as they worked with specific families.

Moving with social workers in this way enabled me to attend to how they move about in their everyday working lives, the details of how they interact with other members in various settings, how they build cases, and specifically, how interactions, designed for settings, had implications for how social workers grappled with the practical matter of 'fixing' change. Initially, a concern with a constructive ethnographic analysis<sup>11</sup> led me to consider how the overall shape of social work practice plays out in different settings, and through the story of a case, affects daily interactions (linked to ideas outside of settings that span between them). As my research progressed, I began to make sense of social workers' methods for accounting for change with a focus on actual practices, in situ. By focusing on what social workers *do*, it is possible to remain true to practice as it plays out, and I hope, avoid overlaying theory. The institutional mobility afforded by mobile ethnography resulted in an analytic mobility that enabled explication of the relationship between situations and the temporal dimension to situated meaning, and the practical accomplishment of change methods (see Sheehan, 2021). Specifically, it enabled me to consider how social workers and families themselves draw on what came before and what may come next to accomplish in situ intersubjective objectivity, that will do for just that moment.

### **Finding ethnomethodological sensibilities**

The question of how to produce empirically grounded accounts that adequately represented what I observed in situ, and what I recorded in field notes and audio recordings, was one I grappled with throughout fieldwork, analysis and writing. This interest began with a concern to 'fight familiarity' and ensure that my competencies as a social worker were not making the taken for granted invisible, and drew me towards ethnomethodology (EM), an approach originating with Garfinkel (1967), as one method to do this. An initial foray into using EM to analyse field interactions led to my engagement in a research group doing EM oriented data sessions, and to questions of how ethnomethodological sensibilities may complement ethnographic immersion. In line with my commitment to charting the evolving nature of the research, I outline how three concepts from ethnomethodology (members methods, unique adequacy and vulgar competency) helped me grapple with the issue of

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<sup>11</sup> Constructive analysis (Garfinkel and Sacks 1970) refers to studies of idealized and decontextualized 'reconstructions' of social life, made by the research subjects and/or the researcher, instead of that life in its own situated particulars. In ethnographic research this would involve an ethnographer studying their own fieldnotes as an unexamined resource for their study of a community's life (ten Have, 2004).

meaning, via instrumental use in an attempt to fight familiarity, and via data sessions, which in turn fundamentally shaped the direction of my research. The following account reflects a coming to ethnomethodology and explicates the shift in my thinking about the role of the researcher and the role of data that led me towards ethnomethodologically informed ethnography. As Mair and Sharrock note of reading Garfinkel and Sacks, before reading “it’s difficult to imagine that sociology could be approached that way. After you read it, the idea you could approach it any other way becomes difficult to imagine” (Mair and Sharrock 2020: 20).

### Introducing ethnomethodology

Ethnomethodology’s topic is the organisation of everyday activity (Garfinkel, Lynch and Livingstone 1981). In keeping with its roots in the work of Schutz, it tells us that people, as members of society, use and rely on a body of practical knowledge which they assume is shared, at least partially, with others (see Ten Have, 2002). It is concerned with the ‘seen but unnoticed’ social norms, that we don’t consciously attend to, but learn, then bracket out. ‘Expected background features of everyday scenes’ (Garfinkel 1967: 36) work as taken for granted assumptions about how certain situations will play out, that for the most part, are honoured by everyone involved. This means that social order appears like objective reality and we can forget about it. It is a practical solution to the complexity of life, for if we had to continuously check what we thought was happening, we would never get anything done. Garfinkel demonstrated this through his breaching experiments which showed that when a rule is breached, we become aware that it exists, which in turn exposes the precarious nature of the social world.

Garfinkel uses the concept of “member<sup>1</sup>” where we would usually use “person” or individual. He does so to underscore the point that ethnomethodology is not interested in individuals, but in the competencies involved in being a member of a collectivity (Ten Have, 2002). “The notion of member is at the heart of the matter” (Garfinkel and Sacks, 1970) because it refers to the competencies of natural language, the capacity to speak and act in ways that demonstrate common sense knowledge of the situations in which people find themselves. “Membership knowledge” is treated as a topic by ethnomethodology and is also central to its own methodology, as ethnomethodologists are also members of society with competencies in natural language. For my purposes then, in order to understand child protection practice, I

needed to focus on how it makes sense to its members, of which I am one. I mean this both in the sense of being a member of society and being a member of the professional collective of social work.

### Familiarity

Fighting familiarity was a concern of mine early on in fieldwork. As I entered the field, my social work background contributed to the ease of my initial access and the types of setting I was permitted to observe, as well as an ease of understanding of what was going on in day-to-day social work interactions (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019). Interactions with social workers felt comfortable, familiar, and I felt like I was reconnecting with my identity as a social worker which had taken a back seat during a year of study. During interactions themselves and their life on the page in field notes, I struggled to see the action as anything other than child protection as usual. How was it possible to make sense of what was going on in any meaningful way when what the daily work seemed so familiar? Turning to ethnographic literature for strategies to fight familiarity was a starting point.

Familiarity has long been a topic of discussion for ethnographers, originating with a concern about how best to research settings that were so familiar that daily practices become taken for granted and difficult to see. For the ethnographers in the UK and anthropologists in the US originally writing about this issue, the school classroom was the familiar site. For my purposes, the child protection office was familiar and equally important, child protection vernacular, knowledge and competencies were familiar. Delamont and Atkinson (1995) offer a detailed look why familiarity may be a concern and suggest strategies to fight it. They argue that the primary reason to fight familiarity is to enable the generation of foreshadowed questions which provide directions along which to look when conducting field work that allow the ethnographer to see beyond only the things that are conventionally there to be seen. They outline strategies to fight familiarity, one of which is to adopt the 'ethnomethodological manifesto'. Yet whilst the relevance of ethnomethodology as a strategy to fight familiarity is noted, it is not elaborated on.

One researcher with a professional social work background, Lisa Morriss (2016), drew on ethnomethodology as an analytical tool to support her to fight familiarity in her doctoral research. As a Mental Health Social Worker by training, she was struck



in her interviews with fellow social workers by their recognition of her as a group member. She noticed the ease with which they shared atrocity stories, how this related to her insider status and how she was intimately engaged in the production of such stories in her interviews. She looked to ethnomethodology to make sense of the practices in her interviews and through this looking moved to a liminal position occupying the role of social worker in situ, and the role of researcher during analysis. Morriss (2016) explores how this shift from insider to outsider made her 'strange' to the norms of her profession as she stopped seeing social work as usual and began to see how social work was practically accomplished. Morris (2016) draws on the concept unique adequacy to illustrate her point.

Unique adequacy is an ethnomethodological concept that contends that to follow and describe the coherent detail of phenomena of order as they are locally produced, the analyst must be vulgarly competent in the ways in which members produce, accountably, the phenomena of order they are studying (Garfinkel, 2002; Garfinkel and Wieder, 1992). In simpler terms, an observer must gain a vulgar competency in an activity in order to access its detail. In specialised scenes, such as courtrooms, social work offices, labs and mountain rescue teams, it would likely be difficult for someone untrained in the relevant specialised practices to see what members are up to (see Smith, 2020). This 'weak' form of unique adequacy requires that the observer or researcher attends to how the job gets done and can grasp what it looks like to do it well, that is, they get it. This form of unique adequacy is required of plausible and useful ethnographic accounts (see Pithouse 1998). Ethnographers must develop "vulgar competence in the setting itself, in order to understand life as practitioners themselves comprehend and practice it and to be able to describe it in the language of the setting (Randall et al., 2020).

### 'Getting it'

This 'weak' version of unique adequacy as 'getting it' was observable in different ways throughout my research. As I have already mentioned, being a member of a professional collective had benefits for access to the field and within the field, and to the resources used by social workers to make sense of their work. This account parallels ethnographic debates about the relative virtues of 'insider' research. But as I will show, the ways in which these encounters played out were situationally specific, and drew upon different ways of doing being a social worker. During the early stages

of field work my vulgar competence as a social worker was accomplished as social workers and legal professionals recognised and accepted me as such through different forms of institutional talk. First as a member of a collective who could be admitted - a cultural colleague. Second, and related, as someone who could understand the jargon of child protection. And third, as a trusted colleague – as I outline in the following chapter.

During my first visit to the office to meet the team manager, she inquired about my social work experience. This happened again on my second visit when the practice lead wanted to know where I had worked previously, for how long and where I had studied. This came to form part of the discussion with almost all of the social workers at different points as we drew on our shared professional training and work experience to establish our career trajectories. The idea that I understood what it was like to be a social worker in a child protection team, that I had a sense of what it was about, was important to the social workers and at times enabled them to be frank with me about their experiences. As one worker commented about the team welcoming me in:

That's about you being a social worker, so you're gonna get it straight away, the conversations we need to be having and things like that. I think it's a good thing. It gives you mutual respect straight away - you know the score. (Field notes 10.01.19).

This conversation happened on a car journey with a social worker en route to a home visit. The social worker orients to me as a fellow social worker and links this group membership to a shared understanding of social work practices ("you know the score"). As Garfinkel (2006: 197) notes, 'if Y treats X as a group member, then X is a group member'. My group affiliation as a social worker is accomplished through my recognition as such in situated interaction.

It was not only with social workers that my child protection credentials enabled access and the development of fieldwork relations, but with legal professionals too. Work shadowing social workers, with the consent of families, took me into legal meetings and into the courts. On my first visit to the courts, I arrived with the social worker and sat in the waiting room until the local authority solicitor came out to find us. The social worker introduced me and the solicitor looked concerned and I thought he was likely to object to my presence. Then the social worker informed him that I am a social worker and he smiled, shoulders dropping away from his ears, and said "oh,

you're a social worker, that's okay then". What goes on inside the court and the legal meetings within the court room requires getting it, awareness of the type of talk which is part of the practical machinery of the meeting. This talk would likely seem callous to someone outside of the profession and would also be unlikely to make sense. Once again, being a member of a collective, or a cultural colleague, was attached to the assumption that I would 'get it'.

My early fieldwork encounters were littered with interactions in which I engaged in or responded with understanding of institutional talk. 'Getting it' is more than just being oriented to as a member of a collective, as that membership requires a specific set of competencies. These were displayed by adequate credentialing of social work experience and the type of social workers we were, by responding to social work abbreviations in a manner that demonstrated my understanding (S47; S76; PLO; LAC), engaging in practical reasoning about outcomes for families, debriefing about how visits went, and social workers seeking advice from me. In interactions with families, I was not doing social work, yet I was part of the scene, at times oriented to as 'one of them' and at others as a critical eye upon the social worker. Whilst the perception of my 'insider' status was undoubtedly useful to the fieldwork, it was not uncomplicated. Binary notions of 'insider' and 'outsider', 'involvement' and 'detachment' (Elias, 2007), or 'ethnographer as stranger' and 'over-identification' (Coffey, 1999: 36), only become helpful when one realises one occupies both positions in situationally specific ways. Although I was oriented to as a social worker in many interactions, and this categorisation as a cultural colleague became an element of the background expectancies of the encounters that followed, this was not always the case, and when it was, it played out in situationally specific ways each time. "'Vulgar competencies' are highly situationally specific" (Smith, 2020: 43).

For my purposes, the EM concept of 'weak' unique adequacy supported me not only to attend to how my membership of the collective of social work played out in different interactions during fieldwork, it also led me to focus on the multiple ways in which members themselves displayed adequacy for the task at hand, and how this organised their social work. This shift in my thinking from 'it just is', to attending to 'how it is', helped me to fight familiarity. Yet, it was only through my competencies as a social worker that the machinery of 'how it is' made sense. My competency as a social worker did not extend to having competence in each aspect of the field, I did

not always have the competency of a social worker doing just that thing, I did not have competency as a parent, administrator, health visitor, midwife, teacher, barrister or judge for example. Yet my professional competence in the broader field of action of child protection social work allowed interactions with these members sense-able. Clearly, this part of the biography of the research reflects an instrumental use of ethnomethodological concepts to get a sense of the social organisation of fieldwork. I have done the unforgivable and applied ethnomethodological concepts as a gloss, using them at least initially, to think about interactions after the fact. It was only through attending to how the social world is built from within interaction that I began to cultivate an ethnomethodological sensibility.

### 'Seeing it' and the data session

The distinction between analysis from within and analysis from outside interaction is important as it reflects a debate that is central to disputes over the merits of ethnomethodological ethnography. This relates both to the role of theory and to the way in which one goes about their analysis. The ethnomethodological concept of 'strong' unique adequacy is relevant here, and I illustrate its value through a brief overview of my experience of a 'data session'.

Ethnomethodology was designed as a counter to the tendency of social science to engage in constructive analysis, that is, analysis that seeks to take up a social science model, method or scheme for evaluating what members can already see and describe (Lynch 1999: 221). Garfinkel argues that the researcher does not need to import concepts or analytical methods of 'professional sociology' to understand the data, as it is already there in the accomplishment of any actual case. Garfinkel's 'strong' form of unique adequacy refers to 'ethnomethodological indifference' which is "an indifference to the policies and methods of formal analysis[...] It is a procedure of not needing to consult the corpus of classic methods and findings with which to carry out the tasks of ethnomethodological research" (Garfinkel, 2002: 170). Importantly, 'indifference' does not mean 'value-freedom' as a researcher cannot free oneself of the mentalities inherent in and ordinary situation, rather that they should explicate such situations with a full attention to their ordinary accountability (Lynch 1999: 221).

As I began to think about these requirements, I struggled with the idea that ethnomethodology was doing exactly the thing it was criticising 'professional sociology' for. Weren't ethnomethodologists also drawing on theory to answer questions that were already out there to see? The professionalisation of ethnomethodology's sister approach Conversation Analysis (CA) would certainly suggest so (taking talk, putting it through the machinery of conversation analysis, and coming up with what is happening). Indeed, the dense and impenetrable language of ethnomethodology also suggests one requires a particular set of competencies as a sociologist to understand this (see Watson (2015) on the intentionality of Garfinkel's obscure language) in a manner that is beyond that of another member, outside this collective. Yet, when I began to think of ethnomethodology as just another way of looking at the world, but one that focused on member's practices, it was easier to see the distinction between the analysis it produced and that of constructive analysis. Really, it argues for a set of sensibilities that remain true to the methods people use to make themselves understood and to understand any given interaction. As Randall et al. (2020, 5) note:

Unlike theoretical approaches that claim to reveal the unknown or the counterintuitive, ethnomethodology, says the kinds of things that members couldn't disagree with, it simply reminds them of things they already know and recognise as normal, ordinary, and natural. While theory aspires to novelty, to suggest that society or organizations are actually different to how people believe they are or experience them, this emphasis, this agenda, means that members' experiences get left out and disregarded. The phenomena of everyday life in whatever domain are hidden as somehow being 'surplus to requirements'. [...] the 'anti-theory' stance of ethnomethodology is simply a resolve to look closely at phenomena without reference to what sociological theories might consider important or interesting.

In an effort to look closely at phenomena and subject my analysis of scenes to scrutiny, I regularly attended data sessions with the Cardiff Ethnography, Ethnomethodology, Interaction and Talk Group (CEEIT). I took one particular scene from early on in fieldwork to a data session, a session that I now wish we had recorded so I could provide a more detailed account here. I presented the group with a written account of a meeting in which social workers were collaborating to come up with

possible danger statements and safety goals<sup>12</sup> for a family. This account took the form of field notes supplemented with detail from an audio-recording. I had a sense of what was going on and I wanted to check with the group whether they could see the same things. There are no other social workers in the research group, only fellow PhD students and a senior lecturer who share an interest in ethnography and ethnomethodology. Despite their lack of competencies as social workers, they read the scene with ease and agreed on what was happening and how it was happening interactionally. This was not too dissimilar from my own reading, the data adequately reflected the scene, but I believed the group's analysis missed one important point. As I shared this with the group, it became apparent that my knowledge of the team and their relationships and practice styles gleaned from ethnographic fieldwork had retrospectively shaped my view of the encounter. I had assumed disagreement when there was none as I had overlaid my later knowledge of a professional disagreement about this family onto the scene. This gets at something crucial - the difference between 'getting it' and 'seeing it', which in turn relates to debates about the compatibility of ethnography and ethnomethodology.

The 'weak' version of unique adequacy described earlier as "getting it" came from both my knowledge and experience of child protection practice, and from spending ten months in the field with social workers. Indeed, for those ethnographers without membership of the professional collective they are studying, ethnographic immersion is the key method of achieving vulgar competence. Immersion in the field builds a rich sense of institutional life, of members and their practices, essential to understand practices as they play out. This raises two important questions with interrelated answers. How is it possible not to make assumptions about a scene based on subsequent knowledge? How is it possible not to lose a sense of how practices play out over time gleaned from ethnographic fieldwork? The way through both of these questions involves using the strong notion of unique adequacy, ethnomethodological

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<sup>12</sup> Danger statements and safety goals are terms used in a model of practice called Signs of Safety. Danger Statement should give the reasons social services are working with the family in clear simple language. They include 'what we are worried could happen if nothing changes, and the impact of this on the child/ young person'. For each Danger Statement there should be a corresponding Safety Goal. Safety Goals should say what social services need to see to feel confident that the child/ young person is safe enough to step down or close the case. The Safety goal should show everyone what we are working together to achieve (Turnell 1999; They provide structure to child protection interactions in Salina.

indifference, as a standard to hold oneself to in ethnographic accounts of any scene, and their explication.

Ethnomethodological indifference involves starting with the action and making sense of it in situ. It involves creating written resources from field notes and recordings that adequately and faithfully show the life of a scene lived on a page. It continues as one seeks to explicate the scene, according to the methods used by those within it, and data sessions form one part of this. Using a data session to check that one's understanding adequately reflects member's methods would be unusual in ethnographic research, as overlaying a sense of the scene based on what came later would arguably be viewed as ethnographic context. By taking an ethnomethodological sensibility, ethnographic context becomes something else entirely in that it allows us not to privilege the analysts sense over time, but that of members themselves. Following social work with individual families over time allowed me to follow the phenomena of child protection change methods over time. This is important as accounting for change over time is a key method social workers draw upon to account for their assessments of parenting. Thus, when looking at multiple scenes unfolding over time as families repeatedly encounter a social worker, I was able to show how they themselves make sense of change over time, for situated purposes.

Drawing on the ethnomethodological concepts of 'member' and 'unique adequacy' and using data sessions supported me to scrutinise my understanding and to build a regular practice of seeing without formal theory, of looking at what members make of any given scene. This helped me to cultivate ethnomethodological indifference as a way to check my ethnographic understanding. Taking up the notion of ethnomethodological indifference in ethnographic work allows the researcher to 'see it'. That is, to ensure analysis of the scene occurs from within, and subsequent explication of the scene also rests upon a faithful account of the methods used by those within it. As Mair and Sharrock (2020) note, action and meaning are not separate, meaning is in the action. We see what was done in its doing - action and meaning are "internally related" (Smith 2020). Through engaging with ethnomethodological ideas, the praxiological focus of my research became sharper in that it allowed me ground my writing on what was observable. This was a substantial shift towards creating

more manageable piece of work in which I could put to one side formal social work theory and sociological theory that were not topicalised by members themselves.

### **Ethnomethodological ethnography**

Drawing on ethnomethodological ways of seeing through the fieldwork is what led me to the focus on the topic of 'change practices' in child protection. Once I became aware of these methodical practices, I began to see them in every interaction, weaving together cases through a narrative of change, but crucially also doing so in highly consequential situationally specific ways. The question then became, how might I produce an ethnographic study inspired by ethnomethodological sensibilities? Sacks, Garfinkel and Jefferson the founders of ethnomethodology, engaged in ethnographic work though their detailed approach to analysis differs from what we might call ethnography today. Some ethnographers closely (Smith, 2020, Sharrock and Randall, 2004) follow ethnomethodological sensibilities, and others (Atkinson, 2017; Morriss, 2016) take inspiration in a more eclectic manner. Despite theoretical differences, these scholars share similarities in their arguments about the nature of the social world, and therefore in the design of their research. Ethnomethodological ethnography means taking a particular stance towards social life and to see research practices as a part of social life. The methods used to find out about and make sense of the social world in our daily lives parallel those used to produce research knowledge. My task then is to describe and explicate in adequate detail how social workers go about doing what they take as the things to be done. It is to avoid the siren song of grand theory and the glosses this brings. It is to trace the grain of daily life (Atkinson, 2017), attending to the seen but unnoticed (Garfinkel, 1967) and resolutely focusing on members' practices.

Ethnomethodological ethnography offered a solution to managing my professional competencies in the field and offered ways of looking that attend to the moment by moment detail of 'change practices' in child protection. Coming to ethnomethodology in an attempt to fight familiarity helped me to see past the taken for granted and enabled me to make my competence in the field a resource rather than a barrier to data collection and analysis. Drawing on the sensibilities of ethnomethodological ethnography supported me to maintain a resolute focus on the daily practices through which child protection social work is achieved and ultimately create a more clearly defined and manageable piece of research. This in turn allowed



me to write fieldnotes and memos that describe the moment by moment detail of social work, and produce analyses that make 'change practices' visible, tractable, and analysable. It offered me ways to see how social workers see their work problems, and the ways in which they go about resolving them. This offers a radical approach to unpicking and making known the mundane, common sense processes through which child protection social work operates but are rarely attended to.

### **Professional vision and categorisation practices**

To tie together the topic of parental identity transformation as a professional project of child protection social work, and ethnomethodological ethnography as the method to study it, I outline the approach I take to data analysis in the thesis. Membership Categorisation Analyses (Hester and Eglin, 1997) is a specific strand of ethnomethodology that enables explication of social workers professional vision in action (Goodwin, 1994). I briefly describe the complementarity of 'professional vision' and 'membership categorisation analysis', outlining key terms used in the analysis, and argue that together, they offer a way of re-specifying 'identity' in child protection social work through an explication of the practices through which change is achieved.

Goodwin's (1994) notion of professional vision supports me to consider how it is practitioners come to know about their phenomena of interest. It outlines how seeing and knowing are inextricably grounded in everyday practices that are crucial features of the mastery of a profession. Professional vision "consists of socially organized ways of seeing and understanding events that are answerable to the distinctive interests of a particular social group" (Goodwin, 1994: 606). Goodwin describes how professionals shape events in their domain of scrutiny into the phenomenal objects around which professional discourse is organised. It is useful in focusing attention on the ways in which social workers code and highlight specific aspects of the perceptual field as relevant resources to seeing and knowing parental change. It asks us to attend to the subtle interactional processes at play that make use of specific resources in shaping the facts of a case. This is relevant in considering the interactional processes through which parents are deemed to have changed (or not) that make up the routine dialogue over the course of a case. This line of thinking connects with prior work of child protection case construction as "rhetorical accomplishments" (Pithouse and Atkinson, 1988), the professional accomplishment of facts (Latour and Woolgar, 2013) and the consequences of differential entitlements to define the facts of a case (Mehan, 1990).

The notion of professional vision holds value when considered as an active process amenable to explication, rather than as a simple place holder (Carlin et al., 2021).

A specific strand of ethnomethodology, Membership Categorisation Analysis or MCA (Hester and Eglin, 1997) offers a way to chart members' inferential reasoning in situ, reasoning in and through which change practices unfold, to explicate professional vision in action. MCA is interested in the presumed common-sense knowledge of social action and with producing descriptions of the ways in which people employ them in situated talk and action. MCA necessarily slows down and breaks up in situ interaction to explicate elements of just how it was put together in the first place and just how particular meaning was made. Crucially, it also seeks to show these elements of interaction in a contextualised, layered manner, reflexively tied to the moment they develop in and through. In order to do this, MCA employs specific terms that require elaboration, including: membership categorisation devices, standard relational pairs, category bound activities. It draws upon particular rules for understanding interaction including: the economy rule, the consistency rule, the hearers' maxim, the viewers maxim, the observers maxim. I will elaborate on these to make sense of them to the reader and enable me to utilise them in analysis without having to divert from the flow. Importantly though, these are descriptions of how members' infer, put together and elaborate upon meaning in situ and are not stable elements of machinery that can be simply applied to interaction. Rather, it is the interaction that shows their relevance and just how they might be relevant on this occasion.

Membership categories are classifications that describe persons, collectivities and non-personal objects (Hester and Eglin, 1997). Membership categorisation devices (MCDs) link membership categories together to build collections and have 'rules' of application. Some membership categories are heard as going together as with the MCD 'family' which includes mother, father son, daughter, and aunt for example, and excludes other categories. Categories can be overlaid with expectations of what is to be properly done by members of that category. These are called category bound activities and are one class of category predicate that are assigned by inference on the basis of a given category. Hester and Eglin note that category predicates can include rights, entitlements, obligations, knowledge, attributes, competencies and motives.

Sacks outlined 'rules' for applying MCDs, that is, for hearing something a certain way or explicating that hearing. First, the economy rule which says one category is enough to have some idea about what a person is talking about. Second, the consistency rule that says when a category from one MCD is used to categorise one, a category or predicate from the same MCD is used to categorise the next. Third, the hearers' maxim - 'if two or more categories are used to categorise two or more members of some population and those categories can be heard as categories from the same collection, then hear them that way'.

The classic example illustrating this point is the mummy-baby story ("the baby cried, the mummy picked it up") in which the reader or hearer makes sense of that story as a mother picking up her own child to comfort it (See Hester and Eglin, 1997 for a detailed account). How is it that this action can be read in this way? Inferences can be made through the categories mummy and baby which belong to the collection or MCD 'family'. The specific term used to describe categories and devices by analysts is less important than their capacity to convey a sense-able reading of members' methods. The consistency rule means that upon hearing 'baby', then the following categories are likely to be 'mummy', 'daddy' etc. The term baby could belong to two collections or MCDs, the 'stage of life' collection which may include baby, child, teenage and adult, or the 'family' collection already described. Yet we don't hear it as ambiguous, we hear it as 'the baby of the mummy cried, the mommy of the baby picked it up', due to the hearers' maxim and consistency rule described above. Sacks notes that these rules operate to outline how things were done but also how they are recognised (Sacks, 1992: 240). The way that we hear this story as a description is via the category bound activities - crying is bound to baby and comforting the baby is bound to mother. As Sacks says, "the simplest way you make a recognisable description is to take some category and some activity that's bound to it, and put them together" (Sacks, 1992: 242). This concern with inferences holds value for studying child protection practice.

The term MCA was developed by Hester, drawing on Sacks' work, with a built in critique of Sack's decontextualised use of membership categories, and how the hearer and viewer were disembodied and disemplaced. A decontextualised mode of MCA treats category references as a window into the pre-existing social world, often that of the analyst. An ethnomethodological mode of MCA as advanced by Hester and Eglin

(1997) shows how category practices are occasioned by and given meaning for these participants here and now (Fitzgerald, 2012; Schegloff, 2007). The categories in Sacks' reading have been called 'wild and promiscuous' as it is unclear at times where the categories are coming from. This may be due to the writing out of the ethnographic element of his work. Sacks' notion of the 'machinery' of interaction has been dubbed too stipulative (Hester and Eglin, 1997) and Housley prefers the term 'live apparatus' (2020). For Hester and Eglin (1997), categories may be "lying around" but their application is not straight forward. MCDs are not the basis of practical reasoning as categories do not sit in a pre-existing readily applicable framework, rather, the device and category sense are occasioned, mutually elaborative matters of situated practical reasoning. Attending to this helps us see how members can, do, and are assembling devices and deciding on their "rules of application" in situ and in vivo. This in turn helps us see how social workers and parents accomplish the accountable project of parental change.

From the outset, work on membership categorisation has been concerned with identity, which is central to my understanding of 'change methods' in social work. Identity is something people do. Sacks' (1972: 224) work on person categories layered in sequential interaction was concerned with: how social identities are made relevant and consequential through an interaction; how categories work to enable people to make inferences in interaction; and how the social norms of behavioural and moral accountability are deployed and used. More recently, MCA has considered how person categories are accomplished by members (Hester and Eglin, 1997; Jayussi, 2014; Watson, 1978). Taking inspiration from these studies, my thesis considers the moral work of person categories in child protection, including how they may help a person shift from a spoiled to a recovered identity (see Watson, 1978), and the interactional and institutional possibilities this affords.

Professional vision then acts as a shorthand for describing the situated change practices in which social workers engage, and the work projects into which they draw parents and professionals. Professional vision can be seen in the change methods through which social workers create objects to work on, including workable or unworkable parent identities; how parents and social workers co-accomplish such identities; and the interactional and institutional consequences of the accomplishment of such identities. Conceptualising the thesis and handling the data in this way allows

me to outline aspects of what professional vision in child protection social work is, based on the in situ interactions of social workers and parents. Drawing on MCA enables me to explicate social workers' professional vision in action by detailing how what might be called identity is relevant to social workers' situated practices of change talk, and recognizably so for others. The value of taking an ethnomethodological re-specification of identity is that it takes into account the situated and socially produced nature of these social orders. It moves away from behaviourist conceptions of towards a description of situated accomplishment of change in child protection.

## Chapter Four

### Doing fieldwork and analysis

Ethnographies tend to focus on one setting or group of people and therefore tend to produce in depth case studies. This ethnography is no exception. As the title suggests, this chapter is concerned with the practical details of fieldwork, the approach to analysis and the case study as a whole. It is more practical in tone than the preceding chapter and sets out what this ethnomethodological ethnography looked like in practice. I inevitably provide only a partial account of the research and do so to provide the reader with the necessary information to get a sense of the credibility of the study and a sense of the 'case'.

#### Access

Once I decided that child and family social work teams would be the ideal setting through which to explore my research questions, I contacted two local authorities in South Wales to begin access negotiations. Other researchers have struggled to negotiate access to child protection social work teams due to the sensitive nature of the work, the lack of face-to-face access to gatekeepers (Holland, 1999) and gendered assumptions about the purpose of the work (Scourfield, 1999), which caused them delay. Fortunately, I found access to be a straightforward process, partly as outlined earlier, due to my designation as a social worker. I wrote an email outlining my research aims and the potential value of the work to the local authority directors of children's services. I chose to make this initial approach with the support of my supervisor due to his connections with the directors given that access negotiations in social work research are notoriously difficult. I received responses within a week from the directors in each authority who put me in touch with their children's services managers. I pursued fieldwork in each authority, however, only one of the service managers responded consistently, whilst the other stopped responding to my emails. Seeking access to more than one field site proved an invaluable strategy as when one possibility fell through, I had access to another equally perspicuous setting. Garfinkel (2002) uses this term to describe a setting that shows a profession's foundations as oriented to and operationalised by members. They are constituted by 'naturally organized ordinary activities' (Lynch, 2002; Carlin, 2021), "providing witnessable

direction on members' matters that have hitherto been arrogated as theoretical objects" (Coulter, 2003: 438).

Following an email exchange, I met with the principal officer for research and development in children's services. She could not have been more receptive to the research or more helpful in outlining the steps I would need to follow to get access. This process involved emailing an information sheet and my Disclosure and Barring Service checks to human resources and the service manager who line manages the principal officer. The principal officer co-ordinated this and then put me in touch with the team manager and practice lead for the locality team, 'Salina'. The principal officer made clear that I could access the social work office quickly, providing I started with one of the teams known for 'best practice'. As noted previously, given the phenomenological nature of the study, I did not view observing 'best practice' to be a barrier as it just one among a broad set of possible formulations of the team.

### **How should I be in the field?**

At the beginning of fieldwork, I spent a great deal of time thinking about how to position myself in the field and experienced anxiety about how to 'be'. In the office, should I join case discussions as a competent team member? Should I contribute to case formulation exercises? Should I be a sounding board to enable social workers to reflect on their practice? During home visits and court meetings, should I jump in if the social worker is floundering? Should I support a mother to be heard by the social worker? By doing any of these things, would I be transgressing my role as a researcher and acting as a social worker, a role I am not tasked with in this setting? Each of these questions arose for me during fieldwork and my worry over how to 'be' almost certainly made me appear less authentic and trustworthy to both social workers and families. Part of my struggle here was based upon a sense that I had to be either a researcher or a social worker and it was a few months into the research that I understood that my attempt work within this binary was getting in the way of my relationships in the field. Engaging with my data enabled me to see moments where social workers oriented to me as a fellow social worker and moments where they oriented to me as a researcher. As I demonstrated with examples in the previous chapter, I understood then that it is through trusting one's sense of situated ethics that one can make sense of shifting 'insider' and 'outsider' identities. Shadowing social workers meant I had to find ways of being that did not interrupt their work in the

office, during home visits, meetings and court. Of course, I am not suggesting that it was possible to find a way to be invisible in the field, rather, that I sought to be as unobtrusive as possible and at times where this was not possible, I sought ways to be helpful, such as making tea in the office, answering phone calls in the car, or summarising a visit to a manager. As I show below, there were also occasions on journeys home from visits where I inadvertently helped a social worker reflect upon a case.

### **Where should I be in the field?**

As well as preoccupation with how best to interact in the field, I also began fieldwork with concern with where best to position myself in the office, and then in meetings. I initially found a spot at an empty desk near the duty desk. Phone duty and Section 47 duty is staffed on a rota basis. Being on phone duty requires picking up referrals as they come into the team and deciding how to progress them. Section 47 duty requires a worker to have space in their diary to be called out to urgent child protection assessments. Social workers on Section 47 duty hope for a quiet day to catch up with paperwork. The Team Manager also sits near the duty desk to be on hand should a call come in that requires her input. This was a useful initial spot for me to position myself as it is in the centre of the office with a view to each of the four area hubs, and which social workers frequently visited for informal discussions with the Team Manager. The office is designed to be open plan, though the four area hubs created their own private areas using tall filing cabinets and screens. This means that the four child protection hubs are relatively screened off from the rest of the office. Whilst hot desking is encouraged, the hub arrangement means that social workers each have their own desk. I moved around the office as much as possible but often found myself in the way and ultimately based myself on a spare desk in East Hub 1, near the duty desk. Consequently, I had greater interaction with the social workers and went on more visits with the social workers from the hubs nearest the duty desk (East Hub 1 and 2).

As well as a concern with where to position myself in the office, where to position myself in meetings and home visits also provided me with food for thought. If I sat next to the social worker would I be seen by families as just another social worker to be scrutinised by? If I sat next to families, would I be seen as a family advocate rather than a researcher observing? If I sat in the corner of the room observing, would social



workers, families and professionals feel uncomfortable with the observation? These questions largely resolved themselves through the available seating during a home visit or a meeting, and how people had already arranged themselves within a space. During meetings, the norm became that I would sit at any available seat around the table with the family and professionals and when it came to sharing our roles and relevant information, I would explain my purpose as a researcher to observe how social workers did their jobs, and allow the next person to speak. During professional only meetings, I again sat in a circle with the team, but was often encouraged by fellow social workers to share my views about what I had observed during home visits. I felt reluctant to engage in overt case formulation and planning and instead tended to pose questions about how a family member or social worker appeared to feel during a visit to support their discussion.

Just as questions about 'how to be' reflect a preoccupation with binary notions of insider and outsider research, questions about 'where to be' reflect an aligned preoccupation with being a neutral observer or an active participant. These are questions that it is sensible to grapple with through the fieldwork process but a preoccupation with them can make a researcher so self-absorbed that it is impossible to get out of one's own head to see the detail of practice. A few months in, I found that returning once again to practices by paying attention to the detail of how people were setting up a room or how they were working up a specific work problem offered me much of the information I needed to make a decision about how and where to be in any given interaction, without recourse to anxiety provoking theoretical abstractions.

How can I see and record the detail of practices?

It is difficult to provide a succinct answer to this question which essentially requires the separation of data collection from analysis, which of course, is not possible. However, in an effort to describe my own research practices, I will attempt to outline how I saw and recorded the detail of social work practices. Like much of what I have already written, there is a shift between the early stages of fieldwork and the substantive fieldwork that followed. Early on I was keen to note down every detail I possibly could. This resulted in me constantly writing field notes during office observations, meetings and visits, and consequently missing much of the embodied interaction that the resulting disembodied accounts of talk were achieved through. It was reminiscent of my early professional experience as contact supervisor tasked to

take notes on a parent's interaction with their children at a contact centre, to be used by the social worker to aide her assessment of parenting capacity. In both activities I was operating though a sort of naive positivism, seeking as much information as possible to enable the most well evidenced analysis to be made at a later date. I soon realised that this was an unsustainable approach to fieldwork and was a barrier to the depth research I was hoping to engage in. As well as it being hugely time consuming to note down as much detail as possible in a given working day, it is impossible for one person to ever perceive and attend to all of the detail in any given interaction. I settled upon a far more limited approach to data collection. I was able to focus in on the detail of practices through three key recording technologies - fieldnotes, audio-recordings, and voice memos. Crucially though, these technologies were only useful in as far as I could recall my situated sense of a given scene.

Where possible I sought consent for audio recordings to enable me to be more fully present during interactions and make minimal accompanying field notes in respect of change practices. This process freed me up from a fear of not getting enough data and enabled me to focus on the detail of what I was seeing. Being as present as possible within a given moment was key to being able to understand the nuances of meaning essential to recovering the scene at a later date. Of course, being present is not an easy task for a researcher who is perhaps used to engaging in more constructive re-imaginings of what participants are up to. I found that my personal meditation practice was helpful here, as I used my breath and awareness of bodily sensations to remain as grounded in the present as possible, and to bring awareness to wandering or constructive thoughts. I sought, as much as possible, to understand the scenes of which I was a part, as a fellow participant of that scene, as opposed to a detached observer. My in situ fieldnotes involved jotting down moments where social workers or families made overt reference to 'change', notes on the interrelationships between social workers, families and other professionals during those moments, overt categories in action, as well as further threads to follow. As well as fieldnotes, I made voice memos on the journey home each day and at times after notable interactions. Voice memos were a useful way of recording my initial analysis of an interaction before leaving the office for the day and served as a key resource in writing up fuller fieldnotes either that day or the following day. Initial notes from the field were limited and rough and did not take full shape until I was able to combine them with my

reflective voice memos, the detail provided by audio recordings and my situated sense of a given scene.

### **How can I recover the scene through explication?**

Starting with the action, I created detailed fieldnotes that adequately and faithfully showed the life of a scene lived on a page. To do this I drew upon my sense of the action in situ, shorthand field notes audio recordings and voice memos, to write detailed accounts of my observations. This analytic attention to detail continued as I sought to explicate the scenes, according to the methods used within it. I drew on membership categorisation analysis to make sense of members' methods as outlined in the previous chapter. Here I focus on the practicalities of 'doing' analysis. Ethnography, ethnomethodology and membership categorisation analysis do not each have a standardised 'how to' of analysis. A well known trope of undergraduate research involves claiming one has 'done' 'thematic analysis' or 'grounded theory' as though it were possible to adopt specific set of procedures to lend credibility to an analytic account. Whilst I do not make such a claim, I attempt to present the practical steps I took to analysis.

It is evident from what I have already written that I have privileged my in situ understanding of a scene when writing up field notes. That means that I engaged in an initial analysis of the scene prior to writing or recording an account of it. Analysis then is clearly not a distinct phase of the research process. This is also evident in the shifting focus of the research from decision making to change practices, which is an outcome of data analysis conducted during fieldwork itself. Of course, a great deal more analysis tends to occur once one has left the field for the day, or even entirely as one attempts to make sense of a large body of diffuse data. Once I left the field I had a collection of shorthand field notes, audio recordings and voice memos from 74 days in the field. I organised these by date and made a spreadsheet detailing what I observed on each day with details of the social workers and families involved. This was a key resource to being able to navigate the data to look at types of interaction, for example, core groups, home visits and court work, and the types of case classification in use, for example, 'domestic abuse' or 'non-accidental injury'.

By this point I had developed sensitizing concepts, or threads upon which to look, both from fieldwork and reading. I focused my attention on fieldnotes where 'change

talk' was evident, by which I mean instances where social workers, parents and professionals were talking about case trajectories and projecting future outcomes, and where change was being limited or 'fixed'. Following Francis and Hester's (2012) suggestions for starting to understand membership categorisation analysis, I coded the data by asking the following questions:

1. What is happening here?
2. How is it that this observable feature has been produced such that it is recognizable for what it is?
3. What are the methods used in the production and recognition of the observable feature? What are the categories and resources in use? How is context achieved?

These questions inevitably produced more questions and required further reading and sitting with the data in an effort to describe what was happening for members. Similarly to my approach to staying present in the field, I found my personal mediation practice to be of use here when attempting feel into the data alongside my recall of the scene in which it was produced. By reading and listening to the data, then engaging in a simple meditation on the breath, it was possible to stay with the meaning of a scene and find temporary respite from nagging questions related to sociological theory (Bentz and Shapiro, 1998). The process of analysis was iterative and it took several rounds of coding, sitting with the data, elaborating on the questions posed, before I could produce a fitting description of the scene. I found that the process of writing a description also enabled my understanding of what members were up to, and it would have been possible to write a very lengthy description of the smallest interaction. An invaluable element of analysis was checking across the data set for contrasting and corresponding instances of 'change practices' which supported me draw out the highly situated nature of their accomplishment.

The process of analysis was not straightforward, though it was rewarding. I frequently returned to the audio recordings to check my understanding of the detail of scenes I was working on, which was a time consuming process. One of the most difficult elements of this process that also made it the most analytically rewarding was the continued attempt to focus on members' practices themselves. It is eye opening to realise how quickly one seeks to pave over what can't quite be explained by borrowing from formal theory. I aimed to follow the four principles set out by Francis and Hester (2012) related to the type of descriptions I produced, and the analyses made available

to the reader. These worked as useful set of aims to produce and check analyses against. Their principles require that descriptions show:

1. The demonstrable relevance of sociological descriptions.

This means that all sociological descriptions must be tied to what members are doing, including descriptions of the categories and resources through which members are orienting to one another, that are demonstrably so for members.

2. The consequentiality of members' orientations and understandings.

This means showing how members' orientations and understandings enter into the production of a social activity, which here relates to 'change methods'.

3. The situatedness of talk and action.

This requires that one does not engage in theorising and abstractions about intention or context but shows how meaning is locally produced and understood for members. For example, by tying the action of saying what was said to the specific circumstances in which it was said.

4. The inspectability of data.

To show that members' phenomena and members' methods are available in the talk, one must make that availability inspectable by the reader. This means one cannot produce a general sense of a scene but must show the detail, so a reader can make their own assessment.

The search for and description of detail is not a form of crude empiricism as I am not seeking the 'true' viewing of a scene which will always be partial, but a possible viewing in which the lived detail of that setting's work and staff can be discovered (Smith, 2020). The research materials presented in the analysis chapters of my thesis, whether they are field notes or field notes supplemented by recordings, read much like recapitulations of interaction. This is due to the focus on the lived detail of the scene, as opposed to my reflections about what it is that members are up to. I do not see the value of distinguishing between the types of research material predominantly drawn upon in each analysis chapter as I do not place these materials in a hierarchy, for example, in making the mistaken assumption that an audio recording offers a closer approximation of the true scene. I have drawn upon recordings only to supplement field notes to recover detail. It is important to note here that I only began to take ethnomethodology seriously in terms of its analytic possibilities in the final stages of my PhD and this has consequences for the depth in which I was able to read on the subject. As is often the case, the more I read, the more I realised there was to

learn. Obvious areas in which my capacity to recover the scene and explicate it through analysis is lacking include my capacity to unpick things like emotion, or gaze, and their relevance to the scene. Each form a significant part of practice, of each gestalt, and without them, my already partial account is made even more so.

### **How can I make the thesis readable?**

A further issue worthy of note is that of readability. Ethnomethodological texts can have trouble with readability due to issues relating to professional ethnomethodological language. The focus on members' methods, as analysable as such by any other member, is made opaque and obscure in the analysis that follow in ethnomethodological studies. Watson (2015) argues that the obscure language used by Garfinkel was necessary to clear the ground and offer a back-to-basics way of understanding social life. Yet, for novice sociological researchers like myself, or for social workers seeking to read his works, a thorough immersion in ethnomethodological concepts is required beforehand to gain any sense of analytic purchase. I provided an overview of the ethnomethodological concepts in use in the previous chapter and I provide further detail in footnotes where necessary through the analysis chapters. Ethnomethodological formulations are helpful in seeking to explicate the details of lived realities, although in their analysis they ultimately do present their own formulation of an event as it plays out in situ, however close one tries to remain to the machinery of the talk. This may not be formal analysis in the sense of constructive sociology, but it certainly requires understanding of the language of specialised professional ethnomethodology. How then, might I write a PhD of the social world of social work, that social workers too might understand? The answer to this rests on the idea of recognizability.

I wanted a social worker to be able to read my analysis and recognise the work and the respecification of that work as of the social world of social work. Given there is no clear division between 'native' and 'observer' in ethnomethodological accounts as observers are members and members are participant observers of their own scenes (Smith, 2020; Sharrock and Anderson, 1982) traditional notions of quality in qualitative research become senseless. I cannot hope to claim reliability and trustworthiness, and doing so effectively would be a trick of socially organised textual production for the purposes of the thesis. Perhaps then the best I can hope for is plausibility and recognizability, made possible through writing and reading. In an

effort to get a sense of the text's readability, I shared sections with social work colleagues and academics who are also qualified social workers. Having read one analytic section, a colleague commented, "I was reading and thought, on my god, that is social work", a remark I found encouraging to say the least. Of course, each reader will be able to make an assessment of plausibility and recognizability for themselves.

Whilst the academic conventions of ingredients for a thesis are present here (methods, literature review, analysis), in the analysis chapters in particular, I have tried to write social work in a manner that is of the social world of social work, and recognisably so. This has implications for the form the analysis chapters take and the level of detail provided by the research materials within them. Analysis chapters one and two show the detail of 'change methods' through single interactions with a social worker, within which case trajectories are accomplished. The third analysis chapter is written with the temporal structure of a story, unfolding over time. This is because social workers themselves make sense of cases in this way and so this structure parallels that of the social organisation of the life of a case in social work. The consequence of this is that a range of disconnected materials from different scenes within a case are presented under the rubric of the whole. This gets at the issue of ethnographic context and what that means for the analysis as it unfolds, as providing summaries introducing the place of research materials in relation to their position in the story is an issue of readability, as opposed to a necessity for understanding each scene. Ethnographic context in this sense is 'constructive' but is also helpful to the reader. By contrast, ethnographic context in the ethnomethodological sense gets at how immersion over time allows members (including researchers) to make sense of scenes using details gathered outside of that scene to explicate what is going on (see Smith, 2020).

Context in an ethnomethodological sense isn't imposed, it is achieved (Housley, 1999). Membership categorisation is an activity carried out in situ and categories make sense in relation to their contexts of use. The meaning of a category and the collection to which it belongs can be context embedded and context constitutive (Hester and Eglin, 1997). Context in MCA and ethnomethodology is concerned with the gestalt, the sense of the thing, which forms part of the phenomena of 'categories-in-context' - a reflexively constituted relationship between singular actions and the relevant elements of identity, place, time and meaning implicated by the intelligibility of those

actions (Hester and Eglin, 1997). The idea of 'gestalt contexture' in ethnomethodology means that when looking at any scene, we see things as a whole which takes perceptive precedence over its individual atomistic components, and if we take out a component from its contexture, it and the other elements have radically altered meaning (Fele, 2008). Thus, any analysis must consider all the parts and how they fit together and inform one another reflexively. This produces a paradox in that offering a description of certain categories and how they are layered necessarily separates them from their contexture and alters their meaning. Yet this is necessary to offer fine grained analysis of these components of the social world. The essential point is that categories separated off for analysis cannot be left alone, they must be put back together and any analysis of their fine grained detail must be done in relation to their role in the whole, as far as is possible. The notion of gestalt contexture supports this endeavour and affords a phenomenologically sensitive and intersubjectively adequate understanding of context (Watson and Coulter, 2008). This of course is not easily achieved in the practice of explicating members' categorisation practices when using ethnographic data due to the volume of data and the detail of analysis. The choice to focus on data from three 'cases' offers a partial solution to producing a readable account of the scene that faithfully accounts for its observable features.

### **How do I understand reflexivity?**

The notion of reflexivity is often used to mean only 'reflection' (Atkinson and Whittaker, forthcoming). In an ethnomethodological sense, reflexivity means that the sense of a thing and the elements in and through which it is accomplished are internally related and must be understood as a whole (Hester and Eglin, 1997). I have taken this point seriously both for analysis, and in the writing of the thesis, as I describe below.

I observed office talk about families; meetings in the office, homes, schools, local authority buildings; supervision; home visits; supervised contact in the community; and court visits. As is the case with ethnographic research, I was part of each of these scenes and as I engaged in the action of producing descriptions of them, this was highly evident. You will notice that at certain points in the analysis chapters I write myself into the data because it is relevant to understanding that particular scene. For the most part however, I do not show up in the data as I play such a small part in the scenes I have chosen to describe. This reflects my view that I tended to be the least



interesting part of the scenes I observed. Still, to get a flavour of how I understand reflexivity in both analysis and writing up, it is worth providing an example.

Whilst I was a part of every scene, the one in which my presence was most evident and most altered the natural proceeding of events was the car journey. As car journeys to and from practice settings tended to include just the social worker and myself, they offered moments for a diverse range of interaction to take place. En route to family homes, I would ask about the family we were going to see and the social worker's thoughts about how the intervention was going. Social workers would usually respond by providing me with a case summary, talking to a fellow practitioner, that included 'back stage' professional talk. On other occasions, if we had gone to meetings separately, social workers would ask to sit in my car for a debrief and would use the time to put together their thoughts about a case, about a visit that had just happened, and how they were feeling about the family and their work. Here I provide an example of the car as a site of 'reflexive practice'. I am playing on this term which is central to social work education where it also tends to refer to reflection rather than reflexivity. The field note excerpt shows talk between me and a senior social worker, Angelica, following a home visit to mother to be, Amy Clenham. As we left, Angelica asked if she could get into my car for a chat.

- Angelica     She's making all the right noises. Maybe I am too optimistic, but I just feel like everyone should be given an opportunity.
- Lucy         I think that comes across in your interactions with families.
- Angelica     I feel more optimistic than with pipe guy. I'm probably going to have a difficult session with her today.
- Lucy         Yeah you don't seem to have so much hope with the Slocum's.
- Angelica     Hmm, yeah, she says all the wrong things, I find her responses to my questions ... I feel like there's nothing there. I said to her last week, I met him the day before and went through the police report with him, and he laughed... and she's smiling, and he said that you're lying... She wasn't like, what the fuck, what a prick... like I would be. I don't know whether she's absolutely petrified of him and afraid of not confirming, or whether she genuinely thinks that he won't do it again... I don't know.
- [...]

On paper it seems simple but we can manage it differently, I don't always think that escalating it is always helpful. I just feel like if you can get alongside somebody, and I feel like I'm alongside these two [the Clenham's] though I'm still a social worker, I'm still in a position of power, this is probably absolutely petrifying for them, but I feel like I've got more of a chance of getting a better outcome for this baby that I have with the Slocum's because they're like, yeah and? Like last week I was like "please tell me! Help me understand your thinking?! I don't understand!"

There is a lot going on in this excerpt, but I want to highlight two salient points. On car journeys with Angelica I acted as a researcher, social worker and navigator at different moments. The majority of these journeys took place to and from visits to the Clenham's and meetings for the Slocum's during which Angelica and I talked about the 'cases' and about how it is to do child protection social work, as fellow social workers. Practically, the affordances of the liminal space of the car between visits offered a 'safe space' in which the social worker could topicalise their investment in parental change and its relation to her professional identity. For example, here Angelica makes a positive assessment of Amy's positive trajectory ('she's making all the right noises') and queries her level of optimism as a social worker. Through my relationship with Angelica, the car space is accomplished as safe as seen in Angelica expressing uncertainty ('I don't know') and emotion ('please tell me! Help me understand your thinking?! I don't understand!'). Though ever present, uncertainty is rarely able to be expressed in child protection social work, so much so that White (2009) describes the 'fabled uncertainty' of practice.

Shared experience outside of the office setting discussed in the 'safety' of the car also afforded space for a different type of social work, that of case comparison and projection, to be engaged in and observed (see Ross et al., 2009). This comparative approach through which an account of one case becomes contextually relevant for another is par for the course in social work practice though it is aspect of practice rarely discussed. This excerpt shows that through talk of the preceding visit ('she's making all the right noises') and talk of the Slocum case ('I feel more optimistic than with pipe guy'), the social worker assumes knowledge in common. Further, whilst Angelica does not use formal social work language here, she speaks openly about her

experience of interactions with families and the logics of practice (“I just feel like if you can get alongside somebody”...), without offering detailed explanation, and thus assuming shared professional understanding. Further, in my responses to Angelica I do not ask for elaboration and respond as though I understand her points, as a fellow social worker.

Reflexivity here then refers to just how Angelica and I oriented to one another as fellow social workers, just how shared knowledge in common of cases and professional logics enabled the expression of uncertainty and case comparison, and how together, these elements were accomplished in and thought the ‘safe’ space of the car. This understanding of reflexivity challenges the sociomaterial conception of space itself as having agency (see for example, Dahl and Tjora, 2021) which misses the situated accomplishment of the car as a space for doing particular work at a particular time. In my data, the car was accomplished as a site of identity talk between social workers; as a static site for social workers to do in depth case comparison and projection; as a mobile, shared intentional space, of going to and from home visits, and accounting for this work. This view of reflexivity also reflects the situated nature of researcher identity as accomplished in action. This data is of the field in the sense it is two social workers talking having left a visit; yet it is not practice as usual as social workers tend to go on visits alone. Here, taking an ethnomethodological view of reflexivity alongside the data provided by mobile ethnography offered me a detailed understanding of the social worker’s reasoning in relation to each case in terms of ethnographic context. It also provided a useful way of exploring objectivation practices (Lieberman, 2013) and professional vision (Goodwin, 1994), which became a central feature of my analysis.

## **Conclusion**

In taking the phenomenological position seriously, I have asked through my fieldwork, what is good enough here? The Biography of Methods chapter has done work to show the type and degree of my own competence in the field, my deliberations over method with reference to key influences, my argument for ethnomethodological ethnography, and the Doing Fieldwork chapter has described how I recovered observations from the field, how I present research materials, and the stylistic choices of my analysis chapters. I hope the partiality of my approach and the elaboration of moments of quandary will help a reader get a deeper sense of the

deliberations and justifications for the choices I have made. In the analysis chapters that follow, it will be possible to see the consequences of these choices for the detailed description of 'change methods' that make observable the central project of parental self-transformation in child protection practice.

## Chapter Five

### Assessing and projecting change through the accomplishment of 'moral objects'

The central topic of this chapter is a set of practical methods employed by social workers to account for change within the institutional trajectory of a case. Social workers are tasked to work with parents where an institutional risk category or categories are the first way in which they make sense of a parent and how to work with them. Via assessment and planning, their work is to turn this category into a client with a name, a history, as part of a case with an institutional trajectory. The key methods I describe are forms of 'objectivation' practice that allow parental selves to become work objects through assessment interactions with social workers. I offer an analysis of just how social workers are able to chart parental self-transformation, or lack thereof, through the accomplishment of 'moral objects' nested within institutional trajectories. 'Moral objects' refer to categorially tied accounts placed on the table by the social worker to be recognised by the client and professionals *as* moral. That is, they hold the built-in possibility of a moral response, one that accounts for past or current spoiled identities, and therefore opens interactional and institutional possibilities for parental transformation.

As outlined in the literature review, institutional risk categories in social work relate to children at risk and the very fact of a children's social worker being involved places certain possibilities for the type of parent one is and the type of action that is required on the table. For example, that a child is at risk is usually because of problematic parental behaviour i.e., something a parent is or is not doing. Much of the work of social work assessment revolves around fleshing out and transforming the initial institutionally 'risky' category or categories into ones with 'safer' predicates or activities. For example, that a parent is able to engage with support in order to change their behaviour (or difficult/problematic circumstances), and that a parent is able to switch from a problematic to an absolved or transformed category that no longer requires social work intervention to ensure the safety of a child. Such transformations or lack thereof are accomplished through situationally specific category practices. One set of professional methods for objectivating parental selves and charting parental self-transformation over time - the production of 'moral objects' - are the focus of this chapter. I

refer to these 'moral objects' as 'remorsables', 'transformables' and 'deniables', depending on what parents do with them.

In the data that follows, moral objects gloss the social workers' introduction of categorical items, at particular moments in assessment, to be negotiated by the client; that is, for them to deny, accept, or display remorse. These moral objects, whilst locally accomplished and negotiated, are embedded within an extended institutional temporality, glossed as 'the case', and thus serve as 'objectivated' work items for charting parental transformation. By describing these methods, I recover the lived organisational detail of assessment in child protection. The data I present here are two fieldnote excerpts drawn from assessment sessions from the Clenham and Slocum cases, which make use of the categories 'parent', 'father', and 'perpetrator of domestic abuse', amongst others. The key finding is that social workers have orderly methods for co-producing 'change' in assessment, namely via placing different forms of moral object 'on the table', to see what work parents do with them. I show how a failure to 'pick up' moral objects from the categorical table presents an accountable matter for the social worker, indicating how forms of acknowledgement, or lack thereof, of these items *as* moral objects has interactional and institutional consequences. I show the professional utility of moral objects as a resource used to account for in situ assessments and decisions, however small, relating to a clients categorial status, character, capacity for engagement and change, and projected institutionalised futures.

### **The data**

The data are fieldnote excerpts supplemented by audio-recording to recover details of the scene. The fieldnotes are from assessment sessions observed whilst shadowing one social worker, Angelica, working with two cases over the course of six months. I focus on two assessment sessions here to enable me to consider members' practices closely. Each case is categorised by the Local Authority as one of 'domestic abuse'<sup>13</sup> where the risks to the child are 'emotional and physical harm'. In each case the child is unborn and so the tasks of the social worker are to ensure the safety of the mother carrying the child, and to assess the likelihood of significant harm to the child when it is born. Observing work with these families

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<sup>13</sup> Social workers are generally concerned about domestic abuse due to the risk of a child being physically harmed in the crossfire or being emotionally harmed through witnessing or hearing abuse between parents. While these families are 'cased' as 'domestic abuse' cases, I do not focus on domestic abuse as a sub case within the larger case of child protection, rather, as previously noted, I take as my topic the methods that social workers use to engage in their work project of supporting and measuring parental self-transformation.

over the course of my fieldwork generated a large amount of fieldnotes and accompanying recordings. I offer an overview of the observations relating to each case below to allow the reader to get a sense of the depth of ethnographic context that enables the analysis that follows. I also note the institutional procedures through which they were worked with as it is possible to see how the risks in each case were deemed higher through the increasingly interventionist procedures used to organise the work.

I first heard about the case of unborn Clenham in the office in early February 2019 following which I observed two assessment sessions, a Care and Support Meeting, a Core Group, a Family Network Meeting, office talk, as well as having many conversations with the social worker about the family over the course of the following six months. The family came into social services on a 'child in need' or 'care and support' basis, which is the lowest level of intervention offered by the team, following a referral by probation which outlined that the father of the child had an extensive history of perpetrating domestic abuse. Following a core assessment, the social worker recommended a Child Protection Conference be held and professionals agreed the unborn baby should be placed on the Child Protection Register at birth. As the case continued under child protection procedures, the social worker considered the risks to be higher than originally thought and sought a legal meeting which recommended that Public Law Outline procedures be initiated.

I first heard about the Slocum family at the end of February 2019 following which I observed two assessment sessions, a Core Group, office talk, as well as having numerous informal catch ups with the social worker about the family. The family were referred into social services by the police following an incident in which the father had severely physically assaulted the mother. The social worker completed a Section 47/ child protection assessment and a Child Protection Conference was held, where professionals agreed the unborn baby should be placed on the Child Protection Register at birth. As the case continued, the social worker sought a legal meeting which recommended that Public Law Outline procedures be initiated. I observed fewer interactions with this family as they frequently cancelled or re-arranged visits with the social worker.

### **Accomplishing 'remorsables' – opening interactional and institutional possibilities**

- 1 *Arthur and Angelica sit opposite each other across a large boardroom size table. Angelica has a pad*
- 2 *in front of her, pen in hand.*

3 *Arthur follows Angelica's suggestion he call his probation officer to set up another appointment,*  
4 *then hangs up the phone.*

5 *Angelica: how are you feeling knowing that Amy had the Clare's Law disclosure?*

6 *Arthur: fine really but it's hard that all my family knows and that it's been put on*  
7 *Facebook about me hitting women and stuff... I do feel like saying something in return.*

8 *Angelica advises he doesn't fall into that trap. After a pause, she continues.*

9 *Angelica: when I asked you about the violent incidents in the past, you didn't tell me*  
10 *everything that came up in the forensic history.*

11 *Arthur: yeah, that was the stuff I couldn't remember.*

12 *Angelica sits with one knee up on the chair, her elbow on her knee, resting her head on her fist,*  
13 *sitting with the silence.*

14 *Arthur: what's going to happen next?*

15 *Angelica: well that's up to you. On paper at the minute, we have all this history. Do you*  
16 *want me to go over that?*

17 *Arthur shakes his head no. Angelica leans forward.*

18 *Angelica: there are two paths you can take: the chaotic path which we've been over and we'd be*  
19 *really worried about you seeing Amy and the baby; or the path you're on, getting your mental health*  
20 *and drug and alcohol under control so we can put in place a plan for you to see the baby. You're not*  
21 *far away from that but only you can do it. Mental health can help but you're going to have to go on a*  
22 *big journey now – address what happened when you were younger.*

23 *Arthur nods.*

24 *Arthur: I'm worried going there will send me off the rails*

25 *Angelica: It will be really difficult but you can do it. For us to be considering that you are safer,*  
26 *you need to keep this up and engage with mental health, probation and drug and alcohol services,*  
27 *and to understand how this early stuff is impacting on you – but that will take time, and it has to be*  
28 *when you are ready, it has to be safe for you.*

29 *Arthur nods*

30 *Angelica sets up her next appointment with Arthur and she walks him to the door.*

Layered upon the omni-relevance of the categories social worker-problematic parent that work to accomplish the institutional context of parties to an assessment session (discussed below), is the joint accomplishment of moral objects through category work. In this excerpt, two possible moral objects are taken up by the parent in particular ways, with particular



consequences. These consequences have a temporal order in the sequence of the interaction, and in the sequence of the institutional process that has been and that will follow.

The first potential moral object Angelica introduces is when she asks Arthur how he feels about the Clare's Law disclosure (L5-6). This invokes the category 'perpetrator of domestic abuse' via introducing Clare's Law, also known as the Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme, through which a partner has the 'right to ask' for information from the police regarding another person's history of violence or abusive behaviour, including their criminal record. This works alongside the categories of offender and partner already introduced (MCD abusive relationship<sup>14</sup>). They both understand this as a request for information from Arthur about how he feels about his partner learning about his history of violent behaviour towards women. Arthur's response accomplishes this as a 'remorseable' as he orients to it as something to feel ashamed about (L7-8) and in doing so takes up the category incumbency of perpetrator of domestic abuse.

By bringing in the MCD family and wider community (via Facebook) and orienting to their knowing as the primary source of his embarrassment Arthur achieves important mitigating work. Through these categories, he counters the built-in assumption in the social worker's question that it is his ex-partner's views he is likely to be concerned about, and in doing so, he distances himself from the activities worked up as associated with being a relationship, let alone an abusive relationship. Through Arthur's response, we see that he is orienting to the social worker as seeking remorse about his violent behaviour, and as seeking reassurance he is no longer primarily concerned with what Amy thinks as he is no longer in a relationship with her, thus accomplishing the activities of a 'good' client. As Arthur takes up the category of 'perpetrator of domestic abuse' offered by Angelica and expresses shame, he accomplishes the first moral object that frames the talk that follows. Following this, the social worker is able to move the talk on. Here, Arthur, the person, becomes a category the social worker can work on (see Sacks on "taking a name out and putting a category in"). This could be an 'in' for the social worker to explore shame and change, but there is more moral assessment work required first.

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<sup>14</sup> Membership Categorisation Devices are the 'organisational relevance' providing for, collecting together and organising social categories and their relevant actions, *in any particular instance*. This allows members to use categories to form co-membership with other categories in an organisational and situational relevant 'device' (Housley and Fitzgerald, 2015)

The second potential moral object offered by Amy draws upon a past meeting in which Arthur did not tell her everything subsequently shown in his forensic history (L10-11). Continuing to invoke the category of perpetrator of domestic abuse, she states the incongruity between Arthur's past account and the institutional record of historic facts. This is not posed as a question, rather as something that requires accounting for. This is a potentially risky moment for Arthur as it places the category 'liar' on the table – was he intentionally hiding something? Through this question, Angelica demonstrates the institutional objectives of assessing the truthfulness and plausibility of parental accounts. This is particular to certain professions like social work and policing. In contrast, street sellers and telemarketers for example have an institutionalised incentive *not* to recognise deceit publicly and so when potential lies are uncovered, there are good organisational reasons not to label them as such (see Llewellyn and Whittle, 2019). Arthur accepts he did not provide her with the full information, offering the account that the things he missed out were those he could not remember. Here, forgetting is used as an interactional resource to reject the category 'liar', introducing the less morally harmful 'forgetful' in its place. The facts are not in dispute, only the attribution of intention. One might expect the long pause that follows this statement to be followed by the social worker offering further possible moral objects to Arthur. However, Arthur breaks the silence. Arguably the social worker allows this given that we subsequently see she has knowledge of Arthur's mental health issues and drug and alcohol issues, of which forgetfulness is a plausible behaviour of both. Thus, Arthur mitigates the more severe institutional consequences of accomplishing the moral object by accepting the facts whilst successfully excusing the attribution of intention. Once again, the social worker pauses (L13-14) before Arthur moves the talk on.

In the accomplishment of the first moral object, we see how the social worker draws on an objectivated past event (Amy had the Clare's Law disclosure), that allows her to place the spoiled identity category of perpetrator of domestic abuse on the table, to seek an in situ account from Arthur in response. Arthur's acceptance of the spoiled identity category and display of remorse successfully accomplish a moral object because through his response Arthur demonstrates an orientation to the social worker's turn as moral. The second moral object also draws on an objectivated past event (last time we met), that allows her to place the possible spoiled identity category of 'liar' on the table and seek an account from Arthur in response. Arthur's acceptance of the event but invocation of 'forgetfulness' allows him to downgrade this to a less morally problematic category predicate of someone with mental health and drug and alcohol issues. Crucially, Arthur responds to each possible moral object

as moral, thus doing the work the social worker requires of him to display remorse, which in turn offers the possibility of category transformation.

Both moral objects are accomplished through drawing on objectivated accounts of past events (Juhila et al., 2014b) and an orientation to the social worker's account as moral. Liberman (2013) describes the process of objectivation as: Account (highlighting) → Confirmation → Objectivation → Social Amnesia. It goes like this: Angelica provides an account of the case, such as a recent event (Clare's Law disclosure) or her understanding of Arthur's account in their past meeting ('last time we met'), drawing it to the attention of Arthur as a point for discussion, setting the parameters for the discussion that follows and the resources to be drawn upon in that discussion, including the type of parent that is her work problem. It is the category inferences in these accounts, of 'perpetrator of domestic abuse', 'someone with mental health issues' and 'someone with drug and alcohol issues' that offer the resources for discussion. It is in and through these categories that Arthur accomplishes the two possible moral objects as moral, which as I go on to show, is highly consequential to the interactional and institutional possibilities that follow. It is possible to see the emergence of an institutional trajectory through these moral objects that link together notions of institutional past and present, in situ. I now consider how these moral objects are then drawn upon in subsequent projections of institutional futures.

### **Accomplishing 'transformables' - projecting institutional futures**

The omni-relevant device social worker-client/parent is seen through the respective activities taken up in the talk, without either party having to use these terms explicitly. We can see the activities of a social worker in Angelica's accomplished entitlement to offer accounts, make suggestions, ask questions requiring a moral response (guilt/truthfulness), tie institutional consequences to parental actions, and draw the parent into her professional reasoning. We can see the accomplishment of problematic parent in Arthur's orientation to the social worker as an authority figure and him offering moral accounts in response to her questions. In carrying out specific tasks, Angelica reflexively accomplishes the role of social worker. We see this as she keeps Arthur on plan by getting him to call his probation officer to make a follow up appointment, telling Arthur on two occasions the importance of him staying on plan by engaging with support services, and tying this to the institutionally warranted task of making sure he is safe enough to be around this baby. It is this omni-

relevant device, the accompanying category work, and the production of moral objects through which institutional trajectories and institutional context are accomplished.

We saw the beginnings of an institutional trajectory in the accomplishment of moral objects and now turn to considering how institutional futures are accomplished. Importantly, it is the successful production of the two moral objects that allows the talk to move on to the future. The social worker pauses after the production of each (L9 and L13-14), moving talk on after the first (L10), and taking up Arthur's future orientation after the second (L16). The production of the first moral object brought into talk the categories 'perpetrator of domestic abuse', 'victim of domestic abuse', 'child at risk', and 'good client' which, alongside those introduced for the first time in the talk, are used to jointly produce institutional projections. Just how is the joint work of institutional projection accomplished here?

14 *Arthur:* *what's going to happen next?*

15 *Angelica:* *well that's up to you. On paper at the minute, we have all this history.*

16 *Do you want me to go over that?*

17 *Arthur shakes his head no. Angelica leans forward.*

18 *Angelica:* *there are two paths you can take: the chaotic path which we've been over and we'd be*  
19 *really worried about you seeing Amy and the baby; or the path you're on, getting*  
20 *your mental health and drug and alcohol under control so we can put in place a plan*  
21 *for you to see the baby. You're not far away from that but only you can do it. Mental*  
22 *health can help but you're going to have to go on a big journey now – address what*  
23 *happened when you were younger.*

24 *Arthur nods.*

25 *Arthur:* *I'm worried going there will send me off the rails*

26 *Angelica:* *It will be really difficult but you can do it. For us to be considering that you are safer,*  
27 *you need to keep this up and engage with mental health, probation and drug and*  
28 *alcohol services, and to understand how this early stuff is impacting on you – but that*  
29 *will take time, and it has to be when you are ready, it has to be safe for you.*

30 *Arthur nods.*

In moving the talk on, Arthur accomplishes the relational pairing as social worker-client/parent as he orients to Angelica as having the knowledge and power to decide next steps and to her future oriented professional gaze. In her response, Angelica shifts the activity of shaping the future process to the category of problematic parent/client noting 'that's up

to you' (L15). She draws Arthur into her work problem, noting the inescapable problem of his objectivated violent history which must be addressed to enable a category transformation from 'perpetrator of domestic abuse' to a 'safer' (L25) parent who is able to 'see the baby' (L20). The social worker outlines two possible options with associated institutional consequences, a good projected option and a bad projected option, built through activities for which Arthur will be held to account at a later date. Note that there is no talk of him resuming a relationship with Amy which would be institutionally unacceptable due to the risks he accepts he poses to her and therefore to the baby.

Both projections are offered in relation to the established categories 'perpetrator of domestic abuse', 'victim of domestic abuse', and 'at-risk child', where the perpetrator is dangerous, and victims need protecting from him. The 'bad' option is explicitly tied to Arthur presenting as 'chaotic' and the institutional consequence of substantial limits being placed on his access to his baby and his ex-partner. This option, while offering less detail, is reflexively constituted through the 'good' option that follows. The 'good' option sees Arthur doing the activities of a 'good' client, that is, engaging with services. In outlining the activities that Arthur needs to complete in order for him to be deemed 'safer', the social worker engages in the professional logic that domestic abuse is less likely if someone has good mental health, their substance misuse under control and they address their childhood trauma. Completing these actions opens the possibility of an institutional future where Arthur can see his baby. The activity of "address what happened when you were younger" assumes a knowledge in common about Arthur's past trauma of sexual abuse. This brings a additionally relevant yet potentially conflicting set of categories to the table, in which Arthur is the victim of sexual abuse. Arthur takes up this category (L24) and it is through this that he is able to call into question her professional logic, as addressing past trauma may send him "off the rails", which is a predicate of poor mental health which has just been tied to the 'bad' client projection. In doing so he problematises the potentially competing activities associated with 'perpetrator of domestic abuse' and 'victim of sexual abuse'. It is through the social worker's primary work project of protecting the child that these are then negotiated. The social worker's formulation takes as the primary category 'perpetrator of domestic abuse' as she prioritises the safety child, though she also takes up the importance of Arthur addressing past trauma safely and in his own time. The use of time here has institutional relevance as it brings into focus the possibility that the time Arthur requires to change may be longer than the time the social worker has to make her assessment of his parenting capacity. In doing so she meets

her institutional aim of focusing on the baby whilst seeking to limit the harm that may come to Arthur through the change process.

We see then how positive institutional projections here are based on making explicit Arthur's capacity to transform the category 'perpetrator of domestic abuse' to a safer category, the possibility of which was opened in and through the production of the first moral object. We also see how this primary category transformation is layered via sub-category transformations from 'mentally ill' to 'mentally well', 'substance misuser' to 'managed substance user', 'victim of sexual abuse' to 'survivor of sexual abuse'. Possible 'transformables' are produced by the social worker for good institutional purposes, accomplishing projections of possible moral careers (Goffman, 1959a). Not only is she making explicit the activities Arthur needs to engage in to transform his spoiled identity and assessing his response, she can draw on these retrospectively on future occasions to account for change or lack thereof, and justify decisions about safe access to Arthur's baby. The 'transformable' here does not require an immediate moral response, like the 'remorsable' above, but is accomplished as Arthur agrees (L23, L29), with a built in mitigation (L24), that moral assessments of his engagement in the specified activities will be made in future and will affect his access to his child. Here then, the layered category practices through which 'transformables' are produced offer the framework through which Arthur's parental self is objectivated as a legitimate projectionable work project of social work.

Using the term 'object' highlights that such accounts are work objects in social work. Here, they have consequences for the temporal and moral order of the interaction. When it is established that Arthur accepts he is a violent offender, it opens the possibility for the social worker to check whether he is open and honest (or a liar). When it is established that he is forgetful (not a liar), it opens possibilities for the social worker to discuss the 'transformables' she needs to see in order for him to see his baby. Once each of these elements is accomplished the social worker has achieved a successful assessment session, they have jointly identified the problem and made a plan. Arthur's explicit (nodding L23; 29) and tacit (considering potential difficulties he will face L28) agreement to be held accountable for such transformables accomplishes his identity as a problematic parent on the road to accountable change. Only then does the social worker draw the session to a close by arranging a future appointment.

## **Projecting parental transformation through the accomplishment of ‘moral objects’**

Considering the production of ‘moral objects’ in detail shows the ways in which they are practically vital to social work assessment. The accomplishment of moral objects here is a co-accomplishment, it is not a social worker instrumentally applying a set of skills or a specified approach to practice to a parent. Whilst the social worker has institutional entitlements to shape the interaction (Broadhurst and Holt, 2010), the parent’s responses are highly consequential. It is worth considering an alternative playing out of the scene in order to make this point clear. If Arthur had responded differently, for example, arguing the forensic history was all wrong and rejecting the category of perpetrator, or, expressing worry that Amy will no longer want to be with him after hearing this history, the social worker would have had to do different work to move the talk on. Instead, the accomplishment of moral objects allows the talk to move on, through which we see notions of institutional causality in operation. Specifically we see here that if: 1. the perpetrator accepts his past behaviour as recorded in institutional records and professional accounts; 2. the perpetrator is no longer in a relationship with the victim and expresses no plans to resume the relationship; 3. the perpetrator acknowledges he requires support to change behaviours that contributed to the violence, possible institutional routes to change via practical action open up. This allows the social worker to highlight institutional pathways (mental health support; drug and alcohol support; probation) through which Arthur has the responsibility for accomplishing projected transformables (‘mentally ill’ to ‘mentally well’, ‘substance misuser’ to ‘managed substance user’, ‘victim of sexual abuse’ to ‘survivor of sexual abuse’).

To reiterate, two types of sequentially related moral object were accomplished in this assessment session: ‘remorsables’ and ‘transformables’. One ‘remorsable’ was accomplished as Arthur accepted the category of perpetrator of domestic abuse. Another, when Arthur accepted he did not present the whole picture to the social worker because he forgot much of the detail. One of the benefits of considering the accomplishment of moral objects in social work is that it directs our attention towards professional vision in action. Specifically, logics of institutional causality and institutional temporality built in and through the production of moral objects which operate in tangible ways throughout assessment. This in situ production of institutional causality and temporality are intertwined. At the level of the sequence of interaction the accomplishment of ‘remorsables’ allow talk to move onto another type of

moral object, 'transformables'. 'Remorsables' then allow for the possibility of parental change to be worked up in situ, providing that parent orients to the possible moral object *as* moral. This echoes prior work that shows the acceptance of a spoiled identity as central to possible absolution in social work (Gibson 2020). 'Remorsables' serve a practical purpose of providing a co-accomplished parental identity that can be worked upon in situ and longer term. This longer-term work project is set out in and through the co-accomplishment of 'transformables', projected category transformations with accompanying expectations of engaging in institutional support for which both the social worker and parent will be held accountable for. Together, the moral objects 'remorsables' and 'transformables' are the practical methods through which Arthur's parental self is objectivated as a legitimate projectionable work project of social work.

By explicating the joint accomplishment of moral objects through their introduction, recognition and uptake in a relatively successful assessment session, I show their role as institutional work objects in social work assessments and beyond, and their centrality to building trajectories of parental self-transformation. The practical utility of the accomplishment of 'remorsables' and 'transformables' in this successful assessment session is made start when contrasted to a difficult assessment session. In the section that follows, I show the practical problems faced by a social worker in an assessment where the accomplishment of another type of moral object, 'deniables', is an arduous task, with significant interactional and institutional consequences.

### **The interactional production of a series of escalating 'deniables' - frustrating change**

The logic underpinning Garfinkel's (1967) breaching experiments was, simply put, if you break the rules, you see those very rules in action in members' responses to that breach. This logic applies to the excerpt below in which the social worker attempts to produce a series of moral objects, 'deniables', with the built in expectation of a fitting moral and congruous response, but finds herself frustrated. This makes apparent the necessity of the accomplishment of moral objects for social workers, practically speaking, in order to move talk on with a parent and open institutional possibilities for support to change.

#### Deniable 1 – are you or do you want to be a couple?

- 1    Angelica      Okay so have you thought any more about what you said to us last week?



- 2 About what part you wanted to play in the baby's life and what you wanted  
3 for the future?
- 4 [long pause. Asha's foot falls off his knee to the floor and makes a loud thud]
- 5 Angelica it's very important isn't it because this is the third time I've met you now and  
6 I need to know whether I'm assessing you as a couple, whether in future  
7 you're saying you want to get back together or whether you're saying I want  
8 to be a single dad and I want to be assessed on my own
- 9 Asha I want to be a part of the baby's life
- 10 Angelica do you want to be with Jazz?
- 11 Asha uhh... I'll be there for the baby
- 12 Angelica but do you want to be with Jazz?
- 13 Asha I don't know, I don't want to rush anything, we'll play it day by day

In this excerpt the social worker draws on categories from the MCD family ('father', 'partner', 'child') through which the rights and obligations the categories attributed to Asha ('father', 'partner') are worked up through the ORD<sup>15</sup> social worker-client/problematic parents. It is through these categories that the social worker seeks elaboration from Asha about the status of his future parenting plans and the status of his relationship, both of which have consequences for the next steps the social worker can take. We see through the talk that the two categories the social worker places on the table for Asha, 'father' and 'partner', come with situated expectations as to the way a member of that category should behave in a social work assessment session. 'Fathers' make plans for the imminent birth of their child and know if they will be co-parenting or parenting alone. 'Partners' know whether or not they are in a couple and whether or not they will parent their child together. Asha does not provide the social worker with an answer she can build upon in her assessment work. In turn, this opens the possibility of another coming into play – 'good'/'bad' client – with associated activities that directly affect the interactional possibilities available to the social worker.

The social worker leads with an institutionally legitimated question, unlikely to be found in other kinds of daily interactions, as it is tied to the social work activity of making plans for a baby's future. The omni-relevant device operating here is parties to an assessment session,

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<sup>15</sup> 'Omni-relevant devices' operate at an organisational level (of the interactional event) and at times an immediate level (the sequential and categorical flow of the interaction). Here, it refers to the working up of social worker-client categories in and through which the interaction unfolds.

with the key relational categories of social worker-client/problematic parent. We see this through the social work assessment activities of drawing on a past meeting to state her expectation that the problematic parent has done his homework on specific questions about his intentions for being involved with his baby (L1-3). In asking this question, the social worker places the categories 'good' and 'bad' client on the table. Asha doing and sharing his thinking would be a common-sense activity of a good client in this context; not doing so would be the opposite. This is subtle but over the course of the assessment session has consequences, as 'bad' client maps onto the category of 'problematic parent'.

Asha's silence (L4) can be heard as hearing trouble in the social worker's question, a question that via the category of 'father', infers the predicate of thinking and being able to talk about your intentions for the future of your baby. The social worker hears the long pause broken by the sound of Asha's foot dropping to the floor (L4) as him having not done the required thinking and even as a warrant to account for her original question. In this account the social worker does two things. First, she draws Asha into her work problem. At each assessment session, the activity of the social worker is to know more, and to know more about specifically what it is she needs to know. So far, she has not been able to accomplish this to do her job. She topicalises and makes institutional time and institutional knowledge relevant to this work problem. Second, she places another category on the table, partner ('couple' L6), which shows that Asha was right to suspect trouble. The category of father is tied via assessment to the category of partner. Here we have social work logic in action - definitive answers to the state of parental relationships become relevant to social workers when that relationship poses a risk to the safety of a child (L6-10). This is a subtle placing of a moral object to be denied, a 'deniable', on the table for Asha.

Asha does not take up the 'partner' category offered by the social worker (L6-7 'couple'/'single') and instead only takes up 'father'. He does this twice (L9, L11) and each time, the social worker responds to this as an evasion bringing the category 'partner' back to table as she brings up Jazz (L10, L12). The social worker requires an answer to this question to do her job effectively and to open interactional and longer-term institutional possibilities. The categories of 'father', 'mother', 'child' alongside the category of 'partner' map onto categories of domestic space. A couple who are co-parenting are likely to live in the same space. Mapping domestic space through person-categories is how the social worker attempts to get at the issue of proximity, a key concern for social workers in domestic abuse cases. Asha does not orient to the possible deniable as moral, thus the moral object is not produced

for the social worker to take up and run with. If Asha denied they remain in a relationship or want to be a couple in future, it would open the interactional possibility of exploring: 1. Any evidence to the contrary and the risks of lying 2. The risks of them getting back together and Asha's understanding of his relationship with Jazz and the potential impact on the baby 3. The specifics of his planned involvement.

Asha does not take up the possibility of denying he wants to be with Jazz. He does not directly answer the social worker's question, and the uncertainty in his response (L13), layered upon his own timeline of being able to take his time, play it day by day, conflicts with the institutional priorities and timeline topicalised by the social worker. Still, as I show below, inferring (L13) he sees getting back with Jazz as a possibility allows the social worker to move the talk on, to attempt to learn more about the status of their relationship.

#### Deniable 2 – are you lying about being a couple?

- 1 Angelica So are you guys in contact with each other?  
2 Asha uh... I've been to an appointment with her  
3 Angelica was that before you saw me last week?  
4 Asha don't know, I can't remember, I think it was the week before  
5 Angelica 'cause when I saw you last week you said you hadn't seen her  
6 Asha it was the midwife, she told my sister she wanted me to come  
7 Angelica right, but you're not in contact with her at all now, you haven't spoken to  
8 her? If you are just say because the reality is we're going to find out in the  
9 end  
10 Asha I haven't seen her since that appointment

Staying with the idea of producing deniables, after the social worker has not received a complete and satisfactory response as to Asha's intention for his relationship with Jazz, she moves onto explore the status of their relationship now, this time placing another category on the table – 'liar'. The social worker uses time as a resource to produce incongruity in Asha's past and present account by constructing a working timeline.

As the social worker asks if Jazz and Asha are in contact, there is an institutionally preferred response built into its organisation. As there are domestic abuse allegations, the social worker would view the risk to the baby as higher if Jazz and Asha remained in touch, as proximity

to one another could lead to altercations which could harm the baby. Asha's answer (L2) demonstrates his orientation to producing a dispreferred response as he answers yes, plus produces an account (see Sacks 1992 on preference organisation) for having seen her. The social worker uses time a resource to establish incongruity between Asha's prior account during their last assessment session of not having seen Jazz (L3, L5). Accomplishing this incongruity through this institutional trajectory infers the category 'liar'. Asha could deny this, though there would be little value given the timeline and knowledge the social worker is presenting him with. Asha does not deny lying and instead offers the account of attending a midwife appointment with Jazz as he was following a professional request. In doing so he responds to the social worker's possible deniable (L5) as mitigatable in two ways. Following professional advice is a positive activity a problematic parent can engage in as a good client in an assessment session. Asha also distances himself from the category 'partner' by outlining his sister was the go-between for him and Jazz, which one would not expect if they were together. In doing so, does not produce a deniable but offers a dual mitigation for being caught in a lie (good client, not partner), allowing the social worker to continue to orient to him as a client who lies (L8-9).

The social worker responds by continuing to offer possible 'deniables', that Asha is not in contact with and hasn't spoken to Jazz (L7-9). The question is organised for the preferred response 'no.' but is tied to a warning against producing a 'no.' response and being once again found out to have lied. Here, the social worker infers that Asha is the type of client that lies (L8-9), continuing to build upon the morally problematic categories in use ('problematic parent', 'perpetrator of domestic abuse', 'liar'/'bad client'). Asha offers the response that he has not seen Jazz, not that he is not in contact with her and in doing so produces a denial that he does not orient to as moral in the interaction but has the possibility of becoming so in future. If the social worker finds out at later date that this is not true, she will likely view the risk of harm to the child as higher deeming Asha as unable to work openly and honestly. The social worker remains unsatisfied with Asha's responses, and as I show below, becomes increasingly frustrated as she offers a series of possible deniables which in turn open up interactional possibilities.

### Deniable 3 – why aren't you angry?

- 1 Angelica I wanted to talk about, is when we spoke before I read out a lot of the really  
2 serious allegations that Jazz had said had been happening and your response  
3 was that it was all a lie and that you can't remember any of that happening. Is  
4 that still your response to all of this?
- 5 Asha yeah
- 6 Angelica can I just ask you then... if my ex-partner had made the allegations against  
7 me, really really serious things, I don't know if I'd be laughing about it when  
8 a social worker was reading it out... You don't seem angry about it or
- 9 Asha Angry? Why would I be angry about it?
- 10 Angelica I mean, let me just read out again, what she's saying
- 11 Asha I already know it
- 12 Angelica 'cause this is the whole reason we are involved and what she is saying could  
13 potentially mean that you have very limited access to your baby and that's  
14 what I need you to understand
- 15 Asha hmm
- 16 Angelica because it's that serious. What she's saying in this police disclosure makes me  
17 worried that you could kill her and you could kill this baby, it's that serious
- 18 Asha if there's allegations [laughing] I can't really say nothing or do nothing. Do  
19 you know what I mean? I can't, I don't remember me doing that, and you're  
20 going to keep saying them to me
- 21 Angelica I know but I do need to keep going over it because that's the whole reason  
22 why we're involved and I'm really worried about it. To me, reading that, if  
23 there's a new-born baby in the house and there's things like that happening,  
24 do you think the baby would be safe?
- 25 Asha huh?
- 26 Angelica do you think the baby would be safe? In a house where things like that are  
27 happening? Where a mother is being beaten with pipes and...
- 28 Asha uh
- 29 Angelica how do you feel knowing she has said all of this about you?
- 30 Asha I don't know because it's not true! [laughs].
- 31 Angelica 'cause she still says this is true. I think this is what is troubling me a bit is that  
32 if it was me and I was in your position and my ex-partner had said...
- 33 Asha well what do you want me to say if that's not true? I can't say nothing to that

34 Angelica I suppose I'm trying to gauge your response to it and I would have expected  
35 you to react differently that's all, if it was all a lie.

In this excerpt, we see the interactional possibilities opened through possible 'deniables'.

The social worker offers an account of her prior meeting with Asha, bringing in the category 'perpetrator of domestic abuse' via the predicate 'serious allegations' made by his partner Jazz. She objectivates Asha's past account, that Jazz was lying and Asha couldn't remember doing the things she said. By sticking with this response (L5) Asha produces a 'deniable', that he is not a 'perpetrator of domestic abuse' and that Jazz is a 'liar'. The production of this deniable opens the possibility for the social worker to check out the incongruity she sees in Asha's account (L6-L8). The social worker problematises Asha laughing in response to the allegations and contrasts this response with her own imagined response to this happening to her. In doing so, the social worker outlines an expected predicate of the category 'falsely accused' - anger. Accordingly, if Asha were to take this up, his denial would be more plausible for the social worker. Yet, anger is arguably a problematic predicate for Asha to take up given the category 'perpetrator of domestic abuse' has already been layered through the talk. Asha rejects anger as an expected behaviour of a person falsely accused (L9-10). Asha's denial is worked up as incongruous as his behaviour is not fitting of the category 'falsely accused', so the social worker ups the ante in specific ways.

First, she offers to read out the allegations that Jazz made again (L11). The allegations work as an objectivated past account which need to be overcome via assessment, as we also saw in the previous section with Arthur. Here, the social worker uses the detail of the allegations as a resource to support her expectation of anger. Asha stops the social worker from doing this, stating he already knows it (L12). The social worker does not read the allegations in full but offers her account of what the details mean for her professional reasoning (L13-15, L17-19). In doing so she offers the most morally problematic category yet, that of 'potential murderer' ('you could kill her and you could kill this baby') and ties this risk to the potential institutional outcome of Asha having limited access to his baby. Asha does not take this up this potential deniable, instead he laughs as he notes he doesn't remember doing anything (L20-22). This is arguably a dispreferred response as it would be reasonable to expect that placing the category 'potential murderer' on the table alongside the institutional predicate of having limits placed upon parenting would be followed by an emotive turn.

The role of laughter is worth considering further in the sense that it deviates from the response the social worker would expect from Asha having been accused of domestic abuse. The social worker problematises Asha's laughter (L7) yet Asha continues to laugh as she questions him. Although Asha denies the overall allegations, he does not successfully elaborate in the manner expected. As Stokoe (2010) writes in relation to men's denials of violence against women, an anticipated 'category-based denial' might be 'I'm not the kind of man who hits women'. Asha's response falls short of doing this work. It is in this context that Asha's laughter appears to be designed for the social worker in specific ways. The pattern here is the social worker offering a deniable (the most extreme formulation of potential murder, and the specific details of abuse), Asha not taking it up, and Asha laughing in response. Laughter here works as a form of "normalizing practice for extraordinary events" (Jefferson, 2004) as the laughter directly follows the worst descriptions of what he is accused of. In this way, it appears at least partially designed to erode the relevance of 'deniables' the social worker offers.

In response, the social worker changes tack slightly, offering Asha a hypothetical scenario alongside specific details of Jazz's account lifted from the police disclosure. This allows her to draw Asha into her professional reasoning whilst re-invoking the category 'potential murderer', of a 'mother' and a 'child'. It is possible to see that the social worker is offering Asha another chance at providing the expected response of anger as she asks 'how do you feel knowing she has said all of this about you?' Asha responds with his most enlivened denial of the allegation of domestic abuse yet, accompanied by a laugh (L32). This production of this deniable paves the way for the social worker to draw upon Jazz's continued assertion of the allegations to again check the incongruity of Asha's response (L33). Asha rejects the category of 'perpetrator of domestic abuse' and the social worker makes observable her view that he is lying ('if it was all a lie'). Together this 'deniable' and the social worker's response re-establishes the central category of concern, 'perpetrator of domestic abuse', and the tied institutional projection, 'very limited access to your baby'. The category bound work that precedes this turn then infers the institutional possibility of the most interventionist measures available to the social worker, such as a court order, to protect the mother and child from Asha.

The reflexively accomplished category work here is worthy of note as it is through layered category bound predicates that map onto institutional consequences that projections are

made possible. The predicates of killing a 'mother' and 'child' are category bound to 'perpetrator of domestic abuse' and 'murderer'. The severity of these predicates (beaten with pipes/kill her and the baby) open the interactional possibility of a 'plausible' angry response from Asha which is not taken up. The category 'perpetrator of domestic abuse' is tied to that of 'victim' and here, in and through institutional context of social services, the categories of 'victim-mother' and 'victim-child'. This set of categories is topicalised by the social worker as mapping onto the safety of home drawing in the category of 'domestic space' (L25-26), which in turn legitimises her early line of questioning about the status of their relationship (single/couple) and parenting plans (single/co-parenting) as these map onto issues of proximity and access via domestic space. Topicalising the worry that Asha could kill the mother and baby makes observable the 'social work' here, as a concern for child safety and fear of allowing a preventable child death are predicate of doing social work. These analyses offer elaborative detail to Critchley's (2019: 4) thematic findings that pre-birth child protection involves a narrow focus on the immediate physical safety of the unborn baby, but as we see here, also on fathers who may harm the unborn baby. They also show the complex categorisation process through which in situ allegations are jointly negotiated and through which institutional projections are made possible.

### **Accomplishing 'deniables' and frustrating change**

Introducing, recognising, evading and taking up 'deniables' is one method through which social workers and parents jointly accomplish moral objects in the course of charting lack of parental self-transformation. As in the previous section, the social worker produces possible moral objects through objectivated past accounts, drawing on past meetings and forensic history (last time you said this/she said this/you did this) as a resource for in situ accounting. She also draws on objectivated past accounts, in situ accounts, and 'work' problems of social work as a resource through which to open interactional possibilities and institutional projections. We have seen how not taking up possible 'deniables' as moral objects to be denied is an accountable matter for the social worker. The social worker still needs to find a way to work up and account for 'risk', as seen through the series of escalating category bound 'deniables' she places on the table. Asha's accomplishment of the 'deniable' that he is not a 'perpetrator of domestic abuse' is taken up as work object by the social worker which she uses to explore the plausibility of his responses. Importantly, it is in and through this work that the social worker produces institutional projections.



Again, we see how case trajectories are reflexively accomplished through the production of possible moral objects that tie together past, present and projected accounts of parental categories. On this occasion, it is not possible to accomplish a transformable, instead, the social worker projects a possible future in which poses a serious risk to his partner and baby. Here we see an alternative professional institutional causality at play to that described in the section on transformables. We see that if 1. the perpetrator denies his past behaviour as recorded in institutional records and professional accounts; 2. the perpetrator may still be in a relationship with the victim; 3. the perpetrator does not acknowledge he requires support to change behaviours that contributed to the violence, possible institutional routes to change via practical action close. There can be no question of a perpetrator programme given this denial. Whilst the accomplishment of this 'deniable' does not present the social worker with the ideal possible outcome, it does allow her to project an 'unchangeable identity' (Juhila et al., 2014b: 171) of perpetrator of domestic abuse. This 'deniable' then allows the social worker to topicalise future institutional pathways available to her to protect the unborn baby from emotional harm and potential murder.

Following the meeting, the social worker tells me: "I just feel frustrated at him just laughing when he's done such horrendous things". This provides further observability to the social worker's reasoning here. She is in no doubt that Asha has behaved violently towards his partner during her pregnancy with his child. The line of questioning in these three excerpts is essentially: are you in a relationship?; are you lying about being in a relationship?; are you a potential murderer? Through this line of questioning and the series of escalating possible 'deniables', we can observe what is relevant to the social worker in this assessment, to see her primary focus as being on the unborn child and the mother, and to see her attempts to establish a point of agreement upon which they can proceed both interactionally and institutionally. Crucially, this agreement relates to the type of parent Asha is and the possible scenarios this generates. The social worker seeks to establish some solid ground from which to proceed in this assessment through complex categorial methods including the production of moral objects, case trajectory building, and mapping domestic space.

### **Conclusion - the objectivation of parental selves through the production of 'moral objects' in child protection assessment**

Projects of change in child protection are accomplished through projections of positive parental self-transformations or of unchangeable deviant identities. As these analyses show,

one method by which change projects are achieved is through social workers placing possible 'moral objects' on the table and seeing what parents do with them. Moral objects have built in expectations of how they should be taken up, that is, accepting a posited category incumbency (e.g. 'perpetrator of domestic abuse') and producing a moral response (e.g. remorse or denial). Moral objects present moments of possibility before a parent responds, the possibility of alternative case trajectories, possibilities that contract through their consequential response. By orienting to and accomplishing moral objects as moral, parents open the possibility of transformable accounts and transformational activities to be built through institutional projections towards a transformed identity category. Equally, a failure to 'pick' up moral objects from the categorical table presents an accountable matter for the social worker, indicating how a lack of acknowledgement of these items *as* moral objects also has interactional and institutional consequences.

A distinction can be made between the expectations of different forms of moral object accomplished through in situ acknowledgement as moral ('deniables', 'remorsables') and those accomplished as tacit agreement of a future moral reckoning ('transformables'). The accomplishment of 'remorsables' and 'deniables' in assessment sessions was achieved as the social worker placed possible moral objects on the table and the parent recognised them as moral in their following turn. Through their accomplishment, the social worker could transform the person into a category to work on, as seen in the building of positive and negative institutional projections that followed. Whether these moral objects were positively or negatively assessed by the social worker is observable in the type of projection that followed, be that parental transformation and a relationship with one's baby or the contrary. An important finding here is that the co-accomplishment of moral objects allows the social worker to move the talk on in situ and to build institutional projections. Conversely, when a parent did not orient to possible moral objects as moral, the social worker escalated her line of questioning until one was accomplished, making observable their practical utility.

Practically, the co-accomplishment of moral objects is the means through which the social worker takes out a name and puts a category in (Sacks, 1992). By which I mean a person, 'Arthur' or 'Asha', becomes a category, 'remorseful perpetrator of domestic abuse' or 'denying perpetrator of domestic abuse', through which the social worker can make projections for change and work plans. Introducing, recognising and taking up moral objects is a means through which the practical, methodical and moral work of assessment is co-produced as set of actions that are seemingly unremarkable but once attended to, can be seen

as the scaffolding of in-situ assessment and projections of change. 'Moral objects' then are a resource in and through which in situ assessment and planning are made possible. It is only through the accomplishment of 'moral objects' that a social worker can consider institutional next steps, the most hopeful for a parent being through the accomplishment of 'transformables'.

Unlike 'remorsables' and 'deniables', 'transformables' were recognised by parents as requiring agreement for a projected future moral reckoning. 'Transformables' are an interesting 'moral object' to consider further as they topicalise the trajectory building work of social work, and extend moral work beyond the current interaction, projecting into an imagined future. There are two moments of possibility in the accomplishment of 'transformables', one between the social worker's first turn and the parent's subsequent turn in which the parent may express agreement or disagreement with the moral formulation, and another that projects beyond the current interaction and into a possible future in which the parent will be expected to account for their progress. As a transformable is accomplished, the parent momentarily accepts the suggested spoiled identity that requires work and the suggested plan for transformation. This is a delicate moment for a parent who must consider whether they can successfully engage in the work ahead of them, and as we saw in Arthur's assessment session, may offer the possibility of formulating mitigating circumstances in advance. It is potentially less troublesome for in situ interaction than the accomplishment of 'remorsables' or 'deniables' as it can move the moment for moral reckoning to a time beyond the current interaction - the parent does not yet need to be transformed, only moving towards transformation. This allows talk to move on, accomplishes institutional trajectory building and importantly, extends the scene into a projected institutional future.

Commenting upon the moral work of child protection assessment is nothing new (see White 1997; Parton et al., 1997) but attending to the detailed methods through which moral work is done for practical purposes is and contributes two related insights, one relevant to modern Goffmanian sociology, and one to social work practice research. Goffman's work has found favour in recent years as a reference point through which to discuss the qualitative experiences of institutionally produced stigmatised identity (see Tyler, 2018; Tyler and Slater, 2018). As noted in the literature review, these studies seek to link individual experiences with the diffuse operation of power through institutions and have focused on what might be considered as 'fixed' stigmatised identities, i.e identities that travel with a person. In the data presented here, key categories in use were 'father', 'perpetrator of domestic abuse', and

involved interactions with the same social worker, and if one were taking a decontextualised approach to analysis, could be viewed simplistically as belonging to the same category of case, with the same type problematic parent, requiring the same type of social work. Yet through the category work done in the accomplishment of moral objects, we see that parental identities are not fixed, they take shape, shift, and are re-made for practical purposes.

Spoiled identities are co-accomplished, worked up in situ and are central to the production of moral objects and the accounts of institutional next steps available to the social worker. Social workers are highly skilled at doing the work projects assigned by their professional designation, but this work is jointly accomplished. It is not a matter of the simplistic application of social work skills to parents, nor simply a parent complying or resisting such attempts, it is a matter of ongoing negotiation, with evidently unequal rights to speakership. If we shift the focus of social work research the generalisability of members' practices, it becomes possible to see the ways of knowing and rules of operation at play in the profession, and the built-in methods that objectivate parental selves as the legitimate work objects of the profession. Attending to the methods through which parental selves are objectivated and objectivated again allows us to observe the requirement to accomplish spoiled and transformable identities in social work practice. The finding that social workers objectivate parental selves into objects of work is perhaps an unsurprising finding given that social workers are tasked primarily with supporting parents to safely care for their children. What is interesting is that by describing the methods through which this work is achieved we see that they are at the core of daily practice and that they are co-accomplished with parents. It follows that any attempts to transform practice through the development of models or skills programmes needs to start from this basis.

These descriptions provide the lived organisational detail of child protection logic in action. By attending to this methodical detail, it is possible to trace how moral objects are accomplished in and through institutional trajectories glossed as the 'case'. The case is not a stable type simplistically classified by the formal risk categories of child protection assessment but is built through live methods in the vivid present that enable multiple projections of change, or lack thereof, and possible corresponding work plans. In these cases, moral objects enabled the social worker to engage in in-situ assessments and decisions, however small, relating to a client's categorial status, character, capacity for engagement and change, and projected institutionalised futures. Professional vision in child protection assessment then involves highlighting spoiled identities accomplished in and through the

production of moral objects, as a project of charting parental self-transformation (Goodwin, 1994). Crucially, it is through the complex mapping of people (and risks, rights, responsibilities) in time and space that moral objects are accomplished and that trajectories of transformation or lack thereof are achieved. I discuss these practices in detail in the chapter that follows.

## Chapter Six

### **Accomplishing a core group: the interactional production of moral objects, 'transformables', in mapping rights and responsibilities and projecting institutional futures**

Staying with the phenomenon of charting parental self-transformation through the production of moral objects, this analysis chapter describes how they are accomplished in and through a core group with the Clenham family. In this core group, possible moral objects are woven together through mapping family and space categories, glossed as the danger statement and safety goal, within an extended institutional temporality glossed as the case. Unlike in assessment, the moral objects here do not depend on a subsequent immediate turn from a parent. Instead, they are set up by the social worker through her reading of the danger statement and safety goals. In this form, moral objects are grouped together and used to structure the meeting into a scene where spoiled identities and predicates are set out by the social worker alongside proposed methods to transform those, before asking professionals and family members to chart the progress of each goal by scaling. It is through scaling the safety goal, that is, providing a number and a corresponding account of progress, that moral objects are accomplished *as* moral.

This chapter describes how during this core group, danger statements and safety goals<sup>16</sup> alongside situated scaling practices are the methods used to create workable parental selves through the production of 'transformables'. I begin by describing the detailed categorial rules of play for the core group and beyond outlined in the danger statement and safety goals, before describing the accomplishment of 'transformables' through scaling. The complex set of categories described show how parental transformation is worked up in situ and projected to space and time beyond the core group.

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<sup>16</sup> As noted earlier, danger statements and safety goals are terms used in a model of practice called Signs of Safety. Danger Statement should give the reasons social services are working with the family in clear simple language. They include 'what we are worried could happen if nothing changes, and the impact of this on the child/ young person'. For each Danger Statement there should be a corresponding Safety Goal. Safety Goals should say what social services need to see to feel confident that the child/ young person is safe enough to step down or close the case. The Safety goal should show everyone what we are working together to achieve (Turnell 1999; They provide structure to child protection interactions in Salina. On this occasion, members of the core group are asked to score progress on the goal to chart positive or negative change.

## **The case and the meeting – methods of achieving nested rights and responsibilities**

### Excerpt 1 - Danger statement

1 The social worker reads out the first set of danger statements and safety goals from the flip  
2 chart. She asks for updates from key attendees and writes down new information. She  
3 checks there are no further updates from the group and asks each person to scale the danger  
4 statement.

5  
6 Our first danger statement is that social services are worried that Arthur has a long history  
7 of violence towards women and there's been an incident where Arthur has hurt a child in the  
8 crossfire when assaulting a woman in 2015. This makes Angelica worry that Amy could be at  
9 risk of being assaulted by Arthur during her pregnancy and that her newborn baby could be  
10 at risk of being caught in the crossfire of a physical assault by Arthur or being exposed to  
11 frightening behaviour from Arthur when he is being aggressive or shouting. We are worried  
12 that the baby could get hurt, grow up frightened, or think it would be okay to hurt others and  
13 get into trouble with the police. So obviously, everybody's goal is that we want the baby to live  
14 with adults where he will be protected from being physically harmed by his father and not  
15 frightened by him. For this to happen we need to see that everybody is able to follow the plan so he's  
16 safe when he is born.

17  
18 So when we were in conference, Amy, Arthur and everybody agreed the plan that I'm gonna read out  
19 now. So, Arthur's continuing to take his antidepressants and engage with his GP, Arthur is  
20 continuing to work with probation on a weekly basis and complete work on relapse prevention.  
21 Arthur... Arthur is able... will speak to professionals if he can feel his mental health going downhill  
22 or if he feels that he needs to use alcohol or drugs. Mum says that if Arthur starts shouting she will  
23 walk away or go to the police if Arthur will not leave. Dad says that if he can feel himself getting  
24 angry he will walk away. Mum and dad say they will tell the social worker if they have any  
25 disagreements or changes in their relationship. Barb (MGM) says her door is always locked and  
26 there is a security alarm.

27  
28 Angelica clarifies that Amy and Arthur continue not to present as a couple, that Amy and Arthur  
29 will not go to each other's houses and that all contact between them will be via Arthur's sister and

30 *mother. As Amy, Arthur, and Arthur's mum and sister agree the social worker writes this up on the*  
31 *board. When she has finished she asks the group to scale.*

The core group meeting is the first meeting since the child protection conference where it was agreed that the baby's name should be placed on the register at birth. The professionals at the meeting include the social worker, Arthur's probation officer, the midwife, and the health visitor. The family at the meeting are Arthur, Amy, Amy's mum Barb, Amy's friend Becca, Arthur's sister Sam and Arthur's mum Gill. The social worker reads out the danger statement agreed at the first child protection conference. In doing so she puts a series of categorial resources on the table which members pick up, or do not pick up, as resources through which to objectivate parental selves in and through the process of scaling the safety goals. In the section that follows, I outline the ways in which multi-layered category work makes explicit rights and responsibilities, as well as ordering members into a plausible narrative about what has happened and what will happen next, in the meeting and as part of the case. I draw on this excerpt to provide the beginnings of an analysis which will be confirmed as I present further data from the meeting as it unfolds.

#### The category work, rights and responsibilities of the meeting

The meeting is organised and meaning established through the collection of categories in use. Sacks' notion of omni-relevance describes a category device (a collection of categories) that operates at organisational and immediate levels of an interactional event, through which members are able to make inferences. For example, as knowledge in common is assumed, members demonstrate 'extra-textual understanding' and 'background expectancies' through membership work (see McHoul et al., 2008). The omni-relevant device here is 'parties to a Core Group' of which possible predicates are to listen to the account of risk, the plan, offer updates, and scale the safety goal. The stated goal for 'everyone' (L13) is to ensure the safety of the child, as outlined by the social worker. The rights and obligations within the device 'parties to a core group' differ between the categories within this device of 'social worker', 'client/parent', 'professionals', and 'family members', as will become evident through the scaling that follows.

In the above excerpt, the social worker accomplishes a leadership and an expert role. The social worker opens the meeting, stands at the head of the table while the group members look at her, and she reads out the danger statement and safety plan. In doing so she makes a number of possible objectivations. The danger statement (L6-16) itself works as a gloss that



organises a set of nested objectifications of past parental actions tied to spoiled identities, alongside the risks to the baby when born should these continue, and a safety goal which makes explicit that for the spoiled identity to be transformed and the baby to be safe, the activities within the plan must be followed. The safety plan (L126) glosses the set of relationships in the case and the rights and obligations of members to one another. Through these formal work practices, the social worker systematically produces a series of possible moral objects, 'transformables' that are central to the work project of charting parental self-transformation. 'Transformables' refer to the acceptance by the parent or other parties to the core group of a spoiled parental identity, acceptance of the activities set out to transform it, and accounting for the work already achieved towards that end. They are the means through which parents are transformed into the workable objects of child protection. In this core group, the social worker draws on the danger statement and safety goal again as she asks the family and professionals to scale, and the activity of scaling becomes the task through which 'transformables' are accomplished.

#### The category work, rights and responsibilities of the case

The danger statement and safety goal provide for a series of categories that make up the case. This is achieved through the ORD 'parties to a core group' and through mapping the categories and predicates within the MCD 'family' onto domestic space. This is done through 'distal spatial talk' (Smith, 2017) as the social worker draws in home settings, settings beyond where this talk is produced. Space categories are a resource for organising telling stories, whilst also displaying reflexive orientation to the hearer, the setting of the event, and the telling (Sacks, 1992). It is through the gestalt contexture of a core group for a case of domestic abuse, where the spoiled identity categories of 'perpetrator of domestic abuse'-'victim of domestic abuse' and 'problematic parents' are relevant, that this spatial mapping is heard. The danger statement sets up the relational spoiled identity categories and their predicates ('perpetrator of domestic abuse' – assaulting women, aggressive to women, shouting at women; 'victim of domestic abuse' – being assaulted, being shouted at; 'problematic father' – unintentionally cause physical and emotional harm to child; 'problematic mother' – fail to protect child by staying with abusive partner; 'abused child' – frightened, hurts others, gets into trouble with police) that the activities in the safety plan are set up to transform. Thus, each of these spoiled identity category holds the possibility of being accomplished as moral through different members over the course of the core group, including through the production of 'transformables'.

The safety plan does not only set up the activities through which spoiled identities may be transformed, the way it is organised in the local sequential order of the meeting and through the membership, spatial and temporal categories that it produces, it achieves two key things. First, it organises the way in which the plan is to be understood to operate in the community. Second, it sets up the rules and the categories through which 'parties to a core group' are to handle the descriptions that follow in the meeting. Before discussing these points in turn, it is worth elaborating upon the foundations of my argument. The safety plan might be described as setting up the rules for the viewers maxim – "if a member sees a category bound activity being done, then, if one can see it being done by a member of a category to which the activity is bound, then see it that way" (Sacks 1972: 338). These, for example, are approximations of the some of the rules of application and corollaries set out:

- If Arthur feels his mental health worsening or he feels the need to use substances, then he will seek professional help so he doesn't hit Amy (L21-11)
- If Arthur starts shouting, Amy will walk away so he doesn't hit Amy (L23)
- If Arthur won't leave, Amy will call the police so he doesn't hit Amy (L23)
- If Arthur feels angry, he will walk away so he doesn't hit Amy (L24)
- If Arthur or Amy disagree or change their relationship status, they will tell the social worker, so he doesn't hit Amy (L25)
- If Arthur comes to the house, Amy will be protected by a locked door and security alarm, so he doesn't hit Amy (L26)

Taking the first point, the viewer's maxim is how members handle the mutually constitutive availability of spatial, temporal and family categories. Through the mapping of family relations, there is a layered mapping of domestic space and the proximity of family members. The person categories here include the spoiled identity categories discussed above and those organised through the 'MCD' family ('mum', 'dad', 'baby', 'grandmother' etc). It is through these categories that it is possible to map domestic space and requirements in relation to proximity. For example, the categories 'mum' and 'dad' are developed in relation to two houses, that is, the requirement for them to live in separate houses and not visit each other's houses (L29). Through this work we also see the responsibility upon each of them not to be in close proximity, an occasion so dangerous for 'mother' and 'baby' that a set of plans have been created in case of its eventuality. Another example may be seen through the categories of 'mum' and 'grandmother', developed in relation to one house, through which we see the maternal grandmother's nested responsibility of keeping her daughter safe through locked

doors and alarms. Finally, it is through the categories of 'son', 'daughter', 'mother' that the requirement for separate domestic space for Amy and Arthur is made possible through the third-party facilitation of their communication. Thus, the nested rights and responsibilities within the plan are brought to life and understood through mapping of family relations alongside 'distal spatial talk'.

These category-bound rights and responsibilities also have a built-in temporal element that locates key players in terms of their past, present and future, and serve to build a plausible narrative of what has happened and what is going to happen next. Not only is the plan prefaced by the social worker as being previously agreed in the child protection conference (L26) which offers what follows the legitimacy of a work object located in an institutional trajectory, it is objectivated as a resource through which to continue this temporal work via the production of 'transformables'. The plan relates to past and present spoiled identities and offers activities to be engaged in now and in the future, to transform these identities. Of course, accounts of institutional records, prior meetings, or prior behaviour are not simply transported from past and present through linear time, they are worked up anew for this occasion. I provide a detailed analysis of this point in the final analysis chapter.

Taking the second point, setting up the safety plan in relation to the predicate 'hitting Amy' previously worked up for Arthur works as a practical register through which members make sense of these 'if, then' formulations. The way in which the plan is organised only makes sense through the relational categories of 'perpetrator'-'victim'. As the meeting unfolds, this enables 'parties to a core group' to generate and recognise descriptions of 'risks' through the resources set out by the social worker. In the excerpts that follow, when members do this, they display institutional context through their talk. The excerpt ends with the social worker writing up small changes to the plan and the objectivated resources written on the board that are to be taken up in scaling that follows.

To summarise, the danger statements and safety goals provide the category bound resources through which members see the plan in the context of the meeting, in the spaces and relations through which it is to operate, and within the institutional trajectory of the case. This will become evident as I describe the process of scaling the safety goal below, through which the social worker's professional vision as to what forms an acceptable 'transformable' is made observable.

## Scaling – pedagogy and professional vision

Prior to the turn in this excerpt, the social worker reads out the question to scale: “on a scale of 0 to 10 with 10 being the best it could be and Amy having the strength and knowledge to make the best decisions to protect the baby from violence and frightening behaviour and 0 being the worst it could be and Amy presents as emotionally vulnerable and unable to make safe decisions to protect the herself and the baby from violence or frightening behaviour what would you score today?”

### Excerpt 2.1 – picking up child protection resources

- 1 *Angelica*        *What are you gonna score her Barb?*  
2 *Barb*            *I give her 8 last and I'll give her 8 again today*  
3 *Angelica*        *(writes) okay, why 8*  
4 *Barb*            *uh I've seen a lot of difference in Amy, the way she is, all what she's going through*  
5                    *with all she's got wrong with her and she's coping well and keeping all her*  
6                    *appointments.*  
7 *Angelica*        *That's good and with the scoring it's not like a test and basically the only reason we*  
8                    *do it is so when we meet we can see if things are getting better or worse, so if you*  
9                    *scored 8 last time, if things are getting better, you'd expect to score higher, you know*  
10                   *what I mean?*  
11 *Barb*            *yeah but I'll say 8.*  
12 *Angelica*        *Yeah that's fine.*

The social worker asks Amy's mum, Barb, to score her daughter's progress on a scale of 0-10. Barb picks up on the requirement to scale in relation to last time (L2), noting she is sticking to her score of 8. When accounting for that score, she draws on her experience of seeing changes in Amy over time and uses the category bound resources in the scaling question (e.g. emotionally vulnerable - emotionally strong), noting that Amy is coping well. The social worker offers a corrective to Barb's observable understanding of scaling by acknowledging Barb's account of Amy's improvement (L7 That's good) then explaining what scoring is. Through her explanation of scoring needing to reflect positive or negative change over time, the social worker makes explicit the social work project of tracking change over time, as well as the expectation for parties to a core group to engage in this activity. When Barb chooses to remain at 8 and disregard the social worker's corrective, the social worker does not labour the point but instead moves on. This is worth noting as although part of the social worker's

pedagogical practice here is to get members to engage in the activities of parties to a core group, that they get this 'right' is not essential to her job. Unlike with the moral objects discussed throughout this chapter, the social worker can move on here as although the method of scaling and accounting do not meet her expectations, they are still satisfactory. They are satisfactory because in the account Barb provides for her score, she draws on resources outlined by the social worker in the scaling question to demonstrate Amy's improvement/transformation. They are satisfactory because the social worker responds to them as such (L7 – that's good; L12 – that's fine).

A further example of the pedagogical practices of group scaling in a core group is seen through what is and what is not relevant to the social worker here. Neither the score or the proximity to the parents being scaled is of relevance to the social worker, providing the score is relatively near to those of other members, and the account for that score draws on acceptable, social worker defined resources for category transformation, and engages in the work of institutional trajectory making.

#### Excerpt 2.2 – building institutional trajectories

- 1 *Angelica*        *Sam what are you gonna score?*
- 2 *Sam*             *5. It has increased because Amy's contacted me rather than Arthur but obviously I'm*
- 3                    *not with Amy all the time so I don't know what she's like so...*
- 4 *(Sam's baby bounces back and forth on Gill's knee and chatters. Sam says shhhh.)*
- 5 *Angelica*        *Gill?*
- 6 *Gill*             *I haven't really seen Amy until today so I don't know*
- 7 *Angelica*        *Yeah but going off what you've heard today*
- 8 *Gill*             *She seems great today, last time we seen her she was crying wasn't she, she seems*
- 9                    *more together now*

Sam, Arthur's sister, draws on resources from the safety plan (L2-3) outlined at the start of the meeting to account for her score of 5, and engages in institutional trajectory work by indicating her score has increased in relation to last time. Sam hedges this account by noting she is not in close proximity to Amy and so doesn't have the full picture. Gill, Arthur's mum, also hedges her account by noting she hasn't seen Amy (L6) until today and so doesn't know how to score her. Drawing on proximity in the community does specific work in the context of the mapping of the categories in the safety plan discussed earlier. By outlining their lack of proximity to Amy, Sam and Gill are outlining their limited rights and responsibilities to

her, whilst also accomplishing their rights and responsibilities as parties to a core group to provide truthful, accurate information. The social worker explains that Gill should go on what she has heard today (inferring that she understands their proximity to Amy). Gill continues her account by drawing on the resources offered by the social worker, this time from the scaling question, to work up her account of scaling. In doing so she accomplishes a 'transformable' and through this, institutional trajectory building, noting Amy crying last time but seeming together now (L9), before going onto score.

We see then how the social worker engages in pedagogical work to show that she isn't concerned about the score being 'right'. In excerpt 2.1 we see that although the social worker takes time to engage in corrective work with Barb about her score in relation to her account, this isn't a sticking point for her. In excerpt 2.2, we see that the social worker does not require the scores to be based on full knowledge gleaned by proximity to Amy outside of the meeting, but on the evidence presented today. If the accounts provided by parties to the core group draw on the range of possible resources set out by the social worker to transform the category of 'victim of domestic abuse', and if they do so through the 'then and now' work of institutional trajectory building, then the social worker can move the talk on. Through these subtle pedagogical practices, the social worker repeatedly engages in work to shape what is and what is not an appropriate response from parties to a core group, which in turn supports her sustained focus on mapping moral change over time within the acceptable bounds of her professional vision. We see that the scaling itself shows what members do when trying to scale 0-10 rather than the number representing something specific about risk. We also see how it is not the number itself that is important for the social worker but that the accounts for the number chosen 1. Draw on the resources outlined as appropriate by the social worker and 2. Engage in the work of institutional trajectory making. Through this we see the social worker's professional vision in play, that is, what forms an acceptable account through the accomplishment of a 'transformable' in the context of the work project of mapping change over time.

### **Accomplishing and challenging 'transformables' through scaling**

The particular social work methods in the following excerpt, as with the rest of the meeting, are achieved in and through setting out category-bound resources for appropriate responses to charting parental change. The members' methods are also similar to those already discussed – parties to the core group draw on the resources set out by the social worker to accomplish the possible moral object of a 'transformable' through the key category and

predicate of the danger statement (perpetrator of domestic abuse – someone who hits women), the category-bound possible ‘transformable’ in the safety goal (safe partner – someone who doesn’t hit women), and the appropriate activities to achieve this. Here though, during the scaling of Arthur’s safety goal, the sequentiality of the talk, scaling and the accomplishment of moral objects looks different. The social worker scales first, something she did not do for the other safety goals, which works to calibrate the scores of other parties to the core group, who account for their scores by drawing on prescribed appropriate activities for change. Through the following excerpts, we see how these resources can also be used to challenge the logic underpinning the possible ‘transformables’ accomplished by the group.

### Excerpt 3 The methodical production of possible ‘transformables’

- 1    *Angelica*        *So on a scale of 0 to 10 with 10 being the best it could be and professionals are being*  
2                      *confident that Arthur’s risk of assaulting Amy is at its lowest and 0 being the worst it*  
3                      *could be Arthur’s risk of assaulting Amy is at its highest, what would you score him*  
4                      *today? I’m going to score first if that’s alright, I’m gonna score um... a 4, because*  
5                      *you still haven’t completed BBR which is a massive one for us, but obviously its good*  
6                      *your mental health is stable and its good you say your drug use is coming down,*  
7                      *which decreases the risk for me which is good, but obviously you know yourself, we*  
8                      *know you can have periods of stability where you can take your medication and things*  
9                      *are fine it just when you get stressed and when things happen that things go*  
10                     *downhill so that’s what we have to try to help you with and get you support going*  
11                     *forward, yeah?*  
12    *[Arthur nods]*  
13    *Angelica*        *Did you go to the CMHT*  
14    *Arthur*          *I haven’t gone to it, I forgot*  
15    *Angelica*        *Arth! Right okay, when was that*  
16    *Amy*             *Friday*  
17    *Arthur*          *When?*  
18    *Amy*             *It was on Friday just gone, 24th*  
19    *Angelica*        *So what do you need to do about that?*  
20    *Arthur*          *I’ll have to phone them up, I forgot all about it.*  
21    *Angelica*        *Okay, have I just reminded you (exhales) you might have to go back through your*  
22                      *GP. Okay, so I’m scoring a 4 today alright*

The social worker takes the floor as she states, “I’m going to score first if that’s alright, I’m gonna score um”. By vocalising this, she indicates that it isn’t the norm, which infers that she will do something with this first turn. The social worker scores 4 and in doing so calibrates the scores of the rest of the parties to the core group. This becomes evident the excerpts that follow. The social worker also offers the resource of ‘appointments’ alongside others in her account for her score and in doing so provides resources for objectification, that is, the resources to be picked up and used as objects through which to account for scaling, thus boundarying the appropriate resources for discussion that follow.

As in previous excerpts, through the scaling of the safety goal, the social worker sets up the categories, category bound activities, and resources through which to account for change within institutional trajectories. Again, we have the spoiled identity category ‘perpetrator of domestic abuse’, its transformed category, and the resources through which to account for it. If you look back to the danger statement and safety goal (excerpt 1), you will see that transforming this spoiled identity category rests on the predicates of speaking to professionals if Arthur feels his mental health deteriorating, walking away if he feels himself getting angry with Amy, and being open about the status of his relationship with Amy with the social worker. It is also linked to two other spoiled identity categories, ‘person with poor mental health’ and ‘person who misuses substances’. The social worker explicitly ties her scoring of the risk of domestic abuse to these two nested categories. The combination of domestic abuse, substance misuse and poor mental health has been problematically dubbed the ‘toxic trio’ in social work and is argued to have stigmatising consequences for parents. The social worker manages this potential trouble by drawing on Arthur’s own account of his experiences of this link as she provides an account of her score (L8-11).

Unpicking the way in which each category is positioned as transformable through demonstrable engagement in specific activities allows us to see how ‘transformables’ work to generate category bound responsibilities and projections of institutional trajectories. Each spoiled identity category is linked to specific service provision. Transforming the category of ‘perpetrator of domestic abuse’ is tied to the attending appointments with probation and the Building Better Relationships Programme<sup>17</sup>. Transforming the nested category of ‘person

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<sup>17</sup> The Building Better Relationships Programme is a widely used intervention aimed at changing the attitudes and behaviours of men which have resulted in their conviction for intimate partner violence.



with poor mental health' is tied to attending appointments with the Community Mental Health Team, and transforming the category of 'person who misuses substances' is tied to attending relapse prevention appointments. Clearly, this work specifies Arthur's responsibility for category change, but it also makes the work of professionals responsible for delivering these services accountable, thus tying together parental and professional identity (Leigh and Wilson, 2020; Gibson, 2020). It is possible to see the specific activities of social work in charting parental change here, as the activity a parent is encouraged to engage in to transform spoiled identities is tied to institutionally bound support services, and the activity a social worker engages in to account for change is producing possible 'transformables' through which measurable evidence acts as a proxy for a reduction of 'risk'. It is within this context that the social worker's frustration (L15, L21] at Arthur missing his CMHT appointment can be heard. If attending CMHT appointments improves Arthur's mental health, which in turn reduces the likelihood of domestic violence, and supports his transformation from a spoiled identity category to an absolved identity category, then missing his appointments infers the opposite projection. As the meeting continues, parties to the core group pick up and run with the resource of 'appointments' to account for their score.

#### The logics of 'transformables' through scaling

The social worker's first turn in the excerpt above provides the resources for objectivation (Lieberman) that parties to the core group pick up in their accounts of scaling that follow. The following excerpts demonstrate this work in relation to the resource 'appointments', used to accomplish the omni-relevant possible moral object organising this section of the talk – the institutional requirement to transform Arthur's identity from perpetrator of domestic abuse to an absolved category. The requirement to recognise this as moral becomes relevant when the social worker calls on members of the core group to scale.

#### Excerpt 4.1

- |   |                 |  |
|---|-----------------|--|
| 1 | <i>Angelica</i> | <i>I think that when we met last time we all scored really low because obviously Arthur</i>    |
| 2 |                 | <i>wasn't at the meeting, we knew your mental health was really bad, we knew you</i>           |
| 3 |                 | <i>weren't in a good place, so I think most of us scored 0s and 1s that last time, a month</i> |
| 4 |                 | <i>ago we met.</i>   |
| 5 | <i>Amy</i>      | <i>You know he's gotta go to appointments and he's gotta do it for himself and not have</i>    |
| 6 |                 | <i>other people remind him.</i>  |

#### Excerpt 4.2

- 1 Barb *I'm scoring him a 4 'cause he does need to keep up with his appointments.*

#### Excerpt 4.3

- 1 Gill *I'd go with a 5 as well, though you're letting us down when we hear miss missed*  
2 *appointments*  
3 Arthur *I forgot all about it*  
4 Gill *but I'll stick with a 5 he has been doing good other than that*

In each excerpt it is the number chosen in scaling and accompanying account that recognises the possible transformable as moral. Excerpt 4.1 follows Amy scoring Arthur a '5' and the first turn shows the social worker's response in which she accomplishes a positive institutional trajectory of change, charting where Arthur was previously and where Arthur is now. Through this turn the social worker calibrates the scoring to follow. Each score (two '5's and a '4') is higher than what was scored previously which in relation to the social worker's calibration indicates improvement. The interesting element here is that each higher score is followed by an account that draws on 'appointments' as a resource through which further transformation can be achieved, demonstrating the successful pedagogical practices of the social worker described above. Through these scaling accounts we see how the logic of attending appointments becomes moral. For example, when Gill notes missing appointments lets us (the family) down (E4.3 L1); and through the category bound relation of appointments to transforming the spoiled identity category of 'perpetrator of domestic abuse'. As the meeting continues, the professionals also draw on this resource to account for their score. In these excerpts, we see that being good institutional members of a core group involves taking up possible moral objects as moral and reproducing the institutional logic at play through making use of the objectivated resources (appointments) made available by the social worker. Specifically, it requires tying a possible 'transformable' (perpetrator – safe partner) in the danger statement, safety goals and Arthur's update, to the institutionally sanctioned activities through which that transformation is to be achieved. Through this process, the logic that attending CMHT appointments will reduce the risk of domestic abuse is reproduced. In the excerpt that follows we see how the same resources used to produce and accomplish transformables can also be used to call into question their logic.

#### Excerpt 4.4 Challenging 'Transformables' through scaling

- 1 Angelica *Okay that's good (writes 5 on chart), what you gonna score yourself Arth?*  
2 Arthur *10!*  
3 *(Everyone laughs)*  
4 Arthur *I'm not gonna hit her am I*  
5 Gill *(laughing) what?*  
6 Arthur *I'm not gonna hit her am I*  
7 Angelica *Right so what are you, you want to score yourself a 10? So do you think you*  
8 *are the best you can be?*  
9 Arthur *No I don't think I'm the best I can be*  
10 Angelica *okay so that's what a 10 is*  
11 Arthur *but I'm back working and stuff. Okay a 9 then.*  
12 Angelica *okay so why a 9? Cause you're back working?*  
13 Arthur *I wanna get back working but I'm not gonna hit her or anything am I?*  
14 Angelica *well we all hope not!*  
15 *[quiet laughter from everyone except the midwife]*  
16 Angelica *ok, so you're feeling positive so you'll score a 9?*  
17 Arthur *Yeah*  
18 Angelica *(Writes 9 down) Probation?*

Until this turn, the non-professional members of the group have scored '4's and '5's. Amy, Amy's friend and Arthur's family scored him '5'. Barb, Amy's mum, scored him '4'. Referring back to Excerpt 4.1, we see how the social worker's score of '4' is accomplished as a calibration of the scores that follow. When Arthur scores himself a '10!', it is accomplished as out of the ordinary and unreasonable in the laughter that follows (L3). In scoring himself '10' Arthur isn't playing by the rules of calibration established by members so far and set against the '4', makes plain the common sense reasoning rather than formal rule following members were engaged in. Arthur accomplishes the key category and predicate of the danger statement ('perpetrator of domestic abuse' – 'someone who hits women') and the category-bound possible 'transformable' in the safety goal ('safe partner' – 'someone who doesn't hit women because they attend appointments') as moral in his scaling account by saying three times 'I'm not gonna hit her am I'. In doing so, he not only questions the category 'perpetrator of domestic abuse' set up by the social worker in the danger statement, safety goal and scaling question but also the resources ('attending appointments')

through which this category might be transformed. Arthur demonstrates his disagreement with the categories and resources through which he is expected to work up and work on his parental self.

The social worker responds by questioning Arthur's score (L7, L10) twice, describing to him that '10' means he is the best he can be (according to the activities and nested categories set out in the danger statement, safety plan and scaling question). Arthur agrees he is not the best he can be, reducing his score to '9' but maintaining a different logic to that of the social worker and other parties to the core group. Arthur maintains a high score through the logic that a predicate of transforming the category of 'perpetrator of domestic abuse' is 'not hitting women'. The social worker does not labour the point and writes Arthur's '9' on the board. Although as we saw the first analysis chapter, Arthur admits and expresses remorse at perpetrating domestic abuse in past relationships, he has maintained that he has not hit Amy and is not in a relationship with her. For Arthur then, we see that the entire foundation of the concern in the danger statement that he will hit Amy is questionable.

For the social worker, perpetrating domestic abuse in the past, receiving a prison sentence for it and harming a child in the crossfire, brings with it the likelihood of it happening again, a likelihood she is professionally tasked to manage. This is a potentially troublesome moment – Arthur has missed his CMHT appointment and is now denying the possibility he could hit Amy. Yet, the social worker does not press the issue. Instead, she reframes his high score as reflecting his 'positive' state of mind (L16). Seen alongside the other interactions in the case, arguably there are two reasons for this. Firstly, that Arthur has consistently accepted historic domestic abuse, and the need to address his mental health and substance use. Secondly, the social worker previously inferred that Arthur is unlikely to make the necessary changes in time for the birth of the baby who will likely be cared for by Amy, and so his response matters less. Further, the 'transformable' worked up by the core group is already underway and Arthur is deemed to be on the way to change.

## **Conclusion accomplishing 'transformables' - mapping rights and responsibilities and projecting institutional futures**

Professional vision in a child protection core group, like in assessment, involves highlighting spoiled parental identities through the accomplishment of possible moral objects. Whilst the sequentiality of this process works differently on each occasion, the set of methods appear generalisable as a members' practice. Both involve similar situated methods for the objectivation of parental selves and the negotiation of the appropriate categories and resources to project change. To make this clear, I briefly re-iterate the varied methods at play, and I consider how through the core group the social worker engages in distinct pedagogical practices.

As in the assessment sessions, professional vision in the core group was observable as the social worker highlighted spoiled identities as possible work objects accomplished in and through the production of 'moral objects', resources central to the project of charting parental self-transformation. The highlighting involved in the production of 'moral objects' can be seen as the demonstration of professional knowledge in action, that is, of the type of work object required in social work, but also as pedagogical activity through which the social worker provides the resources to parents, and in the core group to family members and professionals, necessary to engage in this moral work. Through providing resources for objectivation, including moral objects, mapping, and distal spatial talk, the social worker engaged in pedagogical activity about how to do interactions in situ and beyond, and about how parents can transform from risky to less risky identities.

Objectivation describes how certain resources, including the category of deviant parent and the resources with which to address it, are placed on the table through the process of producing moral objects, and taken up by members to achieve understanding in objectivating a transformable parental self. Whilst there are multiple, layered objectivations in this core group, I have focused on those that form the methodical, in situ accomplishment of a deviant parent in the process of transformation. Unpicking the way in which each deviant category is positioned as 'transformable' through demonstrable engagement in specific activities allows us to see how 'transformables' work to generate category bound responsibilities and project institutional trajectories. Each spoiled identity category is linked to specific service

provision or activity. The accomplishment of 'transformables' is of interest because it is the way in which members understand the possibility and expectation of parental transformation to an absolved identity, and their accountability for their part in this in situ, in the community, and in future.

Of course, this is not a simple process of sharing knowledge and responsibility but one that is prescribed by the social worker throughout. The layered pedagogical practices seen in the excerpts above are worth re-iterating, as they provided the acceptable resources through which parties to the core group could accomplish the specified moral objects in various ways, whilst doing 'good' child protection for these purposes. The core group begins with the social worker reading a previously agreed danger statement and safety goal that glosses the category work, rights, and responsibilities of the case and of the meeting and sets these out as possible resources to be used by parties to the core group. Following this, the social worker moves on to scaling the danger statement and safety goal, demonstrating that the numbers are only relevant in achieving congruence of opinion between group members, and as an object to aid discussion. Finally, we see potential trouble as Arthur challenges the possible resources available to account for scaling and transformation, and how this is managed by the social worker by working him up as feeling 'positive'. The accomplishment of moral objects in these excerpts occurs alongside the constant shaping of acceptable views and behaviours, both of the parents and of the parties to the core group, and crucially, involves the social worker continually drawing others into the work problems to be solved.

The planning element of the core group and the number of participants involved layered categorial practices through which accountability could be achieved in situ, and in time and space beyond the meeting. In situ trajectory building occurred through the 'distal spatial talk' of mapping where rights and responsibilities were mapped onto domestic space. Mapping provided resources for the web of category relations in the interaction but also for the extension of accountability outside of the interaction through these relations. Crucially, this only worked through the production of transformable categories and associated work plans. It is in this context that mapping rights and responsibilities into community and domestic space was worked up as matter for which members could be held accountable in future. Both

mapping and transformables might then be seen as practical methods through which social workers' professional vision extends beyond the immediate scene, beyond the space and time of a given interaction. Together, the accomplishment of transformables and mapping are not just methods in the social work 'toolkit' but are a way of building an account that extends the purview of the social worker and matters of moral accountability beyond the situated interaction, beyond the institutional space and the vivid present, as surveillance in action. Of course, the social worker will rarely see with her own eyes the actions to be reported on in future but will once again rely on accounts as the means through which proxies for 'risk' are generated.

Moving with social workers as they worked with families over time and observing multiple interactions within the developing 'case', alongside the cultivation of 'ethnomethodological indifference' allowed me to move beyond a simplistic understanding of how identities, rights and responsibilities 'travel' through time and space. Whilst linearity is evident in the trajectory building of social work logic in action, the relation between scenes of practice does not play out according to this logic. Categories-in-use are worked up anew for each occasion and for example, whilst the categories 'father' and 'perpetrator of domestic abuse' were relevant to the two interactions with Arthur described in these chapters, their situated meaning and consequences worked differently in through their use in an assessment and a core group. For example, in assessment, these categories were worked up tentatively as the social worker focused on what Arthur did with each 'moral object', drawing him into her work project of creating a workable parental self, whilst attending to his additionally relevant identity as a victim who needs to access support in his own time. In the core group, these categories were introduced formally as facts of the case, with additional predicates such as causing emotional and physical harm to the baby, and clear expectations about Arthur's need to engage with support now. It follows that whilst the 'moral objects' I describe are generalisable methods through which trajectory building is accomplished in child protection, they are worked up for highly situated purposes, requiring different work, with different possible consequences, depending on the context in which they are accomplished.

I stay with the phenomenon of charting parental change in the chapter that follows, where I consider the resources used by a child protection social worker and fellow professionals in working up a 'fixed' identity and projecting a lack of change. In doing

so I continue to explore the idea of whether and how identities 'travel' as I analyse the role of accounts of historical evidence in shaping the outcome of each interaction in a high stakes court case.



## Chapter Seven

### Fixing change through finding facts in the court process

Social workers are not only in the business of promoting parental change, they are also in the business of working out when change is not possible. I have argued that the accomplishment of 'moral objects' and the tied method of 'mapping' is essential to this endeavour, as it opens interactional and institutional possibilities through which change can be accomplished. A focus on the minute detail of interactions made this argument possible. As these interactions suggest, each scene of talk accomplishes the institutional trajectory building central to a more global formulation of the 'case'. It is to the change methods across a series of linked interactions over the course of a case to which I now turn. To be clear, the term 'change methods' refers both to how positive change is accomplished, as well how deviant identities are 'fixed'. Attending to 'change methods' in either a positive or negative formulation is essential as they provide for the possibility of institutionally prescribed courses of action. In this chapter I consider the 'change methods' at work as 'unchangeable' parent identities are accomplished through establishing the 'facts' of the case that enable the enactment of the most severe form of institutional intervention – the removal of a child from their parent's care.

This chapter considers how the 'facts' of the case are accomplished, how they relate to parent identity, to social worker identity, and how through this process possibilities for change are delimited. Whilst the 'mapping' practices and 'moral objects' described in the previous chapters are observable in the data, I primarily focus on the accomplishment of 'formal facts' through objectivation practices, and their relation to parental and professional accountability. I consider the role of historical institutional evidence, such as a court finding, a chronology, a previous assessment, and a 'medical', as providing evidential resources through which professionals accomplish 'fixed' deviant identities (Sheehan, 2021). Describing the processes of establishing 'formal facts' demonstrates how even when reified as fixed within a case, formal facts are continually re-made for specific interactional and institutional purposes. Social work cases are socially accomplished in specific ways for good organisational purposes, in the case of this chapter, to enable the social worker and legal

professionals to make timely evidence-based decisions in a manner acceptable to the court.

This chapter is more ethnographic in writing style than those that precede it with the aim of showing the key practices through which unchangeable identities are 'fixed' over the course of a case. This necessitates some loss of detail, instead showing the twists and turns taken within a case over time as professionals establish and re-establish the 'facts' of the case, and showing the consequentiality of the situated work projects at play across different settings. The chapter follows the case of one family and is split into two parts. Part one charts child protection change methods through interactions in the car, in the office, and at home. Part two describes the social organisation of change practices in and through occasioned use of the court. Together, these partial analyses provide a detailed description of court oriented and court-based social work that has to date been missing from child protection research.

### The data

This chapter follows the story of a baby, 'Parker', as his parents interact with the social worker and allied professionals through the course of public law outline and care proceedings. This is a public law outline (PLO) case in which the local authority made an urgent application to the court to seek alternative care arrangements for Parker and where pre-proceedings<sup>18</sup> assessments could not be completed due to the 'concealment' of the pregnancy. PLO suggests a 'higher risk' case than the child protection cases described in earlier chapters and is associated in the literature with a reduction in partnership working and an increase in the 'control' elements of practice (Broadhurst et al., 2012). In this case, the following categories, amongst others, are in use: 'concealed pregnancy', 'non accidental injury', 'parent', 'mother', 'father', and 'newly qualified social worker'. I primarily focus on the accomplishment of the 'formal facts' of 'concealed pregnancy' and 'non accidental injury' and their relation to parental and

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<sup>18</sup> The 'pre-proceedings process' requires that a local authority notify and discuss their concerns with a family before bringing a child protection case to court. This process begins with a decision made in a local authority legal meeting that the risks to a child justify court proceedings. Parents are notified of the decision and the local authority's concerns via a 'letter before proceedings', which qualified parents for free legal advice. This is followed by a 'pre-proceedings meeting' in which the local authority and the parents have legal representation as they discuss plans to avoid care proceedings. 'Pre-proceedings' is a process invoked only when less severe forms of social work intervention, such as child protection processes have been deemed unsuitable. On this occasion, concerns for the immediate safety of Parker resulted in the local authority seeking an Interim Care Order for Parker and beginning care proceedings, as becomes relevant in the data.

professional accountability. In doing so, I consider the change methods of specific spaces of practice by describing how 'formal facts' are continually re-made for specific interactional and institutional purposes.

## **Part one – accomplishing formal facts**

'Facting' describes the process of establishing and using formal facts in interaction, and indicates the live, accomplished nature of facts (Sheehan, 2021). 'Facting' refers to the broad objectivation practices through which social workers and allied professionals highlight the facts of the case as a work problem to be solved. The key facts of the case in the following analysis are 'concealed pregnancy' and a finding of fact for a 'non-accidental injury'. Each of these facts is worked up anew in situated practice interactions as a work problem to be solved. Each is worked up as holding possible inferences for the type of parent one is with attendant possible institutional responses. 'Facting' is a layered process, built in and through a series of objectivation practices that specify the possible resources upon which a fact rests, can be challenged or remade. I describe how key facts are objectivated as resources to work up the 'type of case' with inferences about professional accountability, parental accountability and institutional possibilities, each of which boundary parental change.

### **Travelling to Parker's first LAC review – facts, professional accountability, and institutional consequentiality**

*I travel with Stella, Parker's social worker, in her car on the way to Parker's first Looked After Children's (LAC) Review, a regular statutory meeting in which family members (including children) and relevant professionals meet to discuss the day-to-day care of the child and their care plan. Stella asks me about my experience as a social worker and we briefly discuss our professional backgrounds. Stella tells me she is a newly qualified social worker just entering her second year in practice and that she feels overwhelmed with court work. Keen to find out about Parker's family, I ask who we are going to see today, she replies:*

*Now we've got baby Parker, born on [date], mum concealed the pregnancy, we were notified by the ambulance service 'cause it was early hours in the morning. I was already working with mother with her other child who's going through proceedings at the moment. I had suspicions but because I was still building my relationship with mum it felt awkward for me to challenge her and ask her that direct question, 'are you pregnant' on the first engagement session with*

*me. In my head I was building up trust with mum, she'd finally agreed to see me and have supervised contact and next time I thought, I'll ask that question [laughs]. But by the next time the baby had dropped. We had to seek immediate interim care order given the risks previously.*

*Parker was born and police took police protection powers to safeguard him because it was a concealed pregnancy so parents didn't give us a chance to assess them pre-birth so it was immediate action to safeguard. He was placed in foster placement. Parents understood why he was removed. This is the first LAC review today, just to get everyone together to see how Parker is doing, outstanding work needed... see where we're at.*

*I ask Stella what the risks were and she explains that Jacqui's older child was removed having been found with numerous unexplained injuries. Jacqui denied that she caused the injuries, instead implicating the father. However, the court made a 'finding of fact' that she caused the injuries. Jacqui is now seeking to appeal the finding which she continues to dispute. I ask Stella what her view is and she explains:*

*It's really difficult. My view is that she's gone through those assessments in the past, it's not only professionals' word against hers but there's been a paediatric assessment, a psychiatric assessment for mum and there's different professionals who've been involved and they all seem to believe that, because there'd been a period of time where mum did care for the child. So, it's a difficult one really to overrule professional opinion from the past. It could be that she wants to be given an opportunity to care for this new baby and that is what she is challenging but it could be that she has been telling the truth all along. But how can we know that?*

*I ask Stella what will happen next and she says:*

*We are in court on Monday for baby Parker and we were in this morning for his sibling. Mum had always supported current placement with paternal grandparents but she's withdrawing that now and she wants to be assessed to care again and relook at the findings from previously. She's saying she's made a lot of changes. My question in the assessment will be what sort of changes have you made given that you still deny the injuries that were caused in 2015? What do those changes look like and what support has she received?*

### Reflexively accomplished professional identity

It is worth focusing on the elements of the case that the social worker highlights, the specific issues she homes in on as accountable work problems in discussion with a fellow social worker, as it is in and through this talk that professional vision is observable. The social worker specifies two defining elements of Parker's case – a concealed pregnancy and a finding of fact that Jacqui injured her older child. These are objectivated as two factual objects, with moral and practical consequences for the account worked up of the mother and for the social worker's account of doing her job properly. The social worker proposes she will address these work problems via an assessment of parental change. Here, the social worker accomplishes these factual objects through 'troubles talk' with a fellow social worker in which the 'concealed pregnancy' has implications for her capacity to do her job. She also produces an account of each 'fact' that ties to the mother's deviant identity and the social worker's professional intentions. She does this by objectivating each fact and through making use of a shared professional understanding of this 'type' of case.

Objectivation of the fact of concealment can be seen as Stella produces an *account*: 'mum concealed the pregnancy', a *confirmation* via an account of related police actions: 'police took police protection powers', *objectivated* as Stella picks it up as a resource to account for her work: 'because it was a concealed pregnancy, so parents didn't give us a chance to assess them pre-birth' (Lieberman, 2013). Through this the social worker makes clear this is unquestionably a case of 'concealed pregnancy'. This category continues to be highlighted in discussions about and with the family that follow where concealed pregnancy becomes a common sense resource for organising the case. Another fact worked up in a similar way initially seems to fall short of objectivation as the social worker topicalises her inability to 'know for sure' what happened to cause the child the injuries tied to the 'finding of fact', thus recognising the socially constructed nature of such findings. Still, Stella produces an *account* of the injuries sustained by Jacqui's child whilst in her care, numerous *confirmations* of that account drawing on evidential resources (of the court finding, past professional assessment, and proximity to the child), and *objectivates* the finding as a resource denoting risk tied to past institutional actions: 'we had to seek immediate interim care order given the risks previously', and the future focus of her work: 'my question in the assessment will be what sort of changes have you made given that you still deny the injuries'. Both the 'concealed pregnancy' and the 'finding of fact' are used as evidential

resources tied to appropriate institutional actions and are a key means through which the case is organised.

The categories in use here enable a sense-able reading of this talk. The category 'social worker' is tied to the duplicatively organised category 'client-risky parent' where each is worked up as having accountable responsibilities to the other. It is through these categories that the social worker produces an account of the mother's deviant actions and inactions and her own professional actions and inactions, as I describe below. Also operating here is the shared professional category of 'social workers' which enables Stella to produce an account in using language of the trade with the knowledge that she will be understood.

#### Troubles talk between social workers

The objectivated facts operated in tandem with other salient identity categories and their associated activities. Stella describes herself as a 'Newly Qualified Social Worker' (NQSW), a category which a fellow social worker knows comes with the expectation of a protected case load and support and guidance through court cases. This category 'NQSW' legitimates Stella feeling overwhelmed with court work. It is in this context of telling her troubles that Stella orients to the 'concealment' of the pregnancy as problematic for her professional identity, carefully explaining why she did not 'challenge' Jacqui and that the concealment prevented pre-birth assessment. The notion of failing to 'challenge' families was highlighted by the Review into the death of 17-month Peter Connelly who died from severe abuse, with the news coverage that followed associating it with 'bad' social work practice (Jones, 2009). Stella draws on the social work language of Strength's Based Practice (building my relationship, building up trust) to justify her decision not to verbalise her suspicions to Jacqui. Strength's Based Practice brings with it the association of a practitioner seeking to balance their professional authority with collaboration with the family (Oliver and Charles, 2016) and can be heard as Stella doing 'good' social work. Taken together, Stella's descriptions of her professional experience, confidence, and values, do important identity work in this interaction. This moral accounting for a potential failing must be seen in the context of the practical implications of 'concealment' for Stella.

Stella's account of her motivated work with Parker's parents previously and her plans for the future situate her account of key work problems in an extended temporality, where past decisions and future plans are worked up in situ as evidence of the intention of a competent social worker. Accounts of intention may be seen as doing moral work (Watson, 1978). In using the word "building", Stella makes clear she believed she would be able to address her suspicions about the pregnancy in her ongoing work with Jacqui, that she had more time. Stella laughs when she explains "the baby had dropped" which can be heard in the context of 'troubles talk' (Jefferson, 1988) where a person may laugh when telling their troubles, but the other party recognises that this is a serious comment. I understood that Stella's account of not asking about the pregnancy set against the immediacy with which she describes seeking an interim care order meant that resulted in a stressful professional situation. Stella topicalises that she was unable to engage in the pre-proceeding's element of the Public Law Outline process with the family, which she oriented to as problematic, and will now have to complete her assessment and support work with the family alongside the court process. This account highlights the practical implications of 'concealment' for Stella, linking it with a temporal emergency, which in turn serves as a legitimate reason not to have completed pre-proceedings work that would be accepted by the court. It also places import on her plans to address key work problems through an assessment of parental change which will be produced as a document intended for legal evidential purposes. The social worker sets up the solution of assessing parental change as a practical solution to deciding whether Jacqui can safely parent given the problem of the court finding that Jacqui injured her older child and her denial of it, alongside the implications of lack of trustworthiness in the concealment of the pregnancy. She does so as oriented to the evidence she is required to produce for the future court hearing.

### Concealment and balancing evidence in social work

Objectivating 'concealment' and the 'finding of fact' has serious consequences for the type of mother Jacqui is taken to be. The social worker relates the fact of concealment with certain questionable actions taken by Jacqui. These include Jacqui not informing social services of the pregnancy, despite already working with Stella in relation to the risks she posed to her older children. This is moral work, in which a mother, who a court deemed responsible for injuring her child, had the opportunity to inform a social worker that she was pregnant again, but instead chose to conceal it, leaving it to the

ambulance service to inform the Local Authority. It is notable that it is Jacqui who is deemed to have concealed the pregnancy, not Parker's father, highlighting the social worker's concern with maternal responsibility. It is possible to draw links between the category of the 'responsible' pregnant woman and the 'good mother' who puts the needs of her foetus and child first (Lupton, 2013). This moral account of 'concealment', linked to maternal responsibility, is bound up with Stella's assessment of Jacqui's past behaviour and the professional assessments underpinning the 'finding of fact'.

Stella topicalises uncertainty as talks about the 'finding of fact' that Jacqui caused non accidental injuries to her older child. She expresses uncertainty as to whether Jacqui's challenge is motivated by maternal responsibility and a wish to care for Parker, or by a quest for justice as her consistent denials that she caused the injuries were truthful. This uncertainty is set against Stella's account of the consistent judgements made by a long list of allied professionals, who all believed Jacqui caused the injuries. Stella differentiates between the "word" of professionals and their "assessments", placing the later in higher esteem. Stella's evaluation of the uncertainty underpinning Jacqui's motivations alongside the certainty of past professional assessments links to the weight she places on each source of information. This becomes evident as Stella notes the intractability of past professional judgement. The 'finding of fact' is worked up as credible, holding the authority of a previously mandated course of action, which is used as a resource by the social worker to discursively organise Jacqui and create continuity between past and present (de Montigny, 1995). Knowledge from the past is translated from its original site of production via an in-situ account that creates something more solid and is used as a resource to weigh up and understand the possible intentions and motivations of Jacqui. This in turn has implications for Stella's assessment of Jacqui, who is painted as a deviant parent who caused injuries to her child.

A key device organising the social worker's account of Jacqui's culpability in injuring her older child is the issue of 'proximity'. For the social worker, that Jacqui had care of the child when he sustained his injuries places her in a 'pool' of possible perpetrators, undercutting her denials. Alongside the court's 'finding', Jacqui's denial is worked up as not credible. Note that the family court makes a 'finding of fact' that one parent injured a child on the 'balance of probabilities' rather than the higher standard of proof (beyond reasonable doubt) required in criminal proceedings. In the



earlier analysis chapters we saw how proximity is used as a resource for organising child protection plans and as well as for working up risky parent identities. The same logic is at play here, this time drawn in via accounts of historic institutional documents.

#### Facting, professional accountability and delimiting parental change

It is possible to see the central role of identity categories and objectivation practices in the working up 'facts' in telling the case to another social worker. The concealment in question is worked up as having moral and practical implications for the social worker and the mother. Through a process of objectivation, it is treated for practical purposes as fact, a thing that unquestionably happened. In talking through the 'finding of fact', the social worker assesses the relative weight to give competing accounts. She privileges the certainty of the medical knowledge and the mother's proximity to the child bound up in the production of the existing 'finding of fact' over the uncertainty of the mother's account. The moral work that Stella does in accounting for her professional judgement and the uncertainty she works up about the mother's motivations for challenging the findings must be seen in the context of this interaction being reflexively organised as being between two social workers and in the private space of the car. If Stella had oriented to me as an 'outsider', had the family been present, or had the interaction taken place in view of fellow professionals, it is unlikely that she would have engaged in such accounting or left room for uncertainty as accounting for her professional competence, an aspect of which is knowing with some certainty, would be relevant. As noted in Chapter Four, talk between social workers in the 'private' setting of the car affords the possibility of uncertainty talk. Even so, Stella's topicalization of uncertainty did not prevent her from drawing on each fact as an evidential resource through which to tell the case and outline future work plans.

Facting here employs the existing 'finding of fact' as a resource to work up the new fact of 'concealment'. 'Concealment' is inextricably tied to the categorisation of Jacqui as a deviant parent, already working with a social worker following the court making a 'finding of fact' that she caused 'non-accidental injuries' to her older children. There could be no discussion of 'concealment' without these moral and institutional categories tied to Jacqui's behaviours and intentions. 'Good mothers' do not need to 'conceal' pregnancies, but deviant mothers need to account for how they have changed. Failing to do so has serious consequences. Related inferences about Jacqui's

behaviour include 'lies to social worker' and 'intentionally harms children'. The proposed solution to this type of case is an assessment of maternal change that hinges on Jacqui's denial of the finding of fact and her engagement with the support she has received. Crucially, this solution is tied to the limited institutional possibilities available to the social worker due to having to assess the family under PLO and produce evidence for the court. Here then, the social worker can only make the case for Parker to return to his parents care if she can transform the fixed category of deviant mother (lies, harms child) within tight PLO timescales, using evidential resources amenable to the court. Jacqui's denial of the finding of fact further limits the routes through which this can be achieved. As the case progresses, it is possible to see how the constraints of parental denial, the expectations of PLO, and the case the social worker makes delimits the interactional and institutional possibilities for parental change.

### **Attending Parker's LAC review – facts, defining the case, and shared focus**

*As we arrive at the venue where the LAC reviews take place, I follow Stella and the Independent Review Officer (IRO) into a room and Stella provides an update about the case, noting that Jacqui is seeking to challenge the 'finding of fact' that she injured her older child. When the IRO is satisfied that she has a handle on recent developments, she shows us into the meeting room. Jacqui and Bob are running slightly late as they have just come from a supervised contact with Parker. The IRO says she's pleased Jacqui and Bob are both here as it is important that they understand how decisions are being made and the things that are being spoken about so they can give their view too. She continues:*

*So, I'll just give you a little bit of information, my understanding is that it was a concealed pregnancy so Parker was born quite quickly.*

*Jacqui and Bob shake their heads in disagreement and the IRO names this:*

*Not a concealed pregnancy? What, what was it then 'cause you tell me what happened and then then I'll hear from Stella then what we've been told.*

*Jacqui explains that they didn't know she was pregnant, and Bob agrees, noting that Jacqui still had her period and that none of his family noticed that she was pregnant either. The IRO asks:*

*Okay so when was the first time you were aware that you were pregnant?*

*Jacqui and Bob explain that they found out that Jacqui was pregnant three weeks before Parker was born. The IRO asks if they told anybody at that time and Jacqui explains that she did not because she panicked. The IRO responds with her assessment:*

*Right okay, so I think that's why it is thought that it was concealed. So, I think because you found out three weeks before and I understand your anxieties around it because of what happened before, because you didn't tell anybody then that's why its classed as concealed okay?*

*Stella says she agrees, and Jacqui nods.*

#### Collaborative facting between professionals and parents

The IRO highlights fact of 'concealed pregnancy' as she sets out the starting point for the meeting and the discussions that follow. In doing so she sets up the concealed pregnancy as the reason for social work involvement, with attendant possible associations of a deviant mother and father lying to the social worker to hide the pregnancy. She orients the group's perception to the type of case that acts as the shared focus of the talk that follows, the work problem to be solved. The mother and father orient to 'concealed pregnancy' as a problematic category requiring immediate work, treating it as an incorrect fact and later, offering a mitigation that the pregnancy was concealed because Jacqui 'panicked'. Jacqui and Bob appear aware of the specialist term 'concealed pregnancy' and respond in a manner suggesting they understand the consequentiality of the term for the type of parent they are categorised as, for the purposes of the interaction and more generally.

Responding to this interactional trouble, the IRO adopts a safer interactional strategy. She seeks the parents' opinion before producing her own assessment which takes their opinion into account. This is akin to what Maynard (1989: 91) terms a 'Perspective Display Sequence' but it is also a strategy that allows Jacqui and Bob to be heard in the meeting. The IRO proceeds with delicacy and caution using neutral language

(‘what was it then?’) as she asks Jacqui and Bob to account for their view of ‘concealment’, following up with a statement that she already holds knowledge of what happened passed onto her by the social worker. The parents respond with a denial of any knowledge of the pregnancy, providing grounds for the irrelevance of and resistance to the category. These include drawing on the mother’s body as an evidential resource (still had her period) and family members reported observations. The IRO seeks clarification of when exactly Jacqui and Bob became aware of the pregnancy, making temporality a relevant resource in defining the activities associated with the category of ‘concealment’. In seeking detail about when the parents knew and whether they told anyone, the IRO makes explicit the moral consequences of knowing and not telling.

The IRO then gives her diagnosis that it is indeed a concealed pregnancy. In doing so she incorporates Jacqui and Bob’s account of ‘three weeks’, her understanding of their motivation for not telling, whilst also distancing herself from the diagnosis (‘that’s why it’s classed as concealed okay’). She offers an *account* and a *confirmation* of the fact of concealment, with the social worker and mother’s situated agreement, allowing all parties to move onto the rest of the meeting in which concealment is used as a taken for granted resource, or objectivated, as Parker’s care and his care plan are discussed. The IRO works to do facting by cautiously drawing on the accounts provided by parents whilst upholding the professional account in a manner that manages potential interactional trouble and allows her to achieve her professional aims in moving on with the meeting. This is achieved as the parents collaborate with the IRO’s incorporation of their perspective into her diagnosis, a strategy which serves to mitigate interactional trouble and parental shame. The group achieve intersubjective objectivity here as concealed pregnancy is defined as a matter of knowing and not telling for the purposes of the LAC review.

#### Facting for now, facting for future

Tracing the practices through which ‘concealment’ becomes a fact for the purposes of this interaction makes it possible to see that the members of the meeting are concerned primarily with the management of interactional trouble, which is turn associated with the moral categorisation of the parents, and the professional necessity to establish institutional categories on which to base interventions that follow. The occurrence of the ‘LAC Review’ makes explicit a relationship between the social worker, IRO and

'clients' that works as the context for the interaction. The 'clients' here are parents but not just any parents, they are deviant parents with a vulnerable child who the court ordered to be taken into care, and the IRO and the parents themselves orient to this identity as they speak. 'Concealment' is associated with timing (when you knew) and telling (did you tell). The parents respond as though they are aware this category has moral implications for this interaction and beyond in the context of an asymmetrical relationship between themselves and the social work professionals, and future considerations of their capacity to care. Jacqui, Bob, Stella and the IRO work to align their perspectives for practical, local purposes, and 'concealed pregnancy' becomes a factual object to which each person orients, even if the meaning remains unsettled. This brings into the focus how intersubjective objectivity is achieved for practical purposes, just now. In the first excerpt, the fact of concealment was worked up as a mitigation in professional accountability talk and as an impediment to building effective working relationship. Here, it is worked up as a matter of parental moral failing and accountability. As the case unfolds, this situated nature of the accomplishment of 'facts' remains an observable phenomenon.

### **Assessment at home – facts, parental identity, and change possibilities**

*Four weeks later, I attend a home visit with the social worker who tells me her plan is to assess the changes the parents have made since their last involvement with children's services. We spend 45 minutes with Jacqui and Bob who express their frustration at the lack of fairness of the system and the social worker's judgement about the concealed pregnancy.*

*Stella: As long as you are open and honest from this point forward, there is hope.*

*Dad: in my solicitors, you wrote we weren't open and honest but you hadn't even met me.*

*The social worker explains that this is her view because they concealed the pregnancy and Jacqui and Bob shake their heads in disagreement.*

*Mum: like I said, we were a bit suspicious*

*Stella: so you were suspicious?*

*Mum: the suspicion became a reality when Parker was born. We've talked about this. I was still having periods, like I did when I was pregnant with ...*

*Stella: that isn't convincing. I'm challenging you on this... if it happened before, why did you think it was different this time?*

*Mum: no! it was such a mild suspicion.*

*Dad: I think we have different ideas of suspicion*

*Stella: okay, so tell me about it*

*Mum: people said I'd put on weight and I thought I'd been bloating with periods... If you are saying we aren't being open and honest, then you should be specific and say its about this, not about everything.*

*Dad: I don't get how you could say we were concealing a pregnancy. Who does that? It's stupid.*

*Stella: okay, I think we've covered as much as we can on that today... I want to talk about protective factors, who is around to help you?*

### How facts boundary possibilities of change

The device of 'concealed pregnancy' does highly moral work here. It is topicalised by the social worker as implicating Jacqui and Bob as liars who aren't amenable to working with her (not open and honest). In asking the parents to be 'open and honest from this point forward' she ties this attribute to a hopeful outcome which here means a greater possibility of caring for their newborn baby. The contrary also holds, if they are not open and honest from this point forward, they have a less possibility of caring for their baby. Whilst honesty does not make a 'good enough' parent, it is an attribute considered by social workers to create the conditions for a meaningful relationship with a parent in which they can support parental change. 'Honesty' here in fact requires the parents to accept the social worker's formulation of the pregnancy as concealed. It is possible to see in this brief statement the ongoing work of trajectory development done by social workers, who continually consider what current statements and behaviours mean for work possibilities and future outcomes. Here then, a concealed pregnancy infers the parental moral failing of lying which in turn delimits likelihood the parents can build a trusting relationship with the social worker and regain care of their baby.

Here, 'open and honest' is offered in an account by the social worker, confirmed and objectivated in its use by the mum and dad. Whilst the evidential resources and applicability of this object are up for dispute, the attribution of deviance it infers is not. Each party takes up the resource of concealment thus objectivating it for use in discussion. Each party acknowledges the inference of lying as a tied attribution of concealment. Working up concealment looks quite different to the way it was used to achieve intersubjective objectivity via tacit agreement of concealment as a defining

aspect of the case in the LAC review. Here, the NQSW is visiting the home of parents with years of experience with social services. They have been to court more times than her where they have each experienced a child being removed from their care. Whilst they presented a limited challenge of concealment in the LAC review, they present a more sustained challenge here. In calling for specificity the mum topicalises how the negative character trait 'liar' tied to concealment permeates interactions with her and Bob. In doing so she problematises the social work logic of 'if they lied once, they are likely to lie again'. The dad takes a different tack, suggesting the foundations of the notion of concealment are nonsensical. Neither counter argument is acknowledged or taken up by the social worker. For the social worker, the issue of concealment, and the attribution of lying, is closed with no plausible counter arguments being offered and she moves on with her assessment. Here then, facting works to 'fix' or make fast a deviant parental identity.

Jacqui's problematization of the logic that one moral character judgement can run through a whole case in social work is worthy of further consideration. At the risk of engaging in formal analysis, it is worth bringing in a brief consideration of possible reasons for a concealed pregnancy<sup>19</sup> because the attribution of intention (lying) is clear in this instance, as opposed to other more institutionally tolerable intentions. These might include 'denial' of the pregnancy as previous experiences or mental health difficulties make the acceptance of the pregnancy too difficult, or concealment of the pregnancy due to a fear of social stigma or of their child being removed. Either of these options may have yielded a more forgiving response, via the attribution of vulnerability or fear, as opposed to moral failing. That the inference of 'lying' sticks presents a practical problem for the social worker now and as the case continues – how to work with parents who you know have lied to you? By challenging the parents, she offers them an opportunity to produce an alternative, less problematic account. Jacqui and Bob do not take this up either through displaying acceptance and remorse, and instead produce denials and challenge the social worker's logic. It is notable that at this point the social worker draws the discussion to a close.

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<sup>19</sup> The limited research done on 'concealed pregnancy' has primarily been undertaken by nursing researchers seeking to delineate typifications of concealment due to a concern that limited antenatal care can negatively impact upon maternal and infant health. A distinction is made between concealment and denial, as respectively, intentionally hiding a pregnancy, and denying that one is pregnant (see Murphy et al., 2016).

### Facting as 'fixing' parental change

A fact may be objectivated, that is produced via an *account*, *confirmed*, and used as a resource removed from its subjective beginnings, whilst its precise meaning and consequence is still up for negotiation. This is particularly true when there are unequal rights to defining the facts of a case, as in this instance where the social worker closed the topic of discussion. It is also possible to see how the facts of a case can be worked up to infer particular character traits which have implications for how the social worker envisages the case progressing (hope/no hope) and the kinds of interaction reflexively organised through this inference (working together/in dispute). Thus, it is through the subtle re-making of the facts of a case that parental identities and inferences about behaviours are continually worked up, for practical purposes. As the parents aren't accepting of the social workers formulation, the interactional possibilities through which to accomplish parental change are drastically limited.

### **Preparing for a Case Management Hearing: creating certainty - negotiating evidence in the solicitor's domain**

*A few weeks later, I accompany Stella to court for Parker's Case Management Hearing. The purpose of the CMH is to ensure all assessments, statements and reports are set to be completed in advance of a final decision about the child's care. We meet Stella's practice lead, who is a senior social worker supporting Stella with court work, and we wait for the local authority solicitor. We are in a small meeting room adjacent to the court. It is the norm before entering court for parties to proceedings to meet with their legal representatives so they can provide advice and take instructions. The local authority solicitor comes into the room and notes that this case is not about basic care but is about whether Jacqui poses a risk of causing any further injuries on the basis of what happened to her older child. He notes:*

*I know you shouldn't pre-judge but the background's horrific.*

*The solicitor says that Jacqui's statement about the concealed pregnancy is unclear:*

*I've asked their solicitors, I want further statements from them about what they say about whether they knew about the pregnancy. It's not quite clear in mother's response... cause her statement is poorly drafted. She doesn't accept that she knew three weeks before but then in another one of her responses she says something like she accepts she hasn't been open and honest during the pregnancy but will be open and honest moving forward, but it doesn't say open and*



*honest for three weeks. 'Cause she said she only knew for three weeks but it reads as though she knew for the whole pregnancy.*

*The solicitor for the Cafcass Guardian for Parker comes into the room to say they are ready to go into court now and then leaves to find another solicitor. The local authority solicitor continues, asking the social worker and the practice lead if they have seen any statements yet. They have not. The social worker explains that Jacqui remains 'fixated on the three weeks before giving birth' as the time that she found out. The solicitor responds, There is no way on this earth she only knew three weeks before, on baby number three. The practice lead agrees, explaining that even the paramedics said in their notes it is doubtful that the parents didn't know. The Guardian's solicitor comes in once again and asks the group if they are coming.*

#### Facting in the solicitor's domain

The solicitor holds the floor in this interaction as he prepares to go into court. He sets up what the case is 'about' as he enters the room as whether Jacqui is likely to cause physical harm to Parker, given she had been found to have done so to her older child in the earlier finding. The discussion of 'concealment' that follows happens within this context, that is, with Jacqui accounted for as a risky mother who physically harmed her child and may do so again. Through the talk that follows, the solicitor highlights the issue of concealment as relevant to this definition of the case and as a factor primarily speaking to Jacqui's honesty, to which all parties orient to.

The solicitor accomplishes his professional role as he passes on information about Jacqui's position on 'concealment', gleaned via her solicitor and via legal statements, establishing inconsistency. He does this by highlighting the discrepancy in the statement to bring the issue of concealed pregnancy as a cut and dried issue to the table. He is the only party in the interaction to have had sight of the statements and uses this knowledge alongside his critique of the professional competence of Jacqui's solicitor ("her statement is poorly drafted") to set out his position. In making explicit his plan to establish the facts of 'concealment' in writing in relation to Jacqui's knowledge and the timing of that knowledge, he is doing particular work. He is outlining the information he will seek in the imminent hearing, the type of information upon which the 'fact' of 'concealment' rests, whilst also demonstrating to

the social worker and her practice lead that he is performing his role as their legal representative.

Jacqui's statement, as detailed in the interaction, links the issue of 'concealment' with knowledge, timing, and Jacqui's openness and honesty or trustworthiness. This suggests that category of 'open and honest' is important in the context of court work and that Jacqui's solicitor is aware of the relevance of an assessment of her moral character for the interactions that follow. This moral work can also be seen as the group move on to discuss their assessment of 'concealment', which serves as a proxy for establishing Jacqui's trustworthiness. In response to the solicitor's description of discrepancy in Jacqui's account, the social worker puts forward her own account, gleaned directly from Jacqui, that she has been consistent in saying that she only found out about the pregnancy three weeks prior to Parker's birth. The solicitor rejects the credibility of social worker's formulation by linking Jacqui's prior experience of pregnancy with an expectation of knowledge of what pregnancy feels like, thus linking her 'not knowing' to a breach of the normal expectations of motherhood and to her trustworthiness. The practice lead supports this assertion by drawing in the views of the ambulance service as further evidence.

As the group discuss 'concealment', they draw upon the artefact of the statement and moral categorisations of Jacqui to create order with the seeming alignment of their perspectives. The different resources the solicitor (the statement, other solicitor's comments) and the social worker (Jacqui's verbal account) draw upon to make claims about 'concealment' highlight the differences in forms of evidence valued in their professional roles, and the variance in their proximity to Jacqui. The solicitor's dominant rights to speakership make explicit that the court is his professional domain. The fact of 'concealment' is a matter that the solicitor is gearing up to have settled via the court. This preparation for the hearing is also visible in the frequent interruptions of the Guardian's solicitor, hurrying along the interaction. The working up of 'concealment' here relates to professional expertise and competence, alongside moral categorisations of Jacqui. Importantly, the accounts expressed by Jacqui in previous interactions with the social worker, and reiterated by the social worker here, are of little consequence. The solicitor privileges written evidence, amenable to examination in court, above all. Once again, the collaborative facting practices that objectivate

'concealed pregnancy' do work specific to the interactional and institutional context and create and sustain order.

### Facting and creating certainty for the court

The method of 'highlighting' as an element of professional vision, can, like the previous excerpts, can be seen as the professional (this time, the solicitor), specifies just what the case is about and the resources through which it is to be discussed. Whilst this method of developing shared situated focus can be seen in the work of the social worker, independent reviewing officer, and the solicitor, the solicitor objectivates different evidential resources to do so (the statement, the mother's past experience of pregnancy), tied to the project of preparing for court. For the solicitor then, facting relates to matters to be settled via the court, matters that can be proven, rather than to the matter of how to assess and work with parents over the course of the case. This rests upon the capacity to make arguments with certainty, backed up by written evidential resources, as opposed to seeking accounts that could transform deviant parental identity. Through the following excerpts, it becomes clear how in the interactional context of court work the matter of 'unchangeable' parental identity is 'fixed'.

### **Attending an Issues Resolutions Hearing - finding the fact of concealment and considerations of future care**

*The next court hearing I attend with Stella is Parker's Issues Resolutions Hearing (IRH). The IRH aims to resolve key issues of contention and set a timetable for the Final Hearing and any work to be completed. Each legal representative sits before the judge and outlines the position of their client in the order that they sit. The local authority solicitor speaks first:*

*The parents accept that threshold is met but do not accept there was a concealed pregnancy. The local authority is therefore seeking a finding that the parents concealed the pregnancy. The midwife has provided a statement that supports this and is available to attend the final hearing to give evidence.*

*The legal representatives for Bob and Jacqui provide an update to the judge. Bob's barrister questions the proportionality of seeking a finding in respect of 'concealment'. Parker's Guardian's solicitor comments:*

*The Guardian believes seeking finding in relation to the concealment of pregnancy is sensible as likely to be helpful in future considerations of care.*

*The judge responds by noting that she will hear arguments on the issue of 'concealment' and outlines the evidence she requires to make a finding.*

*I suspect parents don't have much to challenge the midwife, there is perhaps something in the language in the midwife's statement [with a raised eyebrow] - that she was 'astounded' that parents didn't know about the pregnancy, but she's the professional. I may need her medical expertise before a finding. The midwife and parents will be witnesses in relation to a finding of fact.*

### Finding the fact of concealment

The local authority solicitor brings the issue of 'concealment' to the judge's attention, seeking a 'finding of fact' based on the rationale that it is one of the final issues of contention that requires resolution before the Parker's case can be concluded. In doing so, she highlights 'concealment' as a fact of the case that requires formalisation via a 'finding' and to which each of the parties subsequently orients. Interestingly, in conceding that threshold has been met, the parents show the court that they accept that they have or are likely to cause significant harm to their child, and therefore provide the grounds upon which the court can make alternative care arrangements for Parker. They publicly acknowledge the deviant identities (harmed or is likely to harm child) ascribed to them. Yet, they dispute the issue of 'concealment' and the attribution of the identity 'liars'. The fact of 'concealment' here does not relate to issues of parenting but to the moral identity of the parents, as seen as the discussion unfolds.

Having highlighted the concealed pregnancy as a shared object of orientation, the local authority solicitor suggests the resources through which it can be resolved, the midwife's statement and her time as a witness. Bob's barrister invokes the term 'proportionality' to support his counter argument which topicalises that threshold has been met and that any dispute over concealment may cause delay<sup>20</sup>. The Guardian's solicitor offers further support for the local authority's request, highlighting the valuable role that a 'finding of fact' will play in any future considerations of care. Future care can be heard as being in relation to decisions about Parker's care which in

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<sup>20</sup> Delay here invokes the 'no delay principle', legal principle under the Children Act 1989 that any delay in resolving proceedings is likely to prejudice the welfare of the child.

the context of threshold having been met relates to the orders available to the court. It can also be heard as relating to decisions about the care of any children Jacqui and Bob go on to have in the future, thus making explicit the role that a 'finding of fact' about 'concealment' will have in setting limits on the parents in the future, based on the attribution of the deviant identity 'liars'. A parallel may be drawn here between the logic of the Guardian's barrister's account and the ways in which the original 'finding of fact' worked to delimit moral and practical possibilities with and in relation to Jacqui in the earlier excerpts.

The organisation of rights to speakership in the courtroom, with each legal representative speaking directly to the judge, creates a particularly formal interaction, in which there are no verbal utterances that work as continuers and no overlaps in the talk. The statements made by each of the legal representatives must be heard in the context of them seeking to influence the judge's decision. The judge concludes that there is value in making a finding as to whether the pregnancy was or was not concealed, noting her reservations about the parents' disputation of 'concealment'. She makes explicit the written evidence she will accept (the midwife's statement) as well as oral evidence from the midwife and the parents. She also makes explicit the type of medical professional she expects in her court, one that is 'professional' which can be read as being factual and neutral in their language, when set against the emotive term 'astounded'. Through this process 'concealment' becomes something that did or did not happen and whilst the judge has her views, the fact must be established through assessing the account provided by the parents against written and oral medical evidence.

#### Fixing change for the future

The arguments in the IRH and the judge's decision work to set up a plan for evidence about the purported concealed pregnancy to be heard and weighed up at the Final Hearing. The grey area of motive with which the social worker grappled in the first excerpt does not feature. The practical accomplishment of a plan for the assessment of evidence in the court requires specificity about what will and what will not be considered sound evidence. The notion of 'future care' draws in Parker and any children Jacqui and Bob may go on to have in the future as warrants for the need to establish whether the pregnancy was or was not concealed, whether the parents did or did not know, and therefore whether the parents did or did not lie to social services.

This warrant also makes explicit the professional orientation to the consequences of formally finding the fact of 'concealment' as spanning beyond this interaction, potentially working to delimit Bob and Jacqui's opportunities to care for their children in the future. Through this work the court attempts to 'fix' deviant parental identities, making it difficult for a parent to make the case that they will be 'open and honest' in their future work with social services. Nonetheless, any future work to achieve this will of course be a situated accomplishment.

### **Attending the Final Hearing - losing the fact of concealment**

*The last court hearing I attend with Stella is the Final Hearing for Parker in which a judgement about his long-term care is made. I sit in a meeting room adjacent to the court with Stella, the Local Authority solicitor and barrister and the barrister for Bob. The legal representatives for the Jacqui and Parker's guardian come in and out of the room to discuss key points throughout. Bob's barrister raises the issue of concealment. The local authority solicitor notes that the midwife is unable to attend to give evidence today and so the family got away with it. Bob's barrister responds in a friendly tone:*

*I wouldn't say they got away with it but it's about what the local authority can prove to the court.*

*The professionals continue to discuss the case until they are called into court. In court, the usual ritual takes place as each legal representative outlines the position of their client to the judge in the order that they sit. The barrister for the local authority speaks to the judge first, noting that she sent her the amended threshold document:*

*The local authority considered proportionality in relation to the concealed pregnancy and will not pursue a finding. The midwife is unable to attend court to offer evidence and waiting on her availability would cause unnecessary delay.*

*The legal representatives for the other parties are in agreement. The judge notes that Bob and Jacqui made the "right" decision not to contest the local authority's plan given their "difficulties" and agrees with the local authority's plan to place Parker in the care of his Aunt.*

### Losing the fact of concealment

In the preceding sections, 'finding' the fact of a 'concealed pregnancy' was central to the interactions and to the attendant moral and practical consequences. And then it was 'lost'. In the institutional context of a final hearing in which a decision about Parker's long-term care must be made, the barrister for the local authority draws on the legal concepts of 'proportionality' and 'unnecessary delay' as warrants for the shift in position to not pursuing a formal 'finding of fact' that Jacqui concealed her pregnancy. The term proportionality can be heard to invoke the pressing need to make a decision about Parker's care, which outweighs the support a finding might offer in 'future considerations of care' as argued at the IRH. Though the fact of 'concealment' has been 'lost' in the formal sense, attempts to 'find' it and use it as an object to orient to collaboratively, were central to shaping, practically and morally, the interactions preceding the final hearing. This prior co-accomplishment of moral work served to limit interactional and institutional possibilities for change and paved the way for the arguably inevitable outcome of a Care Order being made in respect of Parker.

### Part one conclusion

Tracing how two key facts – non-accidental injuries and a concealed pregnancy – were worked up and utilised in Parker's case was made possible by shadowing the social worker as she interacted with the parents and other professionals, in different domains of practice over time. This enabled an analytic exploration of the relational, contextual and situated nature of the accomplishment of facts as practical objects and their use in collaboration. Tracing the way each fact is relationally configured, the resources drawn upon as warrants for them by different professionals in different settings, and their situated consequentiality, makes evident how the facts of the case are worked up in differing ways for differing purposes as a case unfolds. 'Facting' describes a particular objectivation practice in social work, in which seemingly neutral facts of a case gleaned from institutional records are objectivated and used as a resource to link parental actions (historical and recent) with institutionally consequential moral categorisations. Facting is a change practice that both accomplishes situated deviant parental identity and institutional next steps. In this instance, there were consequences for how the parents worked with by the social worker, for considerations of their capacity to work with social services in different domains, and for projections of their capacity to care for their baby and any children

they may have in the future. Each of these consequences related to the enabling, assessing, and planning for parental change, and to providing the evidential grounds for asserting a lack of change now and in the future.

The story began with a fact already established via the court, that Jacqui had injured her older child. The moral consequences of this fact painted Jacqui as a deviant parent, worked up in different ways across interactions as the case unfolded. The new fact of a concealed pregnancy which had not yet been formally found via the court, and thus held greater uncertainty, and was ultimately 'lost', worked for all practical purposes as the defining fact of the case. The category of 'concealed pregnancy' was used repeatedly throughout this case and each time, the category and associated activities of the mother and of professionals were re-established with particular local consequences. The variance in the resources used by the social worker and the solicitors reflect their relative proximity to the parents in their professional roles, and the legitimate resources of their profession, as seen in previous research (see Sarangi, 1998). The practices employed to 'find' and 'lose' the fact of concealment were tied to their situational context, the task at hand, and the types of knowledge relied upon by different professionals in producing and using such facts. Nonetheless, the fact was treated as a neutral object, existing independently of the task at hand, and was used for the practical purpose of collaboration.

In the car, 'concealment' was objectivated as a fact of the case, relevant to professional accountability for the social worker (no time to do a pre-birth assessment), her categorisation of a risky mother (denies a court finding of fact and hid her pregnancy from social services) and the institutional possibilities available to her (assessment of parental change). This account was resourced via accounts of direct interaction with the mother, mapping the mother's proximity to the injured child, and court and medical reports. In the LAC review, 'concealment' was objectivated as a fact of the case, relevant to the parents' trustworthiness, and resourced with a situated parental account and prior knowledge of the social worker's account. In the assessment between the social worker and parents, concealment had implications for parental identity consequences for the interaction and future projections of care. In each of these interactions where the parents were present, their accounts were the primary resource through which to work up concealment which served as an anchor point, a way of homing in on the problems the case presented.



In the pre-CMH meeting, the 'concealment' was objectivated as something that happened that opened the institutional possibility for it to be proven by the court, as a matter for the solicitor's professional accountability, and the mother's trustworthiness and credibility. This account was primarily resourced drawing on written evidence. In the IRH, 'concealment' was up for discussion, as relevant or not relevant to establishing the moral character of the parents for the institutional possibility of determining future considerations of care, drawing on the midwife's statement as evidence. Whilst the term 'concealed pregnancy' was relevant to each occasion, its use and consequences were highly situated. Nonetheless, the issue of concealment as relevant to establishing the parents as untrustworthy was observable across each setting until the final hearing. In the final hearing, the fact of concealment was 'lost' as it was no longer practically necessary to draw on the inference of lying and the related assumption about the capacity to work with children's services, as the parents were not contesting the Local Authority's application. This demonstrates how issues of trust and credibility are relevant when a negative assessment of moral character supports the local authority in adversarial argument. Establishing a lack of trustworthiness and credibility undercut parental claims to have changed, which becomes a relevant professional task in court.

These analyses relate to a few locally situated instances of social work practice with one family and are used to show how 'same' fact of 'concealed pregnancy' is negotiated and managed across different domains and through different knowledge systems. Although it may be practical for social workers and fellow professionals to think of the facts of a case as ontologically stable and independent of their particular moment of use, this obscures the practicalities of accomplishing and sustaining meanings. In these excerpts each professional highlights the fact of concealment as a shared object of focus to which parties then orient. Whilst the pregnancy is always referred to as 'concealed' the work that categorisation does changes depending upon the context of its use. Careful thought is needed to understand the basis of knowledge claims in social work practice, particularly those that boundary parental change, with special attention paid to the moral work and practical work that accompanies them. One way into this is attending to insights offered by the institutional and analytic mobility of ethnographic shadowing particularly in traditionally 'invisible' spaces of practice such as the court. It to this focus that I now turn.

## **Part Two – Facting and exclusionary practices in court**

As I followed this case and others, I was able to observe interactions in the traditionally ‘invisible’ space of the family court. It became evident that that ‘change methods’, which includes ‘facting’, took a different shape in the court which is not social workers’ primary professional domain. I have already considered the difference in evidential resources between practice as usual and practice in the court which reflect the degree of proximity social workers and solicitors have to parents and the key work objects of their professions. Here I stay with Parker’s story and describe sociomaterial elements of court work rarely discussed in social work research. I describe the social organisation of change practices, or lack of, in and through occasioned use of the court. This may initially appear to deviate from the primary focus on talk thus far in the thesis but it holds relevance for just how formal facts are accomplished, and their relevance to ‘change’ in child protection. The description of occasioned space that follows offers ethnographic context to the excerpts provided above, and demonstrates the possibility of the court as an occasion for ‘fixing’ change rather than promoting change, and for limiting social work change practices.

Family court proceedings are held in private and where journalists are permitted to attend, they cannot be fully reported due to the need to protect children’s privacy. In this vein the fieldnotes drawn upon here have been represented without key identifying details. The data here are extended fieldnotes<sup>21</sup> of interactions of preparing for and being in the Final Hearing described above. The complexity of the argument meant it was preferable to separate out discussions of occasioned space from the interactional accomplishment of facts, though the two are of course internally related. I offer excerpts from the Final Hearing for Parker, only briefly touched on above, that include scenes of waiting for and being in court. This brief analysis describes the

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<sup>21</sup> Observations of the Family Court took place in the County Court building, which hears civil (non-criminal matters of bankruptcy, divorce and default of payment, and Family Law. The Family Court Judiciary includes all levels of judge: High Court, Circuit, district judges and magistrates. I observed hearings about Parker with a circuit judge and with a district judge, in matters relating to Public Law. Public Law cases are brought by the state against parents when social workers are concerned that a child is at risk of significant harm, for the judge to make a decision about where the child is best cared for.

occasioned use of the court, with an attendant focus on change practices, or lack thereof.

### **Preparing for court – proximity seeking, professional congregation and ‘fixing’ change**

*Through the security ritual of the court and on our way up the stairs Parker’s aunt tells me she is likely to be caring for Parker under a Special Guardianship Order. As we sit in the waiting room, Jacqui and Bob arrive and I greet them. Bob’s speech is slurred and slow and Jacqui steers him away from me. Stella arrives, nods to Jacqui and Bob and heads towards me:*

*I hope my practice lead is going to be here as I think Bob will ask for more contact and I’m worried I won’t be able to answer questions put to me if I have to give evidence on the matter. I need to find Maria (Local Authority solicitor).*

*I follow Stella as she goes looking, walking through the court corridor and leaning in to peak through the window of each of the rooms. The first five rooms are full with legal counsel talking with their clients and Stella continues her search. She finds Maria in the furthest room talking with the barrister for the Local Authority who gestures for us to wait outside. We find ourselves the only people in the waiting room adjacent to the court. She tells me she has lived and breathed this case, it has taken over her life, inside and outside of work. She has not done important work on any of her other cases for at least 3 weeks because of the constant changes with this case and the plans. Stella says she has handled it badly and thinks the other professionals don’t think she’s competent but equally, she doesn’t know how she would have done it differently, other than to have been more prepared. I share my experience of early court work and she says that makes her feel better.*

*As we wait, Stella shares her worries about whether to tell her solicitor about a recent PPN on Bob:*

*Bob missed the last three contacts and I had PPN about him. It said he had been found in possession of Class A drugs. When I asked him about it, he said his friend was dropping him to contact when they were stopped and searched by the police and they found drugs that were his friend’s. Then I found out that the police searched Bob’s house and found a substantial amount of cocaine, likely to be for supply.*

*Maria calls us into the consultation room. I wonder why it has taken so long. The Local Authority barrister is reading the Guardian's statement which say notes only came in this morning. She highlights the points the Local Authority need to address and Stella nods along.*

*Counsel for Parker's dad walks into the room and asks why he is here and says he can't remember what Bob looks like – "is he the little one?", "I need to know what the fuck is going on". The Guardian's barrister and Jacqui's solicitor walk in next. Bob and Jacqui's respective counsel compliment each other on their pinstripe suits. Bob's barrister says they need to discuss two threshold issues, the main one being the concealment of pregnancy.*

*Maria says that because the health professional who would have been called on to give evidence on that point is on holiday, the family have got away with it. Bob's barrister says he wouldn't say they got away with it but it's about what the Local Authority can prove to the court.*

*The Local Authority barrister says that it is possible there will be a discussion of more contact for Dad although he missed the last one. Bob's barrister asks how much contact 'we' missed. Stella informs him it was 3 and he says: "Tough, he's shot himself in the foot with that". The Local Authority barrister outlines the plan for Parker's contact, with the first three in the community supervised by the Local Authority, with regular CASP reviews, and then once a month. The counsel discuss and agree these amendments to the care plan relating to contact.*

*Stella whispers to me and asks if she should tell Maria about the PPN in front of the others. I note that asking this question might mean she is worried about this and might feel more at ease one to one. She takes Maria aside to inform her. Maria then advises Bob's barrister to ask his client what he was doing when he missed contact last week. He goes out to find Bob to get instructions.*

*When he returns, he says he's received his instructions. He caricatures the dad, mimicking someone under the influence, and says "which I took to mean he would like more contact, that he concedes threshold and is content with the plan."*

*The LA legal team share their distaste for the plan for a Special Guardianship Order alongside a Supervision Order and suggest that the risks mean a Care Order is more suitable. Bob's barrister notes that Care Orders at home rarely work as if a Care Order is needed then you*

*have to think about what the children are doing there. The Local Authority barrister cuts across to say we should into Court now and everyone gets up.*

### Preparing for Court

Here I briefly consider methods of social work practice and methods of legal practice accomplished in and through movement and interaction in the space of the court. I describe the rituals of searching for counsel and of professional congregation before a final hearing. Note that the practices of 'facting' tied to parental change that the social worker engaged in throughout the case are not visible here, the matter of parental change is closed. Here the work is to 'fix' parental change, to consider the matter settled for Parker and agree a plan for his future care.

For the social worker, the professional who has had the most contact with the parents and who outside of the court arena, regularly communicates with the parents, court marks a different occasion. When entering the waiting room, the social worker does not engage in conversation with the parents but nods to greet them. In waiting rooms outside of the court setting, Stella would seek out and sit with Parker's family. On this occasion, she has a different professional prerogative - proximity to her legal counsel. The social worker topicalises her need for support from her practice lead and her fear of giving evidence, inferring her limited experience as a newly qualified social worker. In court, there is an expectation that newly qualified social workers will be supported by their supervisors, particularly on their first court case. It is with anxious urgency that she begins the ritual search for the correct consultation room, a ritual she has followed at previous hearings for the family. This ritual is commonplace in family court hearings, and I remember it from my own practice. It is a mobile practice that does not occur in any other domain of practice. The ritual of seeking out fellow professionals rather than parents indicates that different work is being done here and that the social worker-client relation is not the primary mode through which this work takes place. The space is occasioned through the social worker's movement away from the parents, looking for her counsel, as requiring parties<sup>22</sup> to be separated. By stating her intentions, moving through the court and peeking through each window, and

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<sup>22</sup> For clarity, the parties to the case are Bob, Jacqui, the CAFCASS Guardian for Parker, and the local authority. Each party has a barrister who takes instructions from their clients and represents them in court. The local authority have a solicitor from within their legal team and a barrister who they instruct for some family court cases.

moving on when she does not recognise the occupants, Stella formulates court as a space for 'looking for', searching for counsel who are not yet to hand, whilst also demonstrating that she understands that the purpose of these rooms is, as the Court Design Guide (HMCTS, 2019) suggests, to allow users to prepare for their hearings in relative privacy. In doing so she accomplishes the court as a setting in which social work proximity to legal counsel prior to a hearing and allowing parties to other cases their privacy are matters of professional accountability.

On this occasion, once Stella finds her counsel, she is not welcomed into the room, but is asked to wait outside to be called in as the solicitor and Barrister for the local authority talk. Usually in the field and in my own practice, the social worker enters the room without knocking and sets up camp with her legal team. Directly following this exclusion from the room where her team were talking, Stella offers an account of her work on the case. Stella identifies this as an unusual case both in the demands on her time in and outside of work, the frequent changes to the care plans, and in terms of its impact on her own and others' view of her professional competence. Stella also seeks advice from me about whether to inform her solicitor about the PPN on Bob, presumably something she was seeking out Maria to do. Here, Stella orients to me as a fellow professional, asking what she might ask of her practice lead had she been present. The break in the usual ritual allowed Stella to share her worries, reflecting her lack of competence and familiarity with court work. It allowed the social worker to topicalise her lack of knowledge about what she could and could not share with her solicitor and her preoccupation with ensuring she is meeting the interactional expectations of the legal professionals. The waiting room is occasioned as a safe space in which professional worries can be shared and advice sought, much like the possibilities afforded by social work talk in the car. The court is occasioned as a domain in which legal professionals hold sway, and although they are instructed by and acting for the local authority, of which the social worker is the representative, the social worker is not treated as an equal professional partner by the legal professionals and does demand such treatment.

There is an evident shift in the work being done from the daily work of social work, where togetherness, transparency and collaboration between families and social workers is a matter of professional accountability. In the space of the court, it is the legal professionals, not the social worker, that prescribe the parameters for interaction.

Change here is highlighted and managed by the barristers and *only* relates to changes to the threshold document, which may be conceded or contested by the parents, and to the plan, to which the guardian and the parents may suggest amendments. Accounts of these changes are the professional work objects of barristers who share a community of practice and attempt to conclude as many areas of dispute as possible prior to entering the court. These accounts are organised around the 'facts' of the case but are also occasioned by moving through and interacting with the court setting.

In the consultation room preparing for court, the barristers for the local authority and Bob highlight just what needs attending to for the purposes of the final hearing and just what other parties should attend to. Both specify concealed pregnancy as a threshold<sup>23</sup> issue and contact as an issue in the plan require addressing before the final hearing. Through these accounts we see that their shared professional concern is with the facts of the case as they stand plus any issue of contention they may be required to speak to in court. The key resources the barristers draw upon in making such decisions are who can give evidence to prove threshold matters, and the social worker's account and their client's instructions on the matter of contact. As noted in the previous section, without medical testimony, there can be no Finding of Fact on the concealed pregnancy, which is not essential to meeting threshold. We also see that it is the barristers who set the agenda for discussion, only drawing in the social worker briefly to account for a practical issue, and seeking instructions from parents directly. Unlike non-court encounters where social worker-client is the primary categorial relation through which institutional work with parents occurs, here the relation of barrister-client is key. For example, the matter of contact is resolved through category work as the barrister infers that the dad's actions of missing contact three times and being arrested have implications for his capacity to advocate effectively for his request for more contact. At a final hearing at which your child is likely to be removed from your care, missing 3 contacts and being arrested are activities that relate back to the category of 'deviant father' and place a new category of 'criminal' on the table. This makes the professionally accountable activity of a barrister advocating for his client

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<sup>23</sup> Threshold issues are areas of dispute between parties that are relevant to a judge determining that the threshold has been met to grant a Care Order or Supervision Order where the court agrees that a child has or is likely to experience future significant harm. The plan relates to the care plan for Parker where for example, contact arrangements with his parents are specified. In interim care plan must be seen and agreed by the court before an order can be made.

more difficult. It is in this context that the barrister's moral account of Bob shooting himself in the foot, and that his mocking of Bob can be heard. Accounting for the moral failings of a parent is an activity that legitimises his limited professional options for advocacy.

This work is occasioned in and through the use of the pre-court spaces of the waiting room and consultation room in specific ways. The barrister responds to the local authority solicitor's suggestion that he asks his client about contact with movement rather than speech. The consultation room inhabited by the barristers for the case is oriented to as an unsuitable space in which to bring a parent as the barrister walks out of the consultation room in search of Bob. Through this, he makes visible the barrister-client relation, and the exclusion of that relation from shared professional space. Upon his return, the barrister mocks his client as he mimics his slurred speech and recounts his instructions, further outlining how in this separated space, the dad can be worked up as a caricature of deviance.

To sum up, the social worker's movements and interactions accomplish the court as a space in which specific work, distinct from day-to-day practice, is to be done. These include: being near legal counsel rather than parents; being concerned with professional accountability and competence in relation to lines of appropriate knowledge sharing; and seeking advice and support from fellow social workers. Of course, this work is reflexively accomplished through the category of newly qualified social worker and it is likely that more experienced workers would speak less of fear of being found out as professionally inadequate by legal professionals. Still, even for the most experienced social worker, the prospect of giving evidence can be nerve wracking. None of these rules relate to the social worker's usual business of accounting for parental change as the matter is closed here as the pre-court work is to shore up the making of a supervision order and a care plan setting out alternative arrangements for Parker's care. Everyday practices within the court work to produce unquestioned rituals in which families and social workers and legal professionals are a part, parents and social workers are separated, parents are excluded from shared professional space, and in which legal professionals set the parameters for interaction. The dominant rights to speakership of the barristers who are tasked with preparing for an appearance in a potentially adversarial setting, alongside the exclusion of



parental presence from professional space, arguably create the conditions for dehumanising accounts of parents.

### **Being in Court – spatial arrangements and institutional entitlements to speak**

*The judge sits on high at a raised judicial bench that faces outwards to the room. Behind the judge is the royal coat of arms. In front of and facing the bench sits the court reporter. Behind the reporter is a row comprising one long desk and chairs in which the advocates sit, with their court bundles in sight. Behind each advocate sit the respective parties, the social worker, parents, and guardian. I sit at the extra seating at the back of the court. The judge enters and everyone stands. The judge welcomes everyone to the court and we sit. The advocates speak to the judge in the order that they sit, unless directed otherwise by the judge.*

The court is designed with performance in mind, performance that the Barristers have been gearing up for in the consultation rooms. The Court Design Guide (HMCTS, 2019) prescribes that the judge, and other parties, have clear ‘sightlines’ within the court. The raised judicial bench affords the judge the opportunity to survey the whole court. Sociolegal scholars have argued that height signifies ‘power’ and visual control is associated with full control of proceedings. As Mulcahy describes, the expectations of sightlines as the “panopticon ideal” - an “economic geometry of seamless surveillance” (Mulcahy, 2007: 397). Yet it is through the practical activities of parties to the hearing that such perception in action may be seen:

*The advocates, having been instructed by their clients, each outline key points to the judge. The judge looks to each as they speak. As the advocates speak to the judge, they cannot see their clients. Counsel for Parker’s dad Bob speaks to the judge about a proposed contact. Bob begins shaking his head vigorously and moving in his seat. The social worker responds by waving towards Bob’s counsel to suggest he tell his solicitor. The advocates cannot see and do not respond to Bob.*

### **In the Final Hearing**

At this Final Hearing, the court is occasioned as a space in which the judge’s gaze is fixed on each of the four barristers as they speak, whilst each barrister looks towards the judge or to their desks. All participants in the court room face the judge and the judge is afforded full view of counsel and partial view of those sat behind them. Barristers have their backs to parties who are not able to visually assess the way in

which arguments are put forward. Facing away from their clients and towards the judge presents an unnoticed practical problem in adequately advocating for clients who are unhappy with their arguments.

The only party to see and respond to Bob was the social worker, who in her gesture towards his counsel, oriented to his head shaking and movement as a display of his displeasure and advised this was something his barrister should attend to. Here then, the social worker is once again in proximity to the client, but her role has changed. She is no longer assessing parental capacity to change but she can see him and knows the court affords voice only through legal counsel and directs him accordingly. Given most parents lack of familiarity with the court room setting, it seems likely that their set up, combined with the routine professional relations described above, leaves parents less able to participate in the process. As Carlen (1976) notes in her work on Magistrates courts, this can have a paralysing effect on those who aren't regular users of the court system. This also holds for the relatively inexperienced social worker who, alert to Bob's difficulty, attempted to quietly direct him towards his barrister. However, understanding this was not her stage, she did not press the matter further. Certain rules appear to be in operation here, first that counsel focus their attention on the judge and second, that it is not the place of parents and social workers to disturb the court by speaking up. The accomplishment of these rules is occasioned by the professional activities of the judge and legal counsel which take shape in and through the affordances of the court space.

Summing up, attending to interaction within the space of the court raises questions about the possibilities of participation – here, rather than enabling participation, the spatial and material set up of court, and the social relations as advocates act as intermediaries presenting arguments to the judge, limit the perceptual field of the judge and advocates and afford less parental and social worker participation in proceedings. The people who understand and are sensitive to the nuances of the circumstances of the family are silenced, in favour of advocates who can present clear arguments, often agreed upon prior to entering court. The language of participation in which the HMCTs and the PLO are couched do not appear to be matched by the affordances of the space in which proceedings occur. Families and social workers, unless giving evidence, are to be seen by the judge, but not heard. In the Final Hearing above, the roles, rights to speakership, and spatial affordances accomplish the project

of 'fixing' parental change, where the time to hear parents has gone and the time to agree threshold and formalise a plan for the child, based on 'unchangeable' parent identities, has arrived.

### **Part two conclusion**

It may not seem wild to suggest that the court and final hearings in particular are not occasions for social workers to work alongside parents to accomplish possibilities for change. Final hearings occur when the local authority is so concerned about a child that they have seen fit to bring the case to court and make arguments for alternative arrangements to care for the child. It can be expected that the social worker has worked with the family to her institutional limit and has produced a statement and a care plan that accomplishes deviant and unchangeable parental identities. Yet it is of value to note just how these occasions play out, their sociomaterial relations, as it offers a point of comparison to practices in other domains of social work, including those in part one of the chapter. Doing so makes it possible to stay with the situated accomplishment of professional practices whilst attending to the variance of practices occasioned by professional projects in institutional space. This makes observable the rituals of the pre-court setting in and through which professional activities and relations are accomplished, and the in-court professional perception-in-action occasioned through spatial affordances.

Describing these situated practices is of value to show the seen but unnoticed elements of court practice. The primary categorial relation that social work practice is achieved through (social worker-client) is not central to court work, indeed, for the social worker, the relation of importance is social worker-legal counsel, as demonstrated through the **proximity-seeking ritual**. Further, the social worker-legal counsel relation brings with it the attendant risk of professional scrutiny and accountability for professional competence, as topicalised by the social worker confronted by a closed door. For a Newly Qualified Social Worker in an unfamiliar setting, a shift in the primary working relationship to one in which professional exclusion and scrutiny is on the table, brings further unease to what is already known to be an anxiety inducing professional experience, as the rules of operation have changed. The requirement for adequate support seems essential in these circumstances.

The key relation of parent-barrister alongside the separation of parents from shared legal decision making was demonstrated in the barrister's movements from the consultation to the parent and back again to the pre-court **professional congregation**. The consultation room was occasioned as a space for professional congregation through this movement, through the barristers highlighting of just what was up for discussion, and the type of parents they were representing. In social work practice outside of the domain of the court, the moral status of parents is a professionally accountable matter (good social workers produce good parents). In the space of professional congregation, the moral status of parents is a professionally accountable matter for their advocates, who require 'good' parents to make their best arguments. The spatial separation of legal work from the parents they are advocating for continues in the space of the court room. Even when in the same room, the spatial affordances of the court and professional task at hand lead to a further limitation on parental participation in proceedings.

### **Conclusion – Facting and professional vision across domains of practice**

'Facting' is a professional method through which court-oriented and court-based child protection interactions are socially organised. It describes how professionals highlight the most salient problem of a case, with an accompanying inferred categorisation of a deviant parent, which then serves as shared focal point for discussion. This is a form of 'highlighting' that Goodwin (1994) describes in his account of the methods of professional vision but here, it is accompanied by the resources of institutional artefacts (medical assessment, statement, court finding). It is possible to see how in each excerpt, although each professional (social worker, independent reviewing officer, solicitor, barrister) objectivates a 'fact' for discussion, the particular practice setting and the particular professional project in play shapes the resources through which the fact is objectivated and can be disputed, and the interactional and institutional possibilities of action. There are four key points worth reiterating.

First, 'facting' is the broad process through which inferences about parental identity are made object and relevant for use. It is the broadest objectivation of the facts of the case that follow Liberman's (2013) process of: Account (highlighting) → Confirmation → Objectivation → Social Amnesia. It goes like this: a professional highlights a fact of the case, such as concealed pregnancy or

non-accidental injury, drawing it to the attention of other parties as a point for discussion, setting the parameters for the discussion that follows and the resources to be drawn upon in that discussion, including the type of parents presenting the problem. The account works up the parent in a specific way for specific situated purposes. Although 'concealed pregnancy' inferred the problematic parental attribute 'liar' on most occasions and the general methods of 'facting' were similar across scenes of practice, the resources used to achieve this, and the consequentiality of this identity work were highly situated.

Second, professional vision shapes the interactional consequences of 'facting'. This means that 'facting', or objectivating the facts of the case, is practically useful to get the job done, define the focus of talk, the problem of shared focus and possible solutions, but relates to the situated focus of the professional leading the talk. Here we see the layered nature of 'facting' which draws upon a further set of objectivation practices through which the evidential resources with which to account for the problem are specified. The objectivation of these evidential resources is reflexively oriented to the problematic parental identity set up through 'facting' and the domain of practice in which the interaction occurs, and is assessed on these terms. For example, in the excerpts of the social work assessment and the case management hearing the 'facting' of 'concealed pregnancy' objectivated parental accounts of concealment as resources for discussion and assessed these accounts drawing on the prior account of the mother having had a baby previously as a resource through which to accomplish the inferred identity of 'liar'. In the social work assessment, the parental account was able to be dismissed by working up a lack of plausibility in the mother's account, whereas in the case management hearing meeting, the account could only be dismissed by gaining clarity over the inconsistencies in her legal statement. Taken together, through the broader objectivation 'facting' and the layered objectivation of the supporting evidential resources, the socially constructed nature of evidence and moral categories tied to the facts of case become obscured and taken as given in interaction. Without tracing these differences across practice settings, it would be all too easy to assume the primary risk in the case as being about 'non-accidental injury', which a lay person may expect to hold far greater moral and institutional consequences than concealing a pregnancy.

Third, professional vision shapes the institutional consequences of 'facting', highlighting that it is not the particular fact of a case that matters but what inferences that brings in each domain in terms of 1. How able a parent is to work with social services and 2. How able a parent is to safely care for their child. In the child protection assessment, the parental attribute of concealing a pregnancy was not being 'open and honest', bolstered by the parents' continued disputation of concealment. The consequentiality of that moral categorisation was spelled out by the social worker in the statement *'As long as you are open and honest from this point forward, there is hope'*. Practically speaking, this means the parents would need to own up to concealing the pregnancy and produce a plausible account for doing so that enables the social worker to support them. Without the social worker understanding the parents' intentions of concealment, there are limited institutional possibilities for support the social worker can put in place. In the assessment setting, the social worker offered the parents the possibility of producing an alternate account of concealment, placing the possibility of parental change firmly on the table. By contrast, in the court setting, the 'non-accidental injury'<sup>24</sup> worked up a 'mother who physically harmed her child' and 'concealment' was as the parental attribute of not being 'open and honest', as a dual moral failing. Here, there was no room for parental change, the moral categorisations were not up for dispute, only whether they can be proven as facts in court, and how they can limit future parental care.

Finally, 'facting' is internally related to the particular domain of practice in and through which it occurs. The layered objectivation of types evidence to support 'facting' alters between professionals, as do professionals' rights to speakership in different domains of practice, and the expectations of professional accountability. For example, in the safe space of the car and between social workers, 'facting' held built in uncertainty where some room remained for parental change through assessment, however tightly defined. In the court space, 'facting' related to 'fixing' parental identity as enduring qualities affecting their current and future capacity to care for their children. 'Facting' then is reflexively accomplished via particular occasions of

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<sup>24</sup> During fieldwork I also observed cases where parental explanations of 'non-accidental injury' were not corroborated by the medical evidence but where their plausibility as good parents rested on the care of the child to date which enabled the social worker to offer intensive family support work and opportunities to show change.

use. This echoes de Montigny's (1995: 114) finding that the uncertainties of day to day practice are glossed through the presentation of a singular account for the court.

Whilst the terminology of these historic institutional documents and inferred parent identities is similar across interactions, they are always worked up anew with different situational relevancies. What appears to be same in fact holds multiple possibilities within its situated accomplishment. This is evident in the way institutional histories come into being and the way such histories are reified as objective evidence, the way deviant parent categories come into being and the way these accomplish a 'fixed' parental identity. To be clear, when I use the term 'fixed', I refer to the institutional attempts through which to make deviant identity a workable object, rather than to a parent 'carrying' this identity. Together, institutional histories and parent identities are reified as 'facts' of the case and obscure the professional craftwork at play. This craftwork can be seen through the inferential categorisation practices in operation, the tying of past, present and future together in the trajectory of the case, and through the anticipatory accounts of evidential requirements and professional accountability. 'Facting' thus refers to the process through which 'facts' of the case from past material records are worked up anew, with highly consequential inferences for parent identity, with situated resources for assessing and shoring up the credibility of these accounts. It is through this process that deviant parent identities are accomplished as 'fixed' as evidence upon which to base institutional next steps.

In addition to describing 'facting' as a members' method central child protection, these analyses provide detail of the social organisation of court-based social work, which raises questions about how court-oriented and court-based social work cohere. Few ethnographic studies describe child protection interactions in court, or the occasioned space of the court in and through which social workers, parents and professionals accomplish court work. This is unsurprising given difficulties of access but it is problematic as the courts remain invisible to researchers and perhaps more importantly, to the parents who may find themselves within them. Drawing on data from the court is potentially contentious, particularly in light of the arguments made by the Transparency Project (2019) that limited transparency is problematic in a system involving people experiencing the brunt of cuts to public services and legal aid, and through which the number of children in care continues to rise. Attending to

the social organisation of change practices in this 'invisible' space is therefore timely. The court is accomplished as an occasion where child protection change practice as usual ends as seen in the exclusionary practices of the sociomaterial affordances of the court. The shift in the primary categorial relationship of social worker-client that characterises pre-court social work, from working alongside and advocating for, to working apart and as adversarial to parents, presents practical difficulties for social workers as effectively supporting parents and being a 'competent' professional in the exclusionary spaces of the court appear at odds with one another. It would be worthwhile to consider how 'good' social work with families can translate to 'good' social work in court, and whether this is even possible.



## Chapter Eight

### Discussion

The central claim of this thesis is that a primary project of child protection practice is creating parental change, which in high risk cases occurs via the accomplishment of trajectories of transformation or trajectories of 'unchangeable' deviant identity. The activities of professional vision in child protection are tied to the project of transforming and 'fixing' parental selves. A parent does not enter into interactions with a social worker based on an innate problematic identity, but, rather these identities are worked up and *occassioned* through child protection case work. Identity work is central to social workers' efforts to build foundations for their work, as a key form of evidence, accounts of parental selves are arguably characterised by greater uncertainty than those of a material nature. Attending to members' categorisation practices enabled me to show the specific methods in and through which this work is accomplished. Specifically, it enabled me to show that identities are not innate and similarly that categories and facts do not have innate properties, rather they are all accomplished in situ, and are highly consequential for social workers' professional accountability and parents' access to their children. Ethnomethodological ethnography offered the means through which to describe these members' practices as they unfolded across cases, and how professional 'change methods' are constituted in and through their use in particular practice contexts.

This discussion elaborates upon each of these arguments across three sections. The first summarises key 'change methods' in child protection settings and outlines the value of the detailed description of these practices in cutting across attempts to 'improve' practice that are not grounded in practice. The second outlines how the findings of this thesis extend previous descriptions of person, space, and time categories in the membership categorisation literature through elaborating on the practices of mapping and projections, and argues for the potential value of incorporating ethnomethodological sensibilities into social work research and practice (de Montigny, 2020; Housley and Fitzgerald, 2000). The final section outlines the possibilities and limitations of ethnomethodological ethnography for work studies through a review of this thesis. While each section has a particular audience in mind: researchers and policy makers, ethnomethodologists, and social work lecturers and

practitioners, respectively, there are inevitable cross overs and threads that run between them. As a whole, this chapter presents the argument for attending to the situated accomplishment of 'change methods' in work practices as a means to undercut ill-founded assumptions of a professional project aimed at 'empowerment' through partnership working and co-production.

### **'Change methods' in child protection settings**

This thesis has charted and described key methods through which parental change or lack thereof is achieved in child protection. It has described how social workers objectivate parental selves into workable objects. When referring to the objectivation of parental selves, I refer to the broadest formulation of the practices in which social workers and parents are engaged in child protection change projects, those which allow for accounts of the type of parent one was, one is, and one should be, in order to safely care for their child. It is through these accounts that parents become 'workable' categories in child protection. Through the analysis, Liberman's (2013) description of objectivation as a process of: 'Account (highlighting) → Confirmation → Objectivation → Social Amnesia' was evident as person, time and space categories were objectivated as resources in discussion. Crucially, these processes were layered and included the objectivation of a series of methodically produced resources, such as 'moral objects' and 'formal facts', to achieve the project of parental self-transformation. In the following section, I describe the accomplishment of 'moral objects' and 'formal facts' to demonstrate their practical utility in child protection. I outline the consequentiality of 'social amnesia' in the context of child protection practice, considering how once a situated assessment of parental identity is made, the methods that led to its production no longer feature as part of the talk. I argue that attending to these methods enables us to see 'professional vision' in child protection and that this understanding is essential for policy makers and researchers seeking to understand child protection as it is, rather than how they may want it to be.

### Accomplishing moral objects

Moral objects are a method through which the social worker produces a formulation of parental identity, that generate possibilities for parental responses. Through these responses the social worker can establish whether a parent engaged in a problematic act, whether a parent is engaging with support to change their ways, and whether a

parent understands the moral nature of the work, thus moral objects are also central evidential resources in child protection. Social workers place different moral objects on the table in assessment to see what parents do with them. Parents may treat these objects as moral, be that through denial, remorse, or mitigation, which in turn allows for the possibility of the situated accomplishment or projection of transformable categories. By contrast, a failure to 'pick up' moral objects from the categorical table, presents an accountable matter for the social worker, indicating how forms of acknowledgement, or lack thereof, of these items *as* moral objects has interactional and institutional consequences. Social workers make use of moral objects to account for in situ assessments and decisions, however small, relating to a parent's categorial status, character, capacity for engagement and change, and projected institutionalised future. As seen in the core group, social workers also use moral objects to build projected institutional futures that through practices of mapping and distal spatial talk (Smith, 2017), also project the accountable rights and responsibilities of parties to a core group for enacting a child protection plan. The accomplishment of 'moral objects' is a key means through which social workers and parents accomplish trajectories of change, and through which the social worker sets out accountable expectations through assessment and planning.

The consequentiality of accomplishing moral objects varies between occasions of their use. In the assessment sessions in Chapter Five, they worked as a way of transforming a parent into a workable category. They also acted as an in situ 'test' of the suitability of a parent's responses to proposed concerns and were central to moving talk on and framing talk of institutional possibilities that followed. In the core group in Chapter Six, the formal nature of their introduction as being previously agreed left less room for manoeuvre and bounded the possible resources with which the core group could work, with all parties to the core group taking up resources set out by the social worker to account for the parent's progress. The accomplishment of moral objects in the core group through scaling re-iterated the spoiled parental identity and the conditions through which the group considered it may be transformed. This worked like a 'degradation ceremony' in which the social worker denounced the father to witnesses through working up a spoiled identity, reconstituting the father as a 'perpetrator', as social object requiring work (Garfinkel, 1956). It is through the taking up of these categories alongside the category of 'perpetrator' that the accomplishment of 'transformables' was possible, and therefore also the shift from Arthur the person

to the 'perpetrator', the object of focus. In both the core group and assessment sessions, the successful accomplishment of moral objects enabled the parent to be objectivated as a work object, a parental self amenable to transformation.

The presentation of moral objects is a central 'change method' in child protection. Not only do they enable a social worker to make in situ assessments of a parent's character and capacity to change, they also enable the accomplishment of both positive and negative case trajectories. The positive form is seen in the accomplishment of 'transformables'. Transformable categories are spoiled identities with the built-in possibility of a category switch to a safer category that can only be built if a parent treats the spoiled identity as requiring moral accounting. Social workers tie category switches to parental engagement with relevant service provision and to accounts of behaviour change. By contrast, the negative form is seen in the accomplishment of 'unchangeable identities'. These are spoiled identity categories with the built-in projection of stasis. Social workers tie 'unchangeable identities' to dispreferred and incongruous interactional responses from parents, such as denials of a spoiled identity category or of the inference of a spoiled identity established through accounts of the 'facts' of the case. It is worth highlighting once again that moral objects are an essential method in and through which parental change, or lack thereof, is accomplished. They are the means through which social workers and parents co-produce workable parent identities, and the means through which social workers make in situ decisions and build future trajectories about the level of access a parent can have with their child based on generalisations about the 'type' of parent that span beyond the current interaction into a projected future (Hall and Matarese, 2014). Understanding and describing the fine-grained detail of such high-stakes interaction is therefore essential.

### Accomplishing formal facts

One method through which 'unchangeable identities' are accomplished in child protection is 'facting'. 'Facting' refers to the broad objectivation practices through which social workers and allied professionals highlight the facts of the case as a work problem to be solved (Sheehan, 2021). Formal facts refer to material records or accounts of material records worked up as objective evidence with implications for the type of parent one is. Through 'facting', these accounts are reified to the extent that they lose all sense of their socially constructed nature and are used as resources to boundary interactions and institutional possibilities. Establishing the 'formal facts' of

the case as inferring a 'type' of parent is highly consequential for whether and how parental selves can be transformed. This is a layered process, built in and through a series of objectivation practices that specify the possible resources upon which a fact rests, that can be challenged or remade. I described how key facts were objectivated as resources to work up the 'type of case' with consequential inferences about parent and social worker identity, professional accountability, parental accountability, and institutional possibilities, each of which boundaried parental change.

Past 'facts' are worked up anew to work up the current case in a way that echoes work on the relevance of 'prior talk' in child protection (Juhila et al., 2014b). I described how a 'past' finding of fact of 'non accidental injury' and the associated inferences of parental deviance was used as a resource in and through which to work up a 'new' fact of 'concealed pregnancy'. Both 'old' and 'new' facts were situationally produced as having past and future reach. Attending to this process enabled the observation of the professional logic of generalisation in action, that is, "if a parent lied once, they are likely to do so again", which shows how even though identities do not necessarily travel with parents, moral inferences about identity in accounts of historic records offer resources through which in situ formulations and projections of identity are achieved. This was observable as social workers and allied professionals topicalised the logic of drawing upon moral inferences from 'past' facts in present discussions.

In Chapter Seven, the establishment of formal facts tied to spoiled parental identities allowed quick judgements to be made as a matter of moral accountability for social workers facing the scrutiny of the court. Two points are worth reiterating here, the first, the relationality of social worker and parent identity, and the second, the way institutional demands reflexively shape how cases are constructed. There were arguably two possible ways the 'concealed pregnancy' could have been accounted for, the first, as a legitimate response by a mother who mistrusts social services having experienced the removal of her older child from her care, and the second, as a devious attempt by a mother seeking to hide her pregnancy from social services due to her own moral failings. Through the social worker's account, it is possible to see how the second formulation was taken up alongside the reification of the past finding of 'non accidental injury' leaving little room for discussion of alternative formulation of the mother's reasoning. It is also possible to see how the 'concealment' and associated inferences about the mother's character were tied to the temporal emergency of

having to seek an 'interim care order' and to the professional problem of having to complete assessment in short timescales for the court, with attended professional scrutiny. When parents and social workers' identities are relationally tied, and in turn, these identities reflexively shape and are reflexively shaped by (temporal) institutional demands, the importance of attending to these situated accomplishments becomes evident. Only then is it possible to offer descriptive detail to claims about the potential pitfalls of relationally accomplished social worker-parent identity (Gibson, 2020). Only then is it possible to see just how the institutional demands of court oriented work can shape the possibilities of in situ decision making, as other studies suggest (Broadhurst et al., 2012; Holt and Kelly, 2016).

A further point to add here is how the description of 'facting' in Chapter Seven showed the centrality of achieving situated intersubjective objectivity in discussion of 'the case'. That is, it showed how members introduce and pick up shared resources to account for the 'problem' of the case, in order to provide for discussion of next steps, even as members' understanding of these resources are not unified. The capacity to achieve smooth, flowing talk for particular occasions is privileged over the dissection of meaning and accounting for divergent opinions, as was observable in the looked after children's review and the case management meeting. When the object of professional work is an identity categorisation, the process through which moral inferences are established as given via the production of facts becomes highly significant. As we saw in the final analysis chapter, inferences about moral character were tied to assessments of a parent's capacity to 'engage' which shaped the possibilities of talk and therefore the possibilities of action across the case. Even when a fact, such as concealment, is not directly relevant to the safety of a child, and if it is ultimately not relevant to plans for the future care of that child, it can still be highly relevant to the outcome of a case due to the way in which it is worked up to infer deviant moral character. This is particularly so in court-oriented social work where a social worker has short timescales in which to produce a coherent and defensible assessment of parenting capacity, and a parent's capacity to change, in the knowledge of future scrutiny from the court. Given the high stakes of these interactions, it would be worthwhile to further study the objectivation of inference rich resources tied to identity categories and specifically, the interactional and institutional consequences of the 'social amnesia' of the intersubjective origins of facts and categories.

### Fixing change in court

Attending to 'change' in court-based social work showed the contrast to child protection social work in the proximity between parents and social workers, the possibilities for parents to be heard, and the topicalization of the expectations of professional accountability. Whilst 'change methods' are always accomplished in situationally specific ways, the affordances of the court space require that social workers and parents deviate from practice as usual. The social worker-parent relation is no longer one characterised by proximity and accomplishing possibilities for change and is instead characterised by separation and 'fixing' change. The social organisation of moral work differs, as in the court space, legal professionals hold the social worker accountable and work up caricatures of parents as 'unchangeable'. Alongside this, social workers experience a shift in the expectations of professional accountability, a devaluing of their primary evidential resources - the accounts of parents, and a privileging of written accounts amenable to dissection in the court. Where the social worker's daily work rests in and benefits from a serious engagement with uncertainty, the work of the court is to create a sense of objectivity and clarity as to the best way forward for the child.

Within the court itself, the language of participation in which the court design guide (HMCTS, 2019) and the PLO are couched do not appear to be matched by the affordances of the space in which proceedings occur. Families and social workers, unless giving evidence, are to be seen by the judge, but not heard. Mulcahy (2007, 392) argues that court space affords relations to the judge characterised by segregation and surveillance rather than participatory justice. A contrasting set up can be seen the Family Drug and Alcohol Courts (FDAC) designed to be an arena where parents see the same judge, speak to the judge, only have legal representatives when requested, and receive support from a multi-disciplinary team (Harwin et al., 2018). This court is designed to move away from the adversarial system of the family court. Given the affordances of the court have specific consequences for limiting the voices of parents and social workers, and limiting the support parents might hope to receive, perhaps it is time to give serious consideration to challenging the status quo of the family courts and move towards more 'inclusive' spatial arrangements? How different might it have looked had Parker's parents been heard and had received support as their older children were removed from their care, and crucially, had the expectation of and support for 'transformation' continued, albeit in a likely very limited way?

### 'Change methods' and social work research and policy

Two key analytic insights from the detailed description of 'change methods' in child protection hold relevance for social work research and social work policy. The first is the importance of attuning to the situated production of identity in child protection practice. The second is the individualised nature of the project of parental change observable in professional vision. I outline these insights and consider the questions they raise for research methods, for practice, and for policy. In doing so, I argue for the importance of any attempts to shift policy and practice to be grounded in the evidence of practice itself.

Activities of professional vision in child protection are tied to the project of transforming and 'fixing' parental selves but rather than working with an 'innate' problematic identity, social workers and parents co-accomplish accounts of parental deviance and possible routes to transformation. To do this they, through talk, produce workable parental selves, which are the key phenomena around which 'change' in child protection social work is socially organised. The term 'fixing' here refers to the work that goes into accomplishing a parental identity as workable, or not, by making it appear static, as a basis from which to work. The cases in this thesis did not involve children participating in their own objectivation into workable risk objects (Wattam, 1992) as two were unborn babies and another was in local authority care. Nonetheless, the membership categorisation device of family (in these cases, mum, dad, baby) is what enabled this laser focus on accomplishing parental selves. As I discuss in the next section, through this MCD, social workers were able to map beyond the space of the office and project beyond the present moment. Following the 'change methods' of child protection enabled the description of social workers' perception in action, just what was attended to in situ and how, and the possibilities this generated. Through this we see how person or identity categories such as 'perpetrator of domestic abuse' whilst tied to formal case categorisations (risk of physical and emotional abuse), do not contain a simplistic set of predicates that can be transposed from one case to another, but a highly specific set worked up in situ for the project of parental change.

It follows that any attempt to collate evidence based on formal categories, whether those from child protection practice or those formulated by the researcher, must be accompanied by research that attends to how such categories are accomplished.



Without doing so, researchers risk making suggestions to practitioners that entirely miss the stuff of practice (Stokoe et al., 2021; 2020), and fail to see the inference rich nature of category work that makes up their own work, and the work of child protection social work. A related point here is that not only are identities and categories accomplished in situ as resources social workers and parents draw on in their work, but they are co-accomplished. Child protection social workers have methodical practices to transform parents into workable categories, and that capacity for the co-accomplishment of transformable or unchangeable identities requires parents too. It follows that when seeking to understand social work 'skills', those skills must be considered to be relationally achieved, as opposed to an instrumental set of skills that social workers do to families.

The very fact that a workable parental self is a requirement for child protection change projects makes evident the individualised nature of change in social work (Featherstone et al., 2018). Whilst this work is co-accomplished with parents, the rules of the game are not made explicit by social workers. Parents who understand the requirement for moral work and who are able to achieve this in interaction by working up personal deficiencies that correspond to available services are able to successfully accomplish trajectories of transformation. Those that do not understand or refuse to play by the rules of the game do not have the same access to service provision as they refuse to accept or evade the possibilities of accounting for their morally problematic identity. The value of this work is that it shows in action the working up of what may be termed 'resistance' as leading to the projection of negative trajectories (Juhila et al., 2014a). This isn't merely about how a parent "behaves" in interaction, but whether or not they understand the necessity of accepting the social worker's formulation of the case. This in fact appears to be a central role of the production of moral objects, following which social workers wait for a parent to respond and treat their responses like answers to a test, a test of whether a parent understands and accepts the social worker's formulation and associated inferences, and the moral expectations of their work.

A logic seen across all of the analysis chapters is that for parental change to be possible, a parent needs to accept the social worker's formulation of the problem, specifically the deviant parent identity specified or inferred, including via the objectivation of the 'facts' of the case. This instrumental approach to parental change as key means to

protect children is not new, indeed, it has been described in ethnographies over the past three decades (White 1997, Parton et al., 1997). Although the evidential and procedural requirements have changed, and although the interactions in this thesis were observed in a child protection team in Wales known for 'best practice', the practices through which parental change is achieved appear to be broadly consistent. Whilst the project of parental transformation is co-accomplished and relational, it results in a highly individualised focus on the parent, as it rests on being able to turn that parent into a workable object, albeit a workable object that both the social worker and parent can work on. It would be entirely reasonable for a parent to believe it better not to admit anything that could constitute wrongdoing to a social worker with the power to remove their child, particularly if they were unaware of the consequences of doing so. At a time where discourses of 'co-production' and 'partnership working' continue to be espoused, is it possible that work that attempts to appear less directive result in a lack of transparency of professional logic? Co-accomplishing parental transformation is a clear route to building positive case trajectories. Would it be fairer to parents to be transparent about this? Whilst some may fear that in being explicit with parents, social workers might lose the capacity to test the legitimacy of parent responses, or worse, lead to the poorly termed 'disguised compliance', this is unlikely to be the case. As we saw in the first two analysis chapters, social workers have tried and tested methods for establishing incongruity and inauthenticity in parental accounts.

Seeing the particular problems social workers highlight in assessment, core groups, and in the pre court process, it becomes evident that a relatively stable element of child protection social work across interactions is the focus on parental capacity to change, and routes to parental change. Describing professional vision in action shows the highly individualising nature of practice in that the focus is on individual parents. Social workers require parents to demonstrate responsibility for their proposed problematic identity in order to demonstrate responsibility to their children. The detail of these analyses extend work on stigma in child protection that has tied the seemingly paradoxical way in which producing stigma is an aspect of good social work (Gibson, 2020). I am not suggesting that child protection social workers are 'bad' people or that they are 'bad' at their jobs, rather I am suggesting that moral work is central to child protection endeavour and rather than playing that down, perhaps it would be fairer to make this explicit. We know that all too often attempts to improve

practice through policy change are subsumed into existing ways of practice (Hall and Slembrouck, 2014; Broadhurst et al., 2012). Whilst child protection remains highly individualised in practice, policy makers would do well to heed the warning that tinkering at the edges is unlikely to lead to a more egalitarian endeavour. Unless the proposed changes involve wholesale sweeping reform, how things get done are likely to stay the same. Under these conditions, opening up discussion about the value of being candid about child protection practice as a highly individualised moral endeavour seems wise.

### **Contribution to and possibilities of ethnomethodological studies of category practices**

Alongside findings relevant to social work practice, research and policy, this thesis produced findings relevant to ethnomethodological studies of category practices. Each of the analysis chapters took seriously the inference rich nature of categorisation practices and demonstrated, to different degrees, how they are the means in and through which child protection is accomplished. Membership categorisation analysis (MCA) has in the past decade renewed its focus from the study of person categories to non-person categories such as time and space (Hester and Eglin, 1997). I briefly describe how the findings are relevant to studies of person, time and space categories and draw on existing literature to make the argument for further studies of categorisation practices in social work.

#### Person Categories

MCA scholars concerned with 'person' categories may be interested in the detail of the findings that 1. social workers produce deviant person categories for parents to take up *as* moral via 'moral objects' and 2. social workers and parents co-accomplish category switches (Hester and Eglin, 1997) from deviant identities to rehabilitating identities through 'transformables'. The notion that members can make inferences through membership category work is one that has been taken up in MCA (see Sacks, 1989; Fitzgerald et al., 2008). This work relates person categories tied to assumed competences, knowledge, rights, and obligations, and makes plain that these categories can do fundamentally moral work. The ways in which members accomplish deviant person categories, the ways these are negotiated, resisted, or even switched is evident throughout this thesis as social work deals in the main in 'problem talk' (Hester, 2016) and more specifically, problem talk about identity. The description

of moral objects echoes Hester and Eglin's (1997) description of the machinery and consequences of shifting from one person category to another. For example, they trace the moral judgement involved in membership categorisation using the categories victim-perpetrator and show how categories can be transformed and shift the moral meaning of a predicate, or vice versa. In this thesis, we saw how it was the acceptance of a deviant identity alongside a display of remorse that enabled the category of 'perpetrator' to be transformed to 'rehabilitating'. Note that in the assessment sessions there was no requirement for a parental identity to be rehabilitated, parents merely needed to be in the process of, on a trajectory of positive change. Through the accomplishment of 'transformables' we see how person and time categories are tied and offer the means through which highly consequential case trajectories are accomplished in child protection.

### Time Categories

In describing the process of accomplishing 'transformables', this thesis has continued work that shows how moral categorisations are highly consequential for interactional and institutional purposes. Perhaps more interestingly for studies of categorisation practices, it described how via an in situ category switch from 'deviant' to 'transformable' social workers and parents also engaged in projections in and through which institutional trajectories were built. Time has been considered in three ways in ethnomethodological MCA, first as sequentiality, second as historic, third as a resource. All forms are relevant to talk in this thesis but perhaps the most interesting is that of time as resource that enables accounts of an 'extended vivid present' (Rawls, 2005).

In the flow of interaction, sequential time is a something members make use of, as one thing follows another, a second event can change or give meaning to the first. It is through this relationship that appreciations, failures, corrections can be attempted (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973), including in discussions of allegations of child abuse with parents (Dennis and Leigh, 2020). Sequential sense-making is evident throughout the data and received particular attention in the discussion of 'moral objects' which were sequentially built in relation to how a client handled morality (Sheehan and Smith, forthcoming). I described how the social worker responded to a refusal to accomplish possible moral objects as moral and eventual production of a minimal denial, by sequentially escalating her formulations from a general object (allegations), to a

specification (the details of allegations), to an extreme formulation (possible murder). In doing so, she tied an action category (Jayyusi, 2014), which here was the expected emotional response of anger from the client in the face of allegations, to the extreme formulations of violence and murder against their partner. Through these descriptions, the role of action categories in the moral order of assessment talk becomes evident. Further work considering emotions as action categories in child protection could offer further description of social work methods of making in situ assessments of plausibility and authenticity.

Historic time is also evident in the data seen as social workers present facts from case chronologies and ask parents to reflect upon past meetings and past behaviours. In doing so, situated accounts place a prior event into a larger context of order (Rawls, 2005). Importantly though, these are accounts in the vivid present, rather than part of the original sequential order. The way in which prior 'formal facts', police reports and prior meetings were brought into interaction shows how accounts of historic time are highly consequential in social work practice, as they are tied to the expectation of moral work, of showing remorse, transformation or completing a previously agreed action. Crucially however, past accounts must be built anew, 'each next first time' (Garfinkel and Rawls, 2002), and are understood within the sequentiality of unfolding interaction. Summarising Rawls (2005), members need to be able to see what others are doing, to anticipate the prospective ordering of interaction, to be able to produce a sequential interpretation or a retrospective account. This prospective ordering was observable in the production of transformables, where a parent accepted being in the process of change, with the expectation that they would have to account for said change at a later date.

Sequentiality and historic time do not present a full enough picture of sense-making, as the institutional nature of social work interaction means that workers come to interaction with specific projects, albeit that those projects are accomplished in and through interaction. Staying with the production of 'transformables', we see that time is also used as a resource by members, as orienting to and accounting for the expected future actions of parents. This is akin to what Jawoski and Fitzgerald (2008) call 'anticipatory discourse', where the immediate consequentiality of accounts is held alongside an orientation to future accounts. It was in and through moral objects that in the core group the social worker was able draw on the resources of past documents

and accounts and present documents and accounts, to sketch out negative predications for the safety of the mother and baby *if things don't change in future*. In the context of social work practice, de Montigny (1995) calls this the in situ creation of an “operational future” concerned with how to bring about a here and now possible future state, though he does not detail the practices through which this is achieved. In this thesis, it is through the production of transformables that parties to the core group transform the situated moral consequences of risk predictions by accounting for parental change already achieved alongside future predicted parental change. This shows how positive anticipatory discourses are reflexively tied to their negative counterpart, how time as a resource shapes situated prospective accounts. Linking past, present and future actions might be considered as an ‘extended vivid present’ through which social workers, parents, family and professionals are able to achieve change talk within the extended institutional temporality of the ‘case’. Whilst parental change may not be linear (Leigh and Wilson, 2020), the in situ accomplishment of projected forward momentum is built through the resource of linear time.

Time related categories are used as resources that organise and are organised in and through social work practice that afford possibilities for case building, planning, and situated assessments of parental capacity to change. Time tends to be discussed as a thing there is a lack of in social work. Indeed, few studies have re-specified time as a members’ resource. One exception is White (1998) who showed how time acts as a resource in producing linear conceptions of change over time and in rationing resources. This thesis has only touched upon an analysis of time as offering detailed description would have required the separation of ‘time’ from its centrality to the category work of producing workable parental selves, the focus of this thesis. Still, it offers a useful description of social workers’ practical orientation to and invocation of time in and through category work as central to the explication of child protection change methods.

### Space Categories

This thesis also takes inspiration from and contributes to studies of space categories in MCA. Space has always been a concern of MCA. Sacks (1995) attended to locative and spatial categorisation devices for organising telling stories. Schegloff (1972) attended to ‘place formulations’ in talk through an analysis of members selection of ‘correct’ place terms and spatial pro-terms such as ‘in’, ‘there’ and ‘here’ as categorial

accomplishments achieved through the relationship between speaker and hearer and their treatment of context, 'who we are' and 'where we are'. Of particular interest for this thesis is the production of 'distal spatial talk' (Smith, 2017), that is, talk concerning a setting other than where the talk is being produced. Specifically, how that talk accomplishes and displays categorial knowledge in institutional contexts. I engaged with this as I described the practice of 'mapping' in the child protection core group.

Mapping refers to how social workers map categorial relations of family, professionals, domestic space and their tied rights and responsibilities, holding a complex set of relations and expectations at any one time, and when needed can tie these to the definition of the problem in a given setting. In assessment sessions, mapping was achieved in and through the categories 'partner' and the device 'family', to map domestic space and make sense of the father's proximity to the mother and unborn baby as a means to assess the likelihood of him assaulting the mother. In the core group, mapping was achieved through the category devices of family, institutional space, and domestic space. This enabled the social worker to make sense of the web of connection, rights and responsibilities between the parties to the core group and produce an account of the resulting expectations. Interestingly, mapping in both settings set out the expectations for the current interaction and accomplished the social worker's professional vision as extending outside of institutional space and the vivid present, projecting into domestic space, and producing expectations within an extended spatio-temporal landscape. Whilst the social worker is unlikely to be able to see with her own eyes or directly police the prospective actions to be reported on set out via mapping, she will be able to draw these as 'prior talk' in future interactions (Juhila et al., 2014b). In this sense, mapping practices demonstrate the expectations of prospective moral accountability as social work surveillance in action.

### Ethnomethodological re-specification

It is clear, I hope, from the descriptions of 'change methods' produced in this thesis that ethnomethodological studies of membership categorisation practices hold potential for social work research. The value of taking an ethnomethodological re-specification of identity, time, place is that it takes into account the situated and socially produced nature of these social orders. This thesis describes how, through their use, things that might be called identity, place and time are relevant to social workers' situated practices of change talk, and recognisably so for others. Describing

the in situ production of these social orders enables a deeper understanding of the taken for granted categories and logic in and through which child protection practice is built. It opens up a discursive space that affords the possibility of questioning the logics of practice, as well as the possibility of refining the practical methods that social workers already employ.

The same sensibilities are also potentially valuable to practitioners. Researchers have previously advocated for social workers learning about ethnomethodological sensibilities in order to understand the local accomplishment of their everyday practice (see de Montigny, 2020; Housley and Fitzgerald, 2000). The practice of slowing down and breaking up in situ interaction to explicate elements of just how it was put together in the first place and just how particular meaning was made could support social workers to understand the consequentiality of their inferential and moral work. How would it look if social workers could fully explicate their practices of professional vision in spaces for learning about and questioning their professional practices? Might this give them the confidence to demonstrate that professional vision to clients, not just via inference, but as explicitly topicalised in their practice, thus offering parents the best hope of understanding their expectations? Might this also lead to an honest assessment of the key projects of child protection work?

Ethnomethodological sensibilities can support social work practitioners, researchers and policy makers alike in following Hester and Eglin's (2017: 479) cautionary advice:

"When those of us who wish to intervene in the conduct of human affairs in pursuit of something no less than the survival of civilization, do so intervene, we are well advised never for one moment to forget the mutually accomplished, here-and-now-occasioned character of what we do in any actual case (adapted from Eglin 2009: 53-54)."

### **Ethnomethodological ethnography for work studies**

Ethnographic research offered the possibility of shadowing social workers as they worked with families over the course of ten months. This afforded me access to a variety of spaces of child protection practice, from assessment sessions at home, professional meetings, supervision, office talk, to court. Taking an ethnographic approach did not allow me access to 'all' of child protection practice. For example, I did not observe practice in the car and observed very little practice with children and



child protection statutory visits, all of which are key modes of child protection practice. Nonetheless, a focus on generalisable members' methods meant it was possible to show the logics of change and methods to produce or 'fix' parental transformation across domains of practice. The methods drawn upon in this thesis enabled me to outline 1. How social workers engage in efforts that delimit or enable parental change; 2. How accounts of parental change are achieved in and through normative categorisation practices over time; and 3. Some of the professional methods involved in charting and accounting for such change. The generalisability of these methods situates this thesis within a broader research endeavour that explores 'professional' work as an interactional accomplishment

Ethnographic shadowing of social workers with individual families over time allowed me to follow the phenomena of child protection change methods over time. Social workers themselves account for change over time in their assessments of and plans to improve parenting capacity. Thus, observing this phenomena as it played out enabled me to follow social work methods longitudinally, and show social workers themselves make sense of change over time, for situated purposes. In the first two analysis chapters I described the in-situ practices in and through which the social orders of identity, time, and to a lesser degree, space, are produced in and through their use as resources in child protection change work, and their utility in the production of case trajectories within an extended institutional temporality. In the final analysis chapter, I provided an account of a case over time, and described the practices involved in turning something (accounts, past actions or inactions, assumed motivations, professional expertise) into 'found' facts, that vary across domains and in their consequences. An ethnographic approach offered a combination of institutional and analytic mobility that enabled both a focus on the situated detail, and the unfolding of cases over time. Further, the ethnographic knowledge of these processes greatly enhanced my understanding of just what was going on in any given scene, as I could understand it in relation to its place in the 'case' as a whole.

Ethnomethodological ethnography offered a means through which to ensure resolute attention to members' practices as analysis shifted from the detailed to the broader sense of a case. Attending to members' practices supported a determined focus on how social workers see their work problems, and the ways in which they go about resolving them. This enabled me to produce a more clearly defined and manageable

piece of research, something not to be overlooked when considering the multiple possibilities of doctoral research. Ethnomethodological sensibilities also enabled me to make my competence in the field a resource rather than a problem in data collection and analysis, which was particularly evident when negotiating access, and when meditating on what members were up to. My competency in the field of social work supported me to write fieldnotes that described the unfolding detail of social work, and produce analyses that made 'change practices' visible and tractable. Without drawing upon ethnomethodological commitments it is likely that this thesis would have missed these lived organisational details. Whilst humble in its aspirations, the thesis makes known key change methods, that is, the mundane, common-sense logics, through which child protection operates.

### **Plausibility, recognisability, and generalisation**

The plausibility and recognisability of the findings in this research rest upon an ethnomethodological sense of the generalisability of members' methods. It follows that this study has not sought to generate a universal account of social work, rather, it sought to offer empirical generalisations of members' methods, and particularly the generalisable perceptual and interactional practices of 'professional vision' (Goodwin, 1994). The emphasis upon in situ interaction does not result from "opposition between the general and the specific, but from their conjunction: general policies, principles, rules, standards, and the like have to be applied in particular circumstances, and it is just as much in satisfaction of these generalities as in departures from them that 'situated' action is to be observed" (Sharrock and Randall 2004: 191). Two points are of note here, the first, that what we know as broader social processes of course only occur in and through situated interaction, and the second, that members' methods have a regularity that are rule-like and are conducted on the basis of generalised sociocultural understandings (Schutz 1970; Winch 1958). It follows then that an adequate test of the plausibility of this research is whether the regularities specified in the discussion of 'moral objects', 'formal facts', and 'mapping' are of practical familiarity to social workers, as well as intelligible and recognisable to those engaged in other work studies.

This idea of practical familiarity fed into my decision to present the chapters and data as cases as social work is organised in and through this grouping. Perhaps a separate focus on how members accomplish and use identity, time, place as resources as

professional action could have produced a clearer delineation of these practices analytically. Yet, this would have risked a decontextualised account given that each of these categories were accomplished in a layered fashion and provided the means through which cases were accomplished. In delineating 'moral objects', 'facting', 'mapping' and 'trajectory building', the same risk is possible. These have been grouped as 'change methods' as each forms a method through which parental change or lack thereof is accomplished. It goes without saying that these are produced through 'categories-in-context' and that each component forms an essential aspect of the whole, the gestalt-contexture (Hester and Eglin, 2016; Garfinkel, 2002; Fele, 2008). Removing one component from its contexture, would leave it and the other elements with radically altered meaning (Fele, 2005)

## **Conclusion**

Social work research that takes seriously the generalisability of members' practices makes it possible to see the ways of knowing and rules of operation at play in the profession, and the built-in methods that objectivate parental selves as the legitimate work objects of the profession. Attending to the methods through which parental selves were objectivated and objectivated again in this research made it possible to observe the professional requirement to accomplish spoiled and transformable identities in social work practice. It is perhaps an unsurprising finding that parental selves are central work objects in child protection, yet it is a finding that firmly locates the institutional expectations of self-transformation in the observability of daily practices.

In this way the findings offer a way to understand situated trajectory building practices through which stigmatised identities are accomplished and transformed (Goffman, 1959a). Yet rather than being concerned with change in self beliefs, the thesis has demonstrated the interactional production of accountable category shifts, or lack thereof, throughout the development of case trajectories. The notion of selves becoming workable objects for professionals also has echoes of Rose's theoretical work on the 'psy' disciplines, who considered that the self is constructed to meet the requirements of institutional contexts through the internalisation of dominant images (Rose, 1990). However, whilst the operation of 'change methods' have implications for how parents are expected to produce accounts of responsible selves, considering only this element misses the highly practical nature of the work. Through describing the

observable professional logics in action, it is possible to see that the moral work of parental self-transformation, is not simply 'done by' social workers but *is* the very stuff of child protection social work.

Through describing 'change methods', highly individualising child protection professional vision becomes observable, even within a team well versed in notions of co-productive working. Three substantial questions for social work arise as a result. One, if we understand child protection practice to require highly individualised projects of parent self-transformation, is that how society wants social work to be? Two, if we accept that social work's purpose is primarily to protect children via projects of parental change, would it be of benefit to parents to be transparent about this? Three, if social workers could explicate their practices, could this give them the confidence to demonstrate their professional vision to clients, not just via inference, but as explicitly topicalised in their practice, thus offering parents the best hope of understanding the expectations of their joint work?

# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Ethics pending letter



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15 June 2018

Our ref: SREC/2783

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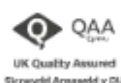
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Dear Lucy,

Your project entitled '*An exploration of decision making in child and family social work employing specific models of practice.*' has been reviewed by the School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee of Cardiff University.

The committee would like to acknowledge that this is a well-considered and detailed application. To receive SREC approval for your project and **before** you can begin your field work, you must confirm to me by email ([socsi-ethics@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:socsi-ethics@cardiff.ac.uk)) that you and your supervisor have discussed the conditions below and have taken the necessary action:

- Q4. Please confirm that you will contact the director of each local authority before making contact directly with social workers
- Confirm that you will seek contact via a social worker rather than your own contacts to ensure participants do not feel obliged to take part.
- Please confirm how you will manage participation should some members of the family (or professionals in the case of wider meetings) choose not to take part.
- Q4. Please confirm that you will issue information sheets to participants following contact by the social worker to allow them time to consider their involvement and also be able to contact you as the researcher with any questions. This should include a child friendly/easy read information sheet.
- Please can you address the following issues around consent:-
  - How will families give consent?
  - How will consent for 16 -17 year olds and ascent for those below the age of 16 be managed?
  - Ensure there will be a process in place for on-going consent as the nature of relationships change.
- Please consider how you will ensure participants do not feel unable to refuse to take part in the study when approached by services they have been supported by?
- Please confirm that all information sheets produced will take into account potentially low levels of literacy.
- Please consider your responses to Q10/11/12: whilst this is unknown, it is highly likely these will be 'yes' given the nature of the participants in the study.



Registered Charity, no. 1136855  
Elusen Gofrestredig, rhif 1136855

## Appendix 2: Response to Ethics Committee

The following list addresses each point of your letter. I can confirm that:

- I will contact the director of each local authority before making contact directly with social workers.
- I will seek contact with families via a social worker rather than my own contacts to ensure participants do not feel obliged to take part.
- If members of a family choose not to take part, the family will not participate in the research and any data held about the family will be destroyed. If the family do consent to participate and a professional chooses not to take part, for example, in a multi-agency meeting, I will leave that meeting and ensure all data relating to that professional is destroyed, but the family can still participate in other aspects of the research if they wish.
- Re: Q4. I will issue information sheets to participants following contact by the social worker to allow them time to consider their involvement and so they may contact me with any questions. This will include an easy read information sheet.
- Re issues of consent for families, children, and young people. If, having read the information sheet and met with me, the parents, or guardians of a family consent to participate and sign a consent form, the children and young people in the family will also be asked to participate. The children and young people will receive an easy read information sheet and can ask questions about the research before they assent or consent. If they choose to participate, they will be reminded at each session that consent is an ongoing process, and they may withdraw at any time and all information gathered relating to them will be destroyed. If they choose not to participate, I will not engage in research in the family home.
- I will endeavour to ensure that participants do not feel obliged to participate by providing two formal opportunities (initially via telephone contact with the social worker; and secondly when meeting me for the first time) to consent. I will ensure that the information sheet clearly states that their participation or non-participation will in no way affect the services they receive. As consent is an ongoing process, each time I have contact with participants I will remind them that they have the right to withdraw from the research at any time and all data relating to them will be destroyed.
- The information sheet provided to participants will be easy read and I will read out the key points as a matter of course, thus allowing for potentially low levels of literacy.
- Re my responses to Q10/11/12, I acknowledge that some participants in the study may have communication difficulties, be in or recently released from custody, or be engaging in illegal activities.
- Re: Q24/25. I recognise the limits on confidentiality and will make clear to all participants that if I am concerned that they may harm themselves or others (including via dangerous practice) that I will report this to the relevant organisations. Although I do not plan to collect data from families without the presence of a social worker, I will ensure that during access negotiations I am able to draw upon existing lone worker support within the teams being studied.
- Re: Q3. All data will be retained for five years.
- Re: Q32. all written hand notes will be kept in a secure location – in a locked draw within the CASCADE offices.

I hope that this addresses the points set out by the SREC and I look forward to being granted ethical approval.

## Appendix 3: Ethical approval letter



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Dear Lucy,

Your project entitled '*An exploration of decision making in child and family social work employing specific models of practice.*' has now been approved by the School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee of Cardiff University and you can now commence the project should all necessary forms of approval been received.

If you make any substantial changes with ethical implications to the project as it progresses you need to inform the SREC about the nature of these changes. Such changes could be: 1) changes in the type of participants recruited (e.g. inclusion of a group of potentially vulnerable participants), 2) changes to questionnaires, interview guides etc. (e.g. including new questions on sensitive issues), 3) changes to the way data are handled (e.g. sharing of non-anonymised data with other researchers).

In addition, if anything occurs in your project from which you think the SREC might usefully learn, then please do share this information with us.

All ongoing projects will be monitored and you will be obliged periodically to complete and return a SREC monitoring form.

Please inform the SREC when the project has ended.

Please use the SREC's project reference number above in any future correspondence.

Yn eiddo'r Prifysgol

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