

The extent of consent and other stories: from an ethnography of child protection services

17th Annual Ethnography Symposium, Cardiff – August 2024

Charlotte Waits | waitsCE@cardiff.ac.uk



CASCADE



Why focus on leadership? It can support (or hamper) change

*“... in creating change in children’s services, **culture eats training for breakfast** ... the local authority in this study was very typical of local authorities in the UK: it was **heavily driven by procedural understandings** of what social work practice should be.”*

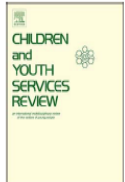
Children and Youth Services Review 88 (2018) 180–190



Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Children and Youth Services Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/chilyouth



A randomized controlled trial of training in Motivational Interviewing for child protection



Donald Forrester^{a,*}, David Westlake^c, Mike Killian^b, Vivi Antonopoulou^c, Michelle McCann^c, Angela Thurnham^c, Roma Thomas^c, Charlotte Waits^c, Charlotte Whittaker^c, Dougal Hutchison^c

^a Cardiff University, Cascade Centre, SOCSI, Glamorgan Building, Edward VII Avenue, Cardiff CF10 3XQ, UK

^b University of Texas at Arlington, School of Social Work, United States

^c University of Bedfordshire, Tilda Goldberg Centre for Social Work and Social Care, Luton, UK

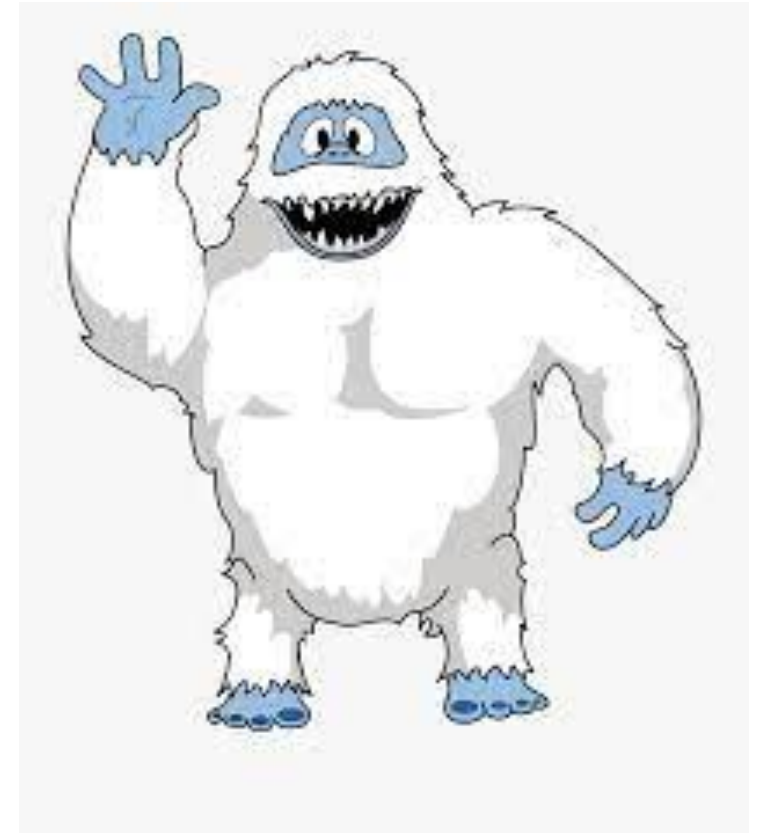
What is leadership in children's social care?

- Elusive ...

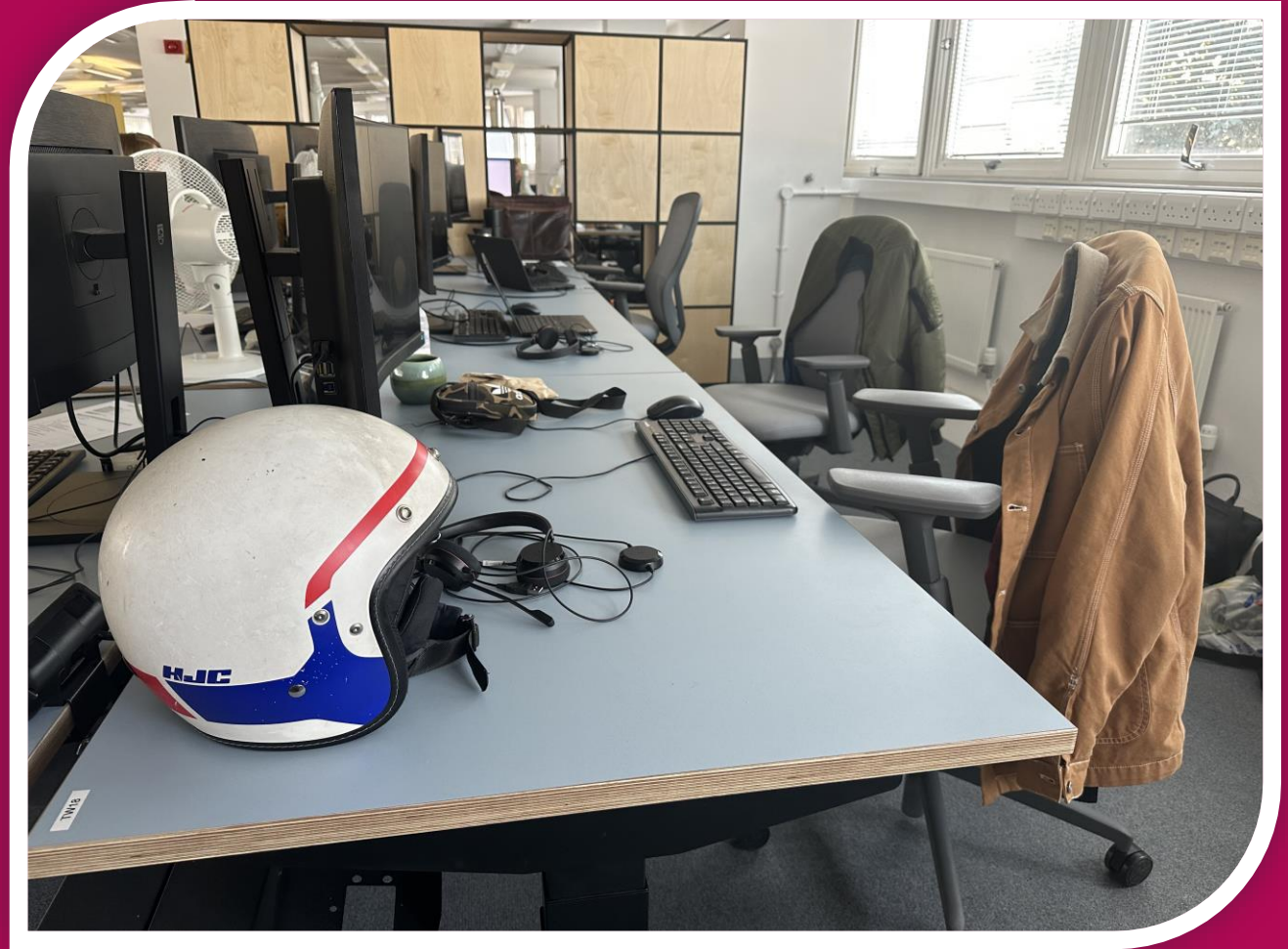
"The qualities that make a successful children's services leader aren't straightforward to define – but inspections show that they're very obvious when present – and strikingly so when they aren't."

(Eleanor Schooling, Ofsted, 2016)

- If the inspectorate don't know ... opportunity to research leadership practice in this context.



**Enter ethnography ...
subject to consent**



CASCADE

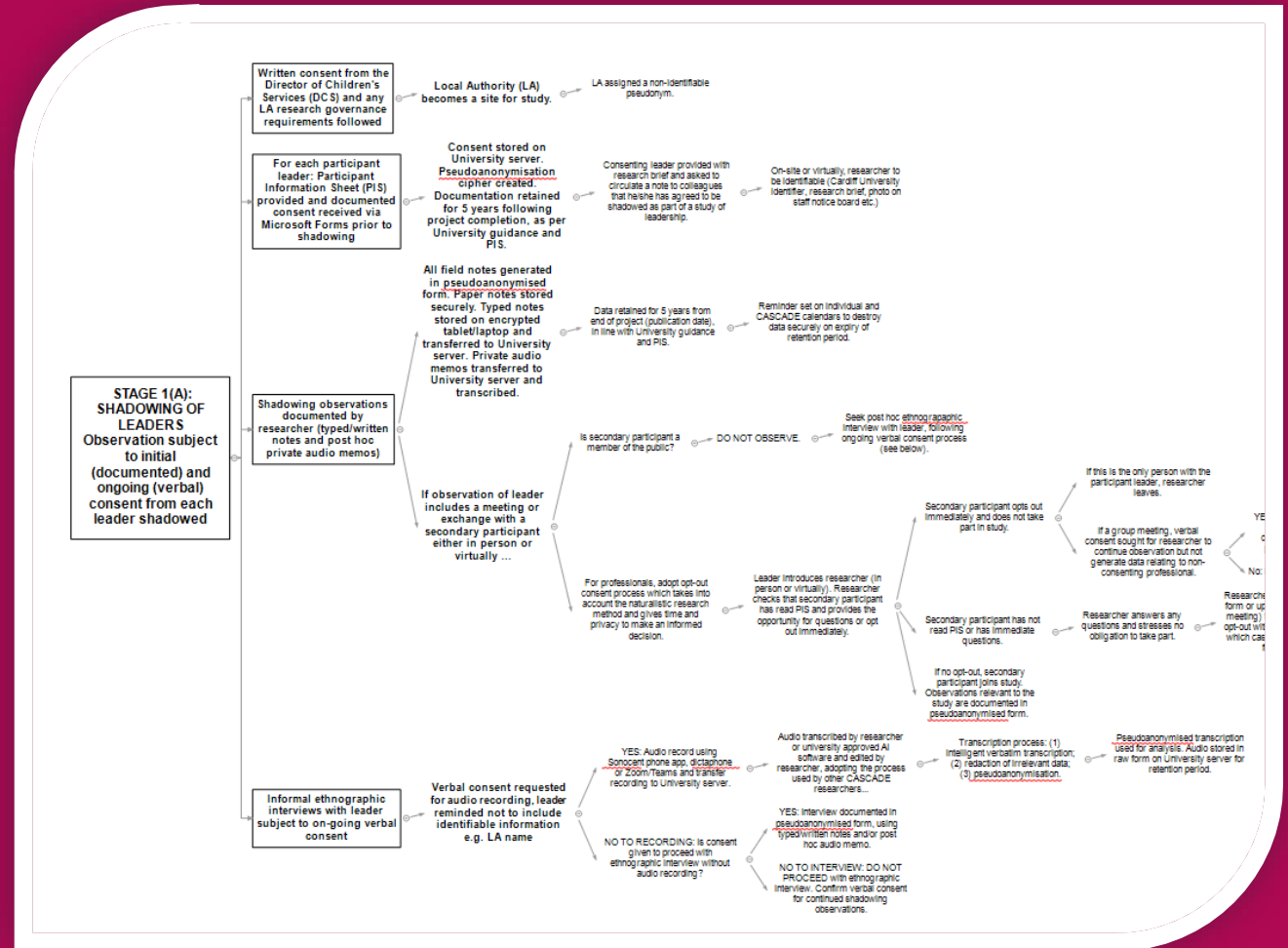
Consent challenge 1 : university ethics approval

- Challenging population to study – children and vulnerable adults are being discussed but are not present.
- Shadowing of leaders – in positions of power – “primary” and “secondary” participants.
- Lots of questions about management of audio recordings.
- Artificial ‘phases’ to appease non-ethnographer reviewers.
- Consent flow diagrams assisted.

Example consent plan for shadowing leaders

“If observation of leader includes a meeting or exchange with a secondary participant either in person or virtually ...

For professionals, adopt opt-out consent process which takes into account the naturalistic research method and gives time and privacy to make an informed decision.”



Consent challenge 2: my experience of 'getting in'

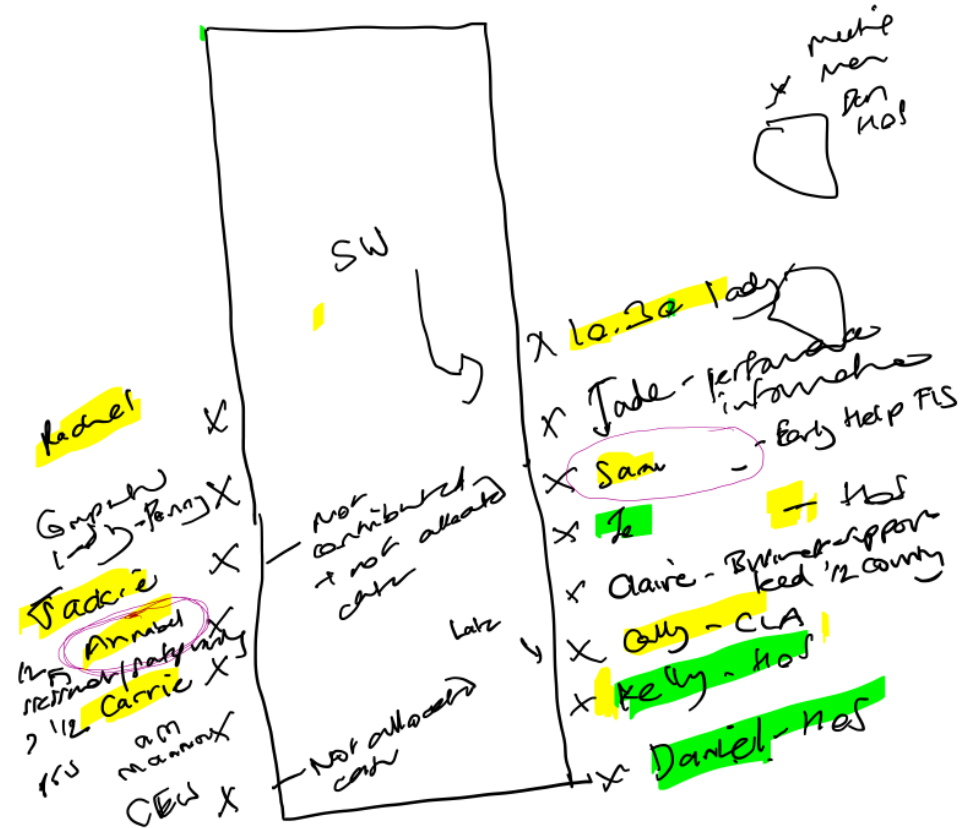
Local authority 1: (DECLINED)	<i>"Yes"</i> → Silence → Nudge → Silence → Nudge → <i>"I'm changing job, not the right time"</i> .
Local authority 2: (ACCEPTED)	<i>"Come and meet me"</i> → <i>"Come and meet my team"</i> → <i>"We don't want to put you on the spot but you could start today"</i> .
Local authority 3: (REJECTED)	<i>"Sounds interesting, we have our own ethics review process, I'll put you in touch"</i> → Nudge → Paperwork submission → Nudge → <i>"Positive ethics review .. delighted you have chosen us"</i> → Silence → Nudge → Silence → <i>"You can start"</i> → Silence → <i>"We have organisational challenges. But come next week"</i> → Silence → <i>"Need to cancel today"</i> → Day 1 → <i>"An inspection has started"</i> → Silence.

What helped in getting into the field?

- Helpful, well-connected PhD supervisor – but managing him my responsibility.
- Busy professionals - “I’m attaching a 1-pager” worked well.
- Being a social worker also helped (I think).
- Knowing and catching the organisational cycle: post-inspection better.
- Choosing the right gatekeeper, someone who can persuade the flock – though raises questions about corpus of published research.

Consent challenge 3: informed consent in the field

- Busy professional participants – and lots of them.
- Balancing naturalistic method with the need for consent.
- Adopted ‘opt out’ consent process at the start of meetings (agreement from Chair and host in advance).
- Followed up by email – virtual consent form for new participants.

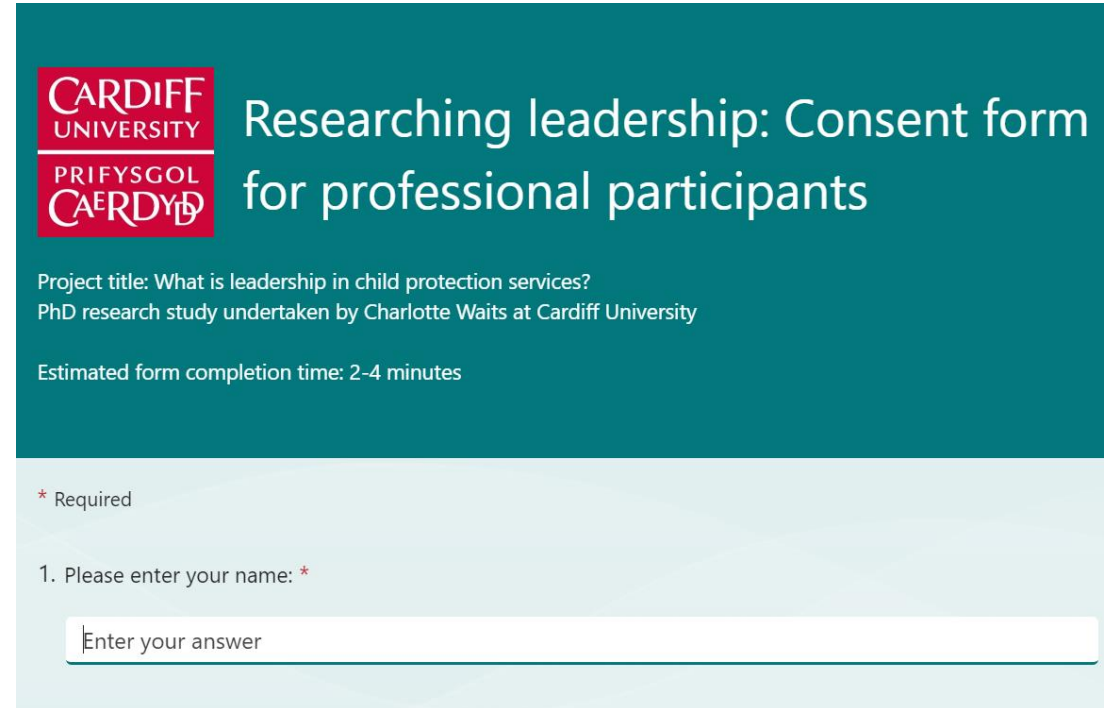


Example of seeking informed consent virtually

Thank you for letting me observe xx in your meeting earlier. If you are happy for me to continue observing, would you mind completing this form at the link below – it takes less than 2 minutes and it will then cover every observation unless you tell me otherwise.

<https://forms.office.com/e/xxxxxx>

I am attaching a 1-pager about my study and also a Participant Information Sheet which tells you more about how I intend to use the observation notes. If you have any questions or concerns, please don't hesitate to contact me directly.



The screenshot shows a consent form interface. At the top left is the Cardiff University logo (Prifysgol Caerdydd). The title of the form is "Researching leadership: Consent form for professional participants". Below the title, the project title is "What is leadership in child protection services?" and it is noted as a "PhD research study undertaken by Charlotte Waits at Cardiff University". The estimated completion time is "2-4 minutes". A section labeled "* Required" contains a question: "1. Please enter your name: *". Below this question is a text input field with the placeholder text "Enter your answer".

Consent challenge 4: 'staying in' the field

Local authority 2	<i>"Come and meet me"</i> → <i>"Come and meet my team"</i> → <i>"We don't want to put you on the spot but you could start today"</i> .
From day 3:	<i>"It would be great to get some feedback"</i> → menu of bland non-responses → quiet acceptance (or resignation?)
At 5 months:	2 nd attempt at an away day observation → <i>"I'll need to discuss with the team the possibility of you coming to team away day"</i> → not possible.
At 6 months:	<i>"I need to move xxx, don't say anything"</i> → request to join a meeting → <i>"not this one"</i> . [Relating to a decision undermining a pet project].

Contrasting experience with the ‘non-starter’ field site

Local authority 3	<i>“Sounds interesting, we have our own ethics review process, I’ll put you in touch”</i> → Nudge → Paperwork submission → Nudge → →Silence → <i>“We have organisational challenges. But come next week”</i> → Silence → <i>“Need to cancel today”</i> → Day 1
Day 1:	<i>“I have sent you those documents”</i> → <i>“meet the Director of Children’s Services”</i> → <i>“I’ll arrange an organisation chart”</i> .

Final reflections on getting in and staying in

- Work with and not against! Meeting the Chair of the Ethics Committee helped.
- Give it time – longitudinal research findings are valuable, even if the host organisation does get a bit bored.
- Not sure that a ‘no feedback’ policy is right but concerned about influencing findings.
- Know when to turn away from a non-starter field site – don’t flog a non-starter. Keep the door open for another time.



CASCADE

Questions?



My contact details:
Charlotte Waits, CASCADE
Email: waitsCE@cardiff.ac.uk