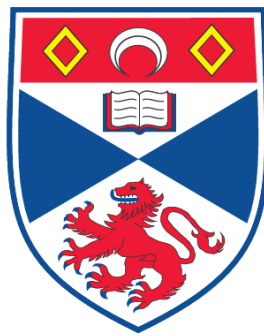


**DOING, DESCRIBING AND DOCUMENTING : INSCRIPTION
AND PRACTICE IN SOCIAL WORK**

Rosemary Doyle

**A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
at the
University of St. Andrews**



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**DOING, DESCRIBING AND DOCUMENTING:
INSCRIPTION AND PRACTICE IN SOCIAL WORK**

ROSEMARY DOYLE

SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT

UNIVERSITY OF ST ANDREWS

Submitted for the degree of PhD on 12th March 2009

DOING, DESCRIBING AND DOCUMENTING: INSCRIPTION AND PRACTICE IN SOCIAL WORK

ABSTRACT

The thesis explores the role of inscription in the management of social work and the effect of this on front-line practice. Inscription is a response to current trends in public sector management, in particular the focus on transparency, accountability and performance management, which drive an increasing demand for the documentation of work in areas of professional practice, traditionally assumed to be at odds with codification. The research investigates the effect of new documenting procedures in social work, specifically, the introduction of a 'standard assessment format' and responses to this by social work practitioners. The thesis uses a constructivist theoretical framework drawn from Actor Network Theory, which understands inscription as a performative technology, which is used to manage the process and content of practice through representation and translation. The thesis is based upon an exploratory, critical case study in a Local Authority Children and Families Social Work Service between November 2004 and May 2006. The thesis explores the translations between practice (doing), articulation (describing) and textual representation (documenting). For front-line practitioners, practice is understood as the 'doing' of work whilst the 'describing' and 'documenting' of work are categorised as secondary, bureaucratic concerns, with no material effect on the core processes and outcomes of social work practice. The research indicates that social work practice is in fact is a *series* of practices, which include the doing, describing and documenting of work. The research suggests that the conceptualisation of practice as 'doing', rather than 'describing' and 'documenting' work determines practitioner responses to the use of inscription in managing social work practice.

I, Rosemary Doyle, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 79,700 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

I was admitted as a candidate for the degree of PhD on 1st January 2006; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St Andrews between 2006 and 2008¹.

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¹ The research for this thesis was started while I was registered as a PhD student at the University of Edinburgh, from September 2003. I transferred to St Andrews University on 1st January 2006, entering my third year of PhD study.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION TO THE THESIS

This thesis is designed to expand our understandings of how inscription is coming to function in the context of professional work in the public sector. More specifically it explores how one widespread instrument of inscription, a form, may be re-shaping the structure and content of professional practice and identities in the social work field. The research setting for the study is a local authority Children and Families Social Work (CFSW) service in Scotland, shortly after the introduction of a new standard reporting format for the assessing of social work cases, the Standard Assessment Format (SAF).

The study draws its ontological and epistemological framework from Actor Network Theory (ANT), and in particular the work of Bruno Latour, Michel Callon and John Law (see for example: Callon 1986 & 1998; Latour 1987, 1990 & 1999a; Latour & Woolgar 1986; Law 1994), because of the central role of inscription in the ontology of ANT. ANT understands the production of the social, of practice and of expertise as built upon a ‘sociology of translation’, in which the representation of phenomena through technologies of inscription, are enrolled in the representation and stabilisation of knowledge about the world through (possibly multiple) translations. Inscription is the representation of phenomena in symbolic medium. For the purposes of this study, inscription is understood as the representation of phenomena through *written documentation*, whether electronic or otherwise². Inscription is a set of practices (inscribing) and also an artefact, an

² This form of inscription is more accurately termed ‘literary inscription’ as per Latour (1987). The term ‘inscription’ is used throughout the thesis for the purposes of simplicity.

inscribing device, which defines inscribing practices and an artefact which is the outcome of interaction between inscribing practices and inscribing devices. Inscription is the translation of knowledge of one phenomenon into a symbolic representation of it, for example by writing about it.

Inscription in organisations is worthy of study because it is one of the most widespread tools of organising. As such, the effect of its use has potentially significant implications for management. In the public sector, the rise of New Public Management (NPM) approaches to the management of public service is also credited with increasing the role of inscription as a means of managing the process and content of practice. It is therefore important that inscription is studied empirically, in order to establish its likely effect.

INSCRIPTION IN NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

Inscription is clearly not a new phenomenon in management. Inscription is fundamental to Weberian accounts of management, as the means of recording and communicating the procedures and structures of traditional bureaucratic organizations (Gerth & Mills 1970). Such bureaucratic approaches are understood to characterise public sector organisations such as the local authority which is the focus of this study. Concepts such as ‘red tape’, ‘paperwork’ etc, are archetypal characterisations of public sector management and indeed the basis of criticisms of traditional public sector management. It is precisely this ‘bureaucratic’ approach to management that drew the criticism of the new approaches to public sector management, which gained precedence at the end of the 20th century in the UK and other western nations, particularly the USA. These new approaches, often labelled ‘New Public Management’ (Hood 1991; Pollitt & Bouckaert 2000; Dunleavy & Hood 1994) are presented as a response to the perceived inefficiencies and ineffectiveness of traditional public sector management (Downs 1967). The rhetoric of NPM is hostile to bureaucratic measures, and yet the managerial demands of such approaches, particularly in areas such as performance

management and the focus on transparency and accountability could be seen to be increasing the role of inscription in organisations.

Although there are debates about the precise characteristics of NPM and the degree to which it has been adopted as the accepted model of public sector management in the UK, there is broad agreement amongst scholars of public sector management that there has been a shift in the rhetoric and in the assumptions about the way in which public services should be managed and delivered, which reflect the features of NPM, as promoted originally by Osborne & Gaebler (1992) (Bouckaert 2000; Barberis 1998). The espoused aims of NPM are: to improve efficiency and cut the cost of government; to increase accountability and public choice; to depoliticise delivery of public services; to improve effectiveness of public services (Pollitt & Bouckaert 2000). Bouckaert in a comparative study of OECD countries describes the common features of public sector management as: the use of market and quasi-market mechanisms; the adoption of private sector accounting procedures such as cost-centre budgeting which creates links between performance and financial criteria, rather than traditional public sector cash-based accounting; individual and organisation performance measurement and the auditing of *performance* rather than simply financial propriety; undermining of traditional terms and conditions of public sector staff (Bouckaert 2000).

The characteristics of NPM which are of most significance for this study are: the increased focus on performance measurement; the importance of transparency in service delivery and the accountability of public officials in this respect; and finally, the low trust of public officials and professional cadres which the NPM agenda of modernisation is based upon (Hood 1995; Clarke & Newman 1997). NPM represents a shift towards a private sector model of management and managerialism which can create tensions between the authority of managers and the authority and autonomy of professionals (Hood 1995). Demands for performance measurement and technologies of accountability can be explained in terms of a drive towards greater efficiency and effectiveness (Boland & Fowler 2000). They can be understood as partly driven by an increased suspicion of the

reliability and quality of professional practice (Power 1997; Porter 1995; Townley 2001, 2002 & 1999a). They are symptoms of a culture of mistrust of public servants and doubts about the certainty and reliability of public institutions (Giddens 1990). Public sector management must draw on 'technologies of trust' in order to manufacture trust in the conduct of public servants and the outcomes of public sector work in circumstances of low trust (Porter 1995). The tools used to manufacture trust are aspects of Power's 'audit society (1997). Performance measures are devised in order to improve performance, by evaluating individual or organisational performance against performance indicators. This process also responds to the demand for 'proof' of good performance. The explicit and recorded outcomes provide legitimacy for practitioners, in an era when their status as public officials or professionals is not enough on its own to reassure managers and the public (Oakes et al, 1989; Townley 1999b; Townley et al, 2003). The instruments used to manufacture confidence in the effectiveness and accountability of public sector professions, for example audit, performance measurement, inscription, are so used because they possess cultural legitimacy, thanks to the foundational discourses of modern, western, post-industrial societies, which privileges abstraction, measurement, inscription, systemisation, rationality and objectivity over the unreliability of individual, subjective judgement and discretion of professionals (Toulmin 1992; Townley 2001; Townley 2002; Bauman 1991). Inscription is one of the main tools by which these technologies of trust are enacted in organisations.

Attempts to improve the quality of public services may express themselves in a policy of proceduralisation of practice, in order to ensure a consistent level of service. Proceduralisation relies upon inscribing for the purposes of the codification and externalisation of professional expertise in order to standardise practice. It is adopted as a means of delivering the performance management requirements resulting from the NPM focus on efficiency and effectiveness of public services (Watson 2002). Proceduralisation is achieved through the inscription of work activity. It relies upon inscribing devices such as guidelines, protocols, forms and reports to define, control and evaluate practice. 'Best practice' is defined, whether

through performance indicators devised by government or inspectors, or according to internally devised standards from within the department, service or profession. Best practice is codified in guidelines, protocols and checklists. Work activity is required to be carried out according to the codified version of good practice and is then recorded, after which it can be subjected to evaluation or audit.

Proceduralisation is a means of ensuring the quality of services, but this too can be interpreted as a lack of confidence in professional forms of quality control. A professional discourse of peer-mediated standards and ethics is not trusted and instead, a managerial discourse of quality, delivered through bureaucratic checks and balances is required (Foster and Wilding 2000, Tilbury 2004). The focus on auditing of performance has also driven the importance of inscription in public services. For work activity to be evaluated through audit, it needs to be translated into the documentation of practice. Inscription provides the 'paper-trails' by which practice can be judged (Foster & Wilding 2000).

INSCRIPTION IN SOCIAL WORK MANAGEMENT

The choice of CFSW as a site for this study is based on an awareness that the general pressures on all public services are combined with particular pressures resulting from debates about the competency of professional Social Workers. A series of high profile child protection 'failures' and the resulting critical inquiries and reports have placed Social Workers under intense scrutiny e.g. The Beckford Report (1985); the Carlisle Report (1987); the Climbié Report (2003). This reduced trust in the professional competence of Social Workers, combined with severe recruitment and resource pressures and the effects of a raft of new policies and legislation are resulting a managerial response which adopts a range of inscribing processes and devices designed to proceduralise and document work activity. A range of protocols and standard inscribing devices are being developed in an attempt to codify and implement good practice.

Debates in the Social Work management literature centre particularly on this use of inscribing technologies to proceduralise to manage Social Work practice (e.g. Dominelli & Hoogvelt 1996; Watson 2002; Banks 1998; Howe 1992). Proceduralisation is the term suggested by Banks (1998) to describe the guidelines and protocols increasingly being developed by Social Work managers and by central government to define and implement best practice in a range of Social Work services. Some of these constitute specific instructions for the way in which aspects of Social Work should be devised and delivered, for example: The Department of Health Standard Assessment Framework (for England and Wales) (2000); Looked After Children Materials (1997) (Watson 2002). The pressure for proceduralisation and documentation in Social Work also stems from broader quality and performance measurement initiatives to which the public sector is subject, for example: 'What Works' (Newman & Nutley 2003); 'Next Steps' (Barberis 1998); 'Best Value' (Boyne et al 2002); Comprehensive Performance Assessment' (Allmendinger et al 2003) and successive Audit Commission performance measurement initiatives (Jacobs and Manzi 2000).

There is concern that Social Work practice is increasingly '*contained in a plethora of pro formas*' (Garrett 2003). Proceduralisation is a means of intervening in and controlling areas of professional work which would have once remained invisible to managerial scrutiny and beyond direct control. Evetts (2002) suggests that this increasing proceduralisation represents an attempt to limit professional power in favour of managerial power, reflecting the erosion of public trust in professionals and public servants. As the legitimacy of a professional discourse has diminished, managerialist discourse has gained legitimacy as an efficient and reliable approach to delivery of public services. For others, the trend towards proceduralisation is a conscious political strategy aimed at undermining the power of professions, in order to bring a problematic power base under managerial and ultimately political control (Banks 1998). Hughes (1992) adopts a broader view, identifying proceduralisation in Social Work as part of a wider epistemological shift towards rationality. Technical-rational forms of management are adopted as the means of managing uncertainty and complexity.

Proceduralisation is a means of delivering the performance management requirements of a discourse of quality and efficiency central to New Public Management. Howe (1992) describes how professional judgement, particularly in Social Work is no longer trusted. This is partly a result of broader changes in attitude towards ‘professionals’ as described above, but also a direct result of the recent child protection failures. Professional discretion is therefore seen as unreliable or dangerous; proceduralisation is introduced to replace problematic judgement with rule following. Proceduralisation is in this way seen as a means of limiting professional autonomy. The lack of trust extends to the ‘quality control’ mechanisms of professions. A *professional* discourse of peer-mediated standards and ethics is no longer trusted, and is replaced by a *managerial* discourse of quality, delivered by bureaucratic checks and balances (Foster and Wilding 2000; Tilbury 2004; Banks 1998).

Inscription is also used to provide the ‘paper-trails’ which constitute the mechanism of transparency and accountability in Social Work services (Foster and Wilding 2000). The symbolic power of written records means that they are accepted as legitimate evidence of good conduct and good practice, despite the fact that they only ever constitute proxies of work done, as the actual face to face work of Social Workers with service users is never/rarely directly observed.

In this climate of low trust in professional work and in the face of political demands for accountability, it is being argued that increased inscription is used as a ‘back-covering’ strategy in Social Work, documenting due care and attention by public officials (Kemshall 2000a & 2000b). This is particularly significant in the area of CFSW, with significant repercussions in the event of high-profile child protection failures. Proceduralisation reduces risk to clients, but also minimises the risk of censure of staff.

Inscription is being used in Social Work to manage quality and efficiency of services, minimise risk and facilitate audit. The focus is on the control of conduct, the explicit definition and implementation of content and standards in professional practice through codification, and the facilitation of audit, all through inscription.

How do these strategies of inscription effect on practitioners? The textualization of work may have a constitutive effect on the nature of practice, its routines and content (Foray and Steinmueller 2003). Inscriptions are not neutral media of recording, but shape what Zuboff (1988) calls the ‘flesh and blood’ of work, the everyday, social, embodied content and meaning of work. Inscription processes, in particular those based on standardised inscriptions devices, may be at odds with established concepts of professional practice, which emphasise autonomy, tacit and embodied forms of knowledge, the exercise of discretion and individual judgement (Evetts 2002; Farrell and Morris 2003; Newman and Nutley 2003). Social Workers have not had the status of a ‘profession’ in the sense that they are not independent professionals, but local authority employees³. As such, they do not have the occupational control associated with true professional status. However they do have autonomy in judgement and decision-making in respect of their activity in the front-line work with their clients, which is a characteristic of professional work (Abbott 1988). They can be characterised using Lipsky’s definition, as ‘Street-level bureaucrats’ – employees who enjoy relatively high levels of professional autonomy and discretion for their relatively low level employment status (Lipsky 1980). Any increased control of this level of work activity is potentially experienced as an attack on professional autonomy (Evetts 2002).

FOCUS AND STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

What are the implications of this process of inscription for the individuals working in these organisations? This level of ‘micro-practice’ is the focus of the research, because it is possible that the increased inscription has unintended consequences for the nature of professional expertise and practice. The aim of this study is to

³ The recent introduction of Professional Registration for Social Workers in 2005 is aimed at improving professional standards, through the introduction and enforcement of a code of practice, and designated routes towards qualification, and to reinforce the status of Social Workers.

examine the way in which inscription is being used to manage Social Work practice in the setting of a CFSW service. It explores the managerial intentions behind the use of inscription and in particular, the introduction of a standard inscribing device, the Standard Assessment Format (SAF). The study explores the effect of inscription on the practice of Social Work.

In Chapter 1 of the thesis I draw upon accounts of inscription as a tool of organising from the perspective of ANT which suggest that inscription may have a constitutive power in organisations, with implications for the status and content of practice. In Chapter 2, I describe the research setting in some detail, in order to provide a context for the research design and methodology, which is outlined in Chapter 3. The following 3 chapters contain the discussion of the research data: Chapter 4 examines the effect of inscription in constituting the Social Work service; Chapter 5 examines the role of inscription in constituting Social Work cases; Chapter 6 explores the implications of new and more comprehensive inscribing processes on Social Workers. Finally, in Chapter 7, I draw my conclusions about the effect of inscription on Social Work practice, and the way in which the study has contributed to greater empirical understanding of the implications of inscription for practice and its empirical value as a focus of research.

CHAPTER TWO: AN ONTOLOGY OF INSCRIPTION

THE ONTOLOGY OF ACTOR NETWORK THEORY

In the Introduction to this thesis, I described the increasing importance of inscription in public sector management as a means of controlling the content and outcomes of work, in order to manage performance and deliver accountability. In this chapter I describe how inscription operates in organisations and its potential effects on practice, from the perspective of the constructivist ontology of Actor Network Theory.

The theoretical framework for this study is drawn from the ontological and methodological principles of Actor Network Theory and specifically it is a study of the ‘sociology of translation’ (Callon 1986; Latour & Woolgar 1986; Law 1986). Actor Network Theory provides a way of conceptualizing and studying a social setting which links the material technologies of organising with the practice. Although those working within the perspective of ANT does not claim that it is a comprehensive theory and in fact, quite the reverse, preferring instead to characterise it as a methodology rather than a theory (Nicolini et al 2003; Latour 1999b), it is a distinct ontological perspective which draws together scholars who conceptualise the social world in terms of effects, relationships and performativity (Nicolini et al, 2003). This approach offers a perspective which allows a researcher to make sense of the status of organizational tools such as the SAE and other technologies of proceduralization such as records, documents and procedures, and their role in the practice of social work i.e. how social workers and social work managers ‘do’ social work. The concept of translation, and associated with that,

inscription and inscribing practices, are central to the constructivist ontology upon which ANT is based.

ANT shares its constructivist ontology with practice-based perspectives such as symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, activity theory and social-learning theories, which attribute a strong social and interpretive dimension to practice. People make use of practice tools based on the meanings things have for them and practice is based on the interpretations of actors of their social and material environment (Nicolini et al, 2003). ANT shifts the ontological focus away from an emphasis on the linguistic dimensions of social construction (although these are not excluded from the constructivism of ANT) and brings in a strong consideration of the material dimensions of society. From the ANT perspective, it is not only that material objects acquire their power and significance from their status within human social and cultural interpretations, but that material objects are actants in the construction of social ordering, in the same way as humans. Reality is not constructed simply through human negotiation and social and political shifts in perspective, but is constructed by material objects and technologies. Social order is not fixed or stable. Objects do not have inherent qualities decreed by nature. Reality is a settlement which may change at any time (Latour 1999, Law & Mol 2002). Social reality is understood as an alignment of human and non-human heterogeneous elements. The 'social' is constituted by a network of heterogeneous material and human actors – people, and also machines, texts, buildings, technology (Law 1992; Nicolini et al 2003). This ontological perspective means that empirical research is important to explain how the durability of orderings is achieved in practice (Nicolini et al, 2003).

ANT shares the concept of performativity with foucauldian concepts of discipline and social ordering (Foucault 1974 & 1979; Rose 1989 & 1999). Entities – human, and in the ANT perspective, also material – are constituted through relationships and interactions with each other. Their status is 'performed' through these processes. Identities and qualities achieve the impression of stability through the process of ordering – i.e. the relationship between entities. These characteristics are

not intrinsic, but constructed through relations between entities. (Law 1999; Nicolini et al 2003). Phenomena (social and technical) are all relational effects; identities, organisations, material objects are the effect of a struggle towards organizing (Law 1994).

Latour uses the term 'quasi-objects' to indicate that even material objects draw their status as objects and their material power from a collection of social and technical arrangements (Latour 1991 & 2005). So for example, a form, although from one perspective, has the material qualities of a 'form' – i.e. a piece of paper (or an electronic representation) with particular standard symbols on it, it acquires the status of 'form' because the significance of a 'form' is understood and accepted by social and cultural norms which understand what a form is for, and accept the authority of such an object to require a set of practices e.g. filling out a form by translating knowledge of a phenomena into text which fits into the prescribed boxes.

The nature of objects is not a 'given'. It is the effect of a process or ordering which is not stable, although there may be periods of stability. Law argues that the powerful are those who can 'freeze' a network in order to stabilise the status of objects and knowledge, e.g. a form is an attempt to freeze a network (Law 1994).

ANT draws on Foucault's concepts of power/knowledge and the enacting of power through technical arrangements of social organizations. Power is an effect. Power is *performed* in practice. Technologies construct and are constructed by regimes of truth or discourses. There is a co-constructive relation between power and knowledge and the actor-networks that sustain them. Discursive practices define legitimate perspectives and legitimate knowledge and establish a regime of truth, which mean that it is only 'possible' to think of things in a particular way (Foucault 1974 & 1979). What ANT does is place the 'material' much more centrally in any analysis of a research setting. Power is enacted in the social and technical arrangements of a particular culture, society or institution (Latour 1990; Law 1994).

ANT links materials and practice. It understands practice as ontologically heterogeneous, in the same way as any other aspects of organisation. (Law & Singleton 2003). Practice enacts and is enacted by the interaction of technologies and human actants. ANT also places inscription as central to the accomplishment of practice. The status of particular materials or practices within a 'mode of organising' dictates what is done and what is known. Law calls this a 'practical epistemology of organizing' (Law 1994, p151). The material practices embody this 'practical epistemology'.

ANT assumes that practice, and the knowing that sustains and is the outcome of practice, is heterogeneous and dynamic – knowing rather than knowledge – continually reconstructed through action and the network of social and technical actors which are enrolled in action (Law and Singleton 2003). In this reading, practice is strongly linked to the context of action, constructed by the material and social arrangements at hand. From this perspective, actors act according to their circumstances and are only able to act according to the material and social circumstances in which their action is situated, rather than being able to stand back and apply some kind of cognitive plan or structure (Gherardi and Nicolini 2000; Suchman 1987). The material circumstances which frame practice constitute what practice is possible at any time. In this way, a technology such as an inscribing device is an actor which will affect the nature of practice.

The practice of representation - how this is achieved and its effects - is central to ANT concerns (Law 1994; Latour 1987). The role of inscription is central to these processes of representation. Latour considers inscription in the context of the production of knowledge (scientific and otherwise). Scientific facts and phenomena are constituted by the material setting of inquiry. What is understood as an objective entity is constructed by inscribing devices (Latour and Woolgar 1986). Callon observes that inscribing devices do not describe an existing reality, but that they construct it. The actors who are the participants in the writing process, who comply with the requirements of the writing device, are constructed through this participation. They are subjects of a narrative, prescribed by a writing device which

formats the telling of a story of a practice, of a service, of practitioners, of customers, of patients. (Callon 2002). Law does this, but also links it more explicitly to ‘organizing’ and a mode of ordering, which is linked to Foucault’s concepts of ‘discourse’ (Foucault 1974) and a more explicitly political perspective. A mode of ordering is also a mode of representation. The process of representation and the materials and practices associated with the inscribing, set within a particular mode of organising, are processes of privilege and deletion and this constitutes a ‘performance of hierarchy’ (Law 1004, p115). This performance of hierarchy is the political project within ANT. Such perspectives argue that inscription enacts and is sustained through foundational discourses of power which act to constitute practice. Law insists that this representation inevitably includes simplification and deletion and privileging of particular aspects of practice, which are an expression of hierarchy. These power effects are overlooked because inscription is such a widespread and everyday tool of organising that its status and role in organisations may be taken for granted, and its potential to shape agreed and accepted modes of practice is underestimated.

INSCRIPTION IN ACTOR NETWORK THEORY

Inscription is accorded a central position in ANT perspectives. The artefacts produced through inscribing practices are sustained by cultural discourses which lend them particular authority in modern societies. As a result, inscriptions may exert substantial technical and social ordering capacities. The status and qualities of inscription in organisations from the ontological perspective of ANT are explored below. ANT is based upon a ‘sociology of translation’ (Callon 1986; Law 1986). The translation of phenomena through their representation through inscribing, and their translation into other objects which then stand for them, but also construct/reconstruct them, constitutes one of the most important ways in which social ordering is enacted, and phenomena such as knowledge and practice are constructed.

CONSTITUTING MATERIAL OBJECTS

Inscribing is a process of translation which creates material artefacts. These artefacts can then represent and stand for other objects. Inscription produces objects which, by virtue of their material qualities, are more amenable to organisation and management than the phenomena represented by these objects. Inscribing is in this way, a means of managing the complexity of organisations through the production of representing artefacts (Callon 2002). The objects constructed as a result of inscribing can function as ‘proxies’ in organisations, by virtue of their representational capacity and also because they have a stabilising effect on dynamic aspects of organisations. Inscribing may create objects which can accommodate and stabilise dimensions of work which may be intangible, or multi-faceted, or temporally or spatially dispersed. An event or collection of interactions becomes stabilised in a form or record as a ‘procedure’ or as an ‘archive’ or ‘history’. So, for example, in service organisations such as Social Work, inscription is of particular significance because the object of exchange, i.e. the service, is not a material object (i.e. goods) but a “system of action” (ibid, p192), a “series of actions to be complete” (ibid p195). The writing device is a materialization of the intangible object of ‘service’. It creates a material proxy object, in files and documents,,that makes concrete what is in fact a “sum of social interactions”. The objects that are ‘written down’ have a stability and tangibility, unlike the ‘service’ they represent, and this has uses in organisations in terms of the durability and transportability afforded them.

Inscribing produces artefacts which are mobile in a way that the phenomena they represent may not be. Latour describes the objects produced through inscribing as ‘immutable mobiles’ (Law 1987&1990). Inscription creates material objects, which are stable, durable and therefore transportable, for the purposes of organising and management (Latour 1987; Law 1994, Callon 2002). Such proxies can be mobile in a way that the phenomena they stand for may not be, although from the ANT perspective, the mobility and durability of objects are ‘relational effects’ not a given quality of the material artefacts (Law 1994). Any study of inscription which draws on ANT must therefore incorporate an exploration of the extent to which the

socio-technical arrangements in the research setting produce proxy objects and whether they are successful in functioning as immutable mobiles.

Inscribing is used as a means of creating and circulating organisational knowledge *and* knowledge of organisations. They are central to the management of expertise *and* the management of practitioners. Systems of inscribing produce artefacts which can contain knowledge about organisations and practice in a form that can be transported to different locations and thereby rendered available to the organisation. Bowker and Star's (1999) concept of a 'boundary object' is an example of such an artefact. They describe how inscriptions are used in organizations as a means of representing and transporting knowledge and information between different communities of practice, by virtue of the fact that such objects are deemed 'robust' enough to maintain a sufficiently stable identity across different communities of practice to be able to mediate communication. Although inscribing may be adopted as a managerial strategy to transport organizational knowledge across difference communities of practitioners within and outside the organisation, the interpretation and understanding of such artefacts by different communities of practitioners may *in practice* be problematic, thereby undermining the utility of the proxy. The situated meaning of inscriptions and the indexical qualities of written communication within professional communities may affect the capacity of such objects to sustain the stability of the representation of knowledge and give lie to their assumed function as 'immutable mobiles'.

The intention behind the creation of inscribing devices may also be as a means of managing work activity. Inscribing may be used for this purpose, because of its capacity to render aspects of work and organisations visible. The codification of previously opaque work practices, makes the organisation's work, and an individual's work within an organisation, more visible. The scale and penetration of codification increases the visibility of work practices in an organisation. The materiality of text objects, particularly electronic text, makes circulation and distribution of information about work relatively easy, and this distribution also makes phenomena visible across an organisation. This capacity allows coordination

and dissemination of work practices and knowledge, and sustains ordering practices. Work made visible can be increasingly subject to managerial scrutiny. This visibility offers the possibility of checking, evaluation and control. It may also be understood as a disciplinary strategy, creating a panoptical device for the self-discipline of practitioners (Foucault 1979; Rose 1989), who may be encouraged to amend their practice in response to the awareness that their activities will be made visible through a process of inscribing (Zuboff 1988). Inscriptions can stand for other phenomena, which could not otherwise be made visible to a central authority. The representation of such complex and/or intangible objects, i.e. the inscription, can stand for an object and bring knowledge of the object back to the centre. A form or a report can be mobilised and delivered up for evaluation or assessment in the way that the original artefacts, for example, a child's experiences, or a family life, could not to the same extent. Inscriptions create 'traces' which represent phenomena in a different form, one more amenable to managing, and transport these representations to the centre for analysis and calculation (Rose 1999).

Inscribing may also be used as means of prescribing work activity, in particular through the development of standard inscribing devices and inscribing protocols. Inscribing devices may function only as a static representation of an aspect of organisation, but as 'protocols for action' (Suchman 1987) or 'actigrammes' (Callon 2002), which define espoused practice through the codification of rules of good practice or protocols, with which practitioners are required (or requested) to comply. Inscribing devices may also enrol practitioners in inscribing practices which are designed to constitute other dimensions of practice. Standard forms, records or reporting formats are created in order to standardise the way in which work activity is represented. In order for work activity to comply with the reporting requirements of such artefacts, work may be constituted in line with the official version of practice codified in the inscribing device. Such inscribing processes may thereby construct a standard way of going about work, standardising practices over and above inscribing practices. In this way, the inscription is not merely a description of espoused practice, which is designed for use as a reference tool for

practitioners to follow, it is a device designed to dictate action through a process of participation.

The capacity of inscription to enrol practitioners in systems of action, i.e. to prescribe the processes and content of practice means that it can be used to standardise practice in organisations. This process of standardisation is useful in managing consistency of practice in organisations, even when the sites of organisational activity are dispersed geographically or temporally. Inscription is used in organisations in an attempt to create standardised institutional processes that define and stabilise an organisation, its routines and action (Czarniawska and Joerges 1998; Foray and Steinmueller 2003).

These standardising inscribing devices, such as forms, are described by Suchman (1987) “self-explanatory, interactive artefacts”, which can be used as pedagogical devices (Callon 2002; Czarniawska & Joerges 1998; Oakes et al 1989). They dictate work activity, without the necessity of having a human mentor or manager figure directing work. The expertise is sited within the protocol or form or procedure, and made accessible through the instructions embedded in the ‘self-explanatory artefact’. Forms are a kind of ‘instruction manual’ for action and practice in organisations. They act as ‘self-explanatory artefacts’ (Ibid) that can convey expert knowledge and instruction in a durable, reusable and standard way that might otherwise have to be delivered through personal interaction with a coach or mentor. They can be produced in a format (i.e. text) that is durable, re-usable and replicable. It removes the necessity of having a human coach available to deal with every trainee/user in every location in every situation.

THE AUTHORITY OF INSCRIPTION

As discussed, the ontological perspective of ANT posits that the organising power of material technologies is not inherent, but is constructed through the network of

alignments, social and technical, within which such technologies are situated. The ordering capacity of inscriptions as described above – as proxy objects and as tools of managerial control and pedagogy – is not inherent in inscription, but is sustained through discourses of authority which characterises modern organisations. It is this cultural authority which creates the power effect of inscription. Inscribing and inscribing devices draw their capacity to represent other phenomena from their status within cultures as legitimate tools of representation (Goody 1986; Latour 199a; Poster 1990; Zuboff 1988). The capacity of inscriptions to create objects is not a quality inherent in the nature of things, but is socially constructed and the status of such objects is drawn from the cultural and political discussed embedded within them and enacted by them. The power of inscription as an organising principle relies upon its authority as a form of representation. Inscription has a cultural authority (Goody 1986; Latour 1987). It is allowed to represent. The objects it produces are perceived, or have the likelihood of being perceived as ‘consequential’ that is, they must be taken notice of, trusted and complied with as legitimate accounts of practice (Garfinkel 1967). The authority of inscription is drawn from wider discourses which legitimise particular ontological and epistemological perspectives, which in turn express themselves in particular material technologies of organisation. Inscriptions command different degrees of respect, trust and authority, according to the authority of the discourses they represent and enact. Inscriptions ‘stand for’ and ‘speak for’ other things – but only because they are *allowed* to speak for and stand for objects (Townley 2001& 2002). The status of different forms of ‘inscriptions’ as technologies of representation is a product of cultural and political considerations. Inscriptions give a rhetorical or polemical advantage by virtue of the status of the written word in modern culture. In our society, the written inscription is privileged above any other information from the senses - the inscription is believed above other indications. A written statement carries more force than an oral statement, and particular types of written statement carry more conviction. Without the cultural authority of the written word, the power of inscription would be lost (Latour 1990). Organising demands ‘material tactics of translation’ (Law 1994) – an understanding of and

strategy for the distribution of durable artefacts which will sustain and express a mode of organising. The ability to distribute such objects is vital in the capacity to organise distant events from a centre of authority. Authority must be safely embedded in the objects (Law 1994).

Inscription thus draws on particular discourses of authority and legitimacy for its organising power. It is also the means by which authority and power are expressed and exercised to govern and to manage. Inscription is the means by which power is transported, through the authority of the objects that inscription produces, objects which have the stability and yet mobility to circulate across time and geography, whether in organisations or in nation states (Latour 1987) The circulation of objects – knowledge, facts, people, artefacts – from the periphery to the centre and back is the process which distributes and enacts power throughout an organisation. It is these sustaining discourses of authority which give inscriptions their qualities as immutable mobiles. Inscribing is the means by which authority is carried from a centre to a periphery, and then exercised, for example, in terms of managing the conduct of staff in an organisation by the production of procedures which define their working practice. Inscriptions represent power and authority in organisations and can exercise this authority across the organisation, irrespective of the absence of the ‘authority’, whether the Manager, Politician, the public. Inscribing is a ‘fidelity technique’ which is used to create ‘conduits of power’ (Rose 1999). Inscriptions express and enact the particular organisational and institutional patterns of authority. In this way, they become a tool of social ordering (Bowker and Star 1999; McLean & Hoskin 1988). Reporting procedures are inextricably tied into other dimensions of the social order they represent, and as such, records and forms are an expression of authority within an organisation. A response to a form is a response to the authority embedded in the tool.

Certain types of inscribing device, in particular, forms, are seen to endow material with the status of objectivity (Townley 2001 & 2002). The fact that inscription speaks on behalf of a particular set of authorities becomes obscured because inscriptions are enrolled in discourses of objectivity. The subjective processes of

authorship disappear in standard inscribing devices, once they are adopted by an organization (Foucault 1977). They become neutral, bureaucratic tools, which have the effect of representing their authority as a given, as an expression of some inevitable and uncontested aspect of the organization (Townley 2001 & 2002). Paradoxically, the authority of inscriptions may be enhanced because over time the political dimensions of inscriptions disappear, because of the perceived neutrality of these technical tools. Such inscribing devices, once they acquire the status of naturalised and taken for granted organization tools, may depersonalise and depoliticise organising activities, and produce objects which are subject to less contestation. The political processes and negotiations that may have gone into the design and introduction of inscribing devices disappear and become accepted and non-contested. Whilst the introduction of new inscription requirements may generate resistance at first, once an inscribing device becomes established as part of the infrastructure of an organisation (or society), these political dimensions are forgotten, and the possibility of generating alternative ways in which to order objects and action is forgotten with them. Such objects “*carry with them a politics of voice and value that is often invisible, embedded in layers of infrastructure*” (Bowker & Star 1999, p229). A ‘form’ is an inscribing device which is a particularly good example of this tendency. Once created, the power of the form as an organising device is obscured because it is effectively ‘deauthored’. The author is anonymous, and indeed any authorship is inevitably fragmented because the essence of the form is that it is produced through multiple authorships – the form is first designed and amended, then completed by a different person. The depersonalised form possesses more authority than a recognisable individual opinion. (McLean and Hoskin 1998).

The production of inscribing devices in organisations may in their development or in the process of their adoption, stimulate highly politicised responses. Organisational inscribing devices such as a ‘form’ constitute an ‘institutional space’ in which and through which power is deployed. A form is a product of those people and positions in an organisation who can claim the authority to author a form. The form then organises individuals and social relations (McLean and

Hoskin 1998) Organisational inscribing devices are not (merely) technical or bureaucratic devices, but may be understood as institutionalised practices, which reflect the social order of an organisation, the relations of power and authority, and the norms of practice. The role of inscribing in the construction of practice is part of the power structure of an organisation. Inscribing devices are an expression of the discourses of authority which characterise an organisation. The power structure of an organisation dictates who has the authority to construct inscribing devices, to design, to amend, to complete them, and to decide who must use inscribing devices and in what ways and at what stage in other organisational work. This power to design and construct the official record of work that inscription effectively produces, is also the power to decide what counts as the record of organisation – what is made visible, what is left invisible and possibly ignored or discounted. The power to author standard inscribing devices, such as forms, is the power to decide what counts. A standard inscribing device becomes the official version of practice in organizations. Resistance to and contestation of such devices from different professional groups, is a struggle around whose version of practice is established as the official version, about what aspects of practice are legitimised through their enshrinement in the inscribing device, and what aspects are deleted (Law 1994).

The constructivist ontology of ANT means that we should not limit any study of inscribing in organisations to its technical functioning and its adequacy to perform the functions attributed to it by managers. To take a constructivist perspective is also to assume that the technical tool of inscribing will act to co-construct the social order of organisations and the status and content of practice. From this perspective, ‘representation’ is not decoupled from its referent, but co-constructs the referent, i.e. what we describe as ‘reality’ (Ibid). Inscription is not only a means of presenting reality, but an actant which itself enacts constructive agency. From this perspective, inscription is not merely a description of reality ‘out there’ (however adequate/inadequate), it is contributes to the construction of the ‘reality’ (Ibid). The translation process, for example, of human actions, ideas, practices, interactions into picture, text or numbers, has a constitutive effect on the object which is subjected to translation. ‘Reality’ is *created through* representation. In this

way, inscription may be and the epistemic and technical arrangements that underpin any technology of representation may be understood to create knowledge about the world, and therefore the nature of the world.

The capacity of inscription to represent an object is bounded by the medium of representation and the translation process which occurs through the inscribing process. The primary characteristic of the process of translation which occurs through inscription is 'simplification' (Law 1994). Some aspects of an original event or experience or object are inevitably lost. The complexity of human experience, thought and communication is difficult to translate into one mode of symbolic representation, for example literary inscription. Different modes of organising will tolerate or produce different forms of simplification. It is by examining this process of selection, exclusion, inclusion and deletion that the characteristics of a mode of organising may become clear and the patterns of authority that sustain it (Law 1994). Inscribing practice in organisations must produce a simplification or selection in the characteristics of the object they represent (Law 1994). What does this selection and simplification do to the status of practice that is being represented through inscribing? What effect does inscribing have to the status of the organisational knowledge it represents?

Inscription constructs knowledge of the world according to its capacity to represent, and the patterns of authority embedded in the inscribing process. Material technologies, such as inscription, therefore play a role in the production of knowledge, and in expressing and sustaining particular epistemologies (Townley 2001 & 2002; Latour & Woolgar 1986; Callon 2002; Law 1994). In this way, inscription constitutes what we know of our world. The world is inscribed – abstracted, measured, translated, reconfigured – and effectively colonised by this way of knowing. We can only know the world in this way, through either the evidence or format of inscriptions, or through technology that expressed these inscriptions. It is only through this network of inscriptions and technology that we *can* know the world. Inscriptions are so ubiquitous that we overlook their fundamental importance in being able to know something, and convince others.

Therefore, changes in the mode of representation, what Poster (1990) calls ‘the wrapping of language’ and what Law (1994) calls the ‘mode of representing’, i.e. the ways in which language is translated into a medium of communication, change the subject: “*subjects are constituted in acts and structures of communication*” *The shift from oral and print wrapped language to electronically wrapped language thus reconfigures the subject's relation to the world.*” (Poster 1990, p11). Modes of representation mediate our knowledge of the world. What we know is affected by the way we can know it. New modes of representation may change the nature of working knowledge. The specific design of an inscribing device may affect the way that knowledge is presented, and effectively therefore, reconstitutes the characteristics of knowledge.

Inscription creates what is visible and therefore what is known about an organisation. The power of inscriptions to render work visible or invisible has a significant effect. On the one hand, work may be rendered irrelevant by being excluded from the system (i.e. invisible) or the increased visibility offered through the classification of work may be used for surveillance and control purposes, reducing autonomy and discretion.

Inscription has constitutive effects because it exerts a pedagogical influence on those participating in inscribing processes. Through interaction with particular inscribing devices, such as forms, human actors are enrolled in the norms of practice, symbolism and politics embedded in the artefact. This is the organising power of material artefacts (Czarniawska and Joerges 1998). Systems of inscription have ordering effect on organisations, practices and practitioners, and express a particular form of social order or authority. People may socialise themselves to the attributes of the category and work may be reshaped in order to fit the categories of a standard inscribing device. Forms and protocols canonise standards that are idealized, “*embodying goals of practice and production that are never perfectly realised*” (Bowker and Star 1999, p15). They are therefore a tool of social ordering, however imperceptibly. These power effects mean that inscriptions processes are

worthy of empirical examination, rather than being allowed to remain invisible and take for granted (Bowker and Star 1999; Townley et al 2003).

If we accept the premise that entities are partly constructed through inscription, then we also accept that these power relations also have an effect on what type of entities are permitted to be constructed (McLean and Hoskin 1998). Inscription may reify certain aspects of practice. Inscriptions may exert a pedagogical effect, which changes the nature of practice in line with the inscribed version of practice. Forms may impose their own structure on work practices, because of the desire to comply with reporting requirements. What does a practitioner do when the terms of the form contradict the practice knowledge? He or she may take a subversive approach, and impose practice based categories, and ignore or amend the structure of the form. Or he or she may comply with the authority of the form, and report practice knowledge in such a way as to fit it in with the forms structure (Garfinkel 1967). The work of following protocols is *“to bring canonical descriptions of objects and actions to bear on the actual objects and embodied actions that the instructions describe.”* (Suchman 1987, p101). Mode of representation and power of representation means that what is represented is privileged in the organisation. Objects are not only represented by inscriptions, but are re-presented, reconfigured and standardised in line with the inscriptions. There is an inevitable gap between the ‘inscription’ and the ‘inscribed object’ – because of the representational limitations of inscription. Because of the power invested in the inscription, both because of the epistemological authority of inscription, and because of the power invested in specific forms of inscription as part of a governmental regime the original objects will conform to and comply with the form of the inscribed objects. Objects thus inscribe themselves and standardise themselves in line with inscribed objects. The rhetorical power of inscriptions is drawn from the symbolic and epistemological authority of inscription in western, post-enlightenment society. They are understood to represent ‘objectivity’, but they in fact *produce* objectivity, by reordering the world in line with their representation of the world (Rose 1999).

It is the combination of its representational and technical capacity with its power effects that give inscription its constitutive force. Although the form is presented as a neutral device for recording and describing stable facts, Hoskin and McLean (1988) describe what they call a ‘transgressive tendency’ (p522) of the form not only to describe ‘what is’ but also to prescribe ‘what ought to be’. The subject/object of the form (i.e. in this case the patient) is subject to the calculations and assessments of experts who are represented by the technology of the form (Ibid). The cultural and political authority of inscriptions may mean that practitioners change their own practice to comply with inscriptions. The form is a prescriptive, normalising device that not only constructs the subject of the form as an object, in the terms of the form, but enrolls a range of actors – such as experts, professionals, administrators, who are involved in the design, completion and processing of the form and constructs their identities also in the terms of the form. The form sets the terms according to which a ‘patient’ is constructed, described and ultimately assessed. It operates according to ‘discursive regularities’, for example, an articulation of needs, of conditions, of significant indicators. Therefore, the patient is constructed according to the characteristics opened up by the terms of the form. The form defines and dictates what material can be included and what must be excluded, what counts and what is irrelevant. As such, the form acts as a standardising device. It standardises objects and relationships between objects. (McLean and Hoskin 1998)

Although many inscribing devices used in organisations, such as forms, are participative in nature i.e. people fill them in, the power relations inscribed within the writing device are *asymmetrical* (Callon 2002). Although practitioners in an organisation may well participate in the production of inscription, their status in the organisation will define the degree of ‘authorship’ they may exercise. The autonomy and discretion associated with authorship are matters of individual status and power. A person may participate in the authorship of a form merely by ‘filling out’ sections, or they may be involved in the design of the form – deciding which sections will be incorporated into the form. Authorship is associated with power – who has the power to decide what is written, by whom, what figures in the

‘finished’ document, who may hold the documents and amend/change them, who may see all documents (Foucault 1977).

Some types of working knowledge may be difficult to represent because of complexity, but also because of their situated and often hugely tacit nature. Action-centred work is often transparent, or unarticulated (Zuboff 1988; Suchman 1987). Inscription alone is incapable of explicating fully background knowledge required to facilitate the “mutual intelligibility of situated human communication”. ‘Common-sense’ knowledge is resistant to codification. It is not just that that explication of all the background knowledge that underpins human communication is an unwieldy and apparently endlessly expanding project, but that it is in fact impossible. “[R]esearchers have not succeeded in constructing rules that do not depend, in their turn, on some deeper ad hoc procedures.” (p45). This ‘background knowledge’ is not just some unconscious, tacit body of knowledge motivating action, which is simply awaiting articulation, but that it is not part of the actor’s mental state prior and possibly even during action. It is only articulated if the actor is asked to justify the action retrospectively. The phenomenon of ‘mutual intelligibility’ in communication means that actors do not need to explicate the background assumptions to their actions, as long as the actions remain unproblematic, and as long as those we interact with show no signs of not understanding us. If inscribing devices require that background assumptions of decisions or actions be articulated, this does not mean simply the articulation of extant knowledge, but the construction of knowledge (Suchman 1987). The problem of representing working knowledge is reinforced by the inherent *indexicality* of language. The concept of indexicality is a linguistic term referring to expressions that rely upon their situation for significance, such as person pronouns and also tense, time and place adverbs. However, far more of informal language is indexical, relying on the immediate circumstances of the conversation for its meaning –“*we always mean more than we can say*” (Ibid, p58). The full interpretation of an expression always relies upon the unspoken situation of its use, and the taken-for-granted background, which never becomes part of the semantic content of the language. This has implications for the possibility of communicating

everything necessary through standard text instructions. In practice, the indexicality of language cannot be explicated thoroughly in any text, but must inevitably be supplied by the end-user (Ibid). The situated context of inscriptions, within a community of practice, means that huge amounts of information can be implicitly embedded in the form – not just in the words themselves, but in the relationship of entries, their ordering, and crucially, what is *not* said. The meaning relies on shared interpretations, on shared assumptions; the writer is aware of the inferences which will be made by another ‘competent reader’ and can draw on these in the way written entries are made. (Heath and Luff 1996)

Representations of working knowledge possess a ‘gestalt’, functioning as a ‘whole’ i.e. more than the sum of its parts in terms of communicating knowledge. If the constituent parts are disaggregated and rearranged, as, for example, in new type of form, the whole meaning may be undermined. Thus, what may on the face of it seem more comprehensive and more detailed records – and therefore, in bureaucratic terms ‘improved’, may in practice terms be impoverished. An inscribing device is more than the ‘information’ i.e. the facts it contains. The relationships of these pieces of information, their arrangement, their interrelation, are incorporated in actual working practices, and any change to a format, may affect working practices. The design of an inscribing device such as a form, also imposes an ordering of material. The ordering of items is also part of the situated meaning, which is the ‘geography’ of records – i.e. the placing of a term affects the meaning of the term. Meanings are not fixed, but are generated by the positioning of terms in the records. As such, inscribing devices may not only have limited success as records or work done, but may also have a destabilising effect on working practices (Ibid). Seemingly trivial changes to the way in which material is documented are consequential in terms of the way they can be used as a working tool in practice. They are no longer user-friendly in terms of practice – so for example, the splitting up of different dimensions of the information into different sections, means they cannot be consulted simultaneously, and this necessitates switching back and forth between sections, rather than seeing what happened ‘at a glance’. *“The system therefore removes the economy, gestalt, and tailorability of*

the paper medical card which is an essential part of the ways practitioners are able to use the record for professional practice within the consultation.” (Heath and Luff 1996 p359)

The authority of inscribing devices may be used to reduce professional autonomy, or at least be experienced as a reduction in professional discretion by practitioners. Knowledge and responsibilities are increasingly transferred from human individuals into material technologies, whether forms or computer systems, and as such, are removed from everyday awareness of these processes. Zuboff draws a connection between textualisation and industrialization, seeing textualization as the continuation of a process of rationalisation which ‘unembodies skill’ and centralises knowledge as a strategy of control. This unembodying of skill or knowledge may reconstitute it and/or disrupt its ‘gestalt’ (Zuboff 1988).

Inscription is also significant in organisational knowledge because of its role in inscribing ‘routine’, which is the embodiment of ‘what is known by the firm’ (Nelson and Winter 1992). Routine is understood as “*the repertoire of organisational members’ capabilities*”(p303) which is partly exercised and reproduced by ‘remembering by doing’, and learning by watching others do, but also, if it is to be circulated through an organisation, requires abstraction and transmission via ‘messages’. The formalisation demanded by inscription, and in particular, by standard inscribing devices may mean that the informal and ambiguous dimensions of practice are lost or discounted (Foray and Steinmeuller 2003).

Formalisation may reduce professional discretion and undermine practice. Inscribing practices are part of the organisation of practice, and if they are changed without due attention to the practices they are embedded in, not only will the changes be difficult to implement and with unsatisfactory results, but they may also disrupt the practice of the work, because their use interrupts ways of working (Heath and Luff 1996). Formalisation may disrupt front-line practice, and the dynamics of communities of practice. The formalising and standardising effect of inscribing devices leaves no room for discretion and nuance in the way information

is presented (Heath and Luff 1996 p363). Systems which attempt to formalise components of a record are aiming to remove the ambiguities and anomalies which undermine the value of the information for other purposes such as research and aggregate analysis. However, this approach does not take account of the possibility that the ambiguities and anomalies have good practice justifications. The “*indigenous rationality*” (p360) of the documentation as it relates to work practices may be ignored: *“The relevant classes and categories have been identified, but the practices through which the documentation is written, read and used within the consultation have been largely ignored. By ignoring why the record is as it is, the design fails to recognise that the very consistencies which have been identified, are themselves the products of systematic and socially organised practices. By ignoring these practices, the design not only discounts the indigenous rationality oriented to by the doctors themselves in producing and reading the records, but fails to recognise that such practices are themselves inextricably embedded in the day to day constraints of in situ medical work.”* (Heath and Luff 1996, p360).

Changes to the mode of representation may demand different practice skills. For example, the textualisation of work has abstracted work. A different set of skills is required to work with this symbolic representation of practice knowledge. Zuboff (1988) calls these ‘intellective skills’ (p73) and contrasts these with ‘action-centred skills’, which she associates with the sentient, embodied skill of craft working. Intellective skills are conceptual, problem-solving skills, such as procedural reasoning and inferential processes. *“Intellective skills are necessary when action is refracted by a symbolic medium. They are used to construct appropriate linkages between a symbol and the reality it means to convey.”* (p79). Action-centred skill is characterised by: sentience (information is derived from physical clues); action-dependent (typically unexplicated and implicit in physical action); context-dependent (only meaningful within the context of the physical activity); and personal (knowledge and action are situated in the individual) (p61). She defines intellective reasoning and learning as primarily ‘analytical’ and action-centred as primarily ‘analogical’ (Ibid).

If practice shifts to require work with new modes of representation, for example, more extensive or different types of inscriptions, it produces a different form of working knowledge. Practice skills must also shift to accommodate this kind of knowledge. This is to some extent a new type of expertise. New forms of working knowledge create a new experience of work. Practitioners have to learn to interpret new forms of representation and the willingness to trust a different kind of experience and accept it as reliable working knowledge (Zuboff 1988). When work is translated into inscriptions, i.e. text, working knowledge is no longer based on a sentient experience of work – “*a seamless extension of sensory experience*”. Effectively, workers have to learn to trust the symbolic dimension they are required to work with, instead of relying on a direct, sensory experience of work (Zuboff 1988). “*The textualization of work-related processes can destroy the sense of meaning inherent in action-centred skill and the oral culture in which they are embedded.*” (Zuboff 1988, p180).

THE POLITICS OF INSCRIBING

Inscriptions are one of the material technologies through which organisations are enacted. Such modes of representation are one of the social, material and epistemological arrangements which constitute, represent and enable particular modes of authority. A ‘mode of representation’ defines what is spoken of in organisations, and in what terms. It specifies what is excluded and discounted (Law 1994). Law describes this combination of discourses and material enactments of these discourses as ‘modes of organising’, which, he suggests, function as competing rationalities within organisations (and indeed more broadly across social institutions), each with their own particular technologies of organising, currencies and values, including inscription. Inscription plays a different role in different dominant modes: so, for example, in a ‘scientific’ mode of organising, inscription is an important aspect of both the production of knowledge and the currency of success (as described at length in Latour 1987 and Latour and Woolgar 1986); in a

‘administrative’ mode of organising, inscription is more Weberian in character, designed to record and prescribe and standardise procedures and information; the mode of ‘enterprise’ expresses itself in forms of inscription linked to performance measurement, competition and audit. ‘Paperwork’ is one of many material expressions of particular modes of ordering. Particular types of paperwork – forms, performance reports, tests, questionnaires, appraisals etc – are used as instruments of calculation. Law insists that the paperwork is a symptom of a lack of trust in the capacity of individuals to work responsibly and ably. Instead, conduct, performance and output must be measured, described and documented in paperwork. The paperwork constructs a ‘performance’ of performance, a demonstration of work done well. It is not enough to *do* work, but work must be documented and evidenced and ‘talked up’ in paperwork. (Law 1994)

The capacity of a particular mode of representation to stand for and contain organisational knowledge is a result of the professional and cultural status of different forms of representation within, for example, a particular community of practice. A symbolic medium, such as inscription, with its distance from experience can be seen as a ‘thinning of meaning’ for practitioners who are accustomed to the sentience of action-centred knowledge. Inscription creates an abstracted representation of work, in contrast to direct, sensory experience. *"The textualization of work-related processes can destroy the sense of meaning inherent in action-centred skill and the oral culture in which they are embedded."* (Zuboff 1988, p180). Conversely, in some contexts, inscriptions are regarded as superior to tacit working knowledge in terms of their reliability. The presentation of knowledge through inscription may be deemed more ‘truthful’, more ‘real’ than embodied forms of knowledge, because it is more explicit (Ibid). Modes of representation are tied up with professional identities. Different modes of representation may be trusted more or less by different practitioners. When the mode of representation changes or when work relies more extensively on inscription, this may change work identities and cultures (Ibid). Institutional practices and the social dimensions of organisations may undermine the introduction of new systems of inscription. For example, professional identities

may undermine compliance with record-keeping procedures. There are not only different technical skills associated with different types of work, there are different moral values attached to the use of different technical skills. The work of record-keeping may be seen as administrative or clerical and inappropriate for professionals. Similarly, professionals may resist detailed record-keeping because it is understood to undermine professional autonomy and discretion and judgement. There is also a political dimension to the documentation of work processes. This is not simply a reluctance to make work accessible to surveillance and evaluation, but also because the possession of a skill or knowledge base is part of the 'political armoury' of the professions: "*Who, what, when and where are well guarded team secrets of cliques and cabals in clinics.*" (p195). What is widely known may never appear in official records, for this reason (Garfinkel 1967).

Conversely, by ensuring work practices are incorporated into a classification system, a profession or body of workers can establish legitimacy for their work. The constructivist effect of inscribing processes can become a conscious political tool in organisations. Inscribing can be a tool in acquiring political recognition: "*A classification of work becomes, then, a political actor in the attempts to establish power on broad institutional and historical levels.*" (Bowker & Star 1999, p253). In order not to be overlooked, a profession must codify its practices so that they could be incorporated into the dominant communication infrastructure, if their work and status was not to be further marginalised in future (Ibid). What can be represented becomes what can be known about an organisation or a practice. Without inscription, many entities are lost as time goes on. Inscription in organisations is often used to create archives, to provide access to the past, by encoding and storing current knowledge, for future use. Again, the preservation of information for the future is a political matter. If work becomes part of history, it maintains its validity in future assessments. If it is not visible in the archive, it disappears. This undermines its visibility as a profession, but also undermines its knowledge foundations – its practices leave no permanent traces (Ibid). Inscription is used to provide access to the past, by encoding and storing current knowledge, for future use. Inscriptions are used to create archives. These archives tend to be

kept in order to be able to reconstruct a past event at a later date, should anyone ever need to know, and most often, that ‘anyone’ is an auditor, or a commission of enquiry. Despite the fact that no individual, and indeed, no written record can ever contain enough information to fully reconstruct past events, if information is to be *officially* remembered by an organisation, it has to be recorded on a *form*. Again, the preservation of information for the future is a political matter. If work becomes part of history, it maintains its validity in future assessments. If it is not visible in the archive, it disappears (Ibid). The categories created by classification systems are not only bureaucratic issues; they have a material effect on work and lives. Classification systems define what is visible and invisible. Categories of object and action that do not fit into the classificatory system are rendered invisible in the formal, officially sanctioned representation of the organisation and its work. These invisible objects run the risk of becoming unacceptable or irrelevant (Ibid).

Attempts to impose standardised inscribing devices or procedures on communities of professionals may mobilise resistance. Bowker & Star (1999) describe such *unnaturalised* objects as *monsters*, inhabiting the *borderlands* of a community of practice, persistently resisting naturalisation, and undermining the smooth use of material tools. Different modes of representation have a political status, and may be integral to professional and individual identities. Changes to the mode of representation may mobilise resistance in organisations. Informal situated practices may well persist either instead of or alongside more formalised reporting arrangements, undermining the value of the formal systems (Heath and Luff 1996). Practice utility may well be at odds with other record-keeping demands, in which case, practitioners may develop informal practices to address practice demands, and comply superficially with record-keeping demands of the “front office” – thus undermining the value of the records produced, decoupled as they are from the realities of practice (Garfinkel 1967).

Systems of inscription may become naturalised as accepted ‘objects’ within communities of practice over time. They lose their ‘anthropological strangeness’ and become taken for granted and therefore invisible tools of practice. They

become accepted not necessarily because they are particularly suitable or functional, but because they are treated as ‘*consequential*’ as objects, within the community of practice: “*Things perceived as real are real in their consequences (Thomas and Thomas 1917)*” (Bowker & Star 1999, p294). They become the accepted medium of action, and therefore acquire agency: “*Something actually becomes an object only in the context of action and use; it then becomes also something that has the force to mediate action.*” (Bowker and Star 1999, p298). The point at which new inscribing devices are being introduced into an organisation is a valuable opportunity for research. It is at this point that the discourses of authority embedded within the inscribing devices are revealed in the responses of practitioners to the new mode of representation. So too are the political and epistemic of professional groups revealed.

CONCLUSIONS TO THE CHAPTER

In the introduction to the thesis I outlined the importance of inscription in current debates about public management and its use within public sector organisations, and in particular in the social work setting. This makes it a significant subject for research, in order to understand better its implications and effects. Inscription creates many of the tools and materials the everyday activities of work rely on. The interpretations and utility which practitioners attribute to such materials reflect the political and social dynamics which underpin organisations (Garfinkel 1967). Inscription is an expression of and a sustaining mechanism of particular power relations and epistemic norms. From the perspective of ANT (Latour) such micro-levels of social and material reality express, enact and sustain broader political and epistemological dimensions. Empirically therefore, examining the role of inscription in an organisation becomes not only of technical concern, but a way of understanding sustaining epistemic and political discourses. “Micro-technologies” such as inscription are usually ‘below the threshold of attention’, yet their role in the enactment of power relations of an organisation makes them worthy of research

attention (Hoskin and McLean 1998). This taken-for-grantedness is precisely why the material tools of organisation have such an important role in the expression of power, because they 'disappear' from attention and are uncontested. The norms and practices of organisational action are 'black-boxed' into material arrangements that are taken for granted and remain invisible and unchallenged (Czarniawska and Joerges 1998).

Material and technical issues effect on the design of organisation systems. Organisations do not operate in a pure, perfectible realm, but are shaped by the capacities and limitations of the material technologies available to us (Bowker and Star 1999). It is particularly useful to study such dimensions of organisations at the point at which technology is changing. The expansion of information technology, and the importance placed upon documentation and proceduralisation by NPM approaches which are shaping public management, means that inscription is becoming more widespread in public sector organisations. If inscription does play a political and constitutive role in organisations, its expanded role in management should be subject to careful consideration in terms of its possible effect in organisations. It is these concerns that have shaped the focus and method of this study.

By adopting an ANT perspective, inscription can be understood as a tool of social ordering which may act to construct aspects of organisations – practitioners and practice – rather than merely operating as a neutral tool which simply reflects stable entities within an organisation. This perspective allows the researcher to approach inscription as the *object* of research i.e. in order to understand better the effect of managerial strategies which emphasis inscribing and in particular the adoption of standard inscribing devices. It also provides a conceptual framework which can be used to explore the political processes of representation in organisations, and thereby understand the political processes which characterise the organisation and which may be enacted through the responses and negotiations which generated through the introduction of inscribing as a managerial strategy. By

examining inscription – the inscribing practices and the inscribing devices – the researcher is able to explore wider aspects of social work practice.

The discussion of the ontological perspectives of ANT produces the following questions, which were used to guide the research study:

- How and with what intentions is inscription used as a managerial strategy to control the content and quality of practice and the conduct of practitioners? What are the implications for the social work service and for social work practice of its use as a tool of ordering?
- What is the role and effect of inscribing in producing objects of organisational consequence in the social work service? How adequate is inscription as a mode of representation and the constitutive effects of representation practices on the social work service and on social worker practice. what is the role of inscription as a technology of representation; what is its capacity to ‘stand for’ and ‘speak for’ objects; what are the discourses that afford inscription its legitimacy and authority; what is the performative and constitutive power of inscription – does it have a material effect on the constitution of objects and relationships between objects in organisations?
- What is the status of inscription within the professional discourses which exist in social work service? What does this tell us about the ‘modes of ordering’ enacted in social work management and practice and the professional discourses enacted and disputed with the social work service? What are the effects of such discourses on the effectiveness of managerial strategies of inscription in managing the conduct and quality of social work practice?

These conceptual questions form the broad theoretical framework for the empirical study. The setting for the research study is described in detail in the next chapter of the thesis.

CHAPTER THREE: THE RESEARCH SETTING

Before outlining the specific methodology and design of the research, it is important to describe the research setting in which the case study took place, in order to set the different elements of the research methods in context. In this chapter, I provide an overview of the organisational structure of the CFSW service in which the case study took place and describe in broad terms the legal dimensions of CFSW which are relevant to the thesis because they provide the framework for much Social Work practice. CFSW is a complex field, subject to a wide range of often very recent legislation and associated statutory processes. Cases may be subject to multiple statutory requirements at the same time. While it is beyond the scope of this study to describe and make sense of all the complex legal arrangements and policy arrangements which surround CFSW, there are a number of key issues which are significant in terms of this thesis. I also describe in some detail the nature of Social Work practice in terms of the type of work activities that Social Workers undertake. What is lacking in the literature about Social Work policy and management, often written for a professional readership who after all will know what Social Work practice consists of, is a sense of the everyday setting and texture of Social Worker activity. For anyone reading this thesis who has not had direct experience of CFSW (and as researcher, I came to the field with no prior knowledge of Social Work) the context in which Social Workers exercise their professional expertise is highly significant. Whilst a lot of their work may be routine and even bureaucratic, they are often working in direct contact with children and families who are in severe need and even crisis, who may be affected by economic deprivation or by the effect of drug or alcohol abuse. This world is very different from the settled environment of a university. In this chapter, I attempt to convey some understanding of the world in which Social Workers work,

through a description of the type of activities Social Workers engage in and the challenges they face, based on my interviews and periods of observation (the detail of which are described in the following chapter). Finally, I describe two particular characteristics of the specific research setting, which are of particular significance for the research: the effect of a child protection failure and the introduction of a standard assessment reporting format – the Standard Assessment Format (SAF).

THE CASE STUDY SETTING: THE CHILDREN AND FAMILIES SERVICE

This case study took place in the CFSW Service of an urban local authority in Scotland. At the beginning of the research study, the CFSW Service was situated in the Social Work Department, along with the Community Care and Criminal Justice Social Work services. During the preliminary stages of the study, the department was reorganised and the CFSW service was moved into the Education Department. The Education Department was then renamed the Children and Families Department. At the time of the research a new structure was being devised for the CFSW Service, along with the new Children and Families' Department as a whole which was to be implemented at the end of the research period. My description of the structure of the service relates to the structure before this restructuring took place.

The CFSW Service had a central management and administration team which was headed up by 2 Senior Managers, an Operations Manager and a Planning and Commissioning Manager, under the management of the departmental head i.e. the Director of Social Work, followed by the Director of Education. Below these Senior Managers were three Planning and Commissioning Officers who had cross service development duties, rather than a line management role and a Children and Families Service Manager. It was one of the Planning and Commissioning Officers

who had been responsible for the leading the SAF project, and designing the form. At the time of my interview of the three Planning and Commissioning Officers, they were in the process of being reassigned to a line management role of a group of practice teams under the incoming new structure.

The CFSW service was split at that time into ten Practice Teams, which were spread around the city, each with their own geographical catchment area. The Practice Teams are based at Social Work Centres, which (at the time of the study) also housed Social Work teams from the other branches of Social Work i.e. the Community Care and Criminal Justice services. Each Practice Team is managed by a Practice Team Manager (PTM). The Social Work staffing in practice teams consists of Social Workers, Senior Practitioners and Senior Social Workers. Social Workers are effectively the front-line Social Work staff. They work directly with children in need and their families and have an allocated case load. The number of cases allocated to an individual Social Worker varies, depending on the capacity of the Social Worker, based on their level of experience, and the workload associated with a case depending on its complexity and level of risk. At the time of the study there was a debate about the proposed introduction of a maximum case-load of 13 cases for each Social Worker. This was seen as an unrealistically low number by interviewees, because of the numbers of cases referred to the service and the limited resources, i.e. Social Workers, available to take on cases. There was also some debate about the difficulty of defining an appropriate workload through a standard number of cases, because of the different workloads associated with an individual case, depending on its level of urgency, complexity and risk.

Senior Social Workers have a line management role. In theory, they do not have their own case load, but it was clear from the interviews that some Senior Social Workers do continue working on cases. This was explained by some Senior Social Workers interviewed as the result of a need for them to step in because of limited resources and by others as the result of their own desire to maintain some involvement with direct case work. Senior Social Workers, along with the PTMs, are responsible for the management of case allocation to Social Workers. They also

have the responsibility of managing the waiting list of cases. This is an ongoing process of being aware of what cases are awaiting allocation and assessing the level of urgency of each case. There is a waiting list of cases awaiting allocation at each Practice Team and a constant pressure to allocate cases as soon as possible. The pressure to allocate has to be balanced against the availability of Social Worker resource, and also the need to take account of Social Workers' level of experience. This is effectively a judgement call by Senior Social Workers, and a process of negotiation with individual Social Workers. Senior Social Workers also act as 'Supervisors' to Social Workers. This is not simply a line management role, but constitutes the quality assurance process for Social Work (and is discussed below). In some Practice Teams there are also Senior Social Work Practitioners, although this does not seem to be standard across all teams and their exact status and role varies from Practice Team to Practice Team. Senior Practitioner roles are filled by experienced Social Workers who, whilst not wanting to take on the management aspects of a Senior Social Worker position, have a more senior status by virtue of their specialist knowledge. Senior Practitioners may therefore take a lead on developing a particular aspect of a team's service, or may specialise in a particular area of CFSW practice e.g. adoption.

THE WIDER SETTING: CHILDREN AND FAMILIES SOCIAL WORK

Local authority Social Work services in Scotland are carried out under responsibilities and powers delegated to local authorities through legislation. A responsibility to 'promote social welfare' was delegated to local authorities under the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968, and this legislation still underpins local authority Social Work services. The legislation assigns responsibilities to local authorities to take action to support welfare for children and families, older people, disadvantaged sections of the populations such as those with mental or physical disabilities and to support offenders (The Scottish Parliament 1999). The legal

context of CFSW changed significantly with the introduction of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995. Under this act, the legal responsibilities and statutory powers of local authorities in respect of child welfare were refined and expanded. The act requires local authorities to provide services for children defined as 'In Need'⁴ or 'Looked After'⁵ and to provide Child Protection services to safeguard children at risk of abuse. Local authorities are also required to co-ordinate adoption and fostering services (The Scottish Parliament 1999). The act lays out a series of rights for children which also define the considerations which must be taken into account when deciding upon local authority intervention in a child's life.

⁴ A child is defined as 'in need' if: "(a) he or she is unlikely to achieve or maintain, or to have the opportunity of achieving or maintaining, a reasonable standard of health or development unless the local authority provides services for him under Part II of the Act; (b) his or her health or development is likely significantly to be impaired, unless such services are so provided;

(c) he or she is disabled; or

(d) he or she is affected adversely by the disability of any other person in his or her family.

2. The Act also states that services may be provided:

(a) for a particular child;

(b) if provided with a view to safeguarding or promoting his or her welfare, for his or her family; or

(c) if provided with such a view, for any other member of his or her family." (Scottish Parliament 2004)

⁵ A child is defined as being 'looked after' by the local authority if:

- accommodated by them under section 25 of The Children (Scotland) Act i.e. in foster or other types of residential care outside the family home
- subject to legal supervision requirements delegated to the local authority
- subject to an order, warrant or authorisation under which the local authority has responsibilities for the child." (Scottish Office 1999)
-

The Children's Act establishes that:

- *“each child who can form his or her views on matters affecting him or her has the right to express those views if he or she so wishes*
- *parents should normally be responsible for the upbringing of their children and should share that responsibility*
- *each child has the right to protection from all forms of abuse, neglect or exploitation*
- *in decisions relating to the protection of a child every effort should be made to keep the child in the family home*
- *any intervention by a public authority in the life of a child should be properly justified and should be supported by services from all relevant agencies working in collaboration” (The Scottish Parliament 1999)*

Under the Children (Scotland) Act 1995, any statutory agency, including the CFSW service, is required by law to take action in the event of a referral by members of the public or any other body, about a case of possible child harm. The Act requires one of a range of options to be taken in this event:

“There is a range of options in response to a referral:

- *provide advice or information and take no further action when the task is completed*
- *refer the family to another agency or service*
- *seek further information from the family or others*
- *offer a service, for example allocation of a Social Worker to visit the family or provide a place in day care service*
- *undertake an assessment of the child and family's needs in order to inform future decisions*
- *make enquiries under local child protection procedures, or*
- *undertake a joint investigation into concerns about a child's safety or welfare with the police.” (Scottish Parliament 2004)*

Social Workers describe cases as either ‘voluntary’ or ‘statutory’. ‘Voluntary’ cases are those where Social Work involvement with a child or family is conducted with the voluntary consent of parents. This may be because the parents have approached the CFSW service for help and support. This may be because they are having problems with the behaviour or development of their children or because they need access to specialist support services for their child, for example in the case of a disability. In some cases, parents may agree to work with the CFSW service in order to avoid becoming subject to statutory intervention. ‘Statutory’ cases are those which are subject Social Work intervention through one of the legal channels which exist to protect children. The introduction of increased legislation in connection with child welfare and child protection through the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 means that local authority CFSW is dominated by ‘statutory’ cases (Brand et al 2005). These statutory measures of intervention are managed through the Children’s Hearing System, which is a part of the Scottish legal system for the management of cases involving children, and the Child Protection arrangements delegated to the local authority. Some cases may be subject to statutory intervention through both systems at the same time.

THE CHILDREN’S HEARING SYSTEM

The Children’s Hearing System was first established in Scotland 1971, under the provision of the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968. Based on a Scandinavian model of child justice, it is devised as a less adversarial, more ‘family friendly’ system of managing legal cases which involve children under 16 years old, who have committed offences or who are the subject of concerns about their welfare. The approach is based on a perspective which understands that child welfare and child offending may both be a result of parental neglect, which may be addressed through support and intervention by a range of agencies such as Social Work or education. Such cases do not have to go to the Sherriff Court⁶, but instead are heard

⁶ The Sheriff Courts are the main civil courts in the Scottish legal system.

by a panel of lay members. The Children's Hearing System is overseen by the non-governmental body, The Scottish Children's Reporter Administration and managed by legal officers called Children's Reporters.

The Children Act (Scotland) 1995 identifies the legal grounds for bringing a child before a hearing, as circumstances in which the child:

- is beyond the control of parents or carers
- is at risk of moral danger
- is or has been the victim of an offence, including physical injury or sexual abuse
- is likely to suffer serious harm to health or development through lack of care
- is misusing drugs, alcohol or solvents
- has committed an offence
- is not attending school regularly without a reasonable excuse
- is subject to an antisocial behaviour order and the Sheriff requires the case to be referred to a children's hearing.

The Children's Reporter may receive referrals of possible cases from the Social Work service, from other agencies such as the police or schools, as well as from any member of the public or even the child him/herself. When the case of a child is referred to the Reporter, the reporter must make enquiries in order to establish whether there is enough evidence to support the ground for referral and whether compulsory measures of supervision, i.e. the enforcement of action in relation to the child, may be needed.

The Reporter has statutory discretion in deciding the next step and s/he may:

- decide that no further action is required.

- refer the child or young person to the local authority so that advice, guidance and assistance can be given on an informal and voluntary basis. This usually involves support from a Social Worker.
- arrange a children's hearing because s/he considers that compulsory measures of supervision are necessary for the child.

Children's Hearings

A Children's Hearing is a legal tribunal in front of a panel of three lay members. Panel members are recruited from the general public and undergo training in order to serve on a hearing panel. One of the three panel members will chair the hearing. The hearing considers reports about the circumstances of the child from any relevant agencies, such as Social Work, the police, schools and GPs. It will also consider information about the circumstances of parents or other adults involved in the domestic circumstances of the child, such as economic circumstances or any criminal records or drug or alcohol use. The hearing will also include personal representations from the welfare professionals involved with the family and from the parents or other relatives, and from the child.

If the Panel decides that compulsory measures of supervision are necessary, it will make a Supervision Requirement, which may be reviewed annually until the child becomes 18, or until the Children's Panel agrees to terminate the Supervision Requirement. The Hearing may specify the terms of the Supervision Requirement and the local authority is responsible for ensuring it is carried out. For example, the child may be allowed to continue to live at home on the condition that they are under the supervision of a Social Worker. In some cases the hearing will decide that the child should live away from home with relatives or other carers such as foster parents, or in a residential school or secure accommodation. The hearing decision may also specify who the child may have contact with, and when. The case will be periodically put before a further hearing to review the terms of the Supervision Requirement, and potentially to terminate it when a hearing decides that compulsory measures of supervision are no longer necessary.

The Children's Hearing system generates many of the cases referred to the CFSW service (although this also works vice versa in that referrals to the CFSW service from other sources may then be referred to the Children's Reporter for consideration). Once the Children's Reporter receives a referral, he or she will contact the relevant CFSW Practice Team, requesting further information. The Reporters have responsibility for a geographical area and as such work alongside a particular CFSW Practice Team. They have close working relationships with the Social Workers on these teams. In the event of a referral, a Reporter may make informal enquiries at first by phone, contacting Social Workers in the team to find out if they know anything about the circumstances of the family, before deciding whether or not to ask for a formal report from the CFSW Service. If the Reporter decides a formal report is necessary, they will ask for one of 3 types of report:

- an initial enquiry report (IER);
- an initial assessment report (IAR);
- a Social Background Report (SBR).

The difference between the 3 reports is essentially a matter of depth and comprehensiveness. The IER is a simple check made by a Social Worker about the immediate circumstances of a referral; a IAR is a more extensive enquiry into the circumstances of the child and essentially designed to assess whether or not further action should be taken; the SBR is a full Social Work assessment report, which is used in the event of the child being subject to a Children's Hearing.

CHILD PROTECTION PROCEDURES

In cases where there is a possibility of serious harm to a child through abuse, the case will become subject to Child Protection (CP) measures. Local authorities are required by law to provide CP procedures. The CFSW Service is required by law to investigate any report made to them about possible child abuse, whether these reports come from members of the public or professionals such as healthcare

workers or teachers. Child Protection processes are managed by the CFSW Service. In the event of a suspected child abuse case, the CFSW service will convene a Child Protection Case Conference, which brings together representatives from relevant professional agencies, such as the police service, education and health. These agencies constitute the 'core group' who will be responsible for working on the child protection case. The core group is required to meet regularly to review the case and make any decisions about the measures required to protect the children in question. The main decision to be made is the registration or de-registration of a child on the local Child Protection Register. The Child Protection Register is maintained by the local authority and identifies children in the area who are deemed to be at particular risk of abuse and which is used to alert any professionals in contact with the child to the fact that the child is 'at risk'. 'Abuse' is defined as: physical injury; physical neglect; non-organic failure to thrive; sexual abuse. A CP Case Conference can also refer the case to the Children's Reporter if it is thought that the child should become subject to compulsory measures of supervision. In cases where the child is thought to be in immediate danger, the Case Conference can decide that an application should be made by the CFSW Service to the Sheriff Court for additional legal powers to protect the child, such as a Child Protection Order, which allows the CFSW service to remove a child from home or an Exclusion Order, which may prohibit contact between an adult (e.g. a parent) and the child.

All Case Conferences, both the initial conference and any review meetings, will require a report from the Social Worker allocated to the case, outlining the circumstances of the child, making an assessment of risk and recommending any measures which should be taken to protect the child and hopefully, to change its circumstances so that it is no longer at risk. Such measures might be recourse to legal intervention or even removal from home. Measures may be more geared towards supporting parents, through Social Work intervention or assistance from other services such as drug or alcohol addiction workers, in order to improve their parenting of the child, thereby reducing the risk to the child.

The Children's Hearing system and Child Protection Measures constitute the broad framework for statutory CFSW cases. It is within this framework that Social Work managers, and PTMs must manage the process of casework, and the progress of cases through the statutory systems.

CASE MANAGEMENT

The process of case management in CFSW is in effect a process which starts from initial referral, through allocation to a Social Worker for assessment and then, depending on whether the case is to be subject to statutory intervention, voluntary Social Work intervention, or no intervention at all, onto the management of the ongoing involvement of the CFSW service with a child and its family. This process is however not as linear and clear cut as it might seem. The term 'referral' might suggest an official one-off event. If the referral comes from the Children's Reporter, this is effectively what happens; the Reporter requests an assessment report from the relevant Practice Team, and the legal process unfolds from that. Otherwise a referral may be a series of events or alerts about a child which the CFSW service is made aware of over time, and at some point, the Practice Team will make a decision that the child requires an assessment, which may or may not result in ongoing intervention by the CFSW service. Each Practice Team runs what is called a 'Duty' service, which is a 'first point of contact' with the CFSW service. Social Workers take it in turns to staff a 'Duty' period⁷, during which they field enquiries from the public, reports of concerns about children from the public, and any other 'referrals' about possible cases. The duty session I observed as part of the case study research yielded the following:

- a number of reports from Juvenile Liaison Officers reporting children who had been engaging in anti-social behaviour, or who had been present when

⁷ In some Practice Teams, Social Workers may specialise in 'duty' work; in others (and in the team I observed) Social Workers take turns to staff a duty rota.

adults had become subject to police intervention.⁸ For example, a child had been present when police had been called to an address because of the rowdy behaviour of a drunken adult.

- a phone call from a member of the public who had repeatedly heard shouting and the sound of a young child crying from a neighbour's house.
- a phone call from a grandmother (herself once subject to Social Work intervention as a parent) expressing concerns about her daughter's treatment of her child (i.e. the caller's grandchild), because of drug abuse.
- a phone call from a primary school teacher who had been alarmed that a parent had arrived, apparently drunk, to collect a child from school.
- a phone call from a member of the public who had observed that a child had been locked out of a neighbouring flat and had slept on the common stairwell.

It is the job of the Social Worker on 'duty', in consultation with the Senior Social Worker on 'duty', to investigate the circumstances of any such referral, and decide whether further action should be taken. This initial investigation may involve: establishing whether the child is or has been subject to Social Work involvement, through reference to the local authority's Social Work case register; writing to the child's parents to require them to meet with a Social Worker for an interview; phoning schools, GPs or health visitors to enquire about the child's behaviour and wellbeing. The investigation may demand extensive enquiries from the Social Worker simply to find out who the child is. For example, one Social Worker described to me how she had had to make enquiries about a child's circumstances after a referral from a neighbour through the duty system:

"Well that's often what takes up your time on duty, rooting around for information – where did the kids go to school or whatever. If we've already had that information, well that would be in the file – but we don't always

⁸ Child Protection legislation requires the police to report any criminal or anti-social activity in children or the presence of a child at an event in which police are involved to the CFSW Service for further investigation.

have the information. Last week, on duty, I had a referral and all I had was the child's first name, and the parent's first name and an address. And I struggled to find any further information. [.....] Often they are anonymous referrals. This was a referral from a neighbour. So, unusually, this wasn't anonymous. Most of them are. This was one a week, parents in the kitchen with the small child at 7 o'clock in the morning screaming and shouting at each other. And the neighbour phoned saying they were worried. It was disturbing to see this child crying. So I phoned around the local health centres to see if I could get any more information, but it wasn't possible without the child's surname or date of birth. So I was able to go back to the neighbour, who had said that his wife used to go to the same dentist as the mother, so I asked for the name of the dental clinic, or otherwise for the neighbour to try and suss out what the surname was. And he was able to remember the name of the dentist, and I was able to get the mother's surname, and then I could go back to Child Health and they could trawl through and get the child's details. [.....] Because I found where the child was registered, I was able to phone up and talk to the health visitor and raise these concerns with her and ask whether she had any concerns. She didn't have any concerns about the child at all. But because these concerns had been raised with us, I said that what we would do at this stage is to send a letter out to them saying that there had been a complaint made, and that they should phone us if they needed any support, any advice or help. And the health visitor was due to make a check, so, as she had a relationship with the Mum, she could raise the issue. The letter was sent out. She [the mother] then phoned up yesterday saying: "Why have I got this letter, what's going on?!" I went back to the file, and it was all written up so I knew what was going on, so I went back to her and explained. She then turned round and said, well actually, I have got a lot of problems, my husband's an alcoholic and I'm losing the plot. So she's been offered an appointment to come here and talk to someone. But if there had been a history of domestic violence, and we had that in the files, we might have taken a different approach – said they should come and see us, or gone out to see them, say if there was a history of not turning up for appointments. Similarly, we would a trawl to see if there were any kids at school with any concerns, health visitors and so on. You basically do a big trawl on everything." (PT1/SW2)

For children who come to the attention of the CFSW through the duty system, the initial enquiries made by Social Workers, in consultation with Senior Social Workers, will indicate whether further action should be taken on a case. This might be a full Social Work assessment, with a view possibly to statutory intervention through the Children's Hearing or Child Protection procedures; it may require an assessment of need with a view to working on a voluntary basis with a family, or

simply assisting the family in accessing support services, for example if the child or parent has a disability; if a child, or even an unborn child, is clearly at immediate and severe risk, the CFSW service may move the case straight into the CP process.

At the point at which it is decided (or required by the Children's Reporter) that a child should be subject to a full Social Work assessment, the case has to be allocated to a Social Worker for assessment. Demands from the Reporter are subject to a specified timescale, and this will drive allocation. For other cases, allocation will be driven by the perceived urgency of the child's circumstances. This work of assessing the urgency of cases and matching cases to Social Workers based on their ability, experience and workload is done by the Senior Social Workers. Each Practice Team has its own arrangements for the precise process of managing allocation. My research suggested that this is done through a process of regular meetings and the judgement of the Senior Social Workers of the urgency of new cases requiring allocation and the monitoring of any changes in the circumstances of cases awaiting allocation, for example, through new reports through the duty system. The allocation process is also a process of negotiation with the Social Workers. In all Practice Teams, there are more cases awaiting allocation than there are Social Workers available to take them on. CFSW, across the UK and not only in this local authority, has suffered from a severe shortage of Social Workers in recent years, because of recruitment and retention problems. In this service, the shortage was at its most severe in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and is now easing. A Scottish recruitment drive into a fast-track Social Work training programme and specific measures in this local authority to recruit and train Social Workers have increased the number of Social Workers coming into the profession. However, there are still unfilled posts, and the number of posts occupied by newly qualified Social Workers limits the capacity of Senior Social Workers to allocate more complex cases. The number of cases referred to the CFSW service is also increasing, driven by the statutory requirements of the

Children (Scotland) Act 1995. This adds to the pressures on resources. There is pressure to allocate cases as fast as possible⁹, because of child welfare and child protection concerns but this is balanced by a concern not to overload Social Workers, because this would be counterproductive in terms of the outcomes of the case. Allocating a case to a Social Worker who is already overstretched, or who is too inexperienced to cope with the demands of the case may be counterproductive for the case and for the worker. There were examples in this study of Senior Social Workers who took on the assessment of cases as an interim measure, when no Social Worker was available, in order to move cases through the system. The pressure of the quantity of casework coming through the statutory systems means that the CFSW service has less capacity to take on 'voluntary' cases. As such, statutory cases dominate Social Worker case loads (Brand et al, 2005).

Once a case is allocated to a Social Worker, the ongoing management of a case and the quality of Social Worker activity is monitored primarily through the Supervision System, although there are administrative procedures which dictate the procedural progress of statutory cases. Supervision is not a line management mechanism. Supervision, a system shared by the counselling and psychotherapy professions, is the mechanism through which a Social Worker can discuss cases with a more experienced professional. In the CFSW Service, each front-line Social Worker is allocated to a Senior Social Worker, whom they will meet regularly¹⁰ on a one-to-one basis, in order to discuss progress on cases. It is through these discussions that the progress of cases is monitored within the Practice Team, and that Social Worker practice can be (informally) assessed and improved. The Supervisor has a responsibility to advise the Social Worker on their practice, in terms of activity and outcomes for individual cases and in general. This is also a

⁹ Case waiting lists are one of the performance indicators by which the CFSW Service is measured by the Social Work Services Inspectorate.

¹⁰ There didn't seem to be a standard timescale for this across practice teams. Once every couple of weeks seemed to be average, depending on the level of experience of the Social Worker. In between supervision sessions, Social Workers would also take any urgent problems to their 'Senior' for advice.

forum in which a Social Worker can raise particular problems and concerns about cases, and discuss their professional development. The supervision system is not a formal appraisal or Professional Development Review system. It emerges from a tradition of understanding Social Work as a therapeutic profession.

SOCIAL WORKER PRACTICE

The Scottish Social Services Council, the body which is responsible for overseeing and developing Social Worker training, education and continuing professional development defines the Social Worker role as follows:

“Social Workers work with people who use social services to assess and respond to their care requirements. This will usually involve working alongside other professional agencies to ensure that people who use social services receive the support they need.

Social Workers help service users to find solutions to their problems, so that they are able to live more successfully within their communities. Social Workers also work with the family and friends of people who use social services.

Social Workers will:

- *hold the honours or postgraduate degree in Social Work*
- *have excellent listening skills*
- *be supportive and considerate*
- *have the ability to put people at ease*
- *be able to work well with colleagues and other professionals*
- *possess excellent communication skills*
- *be able to work under pressure and to timescales*
- *know and understand the locality in which they work and be aware of the available resources”*

In the report of the 21st Century Social Work Review (Brand et al 2005) the skills and processes of Social Work are defined as:

- *“recognising and describing the problem*
- *assessing the situation*
- *empowering the family*
- *enabling family members to identify both what they want and how they can best achieve those ends*
- *counselling*
- *negotiating access to information, advice and services*
- *acting as therapist and advocate or broker*
- *championing those who cannot speak up for themselves” (Brand et al, 2005)*

What neither of these definitions reflect is the role of CFSW Social Workers in the legal system, providing assessments and implementing supervision measures in statutory cases. There is a tension in the therapeutic or supportive role of Social Workers and their status within legally mandated systems of intervention, which is explored in this thesis. There is no reference to inscribing skills, such as report writing or keeping adequate written records, nor is there reference to the requirement to operate according to standard formal procedures. These definitions reflect two core areas of expertise, which appear to be central to professional understandings of what skills and abilities underpin Social Worker activity: assessment and relationship building. The purpose of assessment is to identify risk and need, and to devise appropriate recommendations for action and intervention on behalf of a child. This process of assessment may be part of a formal, statutory process, requiring a written assessment report. Social Workers also describe assessment, particularly the assessment of risk to a child, as an ongoing process in case work. Social Workers must be alert for changes in the circumstances of a child at any time, which might translate into greater risk to the child, and demand some

kind of preventative or stabilising intervention from the Social Work service. The process of relationship building may facilitate the assessment, in that it is through the relationships with a child, or a parent or other professionals that information required for an assessment are obtained. The quality of relationships which Social Workers can develop with children and families is also understood to be the process through which Social Workers can mediate the necessary changes of circumstances required for a child's wellbeing. Clearly, positive, supportive relationships are not always easy in statutory cases in which parents are subject to Social Work intervention against their will and may be hostile to Social Workers. However, it is clear, both from Social Workers in this study, and from professional descriptions of the Social Worker role, that this is understood to be a key area of Social Worker skill and activity.

Social Worker practice covers a wide range of activities, from the most routine contact with families to emergency interventions. Social Workers differentiate between statutory work and the work they contribute to formal assessment processes, such as the writing of assessment reports and the servicing of Children's Hearings or Case Conferences, and what they term 'direct work', which are the activities they undertake directly with children and their families. The activities which contribute to the statutory processes will rely on information gathering and written assessments, done by the Social Worker through the interviewing of families and other professionals, by investigating earlier case file information, and in some cases, researching the specific medical or psychological dimensions of a case. One Social Worker, for example, described how she was taking a training course on dealing with 'foetal alcohol syndrome' because she was taking on a pre-birth case, in which the mother abused alcohol.

The outcomes of statutory cases may generate additional statutory work. For example, a Social Worker may be required to obtain a legal order from the Sheriff Court, such as a Child Protection Order, through which a child would be removed from home, or may be required to initiate adoption processes or secure a Parental

Responsibility Order¹¹ through the Sheriff Court. Social Workers often describe cases in their interviews when they have been required to ‘accommodate’ children, i.e. remove children from their parental home through a Child Protection Order. This may involve the Social Worker going to the child’s home and removing the child, with the assistance of the police if necessary. This may occur as an emergency. For example, as part of the research study, it had been agreed that I would shadow a Social Worker on her work on a statutory case. I received a phone call from the Social Worker shortly after Christmas. She explained that the case had suddenly become much more sensitive and she would prefer that I didn’t accompany her on any visits. She had been alerted by a neighbour of the family on 23rd December, that there had been a police raid the day before, and the parents had been arrested on drugs charges. According to the Social Worker, the police had found £10,000 of heroin stashed in the family’s flat – where she had visited the children on many occasions. What upset the Social Worker most was that it had been discovered that the parents had somehow tapped into the electricity supply in such a way as to circumvent the meter charges. This had meant that there was live wiring in the hall cupboard of the flat. She explained to me that, if the children had gone into this cupboard, they could easily have been electrocuted and killed. The children had stayed the night with the neighbours, but the Social Worker now had to ‘accommodate’¹² two young children not only at very short notice, but on the last working day before Christmas. This involved making an emergency request for a Child Protection Order at the Sheriff’s Court, and also finding accommodation for the children.

This is one extreme of the emergency work Social Workers may have to undertake when working on cases. Other aspects of Social Work activity are much more

¹¹ A Parental Responsibility Order is the legal process by which the local authority obtains parental rights over a child who for whatever reason cannot return to their parents and will remain in local authority care until an adult.

¹² Social Workers use the term ‘accommodate’ to describe the statutory process of finding residential accommodation for children outside the family home, whether in foster care or in a residential home.

routine. Social Workers will make regular visits to the families or children they are working with. The frequency of these visits depends on the needs of the case. Social Workers described how the workload associated with a particular case can vary widely, and suddenly, depending on the immediate circumstances of a case. A case may require little intervention for long periods of time, perhaps because a child is in stable, long-term residential accommodation, or because Social Work support is improving the circumstances of a child at home. At these times, Social Worker contact with the child may be limited. At other times, whether because the circumstances of the child have suddenly changed, or because of the timetable of statutory processes, a Social Worker may have to spend a lot of time working on the case. One Social Worker described how the decision of a Children's Hearing meant that he would have to apply for Parental Responsibility Orders for four siblings, who were all currently in foster care, each of whom would require individual reports and applications to the Sheriff Court. Another Social Worker described an occasion on which a child who had been accommodated in temporary foster care, suffered abuse by one of the other children being fostered at that address, and had to suddenly be found alternative accommodation, and supported through the aftermath of this experience. Another newly qualified Social Worker described how in one of her cases, a teenage girl, whom had been placed in secure residential accommodation because her parents couldn't control her behaviour, was then raped by another resident and ran away. The Social Worker was involved with the process of trying to track down this girl, and then find alternative accommodation for her.

Not all Social Work activity is as urgent or as stressful as these examples. Social Workers may visit families and talk to parents about their parenting skills. They effectively create a therapeutic relationship with a parent, in order to support them in their efforts to make changes in their life, which will improve the circumstances of their children's lives. From the research it seems that very often it is chaotic¹³

¹³ The Social Workers I spoke to were very specific about the term 'chaotic' drug user. It was explained to me that drug use per se would not mean that a parent was judged unfit. A parent who was undergoing a managed

use of drugs or alcohol by parents that are the cause of problems for children who become subject to Social Work attention. Social Workers, along with specialist addiction workers, will try and support and monitor parental substance abuse. Social Workers will also spend time building relationships with the children, in order to understand how a child is coping, or to understand the causes of difficult behaviour, and in order to create a supportive relationship which can assist the child in making changes in their behaviour.

Social Workers are also required to manage 'contact' for children. This can mean facilitating, and sometimes supervising, meetings at home or at a Social Work centre or some other location, between parents and children who are not living together, perhaps because parents are separated or because children are not resident in the family home. There can also be the requirement to facilitate contact between siblings and step-siblings who for whatever reason do not live together. Social Workers also described how, for children who are accommodated in a residential home and under local authority parental responsibility orders, 'contact' might mean taking children out shopping, or ice-skating, or on a visit to MacDonald's.

Social Workers may also work directly with families in improving their life skills, or in managing the demands of their everyday lives. For example, one Social Worker described how she had provided a mother with a diary, to help her in planning what had been until then a very chaotic life. The Social Worker explained to me that progress from a very chaotic life, to a more organised approach in which the mother would plan ahead and make decisions about her child, would be a sign that her parenting skills were improving. The diary was a way in which the mother could start this process. On a home visit, which I made in the company of a Social Worker, a father was helped to complete a benefit claim form. The Social Worker also advised the father on aspects of his child's diet, which related to a medical

programme of drug use reduction, for example, a methadone programme, would be seen as making the necessary changes to their lifestyle to safeguard their children. By contrast, chaotic substance use might mean that parents were erratic in their mental capacity and might be involved in crime, or might put the purchase of drugs or alcohol before the purchase of food or heating.

condition, and reprimanded him because the child had failed to attend an appointment with a nutritionist that had been made on his behalf.

This is just a brief example of the range of activities Social Workers may undertake in connection with their cases, and which I either observed or was told about in interviews. Additional areas of work cover specific support roles in adoption, and for children or parents with particular mental or physical disabilities. All of these roles will encompass both the statutory and formal dimensions of processes, and the 'direct work' of building relationships and supporting parents and children in a very direct way through home visits, telephone calls or interviews at Social Work centres.

Social Workers' intervention in the lives of children and families can therefore be in circumstances of extreme urgency and risk, as the instruments of a statutory process, often in the face of hostility from parents. Conversely, Social Workers may develop long term, supportive (and as Social Workers would see it) therapeutic relationships with children and parents, through which workers intervene and involve themselves in many different aspects of family life, from everyday life skills to support in managing drug or alcohol abuse. The foundations of Social Work expertise are characterised from within the profession as primarily relationship building and risk assessment. In addition, Social Workers must be able to represent and work within a strict legislative framework.

THE CHILD PROTECTION FAILURE

I have already described how concerns in the CFSW profession about the quality of Social Work assessment have been fuelled by a number of high profile child protection cases during the 1990s. This generalised concern had been made more acute in this CFSW because of its involvement in a Child Protection Failure in 2001. A baby died, whilst on the Child Protection Register. The ensuing report,

published in 2003¹⁴, concluded that the death of the child involved had been ‘avoidable’ and that there were faults ‘at every level’ of the Child Protection system. In the wake of the report, the Director of Social Work in this local authority resigned although no CFSW Social Workers were disciplined. The report identified a range of problems across the agencies, but identified a number of failings in the CFSW Service, including:

- Lack of CP procedures and lack of clarity or awareness about procedures that do exist
- A gulf between ‘policy’ and practice i.e. what senior managers think is done as a matter of course, and the reality of practice.
- Existing CP procedures not carried out e.g. circulation of minutes and the involvement of the case conference chair in the signing off of minutes.
- A lack of clarity about decisions that should/could be taken, including the grounds for referral to the Children’s Reporter.
- Failings in the circulation of information related to the case and confusion about confidentiality and the circulation of information.
- Poor co-ordination between agencies – information sharing; understanding of roles; (false) assumptions about proactive role of professionals.
- Very little planning and little joint planning, meaning that cases were allowed to drift.
- Poor record-keeping in the CFSW service
- The effect of limited resources in the CFSW service, meaning that inexperienced workers were being asked to take roles that were beyond their experience and authority.
- Poor Practice Team Management

¹⁴ In order to maintain the confidentiality of the research setting, no bibliographical details are provided for the reports associated with this Child Protection Failure.

- The danger of Social Workers being too easily reassured by parents, because of the focus on relationships with family/parents can cause a problem
- Poor case assessment, based upon impressions, rather than *evidence*
- The tensions created by the conflict of priorities for Social Workers in being pushed to keep families together and to consider the welfare of children
- Too much reliance on judgement of case coordinator (i.e. case SW) – a lot of responsibility for one person; lack of alternative interpretations of case.
- Serious flaws in supervision process, in the assessment of risk and the challenging of Social Workers interpretations of case.

The shortcomings identified in the report relate in large part to areas of social work practice which demand inscribing practices i.e. record-keeping, circulation of information, planning and co-ordination procedures. This suggests that in social work, or in Child Protection social work at least, individual social workers and social work services are being held to account because of shortcomings in inscribing practices.

Following the report on the Child Protection failure, in 2003-2004, the Child Protection arrangements in the agencies responsible for the Child Protection procedures in that area, i.e. the local authority, the health service and the police, underwent an external independent audit, which included an assessment of the status of the children who were on the Child Protection Register at the time. The audit found that none of those children were in immediate danger. It also made a range of recommendations which focussed on areas such as inter-agency co-ordination mechanisms, auditing services, information sharing, resources, staffing and systems, training, staff development and supervision, the organisation of child protection services, child protection case conferences, child protection plans, co-location of services and risk assessment and risk management.

The CFSW Service introduced a number of procedural arrangements in response to the recommendations made in the Child Protection Failure Report and the Child Protection Audit, many of which relate to inscribing processes. For example: new procedures have been introduced for the management of the timescales for case conferences and case monitoring; new procedures and protocols have been introduced for the record-keeping of the content of discussions and the decisions made in case conferences; administrative support is being provided by the CFSW Service to support Child Protection procedures, including the taking and circulation of case conference minutes and the circulation of paperwork for case conferences; independent chairing of case conferences is now required, provided by Senior Social Workers from other Practice Teams; all materials in Child Protection files must be typed rather than handwritten; Child Protection files are subject to regular internal audit by senior managers; Child Protection training is now mandatory for any Social Worker before Child Protection cases can be allocated to them.

The Child Protection Failure has focussed attention not only on Child Protection cases, but according to this study, it has heightened sensitivity amongst all levels of Social Workers, to the risks associated in general with their work. Not only risks to the children they are charged with protecting, but risks to Social Workers themselves, of becoming involved in cases which might go wrong and become subject to external scrutiny.

INTRODUCTION OF THE STANDARD ASSESSMENT FORMAT

Although already underway before the Child Protection Failure occurred, the CFSW initiative to develop a standard assessment format for all case assessments is designed to address concerns about the quality of Social Work practice in respect of assessments, and the recording of assessments. These concerns were highlighted in the Child Protection Failure report. The Standard Assessment Format (SAF) is a pro forma for use as a case assessment report (See Appendix One). The design and introduction of the SAF is driven by Senior Managers in the CFSW service and has been adopted by the department as the standard form for use in case assessment reports. The format was designed by one of the three Planning and Commissioning Officers of the CFSW Service. A consultation process with a working party of PTMs and Social Workers at different grades was used to refine the design of the form. It was piloted in 2001 and introduced across the service in 2002. This initiative coincided with the publication of the Department of Health (England and Wales) Framework for Assessment of Children in Need (see Appendix Two) which is effectively the blueprint for CFSW assessment. The DoH framework is represented in diagrammatic form as a triangle (and hence often referred to as ‘the triangle’ by Social Workers), which summarises the criteria Social Workers should use in assessing the level of risk and the specific problems associated with a family.

The SAF, which is a reporting *format*, i.e. a form on which assessments are recorded, is largely based on the criteria outlined in the DoH framework for assessment. At the time when the SAF was being first introduced, there was no equivalent set of assessment guidelines for Scotland, although since then, the Scottish Government has begun to develop a national standard assessment framework, which is still in consultation. At the time of this study, there was no information within the CFSW service about the content of the Scottish framework. The England and Wales framework was clearly used as a reference point by newly qualified Social Workers and had been introduced to them during their training.

In the document presenting the initiative to the CFSWS, the aims of the SAF are outlined as follows: to respond to the requirement for increasingly evidence-based practice; to set minimum standards for the recording of case information; to improve consistency and objectivity in assessment; to create a more accessible vehicle for the involvement of users/carers; to facilitate agreements about care plans (Standard Assessment Framework departmental presentation document).

The form itself is made up of two parts:

Part 1: Essential and family information: this section of the form is designed to provide basic factual information, plus generic information about the family, such as the child's full name, date of birth, address and school; family information such as the parent's names, parent's relationships (i.e. with each other, and with other partners), parent's ethnicity, native language, number and identity of siblings, carers and/or other significant adults such as grandparents; information about previous or current contact with other Social Work services or other welfare agencies, such as medical, educational or other care agencies. As well as the factual information, there are also sections for 'assessment' 'family and environmental factors', which includes environmental or financial circumstances, such as household income and residential arrangements, plus evaluation of 'Parent's/Carer's capacities to respond to the needs of the children', for example capacity to take care of the physical and emotional needs of the child, the capacity to create a safe environment and provide emotional warmth and developmental stimulation.

Part 2: individual child record: this section of the form is designed to contain material specific to the individual child, rather than the more general family details which might be shared by a number of siblings. So, for example, this is the location for information about the child's ethnicity (rather than the parents'), disabilities, and status with regard to 'child protection' or 'looked after child' measures, and any direct involvement with other agencies such as health or social care. The headings for 'family and environmental factors' and 'parents'/carers' capacity to respond to children's needs' are repeated in this second part of the form. There is

also a section for a detailed description of ‘Child/Young person’s developmental stage and needs’, which contains headings such as: health, education, self-esteem, relationships, self-care skills, hobbies. This second part of the form is also designed to contain a record of dates of hearings / case conferences, decisions made at such meetings, a timetabled work plan and progress. There is a section headed ‘Assessment and Analysis’ which covers: ‘areas of *strength*’ (original italics) and ‘Issues causing concern’. Finally there is a section headed: ‘Summary of priority needs of child and family including risks and vulnerabilities’, which is designed to contain the Social Workers recommendations for action.

This division of the form into 2 parts has a very important practical role, and is also the cause of a great deal of dissatisfaction amongst Social Workers. The reason for dividing the general section on the family, is because one family may have more than one child subject to Social Work involvement, and the intention is to reduce duplication, by allowing one general ‘Part 1’ section to be filled in, which can be duplicated for each child, and so only the second part need be completed for each individual child. Furthermore, Part 2 is also designed so that it could be made available under the Freedom of Information Act (Scotland) 2002, whilst Part 1, which may contain confidential 3rd party information about the parents, such as medical, Social Work or police records, could be held back. However, as we see in later chapters, the existence of the 2 parts of the form is experienced by Social Workers as requiring a lot of repetition of material and duplication of effort, and has become something of a focus of practitioner dissatisfaction.

The intended function of the SAF was to create a single, standard format for case assessment reports, which would be used for all cases, whether statutory or voluntary. For statutory cases, the intention was that the SAF should be used for assessment reports for the Children’s Reporter (i.e. to function as the Social Background Report) and for case conferences in the Child Protection system. However, it was intended that the SAF should also be used to produce an assessment report for voluntary cases, i.e. those cases in which families agree to work with the Social Work service, without the statutory intervention of the

Children's Reporter or the Child Protection measures. The aim in voluntary cases was to provide a framework for Social Workers to use in assessing the risks attached to cases, and to decide whether or not the case should at any time be brought forward into one of the statutory systems. The SAF would therefore be a standard tool for *all* cases allocated to Social Workers. As we shall see in the following chapters, for cases without any official assessment requirements, the assessment of the case would remain tacit, as a dimension of the Social Workers judgement of the case, or at best, discussed orally in supervision meetings. Not only would the 'assessment' of the case remain implicit, i.e. the decision about the case, but the *grounds* for this assessment would be implicit, or scattered through the case notes made by the Social Worker. This would mean that the process of judgement and the outcome of that judgement would be unavailable for scrutiny and evaluation. The SAF is intended to ensure that the elements of assessment are made explicit and are recorded.

An internal review of the implementation of the SAF in 2003 revealed widespread dissatisfaction with the format and piecemeal adoption of the form by the service, although the principle of a standardised assessment model was broadly supported. The review report stated that the SAF was in use "in 50% of cases by 50% of Social Workers". At the time of this research study, the effect of the Child Protection Failure Report, and the reorganisation of the Social Work department had effectively put this initiative on the back burner. An intended review and redesign of the format had not happened and the member of staff who had led the designed and implementation of the SAF was being redeployed under the new structure. However, in principle, the SAF was designated the standard case assessment form in the service, whatever the actual uptake by Social Workers. From my interviews, it did seem that the SAF was gradually being adopted by more Social Workers for statutory cases, but it was not being used for voluntary cases.

In this chapter I have provided a brief description of the legal and organisational context of CFSW and some details of the work activity which constitutes Social Worker practice. The themes of this chapter will be picked up again and developed in the data discussion chapters of the thesis. The aim of this chapter was to provide some context for the setting of the research design of the case study, which is discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

ONTOLOGICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

The research design for this study reflects the ontological and epistemological perspectives of ANT, from which the theoretical framework for the study is drawn, as described in the previous chapter. The design and conduct of the empirical research is informed by the constructivist ontology of ANT which demands a symmetry in the way that the effects of social and technical arrangements are handled in the research (Latour 1999a & 2005; Law 1994). This perspective regards the material and social world as constructed by a combination of ordering processes and technologies, which draw their ordering effect from the discourses of power and authority which sustain them, and which are sustained by them (Law 1994; Law & Mol 2002)). The focus of the research methods is to understand better the micro processes of everyday action and the basic, technical arrangements of organisation such as inscribing processes, sustain and express wider political and cultural discourses and shape practice according to these discourses. Precisely because of the taken-for-granted status of such material arrangements, they, and the discourses they sustain, are overlooked. The aim of the research is therefore to draw such everyday arrangements into visibility, to understand how they function and to examine their effects (Bowker and Star 1999). The aim of this study is to observe and understand how work is done, with what tools and how this is understood and made sense of by practitioners. This approach is aimed at understanding practice at a micro-level, to understand how the tools of inscription shape practice. Practice is constructed through the alignment of the technical and

social arrangements at hand which possess political or cultural authority and the actions i.e. the *practices* which are produced by these arrangements. Approaching research from this perspective means that the nature of practice is understood to be a product of political, social and technological processes. By examining practice, i.e. what people do and what meanings people ascribe to their actions, the socio-technical processes can be understood. Such a practice-based approach (Nicolini et al 2003) regards the observation and understanding of the status and methods of practices as having theoretical implications and practical consequences in organisations. From the perspective of ANT, practice is constructed in the ongoing practices of action in ways that are relational, mediated by artefacts and always rooted in a context of interaction. (Nicolini et al 2003)

The research is designed to be exploratory research, rather than a hypothesis or theory building approach, the theoretical framework was used as a focusing framework for an abductive, iterative process. The conceptual framework of inscription drawn from the ANT (described in Chapter 2) functioned as a methodological ‘organising principle’ for the research study (Latour and Woolgar 1986, p63). The concepts embedded in the ANT perspective of inscription acted as ‘sensitizing concepts’ (Blumer 1954, p7), for example: the use of inscribing devices as a tool for the production of proxy objects for the purposes of representing and mobilizing organisational knowledge (Latour 1994; Law 1987); the use of inscribing devices as actigrammes to define and manage work activity (Callon 2002) the status of inscribing practices in the ‘modes of ordering’ which characterized the research setting (Law 1994). These concepts were the preliminary parameters for the research and a focus for the interviews and observation period. The use of these theoretical concepts was iterative, and was integrated with the evolving development of additional concepts which emerged from the empirical research and which are described in the data analysis chapters below.

RESEARCH METHOD: THE CASE STUDY

The research took the form of an exploratory case study (Yin 1994; Gomm, Hammersley et al. 2000). A case study is suited to this research topic because of its exploratory aims and because of the complex and embedded nature of the phenomenon under study (Yin, 1994). The use of a case study approach is suited to the complex, situated dimensions of professional practice (Nicolini, Gherardi et al. 2003; Osmond and O'Connor 2004). The case study is of particular value in organisational analysis, generating 'thick' data (Geertz 1973). The research approach is to acquire an empathic experience of social settings and to consider behaviour in a social context, thereby uncovering underlying patterns and understanding the often unanticipated outcomes of change (Marshall & Rossman 1995). To explore the use of inscription to manage the complex, situated, embodied aspects of professional performance, requires an approach that can incorporate this degree of complexity. Stake (2000) for example suggests that this kind of empathic understanding is being more appropriate to knowledge about human activity.

This is an 'illustrative case study' (Dopson, 2003, p218) which although singular and specific in nature, is related to a broader phenomenon in such a way that the findings from this case can be related to wider issues, whether theoretical, practice or policy orientated. The aim is not to produce a representative or archetypal study, but one which explores the effect of broader issues on a concrete setting, thereby understanding not broad, abstract principles, but the effect of these principles on everyday practice. This case study could also be described as a critical case study (Flyvberg 2001). The circumstances of the study, the introduction of the SAF and the effect of the Child Protection Failure - lend it some claim to be of particular significance as an example of the general trends and concerns which dominate not only the debates in Social Work management, and more broadly in public sector management in the UK. Nicolini (2003) suggests that it is useful to observe practice at the time of a 'rule-breaking event' which disrupts normal routine and introduces 'reflexive understanding' amongst practitioners (p28). When some kind of change is being introduced, the disruption of habitual practice brings it out of the

shadows of taken for granted unconscious action, and instead stimulates a conscious awareness of how work is achieved. This offers the opportunity for organisational members (and researchers) to reflect on and understand practice (Nicolini et al 2003; Zuboff 1988). In the case of the CFSW Service the introduction of the SAF and the effect of the Child Protection Failure both constituted a point of enforced change which disrupted accepted practices and caused practitioners to reflect on their work activity and the meaning they gave to that activity.

In line with good case study practice, the research combines a variety of data: qualitative interviews with a range of practitioners; review of official and policy documentation; extended periods of non-participant observation; examination of case file material and other case documentation (Gomez et al 2003; Yin 1994; Gomm, Hammersley et al. 2000). This ‘triangulation’ increases the depth of the data, but also increases the internal reliability of the data by examining phenomena from a number of different perspectives (Dopson, 2003; Waldron, 2004; Jones, 2004). A combination of prompted and unprompted interviewing techniques and an open-ended, flexible interview framework (Zuboff 1988, Marshall & Rossman 1995) allowed earlier responses from interviewees to be checked out with later interviewees, thereby exploring the significance and reliability of concepts drawn from practitioners. For example, concepts such as ‘tick-box Social Work’ and narrative ‘flow’, which are discussed later in the thesis, emerged unprompted in early interviews. I was then able to incorporate these concepts in later interviews, in order to check the significance of such terms for practitioners in general.

Any exploration of the effect of changes in policy or practice assumes a dynamic temporal aspect to the phenomena under study (Gomm et al, 2000). The in-depth interviewing approach of this case study provides an opportunity to investigate phenomena as ‘historically-laden’ and as such to introduce a quasi-longitudinal aspect to the data (Dopson, 2003).

The specific approach I took in this case study is informed by an ethnomethodological perspective, in line with ANT studies, in which the aim of the

researcher is to enter into a social setting and through observation, inquiry and reflection, understand the ‘indigenous meanings’ of actions (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw 1995; Garfinkel 1969; Law 1994). ANT studies share an ethnomethodological focus on the observation of practices and the understanding of social ordering as the accomplishment of social members, and their everyday activities, which are themselves constructed as a response to the sense-making of actors (Garfinkel 1969). Thus, in the research setting, members’ accounts of their practice and their social and material environment are important data as well as the observation of what actors *do*. ANT incorporates a stronger constructivist perspective into ethnomethodology with its ontological symmetry in respect of the material and social dimensions of human activity i.e. both the material and human actors.

There was an attempt to incorporate ethnographic dimensions into the fieldwork, in order to increase the depth and richness of the data obtained (Becker 1986 & 1998; Van Maanen 1988). The method of doing this is through participant observation. The ethnographic perspective, with its focus on the observation of ‘natural’ behaviour, was an important dimension of research aimed at identifying and understanding the ‘taken-for-granted’ dimensions of practice, and the use of everyday technologies – in this case, inscribing practices.

This type of study although chosen as suitable to the focus of the research, was also designed to capitalise on my own experience and skills as a researcher and my training and experience as a person-centred¹⁵ counsellor. The capacity to create empathic, non-threatening relationships is important in stimulating deep reflection in participants during interviews and observation periods.

¹⁵ Person-centred counselling is based on the work of Carl Rogers, who developed a style of counselling in the 1950s and 1960s which contrasted to the dominant psychoanalytical approach of Freud’s followers. Person-centred counselling is based on a non-directive approach, in which the counsellor facilitates the clients understanding, rather than giving his or her ‘expert’ analysis. It is based on three core qualities in the therapeutic relationship: empathy, unconditional positive regard and congruence.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The critical nature of the case study setting (Flyvberg 2001) added to the methodological challenges of the research. The Child Protection Failure, and the ensuing report, had placed the service under close and critical scrutiny. Anxieties were high amongst staff in the service, both in respect of being judged as individual practitioners and also in terms of a heightened fear of what could go wrong in the management and assessment of a CP case. The negotiation of access had to be taken carefully and gradually. This care informed the choice to negotiate access in two stages (see below) with the attendant risk that research access might only be granted for the first part of the study. The fieldwork itself had to be conducted sensitively in the light of the Child Protection Failure. Parts of the study took place in the Practice Team which had been responsible for the child who had died whilst subject to a CP registration. I was concerned to make it clear that the motivation for my research was not the Child Protection failure but the introduction of the SAE, in order to minimize any defensiveness or guardedness on the part of research participants. I also made it clear that my interest and my expertise was not as a social worker, but rather as a management scholar, researching more general managerial trends in public sector management, namely the use of standard documentation. The level of research access which I was given and the willing participation of the interview and observation subjects and the candidness of their responses were remarkable in view of recent events in the department. What was most striking was the willingness of participants to admit to the failings in their inscribing practices, i.e. their record-keeping and their report-writing, when this area of practice was targeted for criticism in the Child Protection report. To some extent, this could be understood as a self-protection strategy, in order to reveal the disparity between managerial versions of the procedural expectations of social work practice and the reality of front-line practice. Whatever the motivations, of the participants, the level of access and the depth and self-revealing nature of responses was gratifying for me as a researcher, considering the sensitivity of the research setting.

The fieldwork was divided into three fieldwork periods: orientation; interviews; observation. The primary research was supplemented by the reading of official documentation produced by the CFSW service, the Scottish Executive and various Social Work bodies.

Stage 1: Orientation (October 2004 – January 2005)

Preliminary interviews were conducted with:

- six senior managers across a range of Social Work services (Community Care, Children and Families, Criminal Justice)
- one representative of the British Association of Social Workers
- two Children and Families Social Workers, one of whom was a Practice Team Manager

The purpose of this stage of the research was to investigate the issue of inscription¹⁶ in local authority Social Work and to explore the political and managerial context of this trend. These interviews were also used to focus and refine the research design, by identifying the range of technologies of inscription in use in this Social Work service and to select the specific research site for the main stages of the research. An interview framework was produced for the interviews, as an aide memoire for the interviewer. However the framework was not devised as a rigid interview protocol (see Appendix Three). The main aim of this stage in the research was to identify the concerns and issues associated with inscription, which were seen as being significant by practitioners. It was through these interviews that the specific inscribing device of the Standard Assessment Format in use in the Children and Families Department was identified, which was to provide a particular focus for later stages of the research. It was also at this stage in the research that I became aware of the Child Protection Failure in this Social Work

¹⁶ In all fieldwork I did not talk about 'inscription' which would not have meant anything to Social Work practitioners. Instead I used terms such as documentation and paperwork.

Department. Notes were made during the interviews, each of which lasted between 1 – 1 ½ hrs. The interviews took place at the offices of the interviewees. The notes were then written up shortly after the each interview.

Stage 2: Interviews: CFSW Service (June – December 2005)

After the preliminary interviews, I decided to focus the study specifically on the CFSW Service. This was in the main because of the introduction of the SAF, which was precisely the type of inscribing device I was interested in exploring. It was being used to proceduralise an area of practice, that is, Social Work case assessment, which had previously been largely individual and tacit. It was also being used to document the process of this work. The recent child protection failure in this service was an additional driver in the move towards greater inscription, and was emblematic of the pressures on Social Work services described in the Social Work literature. Both of these factors, the SAF and the Child Protection Failure provided the points of dislocation and change which can generate reflection and debate amongst practitioners, which can be used in research. The senior managers I had interviewed in the first stage of my research had been interested in participating in further research which helped with research access at later stages in the case study.

The timetable for the research was dictated to some extent by the need to make a request for research access through the formal research access system in the Local Authority. A form outlining the aim of the research, the use of the research and potential benefits of the research to the CFSWS was completed. This form required the specific identification of the number of interviews and the status of interviewees. Although the research design was based upon the desire to undertake observation of Social Workers as well as interviews, in consultation with my PhD supervisor, I decided that it would be safer only to request the interviews at this stage. We felt that this would be more readily agreed to, rather than a somewhat unspecific request to shadow Social Workers, particularly in view of sensitivities about the privacy of clients. My hope was that once I became known to the department, and trusted, there would be a better chance of agreement to a further

and potentially more intrusive research access request, as proved to be the case. The formal request was made through the Children and Families Research Access Officer and research access was agreed to with no problem.

Selection of interview participants

The aim of the research was to get something of an overview of the range of responses within the service. The CFSW Service is divided into 10 Practice Teams, each headed up by a Practice Team Manager (PTM), which have a geographical catchment area. I was provided with a list of all the practice teams of the service, and the names of the Practice Team Managers. I selected 5 Practice Teams, from central, northern, eastern, southern and western areas of the city and approached the Practice Team Manager from each by letter, explaining the purpose of my research and asking if I could interview them. I followed this initial letter up by phone to make appointments. All the Practice Team Managers I approached agreed to the interview. At the end of each interview with the PTM, I asked if I could interview some Social Workers from their team. From each team I asked to interview one Senior Social Worker, one Social Worker who had been qualified for at least three years, and one Social Worker who had been qualified for 2 years or less. The Practice Team Managers selected people from their team and then I made contact with the workers to arrange the interviews. All the interviews took place at the Practice Team office in the Social Work Centre. The interviews ranged from 1 to 1 ½ hrs, although one interview with a Practice Team Manager and a Senior Social Worker took over 2 hours.

In total, 19 semi-structured interviews were conducted across 5 practice teams. Interviews were carried out in each team with: 1 PTM; 1 Senior Social Worker; 1 front-line Social Worker who had been qualified for more than 3 years; and 1 front-line Social Worker who had been qualified for 2 years or less. In one team, it proved impossible to confirm a meeting with the experienced worker suggested by the Practice Team manager, and my requests for other possible interviewees were not answered.

An interview framework was designed to guide the interviews (see Appendix Four and Five), but the interviews were conducted informally. At the beginning of each interview I assured interviewees of the confidentiality of their responses and asked their permission to record the interview, which was granted in all cases. My interviewing approach drew on my experience as a person-centred counsellor, using reflective listening, unconditional positive regard and a non-directive approach to establish trust, and to follow the concerns and experiences of the interviewee, rather than imposing my research questions on them. This approach has parallels with the Gendlin's non-judgmental listening used by Zuboff (1988). My interview framework was an aide-memoire as much as anything, to ensure I covered all the general topics I wanted to raise with the interviewee. However, apart from a standard introduction, I rejected a formal question protocol, which would have reduced the dynamic of the interview to question and answer. My intention was to give space to the interviewee to reflect upon the general issues I was introducing. In this way I was attempting to invite interviewees to discover what they felt, thought and experienced in their use of documentation devices, and thereby deepen their own understanding; to "*tease out aspects of their experience which were implicit*" (Zuboff, 1988, p428) My approach was not exclusively non-directive. I also gently challenged contradictory statements, in order to uncover paradoxes or tensions which might have gone unnoticed. My aim was to make people comfortable enough and to give them time and space to reflect upon and talk about their work experience. There were numerous instances when interviewees commented that the interview had given them the space to think, or made them realize things about their work that they didn't normally take note of. I allowed interviewees to 'get off the subject' to the extent that they were allowed to talk about their own concerns and resentments about the work, and not just in relation to the question of documentation. For example interviewees often talked about the stress of resource limitations or their fears about a child coming to harm, which were not part of the interview framework, or indeed the focus of the research study.

All the interviews were recorded and then transcribed in full. I also made some notes during the interview and wrote up these notes as soon as possible after each interview, to capture any strong impressions I had formed and any observational details about the setting and participants. Technical problems meant that in the case of 2 of the interviews, there was no recording. Instead, these interviews were represented in the research by notes typed up from memory and from the notes made during the interview. As a result, there are no direct quotes used from these interviews in this thesis.

Stage 3: Non-participant observation (January- May 2006)

The final stage of the primary research was envisaged as an 'ethnographic' phase of participant observation, in order to observe Social Work practitioners in action and their use of documentation. The aim of this stage of the research was to observe the ways in which technologies of inscription are incorporated into everyday practice, and to interrogate their effect on the processes of professional judgement and decision-making. I selected one practice team from the interview stage of the research and contacted the PTM to ask if she would be happy for the team to participate in a further stage of the research, which I outlined to her. The PTM was in agreement, but I had to go through formal process of requesting research access again, which was granted.

I devised a structure for the research which would offer periods of observation on a range of types of cases: a statutory case, that is, a case which was not subject to Social Work intervention through legal powers delegated to the local authority; a voluntary case, that is a case in which the parents had either requested, or agreed to Social Work intervention without legal compulsion; and unallocated cases through a period of observation on 'duty'. My aim was to observe practice on a 'cross-section' of Social Work cases. This would also involve shadowing 3 different Social Workers, again, to obtain a wide range of responses. The PTM for this team put me in contact with one of the Senior Social Workers (whom I had not interviewed in the previous stage of the research) and in turn, this member of staff asked 3 Social Workers to participate in the research, on a voluntary basis. Of these

3 Social Workers, 2 had been interviewed by me in the previous stage of the research. An initial meeting was held with the Senior Social Worker and the 3 Social Workers. At this meeting, suitable cases were identified by the Social Workers, and it was agreed in broad terms, what I would be doing with whom and when. At this stage, all the Social Workers and the senior Social Worker were enthusiastic about the research.

The reality of the observation period was less organised. Events got in the way. One case I had been allocated to observe suddenly became very sensitive because of a police drugs raid. The father of the children was sent to prison and the children were being 'accommodated' (i.e. placed in foster care) at very short notice. The allocated worker was unhappy about asking the family to accept my presence as an observer at this time. In addition, although it had been agreed that the workers would get in touch with me about our meetings, it soon became clear that this would be something I would have to do. This was an uncomfortable element of the research, feeling like I was hassling busy workers. One of the workers, although initially in agreement, was quite hard to pin down, although in the event, I undertook a lot of work with him.

In the end I observed practice on two voluntary cases (Cases 1 and 2) and one statutory case (Case 3) and spent a day 'on duty'. I shadowed three different Social Workers.

Case 1

This was a voluntary case, which had previously been a statutory case, subject to Child Protection registration. The child had been taken off the child protection register. When concerns were raised at a later date about the child's health and development and the ability of the child's parents to care adequately for their child, the parents of the child in question had agreed to work with the Social Work service on a voluntary basis rather than risk statutory involvement again. This voluntary stage was in effect, the later stages of a statutory case.

My involvement in this case was accompanying the Social Worker on one home visit, at which the child, the child's father and grandmother were present. I also read the case file for this case. The case was also discussed at the Social Worker's 'supervision' session. I sat in on one supervision session, for the Social Worker I was shadowing on Case 1. At this session the Social Worker discussed her whole workload, as well as the case I was shadowing.

Case 2

This voluntary case had been taken on by a very experienced Social Worker, who described how he had done this 'as a favour' to another Social Worker from a different practice team, who was working with someone associated with the family. I accompanied the worker on a home visit to the family in question, at which he interviewed the mother, and her two sons.

Case 3

This was a statutory case, allocated to the same Social Worker who was dealing with Case 2. Case 3 was subject to statutory measures through both the Children's Hearing System, and Child Protection Registration. For this case, I did not accompany the Social Worker on any home visits, but was present at hearings and meetings. I sat in on one Child Protection Case Conference and one Children's Panel session, to discuss 'Permanency' for the children in question.

Through the contact with the Social Workers I was shadowing, I made contact with two of the Children's Reporters and interviewed them. I also sat in on two half day sessions of the Children's Panel and conducted an informal interview with the panel members after the session.

There was also informal contact with other workers, just from being around the Practice Team offices. I sat in on 2 lunch breaks, on a cigarette break and on one staff meeting. In total I spent approximately 22 hours conducting participant observation with this Practice Team, during this stage of the research. Additional 'observation' time was also spent during the interview stage of the research in informal conversations before and after the interviews.

Observation method

The aim of the observation period was to identify not just how the Social Workers thought they used inscribing devices, and inscribing practices, but to observe how these materials and practices were used in the accomplishment of their work. I built on the periods of observation with periods of 'reflective recall' (Osmond & O'Conner 2004, p678) immediately after any observation session, in which I discussed with the Social Worker their understandings and motivations of what had just occurred. I asked them to reflect upon their approach, and how it may have differed or been similar to other situations and circumstances. I also asked how they would translate the work I had observed into documentation. This was done informally: in the car to and from a home visit or meeting, or on the pavement immediately after the Case Conference and the Children's Hearing, or back in the office after a home visit. In the case of my session 'on duty' I intermittently asked the Social Worker I was shadowing to explain what she was doing, and whether that was typical for this kind of session.

I made no notes during my observation periods. Instead I wrote up notes immediately after any period of observation. For the most part, observation periods lasted 1-2 hours. For the observation of the 'duty' session, which last from 9.30am until 4.30pm, I made quick notes at periods during the day and then wrote up fieldwork notes at the end of the observation session.

I had hoped to examine Social Work files but I only secured access to one file for one voluntary case (Case 1). I was able to review the documentation produced on duty. I had no access to the completed SAF reports on cases because of confidentiality concerns. Occasionally I raised the possibility of looking at files or reports. I could probably have been more assertive about requesting sight of client files, but from a research ethics perspective, I felt that this would be inappropriate as I had not requested access to client files in my research access request, as this would have demanded a far longer and more detailed and difficult research access negotiation. It was also not the focus of the research. The focus of the research was the response of practitioners to inscribing processes.

In any observation work, the researcher is inevitably a ‘consequential presence’ creating ‘reactive effects’ in her research subjects (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw 1995, p3/4). Although I did not have such extended periods of observation that I became a part of the furniture, my regular presence in the practice team over a period of a few months for interviews and meetings did mean that members of the Practice Team were more comfortable with my presence. I noted this for example, because on my 4th visit, I was allowed to find my own way through the building’s security door to the offices, rather than having to wait for the Social Worker I was meeting to come out to collect me from the public reception area. By the time I sat in on the duty session, jokes were being made by the Social Workers about me being able to take on the cases instead of them, and let them have a break. Another worker, whom I had accompanied on a home visit to a family, when I explained that she should do her best to ignore me said: “*I always find it easy to ignore you Rosemary!*” The team also began to develop a running joke that whenever I was around, things went smoothly and there were no emergencies. This resulted from the fact that two of the meetings I sat in on – a Case Conference, and a Children’s Hearing, went more smoothly than the Social Workers had expected. Similarly, the duty session I sat in on was deemed by the Social Workers present in the office to have been particularly quiet. I did wonder whether this joke was also an expression of the Social Workers’ desire to present their work to me as being very busy and high pressured – which was a theme of the interviews.

An additional danger in this kind of research is the possibility of going native as a researcher (Hammersley & Atkinson 1983; Zuboff 1988). The methods used by the researcher in order to enhance the depth and richness of data, that is, the building of rapport and trust with research participants, may lead to over empathizing with research participants and a lack of critical enquiry at the field work and analysis stage. I have already described how my approach in the formal interviews and the observation periods was to build rapport with participants in order to facilitate depth and reflection in their responses. It was also vital to develop trusting relationships with the research participants because of the sensitivity of the timing of my research, coming so soon after the Child Protection Failure. I made a

conscious choice not to adopt an interrogative or challenging style of interviewing style, in order to avoid any sense in the participants that I was sitting in judgement of them. This inevitably invited a sense of affiliation with the social workers, with the danger that the researcher becomes a spokesperson for the research participants (Hammersley & Atkinson 1983). The triangulation of interview data was one way in which I guarded against this (Zuboff 1988). I undertook interviews within different Practice Teams, from different professional groups within the service, such as Senior Social Work Managers, Practice Team Managers and front-line social workers. It must be said that I never became so ‘naturalized’ that I felt completely comfortable on site, or part of the social worker community. Instead, I felt occupied the ‘marginal’ position required for research insight: *“poised intellectually between familiarity and strangeness and socially between stranger and friend”* (Hammersley & Atkinson 1983). I attempted to maintain a reflexive position in respect of the fieldwork and data analysis, challenging and interrogating my own responses and understandings of researcher, in order to avoid unreflective adoption of the attitudes and opinions of my research subjects (Law 1994, Alvesson & Skoeldberg 2000). In the analysis and reporting stages of the data, I was always cognizant of the fact that the stories I was being told by social workers were the stories they wished me to hear about social work and was careful not to take these stories at face value. The data from the interviews is not treated as ‘fact’ about social work practice, but rather treated as a means of understanding how social workers experienced practice, or wished different aspects of social work practice to be understood. I have brought attention to this where appropriate in the reporting of the data analysis.

ANALYSIS

This work of transcription and analysis was ongoing during the fieldwork period, so that any emerging themes could be used to refine the interviews and fieldwork. A repeated reading of the transcripts and the fieldnotes identified recurring themes, issues, concerns and practitioner generated concepts. Each individual interview was

looked at as a whole, to understand the narrative for that interviewee, which provided a situated context which informed the analysis of particular comments from one individual participant, before making any generalization with respect to the overall themes of the research data. Comparisons between different levels of experience were made to identify common themes and differences which might provide into any general characteristic of the perspectives of, for example, PTMs or newly recruited social workers. Similarly, a comparison of responses from particular Practice Team members was made, in order to identify any recurring themes which were reflections of the situation in one Practice Team, rather than being more generally representative of the service or the profession.

In analysis, and during the process of the fieldwork, I was interested in discovering the 'indigenous meanings and concerns' of the research subjects (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw 1993). These emergent themes became incorporated into the analysis as concepts. The analysis identified the 'situated vocabularies' of Social Workers (Hammersley & Atkinson 1983, p 153) which provided insight into the way practitioners interpreted and organised their perceptions of their work, their profession and the organisation. This practitioner vocabulary could then be used as concepts in the analysis and discussion of the findings. In the thesis, the quotes from interviews and from my fieldwork notes are used as illustrations. The quotes used represent themes and opinions expressed by a number of practitioners, unless it is stated that the quote represents a singular view from an individual interviewee. The quotes are credited to the interviewee according to the Practice Team (PT1, PT2 etc) and the status of the interviewee, i.e.:

- Practice Team Manager (PTM)
- Senior Social Worker (SNR)
- Social Worker, qualified 3 years or more (SW1)
- Social Worker, qualified 2 years or less (SW2)

LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH DESIGN

There are some limitations to the design of the case study. Firstly, many of the interviewees were a self-selected sample, or rather, a management selected sample. Whilst I selected the PTMs whom I first approached for interview, purely on the basis of representing a geographical spread across the city, the other Social Workers I interviewed were selected by the PTMs. This does mean that it is possible that PTMs selected potential interviewees who were deemed to be 'suitable' for interview, depending on the particular perspective of the PTM of documentation in Social Work. However, there was a remarkable communality of responses across the different Practice Teams, suggesting that even if PTMs did select interviewees whom they thought of as holding 'appropriate' views, then this was a widespread view across the service. I did pick up on some particular common themes *within* practice teams. For example, one PTM I interviewed was particularly cynical and dismissive of the managerial intentions behind the documentation of cases. Whilst this cynicism was not replicated amongst other staff in that practice team, I did sense a less enthusiastic and motivated mood from those Social Workers I interviewed in the team. It is possible that the attitude and leadership of the PTM is a significant factor in shaping the teams responses to the documentation of practice, however the research was not designed to test this out. The fact that the research is based on responses from five different practice teams means that the range of data is wide enough not to be unduly weighted by the responses from one team.

A second limiting factor which shaped aspects of the research, is the choice of Practice Team in which the observation periods were carried out. The choice of team was driven by the pragmatic concern of gaining research access and the willing participation of the staff. I therefore chose the team on the basis that the PTM was particularly interested in and accommodating of the initial stages of my research in the team. It is possible that a more 'interesting' period of observation might have been undertaken within a team which was less supportive of the research, but it seemed more important to secure a positive working relationship with a team if the observation period was to be successfully negotiated. Again, the

PTM of this team was instrumental in the selection of Social Workers who participated in this stage of the research. However, although I was working directly alongside the members of staff identified for me, I was also in informal contact with other members of staff in the team, at meetings, at lunch breaks, and during my periods on duty, who had the opportunity to talk to me about their work and my research. This allowed me to obtain some input at least from a wider range of staff than those selected for me by the PTM.

In this investigation of Social Work practice, there is one glaring omission in the research design: the opinions of the children and families who are subject to the involvement of Social Work. There are pragmatic and methodological reasons for this. Firstly, the process of gaining research access to vulnerable children would have introduced a potentially unmanageable dimension to the research design. In the event, by staging my requests for research access, I was able to secure access for the observation period which did bring me in contact with children and families. However, I did not directly interview them, as this was beyond the parameters of the research access. Although it would have added greater depth to the research data, to have had the responses of children and families to their experience of Social Work intervention in their lives, and the effect of documentation in this process, it was not vital to the aims of the research. The aim of the research is to understand the effect of inscription on practice, the role of inscription in the management of the service and practitioners and the status of documentation within practitioner concepts of practice. It is not actually designed to understand how inscription might affect the experience of children and families subject to Social Work intervention. It is important to remember when reading the following discussion chapters that whilst Social Workers situate their responses to inscription within a discourse of service to children and families, the research does not speak on behalf of these children and families; the research speaks on behalf of Social Work practitioners. These practitioners in some instances may make responses they deem to be on behalf of clients, but this is not tested in the research design.

Finally, the research is limited in the extent to which access was available to completed documentation. Because of client confidentiality, I was not given access to files, to completed SAF forms or similar. I did obtain access to the casefile for the voluntary case which was part of the observation period, and was able to read all the documentation of that case, although I was not allowed to make any copies of the material. In some respects, although the topic of this study is 'inscription', it is not based on discourse or textual analysis. The focus of the study is the role of inscription in *practice* i.e. how it is used as a tool by Social Workers and Social Work managers as a tool in the accomplishment of their work activity. It is not intended that this research should focus on a study of the exact representation of work through the translation into text. For the purposes of this research it is more important to understand the status of inscription as a process within Social Work practice, how this is used, how this is understood.

In this kind of exploratory case study, particularly where there has been an attempt to generate thick, rich data through ethnographic methods, the resulting findings are complex and do not lend themselves easily to simple and linear structuring. In writing this thesis I faced a choice: either to be very selective in my use of the data, in order to produce a very focused argument or to allow full expression to the range of findings which emerge from the data analysis. I have opted for the latter approach. Exploratory research such as this raises almost as many questions as it answers, but to deny the complexity of the findings would be to undermine the methodological approach which underpins the research study. Practice is complex. It is an accomplishment achieved through complex social and technical arrangements. Although the conceptual framework of inscription offers a focusing device, a way in to an understanding of what is going on when practitioners undertake their work using, or not using that particular technology, it does not produce a straightforward analysis of practice. This is reflected in the range of the stories of practice unearthed through the research and represented in this thesis.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONSTRUCTING A SOCIAL WORK SERVICE

In this chapter, I outline the pressures which are driving the increasing role of inscription as a tool in managing the service. I describe the ways in which inscription has been used as a managerial strategy to meet these demands and identify the mechanisms by which inscription is used to manage the process and content of the Social Work service and individual practitioners' work. I suggest that the role of inscription in the management of a service is in standardising work processes and content, and rendering it visible. However, the study suggests that there are limits to the capacity of managers to implement such mechanisms. I identify factors which this study suggests have undermined the effectiveness of this use of inscription as a management device, in particular resistance from Social Workers.

Inscription is used as a conscious strategy in the management of the CFSWS to 'constitute' the front-line Social Work service delivery by creating and managing effective casework procedures. It is used to constitute a service based on consistent and thorough Social Work assessment and intervention. Inscription is being adopted with the aim of standardising work processes across the service and with the aim of standardising work activity by individual Social Workers. It is also used to render casework visible, for the purposes of management and scrutiny. How this is attempted, and with what degree of success and with what effect on Social Work practice is the subject of this chapter. Interviews with senior Social Work managers identified three areas of concern which drove the focus on documentation practices in managing the Social Work service: the legal framework of much CFSW activity; concerns about the quality of Social Work services and practice; the need to defend practitioners and practice in the face of public and government scrutiny.

THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

SOCIAL WORK

The drive to inscription in CFSW is stimulated to a great extent by the legal framework of Social Work, which has changed substantially in the last 10 years. Local Authority Social Work, and in particular, CFSW operates within an extensive legal framework. As well as the legislation which directly addresses local authority Social Work, in general terms or in respect of specific dimensions of Social Work activity (e.g. adoption, or children with disability), other legislation, most notably the Freedom of Information, Data Protection Acts and human rights legislation, has an effect on the role of documentation in CFSW. The legal framework of CFSW has changed significantly in recent years. With the exception of the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1998, the legislation which effects on CFSW is relatively new – acts brought into force within the last 10 years. CFSW now operates within much stricter statutory boundaries and this effects upon service management as well as individual practice. The law, in particular the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 defines in great detail the aim and scope of CFSW intervention and explicitly identifies the accountability of CFSW as a service and Social Workers individually. This statutory accountability is one of the factors which drive the focus on inscription in the service. To give an indication of the range of legislation which impinges on Social Work. This consciousness of the legislative framework of Social Work is not confined to those responsible for developing management policy. Frontline Social Workers are cognisant of the legislation to which they are subject and from which they draw their authority to take certain action. For example, during the duty session I observed, a Social Worker explained how she is required to specify the section of the Children's (Scotland) Act 1995 which gave her the authority to make emergency funds available to a family in the form authorising such a payment. On another occasion, I spoke to a very new Social Worker, who had been appointed only that week. She was so new that her Social Work qualification had not yet been confirmed and her interim status was 'Social Work assistant' rather than Social Worker. When I spoke to her she was about to go out to make a home visit to a family. She was clutching

a paperback book entitled 'Law for Social Workers' (Brayne & Carr 2005) and explained to me how it had been emphasised in her Social Work course how vital it is for Social Workers to understand relevant legislation.

Although the range of legislation which Social Workers may need to draw on for specific cases is wide, the study identified a number of key pieces of legislation which are uppermost in the minds of Social Workers at all levels, from front-line to PTMs.

Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968

Local authority responsibilities and delegated powers to promote social welfare are established through the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968. It is under this act that provision is made for the establishment of the Children's Hearing System (in 1971), which is the legal body which manages many of the statutory CFSW cases. The demands of the Children's Hearing system drive much Social Work documentation. The preparation of assessment reports for the Reporter and for Children's Hearings constitutes one of the most important documentation activities for front-line Social Workers.

The Children's Act (Scotland) 1995

The most significant piece of legislation for CFSW is the Children's Act (Scotland) 1995 which updates redefines elements of the 1968 Social Work act¹⁷. This effectively determines the aims, priorities and parameters of CFSW intervention. The act lays out the responsibilities of local authorities in terms of child welfare and makes provision for the delegated powers which local authorities may use to secure child welfare in the event of children being 'in need' or at risk. The act effects upon CFSW services as follows: it establishes the degree and scope of local authority Social Work accountability in respect of child welfare; it establishes the Child Protection responsibilities of a local authority; it refined the activities of the Children's Hearing System. All of these factors drive the need for careful attention

¹⁷ The act is preceded by the Children's Act 1989, which applied to England and Wales.

to Social Work documentation practices. The legal status of intervention by the CFSWS under the Children's Act means that such interventions can be called to account and scrutinized. Senior Managers and PTMs are very keenly aware that documentation of Social Work activities and documented procedures are vital. Firstly, documented procedures are used in an attempt to ensure that the grounds for and nature of Social Work intervention are appropriate and adequate in a case, in terms of the statutory responsibilities of the local authority. Secondly, the documentation of work activity and grounds for decisions about cases are the means of defending Social Work intervention in the event of a legal challenge, whether from parents appealing against decisions or in the event of a public enquiry should a case, and in particular a Child Protection case, come under scrutiny because of child injury or death.

Human Rights Legislation

The Children's Act (Scotland) 1995 is informed by principles enshrined in Human Rights Legislation¹⁸. The act explicitly identifies certain rights for children, such as the right to a family life and the right to a safe and secure environment¹⁹. It also

¹⁸ European Convention on Human Rights (1950); the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990); The Scotland Act 1998; The Human Rights Act 1998.

¹⁹ The Children (Scotland) Act 1995 is founded on the principles that each child has a right to be treated as an individual

- each child who can form his or her views on matters affecting him or her has the right to express those views if he or she so wishes
- parents should normally be responsible for the upbringing of their children and should share that responsibility
- each child has the right to protection from all forms of abuse, neglect or exploitation
- in decisions relating to the protection of a child every effort should be made to keep the child in the family home
- any intervention by a public authority in the life of a child should be properly justified and should be supported by services from all relevant agencies working in collaboration

In support of these principles three main themes run through the Act

- the welfare of the child is the paramount consideration when his or her needs are considered by courts and children's hearings

redefines parental authority over children as rights and responsibilities rather than form of 'ownership'. The redefinition of the status of children within human rights legislation has contributed to some refocusing of Social Work intervention. Human Rights legislation has not necessarily contributed directly to an increased requirement for documentation of Social Work activity but it has influenced perspectives of the status of the child within casework, which does affect documentation practices. This shift of perspective is evident in general CFSW theory and practice. For example, the Department of Health Framework for Assessment of Children, which is effectively the definition of current CFSW good practice, explicitly places the child at the centre of assessment. This is represented visually in the summary diagram which new Social Workers use (see Appendix Two). This orientation of assessment around an individual child in turn affects the way in which cases are documented. For example, the focus on the child as an individual, with individual rights, places the child at the centre of Social Work assessment and documentation. The child is no longer seen as a sub-unit of a family, subject to the authority of parents, but instead becomes the individual focus of Social Work assessment; the family and parents are understood, in theory at least, as the context within which the individual child exists. This is a subtle inversion, but it comes up repeatedly as a consideration for Social Workers in orientating themselves in their casework and in their documentation of cases. It is one of the issues addressed through the design of the SAF, as discussed below.

The emergence of a discourse of human rights more broadly in society effects upon CFSW, particularly, according to front-line Social Workers, in parents' awareness of their own rights in respect of the Social Work service. This is one dimension of the belief amongst Social Workers that they have to be ready to defend themselves

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- no court should make an order relating to a child and no children's hearing should make a *supervision requirement* unless the court or hearing considers that to do so would be better for the child than making no order or supervision requirement at all
 - the child's views should be taken into account where major decisions are to be made about his or her future.

and their actions, which emerges as a recurring theme in the study as a reason for increased emphasis on documentation. One experienced Social Worker explained to me, after I had accompanied him to a Child Protection Case Conference that the partner of the mother of the children who are the subject of the case, and who is the main reason for the Child Protection registration because of his previous activities²⁰, had threatened to take the Social Worker himself to court, for denying his human rights. The issue here is not whether or not the man in question would actually have acted on his threat. What is of interest is that this discourse of Human Rights is used as a means of threatening or pressurising Social Workers. There are instances cited to me, of Social Workers being subject to appeals and legal pressure from parents, which the workers put down to an increased awareness of 'rights' (although this could also be explained as a reaction against the increase in statutory powers of local authority Social Work, and parents' perception that they need to defend themselves against this power). One Social Worker described how parents had attended a Children's Hearing accompanied by a QC.

The sensitivity of Social Workers to the possibility of legal action drives the awareness of the potential importance of documentation in Social Work. However, the fact of legal action also drives additional Social Work documentation activity, in preparing materials for court. A Senior Social Worker told me of a case which the parents had taken to appeal at the Sheriff Court and which had required the photocopying of 10 copies of case files.

The Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the Data Protection Act 1998

Legislation concerned with access to personal records and information contributes to managerial and front-line Social Work debates about inscription. Access to files under the Freedom of Information Act raises concerns about the quality of record-keeping in the service. This raises practical questions about the standard and format

²⁰ For confidentiality reasons, I am unable to provide more detail about these activities, as they are unusual enough to be potentially identifying characteristics.

of case records. The need to fulfil Freedom of Information (FOI) requirements is another explicit dimension of the rationale behind the design of the SAF. However, this is not simply an administrative concern for the managers of the service. It is an explicit concern at practice team level. In interviews, PTMs and Senior Social Workers frequently raise FOI in connection with the debates surrounding documentation practices by Social Workers. Increasingly, thanks to FOI legislation, children who have been subject to Social Work intervention are returning as adults to look at their case notes.

“It doesn’t happen a huge amount, but we certainly get a few requests a year. More so for children who are ‘Looked After’ or who are adopted. And the ones I’ve dealt with certainly tend to be in their early twenties, who are trying to make sense of what happened. Maybe they have a partner or a child themselves. They want to come back and look at the files.” (PT2/SW1)

PTMs expressed concerns about the practical implications for workload of this kind of access to files. Access to files under FOI legislation generates workload in tidying up the files ready for inspection. A request for access to a file means the team must allocate the work of finding the file and checking its contents. Most importantly, it requires a Social Worker to go through the file and remove any confidential third party information, for example medical or criminal records for the child’s parents or other adults connected with the case. This is not necessarily a question of simply opening a filing cabinet to retrieve a file and leafing through a few pages. For the most part, such requests relate to old cases, which have been closed for a number of years. Old case files may be stored in basement storage rooms, and one case ‘file’ may actually represent a large amount of material. Children may be subject to CFSW intervention from before they are born, until they are 18 years old. Even a relatively stable case, for example, where a child is removed at birth from its mother and then either adopted, or placed in long-term foster care, or a short-lived case, where a child is briefly under supervision measures, may generate a number of ‘files’ i.e. the standard issue manila folders used by the CFSWS. All this material must then be sifted through and checked for confidential third party information. The specific challenges of managing the recording of third party information in Social Work cases is examined in more

detail in the next chapter. The point I am making here is that the legislation has a material effect on the role of documentation in managing the CFSW service. PTMs must accommodate the workload created by such requests. They must also pay attention to the management of the documentation of their cases by front-line Social Workers, in the light of the rise in such FOI requests.

Access to files under FOI legislation generates debates in Practice Teams about how this process should be managed and supported by Social Workers. It creates, what one PTM described as a 'piece of work', meaning that it is not simply an administrative process, but one which needed Social Work expertise in supporting the person accessing their files. PTMs and Senior Social Workers describe how such FOI requests raise questions about the need for the person accessing their file to be supported through the process by a Social Worker. They speak about a continuing professional duty of care as Social Workers to continue their support of what is once a child under their care. As such FOI access to files becomes another 'Social Work' task, part of Social Work practice, and not an administrative arrangement. This too means additional workload for Practice Teams.

Recent legislation has created a new framework within which the CFSW service operates. A variety of legislation not directly associated with Social Work or child welfare also creates demands on the Social Work service. This legal context is responsible for much of the debate around inscription in CFSW. Senior Managers in the CFSW service have responded to these demands with a variety of inscription measures. These are explored below. However, legislation is not the only pressure on CFSW which drives the move toward greater inscription. There are concerns about the quality of performance and the value of the outcomes of Social Work intervention, which are emerging from within the profession and which are stimulating debates about the role of documentation in managing the CFSW service.

PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT

The legal framework of Social Work establishes the broad terms of inspection and audit of CFSW services. Social Work legislation establishes the provision for the inspection of Social Work services. Inspection and audit of social services in Scotland is undertaken by the Social Services Inspectorate, a non-government body. The Social Work service is required to produce figures on certain performance measures. This is done via a departmental information officer. These measures are collated annually and published, along with measures for all other local authority Social Work services in Scotland. In addition, the Scottish Government has made provision for regular full inspections of local authority social services by the inspectorate, on a 3 year rolling programme. Such an inspection was scheduled to take place shortly after this study.

Although there is some mention of the impending inspection, and other aspects of performance measurement in my interviews with the Social Work managers, there is barely any reference to it in the interviews with front-line Social Workers. The only audit procedures which figured as a concern in interviews with front-line Social Workers are the arrangements for internal audit of CP files, discussed later in this chapter. The statutory inspection regime did not seem to be on the radar at all in terms of the attitudes of front-line Social Workers to their work.

In my interviews at Senior Management level in the CFSWS and with some PTMs, there is some discussion about the requirement, driven by the Scottish Executive²¹, for the service to demonstrate effectiveness through performance measurement. The discussion is centred on the difficulty of finding suitable performance indicators for Social Work outcomes. Performance indicators do exist, for example: the number of children registered on the CP register; the number of

²¹ The Scottish Executive changed its name to the Scottish Government in September 2007. At the time of the study, it is still called the Scottish Executive, and is referred to as such by the interviewees. I have reflected this in my use of the term in this thesis. In some instances, recent materials referred to in the thesis are published on the internet under the name Scottish Government, and referencing reflects this. The body referred to by both terms is the same.

children removed from the register; education achievement for 'Looked After' children. There are also procedural measures, such as the number of cases awaiting allocation to a Social Worker. Social Work managers expressed doubts about the value of such indicators in evaluating the effect of Social Work intervention on behalf of children. For them, the complexity of Social Work cases meant that it is almost impossible to identify key indicators or measures which could be used to evaluate the effect of Social Work activity. Of the variables which might affect outcomes for a child, few are directly under the influence of Social Workers, for example: the presence or lack of certain adults in the child's life; their economic and housing circumstances; illness or disabilities. In addition, changes which might be of little significance for the general population, and barely register in performance measurement terms might constitute major shifts for a looked after child, for example a minor increase in educational achievement or in school attendance.

"Researcher: How would you suggest quality is assured?"

There are hard and soft measures. And the hard measures are easy to track, but they're not popular because they are number crunching. So for example, with children's hearings, reports should be turned around in 5 days ...

Researcher: So again, that's procedural?

Yep. Procedure, timescale. The softer quality is much harder to assess. If a Social Worker is involved with a family for 6 months because a child is on the child protection register and they're concerned about the safety or welfare of the child. Six months down the line, how do you measure what's changed?

Researcher: And how do you?

Erm, by using very crude measures like, erm ... : improved attendance at school; the child's attended the child and family centre; the child has moved from the 5th centile in school performance to the 9th centile; the child's presenting at school much better dressed." (PT4/PTM)

The main concern amongst Senior Managers seems to be to *protect* front-line services, and front-line workers from the possible detrimental affects of the measures. At Senior Management level, there is a determination not to allow these performance indicators to drive the service, and certainly not to result in the

presentation of a rosy picture of the state of the service, in order to score highly. On the contrary, these managers are insistent that the visibility sought through performance measurement should be used to demonstrate the resource limitations of the service. For example, one manager explained that the waiting list for the allocation of cases to Social Workers is one of the key indicators of the quality of the Social Work service. However, she insisted that to allow this pressure to force the allocation of cases in spite of resource limitations is counter productive, both in terms of the service and in terms of outcomes for children. If cases are allocated to inexperienced or overloaded Social Workers, simply in order to make the service look good, it not only increases the risks of problems in the case, but hides the need for additional resources.

“What does allocation mean? Is it just that someone’s name goes on a list in a filing cabinet?”

She cited the tragic example of the Victoria Climbié case as a prime example of this kind of decision-making. In her opinion, in that case an inexperienced worker was assigned to a case which was high risk and this is one of the reasons for the tragic outcome of this case. There is no suggestion that the Senior Managers interviewed felt that good performance indicators should be achieved at the cost of the front-line service. On the contrary they insisted that it would be better not to allocate cases, even though this is a poor indicator, in order to protect workers, and to make clear the resource limitations affecting the service.

Whilst performance measurement at a high level such as inspection and audit do not seem to be driving the focus on inscription in the service, the audit of Child Protection files introduced in the wake of the Child Protection Failure do include provision for. This does focus the attention of the service and individual workers on inscribing processes. This is discussed below.

THE QUALITY OF SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

As well as the statutory and political issues which are driving inscription in Social Work, concerns about the quality of Social Work practice are resulting in increased focus on inscription. Inscription is used in the CFSW service as a mechanism for improving the quality of the process *and* content of Social Worker assessment and intervention, in response to the concerns about the standard of practice in CFSW. Some of the concerns about the standard and consistency of front-line CFSW practice seem to be emerging from within the profession, from practitioners themselves. There is frequent mention in the interviews at all levels of the need to improve aspects of practice, both in terms of procedural factors and in terms of professional judgment. These debates seemed to stem to some extent from a culture of reflective practice, in which practitioners are motivated to question the efficacy of their interventions on behalf of children and seek to improve their own practice and the standards of the profession as a whole. My interviews with Social Workers, from PTMs to Senior Social Workers to front-line Social Workers are characterised by interviewees discussing their doubts about the effect of their work and descriptions of how they might seek to improve their practice. This is not the focus of my study and the voicing of these concerns were not directly prompted by my questions. As well as references to initiatives to improve the effectiveness of Social Work intervention by the wider profession, such as the Department of Health Standard Assessment Framework, and from within the CFSW Service, such as the SAF, individual workers and teams are explicitly seeking ways of improving the outcomes of practice.

There is an undercurrent of concern about the status of the evidence used for Social Work assessments. This reflects debates amongst the wider profession, but also reflects issues raised in the report on the Child Protection failure. There is a debate about the reliability and objectivity of Social Work assessment. The aim of the SAF is to move workers towards a focus on defensible and explicit evidence to support their assessments in response to these doubts.

“In the past we’ve been doing it [assessment] relying a lot on intuition, few facts and subjective opinion.” (SWC4/PTM)

“I think you have to be careful about your assumptions, putting in your own personal assumptions. Yes, it is your personal assumptions, but it is also an assessment.

Researcher: What’s the difference between a personal assumption, and an assessment?

My personal assumption would be something I put down which I didn’t back up with fact. So I might say the house is untidy. But no actually saying how, why, what gave you that impression. My standards of tidy might be different than yours. So that’s my personal opinion. I might go into a family and see that things are much improved. You might go in and see that it’s still a mess. So I am really aware when I am writing up my detailed records, to say, for example, the buggy is dirty, it had crumbs all over it. So I would be giving examples to back up any judgement I is making.

Researcher: Is this a case of having evidence?

Yes! Evidence. As well as making sure it’s not just your personal opinion. It’s a professional assessment.” (SWC4/SW1)

The current of concern from within the profession is in part driven by a belief that Social Workers are under attack from the wider public and authorities. A belief that Social Workers are in a beleaguered position:

“But it’s also the climate of Child Protection, covering your back, damned if you do, damned if you don’t culture. The only thing you only ever hear about Social Workers is negative.” (PT4/SNR)

This is driven by the high profile Child Protection ‘failures’ in England since the legislation was introduced under the Children’s Acts in England and Wales and in Scotland and most acutely by the Child Protection failure which occurred in this CSFW Service in 2001 and the ensuing report (2003).

THE CHILD PROTECTION FAILURE

It would be wrong to attribute all aspects of the drive to greater inscription in this service to the child protection failure in the department. Work on the SAF began before this CP failure, and national initiatives, such as the DoH Standard Assessment Framework and the ongoing work by a multi-agency working group set up by the Scottish Executive to develop an 'Integrated Assessment Framework' for all those working with children, demonstrate that the standardisation and documentation of CFSW assessment is a current topic of interest in the Social Work profession in general. However the CP failure report has been instrumental in the introduction of new measures to improve CP practice, which rely on the use of inscription for the purposes of proceduralisation and documentation of CP cases.

The CP failure report highlighted procedural failings in the Social Work department and in the other involved welfare agencies in the management of CP cases. According to the report, there was a lack of adequate procedures in managing, monitoring and co-ordinating CP cases. Where procedures existed, there was a lack of clarity about them. In some instances, things which should have been done under existing procedures, simply weren't done, for example the circulation of minutes to all involved parties. The report finds that the system was as much at fault as individuals. The report highlighted problems in the procedures for information sharing in the multi-agency work of child protection. There was poor co-ordination between agencies and misunderstanding of roles and responsibilities in CP cases. There was little joint planning and a lack of monitoring of cases. Cases were allowed to drift. According to the report there was confusion about confidentiality of third party information which meant that potentially significant knowledge about the medical and psychological state of adults in the child's life was not passed on to Social Workers. The report also found that there were 'significant problems' in the 'recording and sharing of accurate documentation relating to a baby known to be at risk'. It identifies a culture of poor record-keeping in the CFSW service. There are various mentions in the report of notes of meetings with the family or other professionals being missing from the files, or being illegible. The report also claims that documentation of casework is not a priority

within the CFSW service. The report explicitly raises concerns about the quality of assessment amongst Social Workers, and amongst other professionals involved in the case, and in particular, the assessment of risk. It suggests that some aspects of the Social Work assessment are based upon impressions of the situation rather than evidence (Child Protection Failure Report, 2003). Many of the criticisms of CFSW practice identified in the report are based upon shortcomings in the procedures around CP practice, and significantly for this study, procedures in the documentation of CP cases.

MANAGING THE SERVICE THROUGH INSCRIPTION

The legal framework of Child Protection and the Children's Hearing system plus the anxieties around professional standards in CFSW create the context in which managers must manage the CFSW service. Although not the only response to the demands made on modern CFSW, inscription is a dominant theme in the initiatives designed to respond to the legal and professional pressures on the service. Inscription is the mechanism by which Social Work managers are attempting to manage the quality of the Social Work service and to ensure the defence of practice standards in the event of a challenge by audit, inspection or public enquiry. Inscription is being used in improving adherence to procedures, to improve the standards of record-keeping and to manage the professional expertise of Social Workers.

The managerial and professional intentions behind attempts to standardize aspects of the Social Work service are part of a more general attempt to improve consistency of the service across the city, for the benefit of service users. Practitioners at all levels in this study comment that this CFSWS has been traditionally characterized by inconsistencies and different approaches across Practice Teams. Practices have been individual between and within Practice Teams. As a result, there is the desire to standardise practices in order to establish consistency of service and to ensure that service users are not treated differently

depending on which practice team catchment they are resident in or to which Social Worker their case is allocated. The desire for a more standard and consistent approach across the service is also expressed in the Practice Teams as a means of making the expectations and responsibilities on Social Workers clearer and more manageable, for both the PTMs and the individuals involved. The attempt to standardise Social Work practices, in particular the process and content of Social Work assessments and the documentation of cases, is also an attempt to improve the quality of the Social Work service, by identifying and implementing a base line of good practice. This is driven by concerns that there had been shortcomings in the consistency and the quality of Social Work practices.

Inscription is the means by which information about a case and about work activity can be made explicit and visible, and in this format, circulated across the service and within the other agencies involved in Social Work cases. Inscription also has the effect of rendering work activity more visible. This visibility is created in order to manage, monitor, evaluate and defend work activity. This standardisation and visibility is achieved through an increased emphasis generally within the service on documentation.

DOCUMENTING SOCIAL WORK: NEW INSCRIPTION MEASURES

The report on the CP failure in 2001 raised specific shortcomings in the procedures and documentation of CP cases which have been addressed through a range of measures. These are designed with the aim of improving specific dimensions of CP practice, for example: better information circulation; more consistent and robust assessment and decision-making; better co-ordinating and planning by the multi-agency core group, which is assigned to any CP case. These measures include: the provision of administrative support to take, type up and circulate minutes of case conferences; explicit processes and timescales for the circulation and signing off on case conference minutes; the requirement to type all CP case documentation; regular internal audits of CP files by Senior Social Work Managers, which check that all documentation is adequate and up to date.

“[The issue of documentation] has become more highlighted since [the child protection failure]. We didn’t have minute takers, we didn’t have proper reports, proper minutes, we didn’t have core group minute. There’s been an exponential growth in these things. We didn’t have minute takers. There are now admin people who do that. And we don’t chair meetings for our own team. We chair conferences for other teams, so there’s an independent view. The admin person sorts out the meeting, and sends out the reports, hopefully in advance.[.....] The admin person will circulate the report, after having checked it with the chairperson, including the parents, except for any bits that are restricted. And again, that’s much more detailed than it ever is before.” (PT1/SNR)

THE STANDARD ASSESSMENT FORMAT

The introduction of the Standard Assessment Format is the main mechanism through Social Work managers are attempting to address their concerns about the quality and defensibility of practice. As its name indicates, its primary aim is to standardise: to standardise the process, content and representation of case assessment. The SAF is also the vehicle through which Social Work practice – in terms of both the *process* of judgement underpinning an assessment and the *representation* of that assessment – is made visible. It is used to manage the process of a case, to manage the content of assessments and to create a record of decision-making activity on a case.

The intended function of the SAF is to create a single, standard format for case assessment reports, which would be used for all cases, whether statutory or voluntary. The SAF is intended to be a working tool for use by Social Workers in any case allocated to them.

“My original understanding is that it is to be used for case conference reports, for children’s hearing reports. And when families are in contact with us, and we are going to be assessing them for a service, that there would be a standard format so that we would actually have an assessment, rather than the information being held in the case files. So for families who aren’t in the hearing system, or aren’t in the child protection system, that there would be a gathered assessment, rather than it just being in the fabric of the files.” (SWC5/SNR)

The intention is that by creating a single, standard assessment report, the amount of duplication required in reporting on a case in different circumstances will be reduced. As such, it was intended that the SAF would reduce the increasing burden of documentation on Social Workers. For example, individual cases can be subject both to a supervision order from the Children's Reporter and to Child Protection Registration both of which would demand reports. In order to secure a particular support service for a child, additional reports would be required. All of these instances would require a separate report. The aim of the SAF is to allow one report to be produced for all such instances, or at worst, that the SAF would provide a repository of appropriate information which could easily be reworked into a report for a specific requirement.

USING THE SAF TO MANAGE DOCUMENTATION PRACTICES

The SAF is created in order to improve documenting practices in the service. There are shortcomings in the quality of documentation of cases in this service, something which had been identified by the Child Protection Failure Report as a contributing factor in the outcome of that case. There is a general acknowledgement amongst PTMs, Senior Social Workers and more experienced workers, that in the past, standards of documentation had been at best erratic, and at worst, very poor.

I don't know how much you've looked at Social Work files ...Well, they haven't changed much in 30 years. They're crap. Still for the most part handwritten, although that is changing. (PT2/PTM)

"There's nothing worse than picking up a file and finding it's not been kept properly up to date. Very simple things have been missed, like phone numbers." (SWC1/SNR)

I think they're now looking at standardizing the way people keep their files. In terms of expectations, a way we should record information. But I guess, in inquiries or whatever, they look at files and think there isn't much recording in here. If there isn't a standard level, then workers could say, well nobody ever told me I should do it like that, and everyone could do their own thing. Whereas, if everyone has a standard format for file or reports or whatever, and things could be picked up on. Whereas without that, people are just left to their own devices."(PT3/SW1)

It is accepted that improved standards of information management would improve not just administrative standards but also the case assessment itself.

“The initial risk assessment is essentially based on the standard assessment, in terms of child protection. There is much more of an investment in doing things more thoroughly. And that standard form, you can be seen to have done It becomes more standard.” (PT1/SNR)

Managing assessment practices

The SAF has been introduced not merely as a means of presenting a report to a case conference or Children’s Panel. Its managerial aims go much deeper than that. The SAF is intended to improve the quality of decision-making and professional judgements; it links assessment to action, in the shape of explicit care plans and provides a means of monitoring this action; it is a means of managing the inter-agency work on cases.

In the wake of the Child Protection Failure Report, standard processes to manage the progress of cases through the child protection system are being introduced, as described above. These measures aim to create consistency of service, but also to ‘tighten up’ the progress of cases through the system. The timescale of cases is understood as being of real significance in terms of the families and children involved. There is an acknowledgement that in the past, cases had been allowed to ‘drift’, because of resource pressures as much as anything else. This is not simply frustrating for the families involved, but might have material effect on the circumstances of a case; early Social Work intervention may minimise the risks to children. The SAF reflects these issues and incorporates elements which require explicit, timetabled interventions, thereby aiming to manage the progress of case work.

Inscription is being used to manage the process of case management. However, it is not confined to administrative or bureaucratic dimensions of the service. It is also being used to manage dimensions of the individual expertise and practice of Social Workers. The SAF is also intended to standardise the assessment itself, not just the reporting of assessment, nor the process of assessments through the system. The SAF does standardise information collection and reporting but it has also been

introduced as a means of standardising other, substantive dimensions of Social Work practice. For example, the SAF by virtue of its in the criteria and information used in assessing cases. In effect, any attempt to standardise the documentation of practice inevitably requires a standardisation of the content of practice; in order to devise a documentation format, there has to be an agreement about the standardised approach to an assessment. The format has to be based on a codification of the process of assessment, of what might be expected to be included in an assessment. By textualising the tacit processes of Social Work judgement and assessment, the SAF is designed to act upon the nature of Social Work practice.

The SAF has been devised to identify a base line of good-practice and to improve the comprehensiveness and consistency of assessment criteria. The detailed format of the SAF means (in theory) that Social Workers are required to be more thorough and consistent in their collection and assessment of information relevant to the case. It is hoped that this would reinforce evidence-based practice, and counter criticisms that Social Work decisions are based upon individual opinions and potential prejudices. There is a clear practice-based rationale for this, i.e. the improvement of assessment and decision-making. The standard form identifies the specifics of the information upon which workers should be basing their assessment.

In order to standardise and control the quality of Social Work practice, the SAF has to *act upon* practice and affect the nature of work activity. It must function as what Callon (2002) describes as an ‘actigramme’. It does this by enshrining detailed specification of what constitutes the relevant information required for a good assessment in its format. In theory, in order to fill in the SAF, the Social Worker must participate in a process of information gathering and assessment based on professional concepts of good assessment. The use of a standard format for assessment reports on CFSW is not new. A standard format existed for reports before the development of the SAF. However the format is far less detailed and prescriptive. Standard reports in the past have effectively been a list of headings, which gave a general structure to a narrative style of report. The SAF differs from previous inscribing devices in its demand for detail, in the attempt to introduce it as

the standard format for use in internal and external documentation of cases, and because it requires explicit and timetabled recommendations for action and intervention.

The standardisation of practice through this kind of inscribing device is seen as a means of articulating what is expected of workers by making the boundaries and content of the assessment process, and other types of Social Work intervention explicit. There is a sense amongst Social Workers that the potential remit of Social Work is unmanageably broad, that Social Workers had to pick up all the issues that other agencies – the police, schools, GPs and so on – don't want to take on: *"If it's not health, or education, or the police then everything else must be Social Work."* The demands placed on Social Workers, and indeed the demands they placed on themselves because of their sense of commitment to the children and families they work with, are unrealistic. By identifying a base-line of good practice, it is hoped that it might clarify the limits of Social Work responsibilities. The codification of good practice defines a baseline against which Social Workers could be judged, but it would also protect workers. Similarly, it is hoped that the drive to use proceduralisation to formalise and clarify the involvement and responsibility of other professional agencies in respect of Child Protection cases would share the burden of responsibility between these different agencies.

DOCUMENTING PRACTICE: ARCHIVAL AND CONTRACTUAL RECORD-KEEPING

Because the SAF is detailed and prescriptive, it increases the visibility of the criteria upon which Social Work judgements are based, thereby rendering the process available for scrutiny and evaluation. To use Garfinkel's categories of records: the SAF is designed as both archival and contractual (Garfinkel 1967). It is 'archival', in that it is designed as a repository for information about cases, about assessment and recommendations and activity, which can act as a record of work done by Social Workers on a case. It is also 'contractual' in the sense that it is

evidence that work has been done and which can be used to demonstrate the competency of the handling of a particular case in the event of a challenge.

Record-keeping is an important dimension of the service, and not only through the SAF. The records of a case have an important archival function, something which has a material effect on a workers understanding and assessment of a case, in the event of a case either being passed on to a different Social Worker, or as often arises, when an old case is relevant to a new case. Often, the parents of a child subject to Social Work intervention have themselves been the subject of Social Work involvement in the past. Record-keeping also has an important role in documenting work done, for the purposes of audit and evidence, should the management of a case be called into question. Perhaps more importantly from the perspective of Social Workers, there is a responsibility to keep adequate records of a case, in the event of the children involved in the case seeking access to their case files in future.

Inscription is contractual in its use as a strategy to increase the legitimacy of Social Work decisions. As well as using the SAF to improve record-keeping, and to manage aspects of practice, the aim of the SAF is to render practice visible. Work can only be scrutinised if it is visible. Social Work has been described as the 'invisible trade' (Pithouse 1998). Many Social Work activities are carried out on a one-to-one basis with families, or through the individual, tacit processes of assessment. The translation of work activity into inscription is one way of providing a window on Social Work practice. The SAF is introduced explicitly with the aim of facilitating greater scrutiny, transparency and accountability in Social Work assessment. This is as much about protecting workers as improving public accountability, by being able to support Social Worker decisions with explicit evidence and demonstrate work done and compliance with procedures.

Whatever the limitations of the implementation of the SAF, and the discontent with the design of the form, it is welcomed in principle by Practice Team staff who hope that this kind of standardisation will protect workers. There is a culture of insecurity amongst the profession, a feeling of vulnerability to criticism and

censure. There are explicit references to scare stories, of workers who had been the victim of, as it is perceived amongst practitioners, unreasonable criticisms about their work, when things went wrong. There is some sense of 'back-covering' in this view of documentation; if they could *be seen to* have gone through the motions, no one could criticise them or label them as negligent.

Of far more significance for these workers is the awareness of and anxiety about being able to justify decisions and actions, should 'something go wrong'. In other words, in the case of a child protection failure, such as the incident that had occurred within the department in 2001. Of most concern for Social Workers is the anxiety that a child might die or be injured, and that the Social Worker assigned to the case would be held legally accountable. There is a definite sense that, in the event of any legal proceedings or official inquiries, any shortcomings in record-keeping would be as much grounds for censure as any fault in decision-making. This need to 'back-cover', to protect oneself, to have the evidence (i.e. written evidence) to justify oneself is a constant theme in the discussion of record keeping. This anxiety is clearly exacerbated by the recent experience of the Child Protection Failure, but there are numerous other stories told by Social Workers of either their own experiences or experiences of colleagues who had suffered the stress and consequences of such a legal process. Social Workers are very aware that their judgements and work activities on cases might be challenged in court, or be subject to a public enquiry. They are very aware of the importance of having a paper trail of evidence for their decisions.

"But it's also the climate, you know, of child protection, covering your back, damned if you do, damned if you don't culture, when the only thing you ever hear about Social Workers is negative. If you hand in a standard assessment report, that's going to back you up if you end up in court. It's a tool to back you up. It's something that back's you up, you know 'I use the standard assessment, and that's what the department requires us to use and it means that everything's covered'." (PT1/SW2)

"I am in an unfortunate position because 3 ½ years ago, a child that I worked with died. She killed herself by falling out of a building. So I've been through the process. I know exactly what it's like. [.....] And of course there is a report done and everything. And my manager is, make sure all your files are up to date, which they are. But that doubly makes me more aware of the importance of having good case records. [.....] So I

will make sure I self protect. Maybe more than most people do..... You have to be able to back up everything. Every action you take. You need to back it up, and you need to write it down the reasons why you take a certain action. Of course you do.” (PT2/SW1)

“I think the most important thing for me is making sure my detailed records are up to date, and making sure things are written down. Like, if I’ve made a decision, I need to write in that I’ve run it past my senior as well. Say if something goes terribly wrong and I’ve not actually written down that say, I’ve phoned the health visitor or whatever, then it will land on me.” (PT4/SW2)

A further factor in the expansion of inscribing practices in Social Work is based upon concerns about the possible degree of accountability Social Workers will have in the event of problems with cases, whether child protection failures and the associated public enquiries, or other circumstances which result in legal challenges to decisions made on case. These latter may be, for example, instances in which parents whose children have been accommodated or registered on the CP register mount legal challenges to appeal against decisions made through the CP process or Children’s Reporter system. At all levels in the service, practitioners talk about the awareness in the profession of being vulnerable to this kind of challenge and that inscription of case work is required as evidence with which to defend the actions and decisions taken by Social Workers. This is certainly a strong theme in the attitudes of Senior Managers and PTMs.

PTMs and Senior Social Workers see the anxiety about being held to account for poor record-keeping as one of the main sources of stress amongst front-line workers, particularly when combined with the workload pressures caused by caseload levels and recruitment and retention problems. On Senior described how this fear is affecting Social Workers:

“There is one of my supervisees, she had a nervous breakdown a few years ago. She questions absolutely everything. She is so concerned to get every procedure right. She’s a good Social Worker, very committed to the client, but this anxiety about procedures creates a lot more work. And it even causes problems with colleagues and other agencies, because she is always questioning whether they’re doing things according to correct procedures. She wants to check everything, and gets into arguments with other people because she’s checking everything all the time. This is a case where procedure has overruled everything else. They have to make choices about what gets done because they have so much work to do. They are so anxious

about leaving anything undone, because it might catch up with them. They have to do lots of overtime to keep up.” (PT2/SNR)

“Social Workers are dreadfully overworked and this is compounded by the problems with turnover and recruitment difficulties. Social Workers have a choice. Do the unpaid overtime necessary to keep up to date with paperwork, procedures, documentation etc and feel more secure, but risk burnout, or, make judgements and leave things undone but thereby taking the risk that things might come back to haunt them. Sometimes, after running it by me, my workers will leave things undone because they don’t have time. Social Workers would have to say – it’s 5pm, I’m clocking off because this is what I am paid for, and leave work undone. [.....] They are overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of different forms and procedures. Which is why it’s worrying in terms of introducing the Family assessment model, to persuade people it’s not just another fucking form.” (PT4/SNR)

The concern about accountability and the possibility of legal accusations of negligence is highlighting the issue of inscription. Documentation creates a paper-trail, providing evidence for the work done by Social Workers on a case and the criteria on which they have based their judgements. Whether the awareness of the importance of good record-keeping as a protective measure translates into good record-keeping in practice is another matter.

Because the SAF is designed to demand detailed description by Social Workers of the criteria they are using in their assessment of a case, it is designed to generate better standards of record-keeping and thereby ensure greater visibility for the content and process of a Social Worker’s assessment. This is an attempt to change the culture of Social Work and create a culture of greater emphasis on the work of documenting cases as part of everyday Social Worker practice. From the perspective of the senior managers responsible for the design and introduction of the SAF, increased visibility of work activity is a means not of scrutinised or criticising their front-line Social Workers, but of supporting them and ensuring that they can defend themselves in the event of a challenge to their work.

IMPLEMENTING INSCRIBING PROCESSES

The SAF is designed to standardise practice in the assessment of cases and the reporting of assessment. However the success of the initiative in this process of standardisation is extremely limited. There are two dimensions to this lack of standardisation: firstly, the format is not used in all the circumstances for which it had been designed; secondly, Social Workers amend the form according to their own preferences.

It is intended that the format should be used as an ongoing working assessment tool for cases which did not require reports as part of a statutory reporting system – what is described as a ‘gathered assessment’. However it appears that the SAF rarely used at all for voluntary cases. This type of written assessment is not done at all for non-statutory cases, apparently because of time pressures. Full written assessment reports are only done if demanded by an external authority or the demands of a statutory process. The SAF is not used for all these written assessment reports. It is clearly in use by an increasing majority of Social Workers and practice teams, but it is by no means adopted across all Practice Teams. Some Social Workers use different forms – for example, the ‘old’ Social Work department form or other templates provided by external bodies, for example the Children’s Reporter.

The Departmental review of the SAF in 2003 and my research indicates that the SAF is underused, both in terms of the range of circumstances it is used in, and in terms of the number of Social Workers using it. My research suggests that it is increasingly being taken up and used as the standard report format for statutory cases, although even this is not the case for all workers, or for all cases.

The SAF is designed to standardise inscribing practices, however the success of the format as a standardising tool has been limited. Uptake is far more limited than had been hoped for, and as such, the model is not operating as the standard assessment format. In addition, those workers who did report using it adapted the form to suit their own preferences, thereby undermining the whole notion of it as a ‘standard’

form. Workers continue to amend the format according to their own preferences, cutting out sections of the form, rearranging the order of headings and adding their own sections. Thus, rather than a standard form, the SAF seems to be used as a basic framework, which is then adapted by individual Social Workers, undermining the attempt to standardise practice.

“So I was very pleased to discover how to ‘unprotect’ the document so you could cut things out!” (PT5/SW1)

“People butcher the reports as well. You’ve got a SBR to do, so you do a standard assessment – you take the front part of Part 1, and the second bit of Part 2. I’ve seen people take whole sections out. I’ve just picked up a case, and the report had been written, but the way it was written was just crazy. There was Part 1, but the worker obviously hadn’t had enough time to do a Part 2 for each child, so there were the first 3 pages of Part 2 for each child, but they had just been amalgamated. So it’s not a format that’s being stuck to rigidly.” (PT1/SW2)

“I will use it [the SAF], but I will play around with it. You don’t always need all the headings that are given, or, I’ll create my own headings. (PT3/SW1)

“There is a great deal of resistance to the Standard Assessment Format at first, amongst practitioners and front-line managers, for a whole load of issues. [.....] There was a huge hoo-ha when it came out. We are promised a review, and as is the nature with these things, the review dragged on and on and in the meantime, people conspired not to use it, or used it for some things and not others.” (PT4/PTM)

Generally throughout the Practice Teams who participated in the research, there is an awareness that more attention should be given to the documentation of Social Work cases. All Social Workers understood the necessity and value of the documentation of work in managing their accountability. There is a paradoxical response in Social Workers: the SAF is a good idea in principle, but they are unhappy about using it. On the one hand, Social Workers admit the historical shortcomings of the record-keeping of Social Workers, and the potential problems this might cause in Social Work practice. They complain about the problems in taking on cases from other workers, or picking up ‘old’ cases which have not been adequately documented. There is generally an acceptance that a standard assessment format is a ‘good thing’, for the purposes of information management

and circulation, and to support the information and assessment aspects of individual casework. However, only one of the workers interviewed in this research unequivocally welcomed the SAF and stated that he used the form for all his cases. This is the only worker whose use of the SAF approached the intended use of the form – i.e. for all ‘official’ reports and also for the collection of working knowledge for ongoing casework, whether for statutory or voluntary cases. Otherwise, the interviewees reported sporadic use of the form, amending it as they saw fit, and in some cases, even being unaware that they are supposed to use it at all.

There were three broad reasons given as the explanation for the reluctance to use the form: the inadequacies of the design of the form itself, making the completion of the form cumbersome and even at odds with normal assessment processes; a lack of awareness of the role of the form, i.e. no sense that they have to use it; problems with workload which mean that there isn’t enough time to complete such an extensive piece of documentation.

For PTMs and Senior Social Workers, there was a clear understanding of the value of such an inscribing device in improving the quality and consistency of assessment practice:

“A common assessment model is very much an assist in balancing things out. That is assessment: strengths, weaknesses, fallibilities, services to be done, compulsory measures and so on. Tools that will assist in helping to get an informed and evidenced recommendation are useful. (PT5/PTM)

“If I am chairing case conferences, which I won’t be because of this new thing, then it is a huge amount of responsibility, but it [the SAF] is more likely to bring about consistency in the way that children are on the register or not, and ... erm ... make sure it’s a professional decision, rather than a decision borne out of anxiety.” (PT4/SNR)

“We’ve moved from a culture where there’s been fairly limited standard assessment, to something that hasn’t been implemented and I think you’ve got a range of different practices. And I think it’s how we move people into a different position. Because I think when you look at some of these materials, it really lifts the whole standard, the whole profession.” (PT1/PTM)

“I think because it provides a structure, for the report writing, and hopefully for the people who read it, it does make sure all the areas we are supposed to cover are explicitly stated, so you can’t ignore all the different areas of an assessment that you’re supposed to be making. So to that end, because it’s explicit about what’s required then there’s a certain improvement there, because people might miss things.” (PT1/SNR)

PTMs and Senior Social Workers identified the value of the SAF in supporting and guiding newly qualified workers in assessment. This is particularly important in the context of the staff turnover rates in Social Work services.

“..... we’re in a world where new Social Workers are coming in, and are not staying as long in the same practitioner base, it just makes life easier to say, this format ... of course there is some individual possibility, you can have a format and it’s as good or as bad as the information, and the energy, and the sophistication or not of the material that’s put into it. But, it assists, in terms of the training and professional development.” (PT5/PTM)

This is reinforced by the newly qualified workers themselves, who talked about the value of the SAF as an aide memoire, or as a prompt to the type of information they should make sure they have considered in their assessments. PTMs also suggested that the SAF is useful in reminding experienced workers of the important criteria for assessment, as practice could become habitual in long-standing workers. The SAF became a tool in reinforcing or refining dimensions of the assessment process.

There is a clear divide in responses to the SAF between the attitudes of newly qualified and more experienced workers. Recently qualified workers are more accepting of the role of this kind of form in their practice than more experienced workers. This is partly because of different levels of confidence, amongst workers, but also because of the changes in Social Work training. For less experienced Social Workers, the SAF is often described as a ‘trigger’ or a ‘reminder’ or a ‘framework’ for their assessment, although even newly qualified workers complained about the format and design of the SAF.

“I know some people are like, we don’t need this, we shouldn’t need this, we should just be able to write a report as professionals and have all that information in there but for me, as a new worker, or as a training worker it is helpful for me because it triggered, it is a trigger – I might think, ‘physical information’ oh I haven’t written anything about whether or not

he's going to school, or he's dirty or whatever. So for someone like me, it does create triggers." (PT1/SW2)

"The concept of having a report that includes triggers, I think that's a good thing. It makes sure you get all the information. That's a good thing. Because I've seen reports that have no structure and don't have all the information, from other teams." (PT1/SW2)

More experienced workers had developed their practice to the extent that they felt that they had internalised the criteria for assessment to the extent that external prompts are no longer necessary. However, PTMs and Senior Social Workers commented that even for more experienced workers, the detailed and explicit nature of the SAF would ensure their practice did not become complacent or shoddy.

Some very experienced workers did admit that the SAF had caused them to reconsider aspects of their assessment.

"As a worker, some of the new expectations are very helpful in making me look at things a different way, as a shake up, there can be some complacency." (PT1/SNR)

According to Social Workers, the failure to implement the SAF initiative across the service was a result of the management culture in the CFSW service. They complained that there was little central management control and guidance. Rather than a strong, unitary management line about procedures and practices, individual practices had grown up within each Practice Team. This had left PTMs with a large degree of autonomy in the way that the service was managed within their Practice Team. However, this was not experienced as valuable professional autonomy but rather as a lack of management support.

"Everyone's been there just trying to survive the best they can. Individual unique practices have developed, which has mitigated against centre drives about 'you will do that'. The quid pro quo I suppose is that we have all been left to get on with it, with a very weak management, we've just had to survive. Unless there is a total disaster, you just got on with it, and are left to just do it. Until the disaster, just get on with it. But that meant that there is no weighty centre to act as monitor, or developer, or lead role, or ownership. There are individual practices, and no-one took ownership of it." (PT3/PTM)

“Things are left at a very local level. Local culture, local practices in teams. It’s not all connected to an organisation, where there’s a sense of: ‘this is what we’re doing, this is why we’re doing it, this is how we as senior managers are following through with this’.” (PT1/PTM)

I think it’s [the SAF] trying to get standardized practice across the board. Offices do work very differently. As I said, they all have different duty systems. People do things very, very differently.” (PT3/SW1)

This lack of clear central guidance was reflected in the range of responses from interviewees about the ‘official’ status of the SAF. In some teams there was clearly an understanding that the SAF was *supposed* to be used, even if it wasn’t. In other teams, there seemed to be very little awareness that the SAF had been adopted by the Service as its standard assessment form. At the beginning of one interview, with a Senior Social Worker, I asked about the use of the SAF. This was met by bafflement. It took me a few moments describing the form until the interviewee realised to what I was referring.

The perceived lack of the standard adoption of the form across the CFSW service became a vicious circle when PTMs, seeing that other Practice Teams are not using the form, did not feel it is right to insist that it be used by their own teams.

“I’m not going to insist my workers do something, when the person sitting next to them isn’t getting that message, and it’s not the message that is coming from our practice team manager, or indeed from other teams. I don’t think it’s helpful to bang away about a procedure that isn’t fully adopted, that there is a lot of disquiet about, that I know is difficult for people to implement.” (PT5/SNR)

“My management expectation is that the model is used for core assessment. My understanding is that a core assessment should be used in all cases – children’s hearings, compulsory measures, which we do. However, one of the contested issues about the core assessment that is used for child protection and case conferences, and although they should be used for these, there are still pockets in the city of people using their own style of report. But that’s a management problem. People should be told, use it or don’t, end of story. But that’s not been the culture in the city.” (PT3/PTM)

“On this team, we don’t have anything to say we must use it. There is a push on using it first of all, and there is never a thing saying we aren’t to use it, but people are having such difficulty, we haven’t pushed it. It is going to be reintroduced with a great flurry, but, other events have pushed it aside. People have other things to deal with more immediately.” (PT2/SNR)

Even new Social Workers in some Practice Teams, who have joined the CFSW service since the adoption of the SAF, are not clear that this format had been adopted as standard practice in the department:

“Well, when I first started, it is never made explicit that I had to use it. And rightly or wrongly, a lot of the procedures are a bit lax. You know, it’s: ‘well there’s this, but actually, you don’t have to use it’. So it makes it a bit unclear.” (PT5/SW2)

What has perhaps been underestimated by senior managers in introducing this kind of inscribing device, is the effect it has on established working practices, on the skills required by Social Workers and on workload. Increased levels of inscription take additional time to comply with, and are a form of work intensification. The adjustments which Social Workers need to make to their work in order to accommodate new inscribing practices take time to bed in. There is already evidence from the study that the uptake of the form is increasing as Social Workers become more accustomed to this way of working.

RESOURCING INSCRIPTION: TECHNOLOGY AND SKILLS

Practical considerations, such as the limited availability of IT in the service have also affected the adoption of the SAF. The SAF is a typewritten template designed to be filled in on the computer. Although there is a move to computerise all Social Work records and to insist on the typing of most Social Work records, there are limits to the availability of IT equipment to workers. Historically there is little culture of workers using PCs to type their own work. In the teams visited in this study, not all members of staff have their own PC. Computers in some offices are still shared between staff. In those offices which do have better IT facilities, this is a relatively recent development, in the previous 1 or 2 years. This lack of access to PCs creates an additional obstacle to inscribing for Social Workers who, under pressure of work, are trying to find the time to type up reports and transfer handwritten notes into typewritten form.

“In terms of technology, the council’s really not that up to date. We have really old computers and we’re working off a really old ‘Word’ package. Me and my office mate share this one.” (PT2/SW1)

Changes in Social Work training may well affect the changes in responses to the documentation of work. More experienced Social Workers may have qualified through a professional vocational qualification, while new Social Workers come through an academic course. Thus the training of more recently qualified workers has focused much more on written evidence of competence and has incorporated within the training, the use of assessment models and other protocols which relied heavily on documentation. For the newer workers, the documentation of work is seen as an integral part of Social Work practice.

“This is the way I’ve been trained. This is the way I did my learning. It is competency based. So I find it very easy to use, because I think it’s much easier when you’ve got a foundation and a direction. I think it’s a good way to work. Even when I’m writing up my detailed records, I’ve got it in mind, thinking about the assessment process, and looking at whether I am meeting the assessment. So I think I find that particularly easy, just because I am so recently qualified. That’s been my whole process of learning. That’s the way I’ve been taught.” (PT2/SW1)

What is also overlooked is the requirement for particular skills associated with this kind of work, which Social Workers may not already possess. As more areas of work become subject to inscription, Social Workers must increasingly possess good literacy skills and specific types of literacy skills. The ability to use IT is a skill which many professionals take for granted, but for many long established Social Workers, this is not something they have been required to develop until now. In the past, Social Workers would handwrite correspondence and reports and these would be typed up by secretarial staff. For some Social Workers, the task of typing the SAF is something which in itself is a new challenge and can be laborious and time-consuming, further discouraging Social Workers from using the new and ‘difficult’ format.

The limited uptake of the SAF is attributed to resource pressures on front-line Social Work. Although one of the intentions behind the SAF is to reduce workload, by reducing the number of different reports Social Workers would have to complete for one case, and by creating an easily accessible repository of

information about a case, the reception by Social Workers indicated that it is experienced as an increase in workload, specifically in terms of documentation – the area of work which Social Workers feel most burned out by and resentful of.

There are numerous comments by Social Workers, both newly qualified and longer established, about the difficulty of keeping up to date with record-keeping and filing. Social Work practice is to make handwritten notes during or immediately after contact with clients, or other people involved with a case. These notes are supposed to be written up onto ‘Detailed Record’ sheets, which sit in the case files. It seems from the study, that whilst workers keep their own notes about files, they struggle to find time to do the writing up. According to this study, respondents believe the specific design of the form has contributed to this additional workload. The dissatisfactions with the design are discussed below.

DESIGNING INSCRIBING DEVICES

The most widespread complaint I heard from Social Workers was about the design of the SAF. Without exception, Social Workers complained that the form is badly structured and therefore difficult to use.

“I am not happy about the way the form is actually designed. It’s a bit gloopy. You get stuck in it. The concept behind it is good, but the particular format is bad. It’s diabolical.” (PT1/SW2)

The most detested aspect of the design of the form is the separation of the form into 2 parts. Whatever the practical reasons for this, Social Workers found it repetitive, unwieldy and perceived it as demanding unnecessary duplication of effort.

“Some of the stuff is just too clumsy. The Part 1 and the Part 2. People get a bit fed up with the repetition.” (PT3/PTM)

“We’ve had so many debates in the team about the SAF – and a lot of the team are really anti the SAF – you know, the part 1 and part 2, there’s a lot of repetition. – there’s not really a flow to it, you don’t feel you can get into a flow with it. “(PT1/SW2)

“Well, I’m just about to do an assessment. I’ve got, well, two actually, hearing reports I’ve got to do in the next couple of days. I’ll be looking at

the format and the questions they ask. I do think sometimes they can be repetitive, and there's not enough consideration has been put into I think it could be tweaked. In terms of the repetition. I hate putting in my report 'as seen in part 1' but you also don't want to be also, bearing in mind that panel members have an awful lot to read, so you want to make it as concise as possible, but there is also a lot of repetition. The Part 1 and Part 2." (PT4/SW1)

To minimise this problem, Social Workers have developed a range of strategies. Some Social Workers use a 'cut and paste' approach to accommodate this, copying elements from Part 1 of the form and pasting them into the corresponding sections of Part 2; others describe how they cut out what they deem to be repetitive sections in Part 2; others leave sections in Part 2 blank, or state 'see Part 1'.

The overriding impression is that Social Workers resent what seems to them to be additional, unnecessary work to fill out the SAF. During one of my observation periods, I talk to a young, male Social Worker who very vividly expressed his opinion of the SAF:

"He asks me what my research is about. I explain I am looking at the effect of documentation and forms. He says I should look at the 'Social Background Report because it's crap'. When I ask him what the Social Background Report is, it emerges that he is talking about the SAF. He says that the form is 'rubbish' because of all the repetition in it. He adds: 'How many trees are getting chopped down just so we can write 'see part 1, see part 1, see part 1?'" (Fieldnotes, 10 February)

The fact that the SAF is experienced as unwieldy and difficult to fill in, reinforces the opinion amongst Social Workers that it is overly time-consuming to complete. This perception fuels resistance and resentment about using it.

"Quite often you're having to do these things really quickly, and people feel really pressurised – oh no, I haven't done it yet, and so on – it's not this really lovely, quiet, peaceful environment where people can sit down and think, oh yes, I'll do my assessment now, they're dragging files home with them to get it done! And I think, well certainly for myself, if you're thinking, this needs to be done, then you can't be doing through this version, and that version, you just think, I need to get something down on paper and now! And folk either go for a blank sheet of paper and write the stuff, or they go for what's familiar." (PT4/SNR)

"The difficulty is for me, when I do the standard assessment forms, it's usually at the beginning of the case, say a child has been accommodated in an emergency. And at that time, there's a lot of other paperwork and forms

to be filled in for practical reasons. So you kind of get bombarded. But you also know, the reporter's asked for that report and you have to get that in. The report should be in a week before the case conference. There is a huge pressure. But it somehow gets done. It just has to get done. You wouldn't be expected to go along to a hearing without a report having been done. Same with a case conference. The chair probably wouldn't go ahead with the case conference if you hadn't done the report. So there is that pressure. And sometimes unfortunately you do have to do it in your own time to get it done. But fortunately it's not like that every night, otherwise I wouldn't still be here! (laughs).” (PT3/SW1)

RESISTANCE TO STANDARDISATION

A lot of resistance to the SAF is focused on the standardisation it attempts to enforce. One justification by Social Workers for their reluctance to use the SAF is that case work itself cannot be standardised because of the specific circumstances and issues of each individual case. As such, they feel it is reasonable to edit and augment the SAF according to the specific demands of the case.

“A lot of what we do doesn't you know, working with people you can only standardize so much. A lot of what we do is unstandardisable. And the things you can't standardize, maybe they don't get attention.” (PT1/SNR)

Social Work culture has traditionally accepted, even been built upon concepts of individualised practice. However valuable standardisation is to the management of a service, it is at odds with a deeply entrenched professional culture of individualized assessment. This could even be seen to be central to good Social Work practice, enshrined as it is in Social Work guidance, the Children's Act, and the DoH framework for assessment, and the Social Work Code of Practice. Social Work guidance notes issued by the Scottish Office explicitly comment that judgement should be used by Social Workers in applying standard approaches to individual children and families. The professional culture in this CFSW reflected this perspective.

“Staff have different styles, different approaches. They would want to tell their own story, in different ways.” (PT1/PTM)

Resistance to standardisation is justified by Social Workers not in terms of the political autonomy of their profession, or the importance of individual judgement as an expert practitioner, but in terms of the needs of the case, of the child and family on whose behalf they see themselves as acting. The professional discourse which puts the child and family at the centre of practitioner concerns will emerge as a strong theme in the study.

CONCLUSIONS TO THE CHAPTER

Social Workers admit that however much they are aware of the importance of record-keeping, in practice it is sidelined in favour of other types of work. In addition to the managerial and technical effect of proceduralisation, there are political and symbolic dimensions to consider. Inscriptions are not merely neutral technical devices of organisation. They occupy a particular cultural and symbolic role and represent particular discourses. For Social Workers, inscription is taken to represent a bureaucratic logic which goes against the practice-based logic central to their professional identity. As such it is seen to demand a fundamental shift in their understanding of what constitutes Social Work practice. It is this political dimension of the SAF as much as the technical shortcomings of the form itself which undermined its implementation. These issues are considered in the following chapters. The limited uptake of the SAF is in some respects a result of the traditional, professional culture of Social Work which values other aspects of practice, such as contact time with clients, over the 'bureaucratic' tasks of file and information management.

Inscription is being adopted by Social Work managers with the intention of managing the process and content of the Social Work service and individual practitioners' work. Inscription is a response to the need for accountability in line with the legal framework which surrounds CFSW and a reaction to concerns about the quality of Social Work practice. Inscription is used as a conscious strategy in the management of the CFSWS to 'constitute' the front-line Social Work service

delivery by creating and managing effective casework procedures. It is used to constitute a service based on consistent and thorough Social Work assessment and intervention. The aim of initiatives such as the SAF is to improve the quality of Social Work assessment, by using the standard format as a pedagogical device, which will require Social Workers to participate in an assessment process based upon principles of good practice. Inscription is also used to create the visibility of practice, through the construction of archival and contractual records, which can be used to represent the work undertaken on a Social Work case. This is useful from an organisational perspective as a means of storing practice knowledge, for use when the Social Worker is not available in person, either because he or she is no longer working on the case, or because the case knowledge is required to represent the case in wider fora. This visibility through documentation is also a means of defending practice and practitioners if the service is subject to legal challenges.

However, the study suggests that there are limits to the capacity of managers to implement inscribing processes. The successful implementation of inscribing processes as a means of managing and improving Social Work practice is limited by the practicalities of implementation. Shortcomings in management guidance and enforcement and the technology and skills available to Social Workers have undermined attempts to improve inscribing processes in the CFSW service. Inscription is also limited by the professional culture of Social Work practitioners, which creates resistance to attempts to standardise assessment and which de-emphasises the importance of archival and contractual record-keeping, causing practitioners to neglect documentation work in favour of other types of work activity.

CHAPTER SIX: CONSTRUCTING A SOCIAL WORK CASE

In this chapter I examine how inscription is used to construct Social Work cases in such a way as to allow the Social Work service to act upon and on behalf of children and families. Although inscription is an important mechanism in the management of cases, it is not the only means by which case work is rendered subject to intervention. I consider the stages of Social Worker activity which are not represented through inscribing. Inscribing requires translation work which can be problematic. There are tensions caused in the translation of case knowledge through inscribing and practical and material limitations to the capacity of inscribing devices to represent cases. In this chapter I also examine how the different functions of inscription set up tensions in the attempt to represent cases adequately through inscribing. Finally, I examine how the representational style of inscribing devices may affect the capacity of inscriptions to represent a case and how the debate about modes of representation is enrolled in the professional discourse of Social Workers.

CONSTITUTING A CASE THROUGH INSCRIPTION

Inscription is used in this CFSW Service to constitute proxy objects which can represent the Social Work 'case'. In many circumstances in the CFSW service, a case becomes constituted as a case through the process of inscription. The use of inscription to create a proxy object which can represent a child and its family is the process by which the Social Work service can act upon the problems of a child and its family. Inscription is the process through which a child and family becomes constituted as a case and are rendered available for intervention by the CFSW

Service and the other bodies involved in CFSW, for example a Child Protection core group or the Children's Hearing system. Inscription is the means by which families are subjected to the scrutiny and judgement of the Social Work service and the authority of the law. Inscription is also the process through which a family becomes eligible for the support services which the Social Work service can provide. A family must be 'written up' as a report and it is this report which speaks on behalf of the family to the 'authorities'. It is not only the child and family who become available and subject to scrutiny through the process of inscription. Through inscription, the work activity of Social Workers becomes visible, and as such, can be subject to scrutiny by managers and through audit and inspection. The proxy object of the case represents a child and a family, but also the work done on a case by individual Social Workers.

A child becomes a case by virtue of inscription. The inscribing process may be formal, or more informal and gradual. The child is constituted as a 'case' through the production of certain inscribing devices which represent the case within a formal process: e.g. the request for an assessment report by the Children's Reporter or the decision by a Practice Team Senior Social Worker to allocate a child to a Social Worker for an assessment report, with a view to calling a Child Protection Case Conference. Although voluntary cases do not automatically generate a formal assessment report, on allocation to a Social Worker, they will get 'a file', which is also a material proxy object created through inscription. This process of inscription can begin either through formal requests or referrals by statutory agencies or through the more gradual process of the 'duty system', as described in Chapter 3.

A case may be constituted through the inscribing processes of statutory systems. For example, if a case is referred to the CFSW service via the Children's Hearing system, it is constituted as a Social Work case at the point at which the Children's Reporter requests that the circumstances of a child should be written up in a formal report. If a case emerges through the duty process, this process of inscription, of being constituted as a case is more gradual. It emerges through a series of events

which are written up and logged as individual instances, before coalescing as a 'case'.

“Shadowing a Social Worker on her ‘duty’ shift, I note that on ‘duty’, fragments of lives, of events come to the attention of the Social Work service via pieces of paper. A letter from a teacher or a health visitor; one of the pink standard reports from a police Juvenile Liaison Officer; handwritten notes from other Social Workers; the formal summary of the previous days activities on duty, written up on a standard form. The day’s business is represented on pieces of paper, each representing an event that may or may not progress into becoming constituted as a ‘case’. These events may sometimes coalesce and become a case, at which point a formal assessment may take place, creating the object of a case. At one point, the Senior Social Worker on duty comes to check on what’s going on. The Social Worker on duty describes one of the matters that has come to her attention. It seems that there have been repeated events concerning this family that have come to the attention of the Social Work department. The Senior Social Worker looks at the notes made by the Social Worker and says, “I think this is going to be an assessment”, meaning that this event, or rather this collection of events will progress into a ‘case’, with representation through the proxy objects of a file and reports.”

Cases are represented through a whole series of ‘official’ inscribing devices which create a range of proxy objects, which are used at different times in the management of a case. The representation of a Social Work case changes according to the nature of the case i.e. statutory or voluntary and to the demands of statutory procedures. There are two primary objects which represent a CFSW case through inscription: the file and the report.

THE FILE

Once a case is allocated to a Social Worker, it acquires a ‘file’. The file is meant to be the most comprehensive representation of the current status, history and ongoing work on a case. The file, itself a proxy object for a case, is the physical place where all other documentation about a case is gathered. A file is supposed to contain for example: copies of any formal assessment reports relating to the case, whether produced by the practice team or by other agencies, such as GP or school; copies of correspondence relating to the case, both incoming or outgoing; and ‘Detailed Records’ for the case, which are expected to document ongoing activity

on the case by the allocated Social Worker (see Appendix Six for a description of the contents of one case file).

The ‘detailed records’ (or DRs) are a standard inscribing device on which to record the process of ongoing work on a case. It is understood by Social Workers that good practice dictates that these detailed records should be kept up to date and used to note down work on a case as it happens. The detailed records are a simple form, with boxes for ‘date’ and ‘action’. However, it is clear from the interviews with Social Workers and the examination of some Social Work files that DRs are not kept up to date. Of the Social Workers interviewed, very few indeed gave the impression that they were assiduous in keeping up to this type of record-keeping. The majority were explicit in admitting that this was something they fell behind at. Nor is the ‘detailed records’ official pro forma necessarily what is used to record the case activity. In the file I examined, although the DR pro forma was used, a Social Worker had basically used the form as a blank sheet, marking the date periodically in the ‘date’ box, but then handwriting a narrative of activity across the page, irrespective of the ‘boxes’ supposed to be filled in.

THE REPORT: THE STANDARD ASSESSMENT FORMAT

The precise characteristics and function of the SAF have already been described at length. Although, as I have already discussed, the SAF is not the only standard form being used in the CFSW service, it is *supposed* to be the standard and comprehensive assessment report. The SAF is one of the main ways in which Social Work cases are represented outside the CFSW service. More often than not, a Social Work case becomes ‘a case’, rather than just a problem, or a family, or a referral, once it becomes the subject of a formal assessment report.

THE EXCEPTIONS TO INSCRIPTION

Some casework and some cases are not represented by formal inscriptions devices such as the SAF, and some work is not translated into documentation at all.

Working knowledge of a case may remain tacit, or in the Social Workers private notes, with no formal material representation in inscription. Although inscription is the formal means by which a case is objectified within the system, not all work activity relies upon the formal, documentary processes which exist in the Social Work system. Although all allocated cases will have files, Social Worker practice does not require a case to be represented through inscription at all times. For much of the process of Social Worker involvement with a case, the case is not translated into the material object of documentation but remains dispersed in the series of events and relationships which occur between the Social Workers and the children and families involved in a case. Working knowledge of a case for the allocated Social Worker for the most part remains tacit, rather than translated into explicit form through inscription. Cases which are not in the statutory system, or those in the system, but which are not imminently the subject of a hearing or a case conference, are not necessarily represented through inscription, and certainly not objectified in the form of a 'gathered assessment', i.e. the SAF or a similar formal written report. In these cases, the bulk of the working knowledge of a case is held in the tacit knowledge of the Social Worker.

Even the formal inscribing processes co-exist alongside informal, oral practices. For example, although the Children's Reporter system is highly formalised, proceduralised and documented, interviews with Reporters suggest that more informal practices exist alongside the formal system. For example, Reporters have close working relationships with Social Workers at the practice team with which they are associated. One Children's Reporter explained to me that she may phone a Social Worker and ask if a family under investigation is known to them. If it is, the Reporter might ask the opinion of the Social Worker about the necessity of formal action. The Reporter may ask the Social Worker to make some informal enquiries. One Reporter interviewed, who had herself worked as a Social Worker before qualifying as a Reporter, explained that she was very aware that a formal written assessment is a lot of work for a Social Worker to take on. She said that she would usually prefer to make some informal enquiries first, to establish whether or not a 'SBR' is necessary. However, the Reporter explained how she would always then

document these informal, oral exchanges. One Reporter explained how she would always note the details of any calls made, and this will be noted in the relevant file. She explained that she needed the written evidence of the work done. She was very aware of the necessity of maintaining good, documentary records of the process as well as the outcome of any involvement with a potential case. Contemporary written notes, even material simply noted in person by the reporter, constitutes evidence in a way that personal recall does not. Note that in spite of informal, oral processes, the legal perspective of the Children's Reporters means that it is understood that any important information requires the legitimising process of inscription to constitute it as 'evidence'. This is not the accepted practice amongst Social Workers, who, whilst understanding the importance of written documentation to create an evidence base for their work activity, allow documentation activity to fall behind in practice.

THE CHALLENGE OF INSCRIPTION

MANAGING BOUNDARIES

The inscribing process is not without its challenges. The process of translation the tacit knowledge and interpersonal activity relating to a case into documentation, particularly standard documentation, creates boundary issues. Whereas, the tacit understanding of a case allows for the accommodation of fuzzy boundaries and multiple relationships between dimensions of the case, the translation into written material, and in particular into the standardised format intended by the SAF demands clear cut boundaries. The various purposes for the inscribing devices used to represent cases also has an effect on the way in which boundaries have to be established around cases.

A single case is represented through a report or a file. However even a new case, is linked to other earlier cases and as such, any report must somehow encompass or

represent a cascade of earlier documentation. According to Social Workers, it is rare that a new case is not linked to previous cases. A family may well have been subject to Social Work involvement in the past, whether in respect of other children, or because the child in question in the current case has been subject to Social Work concern before, in another geographical area. And what constitutes the boundaries of a family? The families I heard about during the research were a shifting collection of mothers, children, siblings, grandparents, step-parents, step siblings. Any of these people may have been subject to Social Work intervention in the past and therefore will potentially bring with them additional case materials for consideration. Materials for these other cases must be tracked down and read, in order to make an assessment on the current case. The boundaries are also difficult to establish historically. Social Workers suggested that more often than not, parents whose children were cause for concern had themselves been the subject of Social Work involvement when they were children. There was a history of a family told through archived Social Work cases. Again, the documents relating to the parent's cases had to be sought out and read by the Social Worker allocated to the current case and then incorporated into the materials representing the new case. This is not a process of simply assembling documentation, but a process of judging what is relevant to the current case, and synthesising historical material within the new case notes or case report.

"It's very rarely that you pick up a brand new case. There will be existing files to look through. I have a case, and it has 10 files. The Mum and Dad had been in care, and then there were concerns about the unborn baby. So I need to know the whole background. Mum and Dad had both been in care since they were 3. So they had major issues. So I needed to look at the history. I don't always draw directly from old reports. Sometimes people do get things wrong, so you don't want to be just repeating old mistakes. So I am looking at historical factors that may be affecting things now."
(PT4/SW1)

The object which represents a case has to be able to accommodate the tensions between the status of a child as an individual, and the primary focus of a case, and process of working with a child as part of a family. There is a tension between the administrative and the legal definition of a case as a 'child' and the Social Worker's understanding of and engagement with a case as a 'family'. Since the

Children Act (Scotland) 1995, the status of the child as the focus of Social Work intervention has been emphasised. It is an individual child who is placed upon a child protection register, or becomes subject to a supervision order. However, the reality is that Social Workers work with families, which often include more than one child. Although Social Workers did acknowledge that there were occasional cases in which only one of the children of a particular family prompted Social Work involvement – for example, if a child suffered from a particular mental or physical disability – generally speaking, if there are problems within a family, it is going to affect the welfare of all the children in that family. The dynamic of a family, the history of family members, the material and social circumstances of the family, all of these issues have an effect on the circumstances of the child, and are the way in which the assessment for a child is approached. The very principles of Social Work practice are based on a theoretical approach in which assessment of risk to children is made through a consideration of the child's context, mainly the family. Thus, a large part of the SAF is taken up with descriptions and analysis of family circumstances and dynamic.

Inscription is being used to force this focus on the child, which reflects current thinking on good practice, by enshrining it in the SAF. Social Workers do acknowledge that it is important to focus on individual children within a family, because although the children may share the circumstances of their family, it may have a different effect on siblings, because of different personality and needs. Social Workers acknowledged the benefit of the SAF and other arrangements around documenting cases in terms of individual children, because it reinforced the practice of focusing on children as individuals, which they suggested was increasingly understood to be good practice.

“People are much more aware of the focus on individual children, seeing them as individual children rather than clumping them together in one family. They have individual needs and develop differently.” (PT3/SW1)

There is a developing practice argument about refocusing attention on individual children:

"I think there's been more emphasis recently on using a separate form for each child. People are much more aware of the focus on individual children rather than clumping them together in one family. And that they have individual needs and develop differently.... It's improving the assessment. And certainly, if you go to a child protection case conference, they will look at each child individually and draw in different agencies who might be involved for each child."(PT3/SW1)

Whatever the value of representing cases in terms of a single child, this creates logistical challenges. The keeping of individual files and the production of individual reports creates a significant amount of translation work from the tacit, holistic understanding of a case in terms of the whole family, which is the everyday practice of Social Workers, and the need to define cases as individual children in certain contexts. One Social Worker described the challenge of preparing reports and documentation for one family of five children:

"The whole thing of one file per child.... There can be, but it is enormously onerous, enormously difficult in terms of the sheer time it takes, and the mountains of files, we are talking mountains of files. You're going through one paper file, sometimes in a month. If we record things separately, like correspondence, like reports, then how do we manage case notes? So for example, we have a family who were on the child protection register. Five children. Five children who are subject to registration, who are subject to children's hearings. Is a Social Worker going to come in after a visit and write 5 sets of case notes? I don't think so. You would never be away from that one file in terms of meeting the expectations. So you have to compromise. What we try to do here, is modules within one family file, and try to separate out how we can, but one case history, which in terms of third party whatever, is not acceptable. But, there is not one single office Some people have tried, for example, having one file per child, and what they do, at the point of audit, photocopy all the case notes. But it's till not individual recordings of each child. And we have never bitten the bullet on this. And that's the frustration again in terms of what we should be doing, and what we said we would do, and what actually is.

Researcher: Presumably, as far as Social Workers go, it's not only the burden of recording, but it affects what you think of as a case. A child or a family?

JW: Yes, if you had to work on that level, it would be hopeless. You have to give the time to each individual. And one child maybe much less vulnerable than another child. If you're attached to a family, not on the child protection register, there may be one child much more needy, say an adolescent who's just gone to hell, and a preschool child who you're trying to build in compensatory factors. That's the responsibility of the Social Worker, to make sure. The pressures are huge just now in terms of always

balancing what's good enough with what's absolutely necessary."
(PT3/PTM)

The boundary of a single case changes depending on the working context at a particular time. The working unit of Social Work is a family; the bureaucratic, or reporting unit is the individual child. Whilst a Social Worker will work on the case with the whole family, when it comes to reporting the case either through a SAF or similar report, or in recording the material in a file, the proxy object representing the case is supposed to be a discrete representation of one child's circumstances. A large challenge for workers is in duplicating and/ or dividing up the material which relates to all children in a case. In theory, the SAF has been designed specifically to accommodate this, by dividing the form into two parts. The first part is intended to contain material common to all children in a family; the second part to contain information specific to an individual child. The intention is that that part 1 can simply be copied for each of the children in the family, and then a single Part 2 completed for the individual children. Although this seems a practical response to the problem of documenting work with families in terms of the individual children involved, it seems to be particularly problematic for the Social Workers. This is the aspect of the design which draws the greatest criticisms from Social Workers, because of the repetition, which is seen as unnecessary additional work. Once again, there is a paradox in the response of Social Workers to the demands of inscription: on the one hand, they understand that there may be legitimate grounds for the work of inscription, but the reality of the amount of inscription work they are required to do is resisted on the grounds that it generates additional and unnecessary workload.

If a file is closed and becomes an archival object (Garfinkel 1967), the 'one child/one file' requirement creates additional translation work, which is another significant addition to workload. The Social Worker may well maintain one file for a family whilst working on the case, which will contain some documentation on work with all the children involved. Whilst the file is a working tool, which is seen only by the Social Worker assigned to the case, this is no problem. However, when the file is closed, the Social Worker is supposed to create one file for each child. If

nothing else, this would demand the work of sorting the documentation according to its relevance to individual children, and work photocopying material relating to all the children in order that copies can be placed in each file. However, the requirement to separate out material for each child could demand the retranslation of material. For example, notes in the 'DRs' will document work done; work is often done within the unit of 'the family', for example a home visit or a Children's Hearing. To create 'DRs' which only relate to one child would require a rewriting of all the records, sifting out material relating to each individual child.

The boundary issues in representing cases become particularly significant in the event of requests to access files under FOI legislation. FOI access to files also raises the challenge of managing the confidentiality of third party information. This may relate to information about siblings and also often parents or other adults involved in the child's life. This is quite likely because a significant dimension of the assessment work for a case is based on issues such as the medical or criminal profile of a parent or other involved adult (often it would seem from this study, a mother's boyfriend). A child's file may well contain confidential information about parents, carers or other significant adults such as a parent's current partner. This kind of information is important contextual material which is relevant to any assessment made about the risk to the child. The most frequently cited examples by Social Workers are information about drug or alcohol use and treatment, information about criminal activity, or disclosure of childhood sexual abuse experienced by a parent. This type of information must constitute part of the case material, for the purposes of assessment. However it cannot be revealed to the subject of the case, i.e. the child, either at the time of the Social Work involvement, or at a later stage under the FOI act. How is it possible to make provision for this kind of access to information? For the file to function as a working tool and as an archival proxy for a case, it must contain all relevant material. For the file to be accessible to the subject of the file, i.e. the child, it must undergo a further stage of translation, to remove any references to confidential third party information.

"I think particularly with the new legislation that's around. I still struggle with 3rd party information. Where you maybe are describing a mother's

medical condition, because that's relevant to the child, and that's in the child's record. But, that's maybe information that you don't want that child to sit down and read. So I do struggle with the whole file thing. How it's put together. There's not enough work done on how we set out and structure case notes." (PT4/SW1)

"In terms of our files, each child should have its own file, its own record. So in terms of doing a family visit, you should be recording it in, say, 3 files, because if a child comes back say in 10 years and wants access to their files, then ideally it should only be about them. Even though they might be brothers and sisters in the same family situation, it's still only information pertinent to them that you can use.

Researcher: Is that something that happens much?

Yes. More so for children who were looked after, or who were adopted. Usually when they get ...it doesn't happen a huge amount but we certainly get a few requests a year. And the ones that I've dealt with certainly tend to be one in their early 20s, who are trying to make sense of what happened, maybe have a partner or have a child themselves. They want to come back and look at files." (PT2/ SW1)

The management of confidentiality in respect of third party information is not only a bureaucratic or legalistic concern. The CP Failure Report drew attention to the fact that this issue can have a material affect on the outcome of a case. Confusion about the possibility of disclosing third party information relating to the medical status of the father was identified as a reason why important risks to the child were missed. The management of third party information is an ongoing challenge to the inscribing practices required of Social Workers. The interviews suggest that this is far from being solved or from being standardised. PTMs are aware that files should be maintained for individual children, but admit that this is far from the case. The translation work is often only done when archival documentation is called upon for various types of access at a later date.

The point here is that the nature of inscription, particularly bureaucratic inscribing devices such as standardised formats, means that the ambiguities and fuzzy boundaries and categories that can be accommodated in the everyday activity of Social Worker interaction with a family, create anomalies that front-line practitioners and managers of the service struggle to accommodate in inscribing devices.

MANAGING THE MATERIALS

Creating a proxy object to represent a case through inscription brings material challenges. It is precisely the materiality of inscriptions that makes inscription useful as an organisational tool. Yet this materiality is not without problems. The material reality of the files affects their capacity as representational objects. Despite the concerns or complaints Social Workers express about the capacity of different type of reporting formats to adequately represent the complexity of casework, they all acknowledge the importance of creating some kind of material object which can represent the tacit, action-centred process of case work in a practical way. The materiality, the durability and the mobility of inscribing devices in organisations, all of these things are acknowledged as being important.

One of the challenges of representing a case by a material object is the large quantity of documentation a single case can generate. I certainly didn't understand the sheer quantity of material generated by a case or associated with a case. This reflects my initial basic misunderstanding of the milieu in which Social Workers are operating. My understanding was of a 'case' which was somehow free-standing, or self-contained. The reality is that the relational and temporal boundaries of a case are almost impossible to delineate, or to prescribe, certainly in any neat, bureaucratic representation. A case is often built up from events which go back years and which may have emerged through the duty system, until at some point, a decision is made that this collection of events constitutes a case which needs allocation. What becomes 'a case' for one Social Work team or one local authority may already exist as a case in another geographical area. Thus, the new case must draw on the old case. The *dramatis personae* may have changed, for example the mother may now be with a new partner or boyfriend, and may indeed have additional children, but the 'family' has a history in Social Work terms, which must be taken into account when constructing the story and the relevant contextual material for the new case. As I have already mentioned, often a case will involve parents who were themselves subject to Social Work involvement when they were children. As such, their case files from their childhood become part of the context of the case focussed on their children. Social Workers explained to me that it is

very rare indeed that a new case will not have some kind of history with Social Work. New cases are rarely tabula rasa. All of this material, whether in terms of contextual knowledge, or in terms of the material documentation, has somehow to be accommodated, to be incorporated in and translated into the new case. How can all the associated documentation be represented in the documentation of a new case?

In material terms, this means that there is often a lot of paperwork associated with a case. Social Workers talk about ‘a file’ in respect of a case. My understanding was that this might be a single folder or file containing a collection of documents. The reality is less tidy. For example, when I was shadowing Social Workers, I asked one of them if I could have a look at the file relating to the case I was observing. He laughed and dragged open the bottom drawer of his filing cabinet, which was crammed full of paper. ‘*That’s ‘the file’ for the case*’ he said, and emphatically kicked the drawer shut.

The material reality of the files also means that they are not as mobile as intended. Much of the material and certainly the archive material, is not on computer and exists only as hard copies. Any work that demands the circulation of file material to other parties – for example, in the case of a legal challenge or a public enquiry – requires photocopying. One Social Worker described a case she was involved in, in which the parents had gone to court to challenge the decision to remove their children from the home. The worker explained that 10 copies of the files had to be made. Another worker explained how difficult it was even if case material was stored on computer to track down and make use of case material:

*“At the moment, I’m still keeping paper files. If I write a letter, I’m making one copy for the file, one for admin, but it’s already on the K drive. But on the K drive, you just get the name and date. There’s no indication of what’s in the document. **There might be a hundred letters for a case.** Thing how long it would take, to have to think, when would it have been written? August ..? There’s nothing to indicate the content of the letter.” (PT1/SW2) (My emphasis)*

An additional limitation in the capacity of a file to represent a case is the practical problem of reading handwriting. A lot of material in the files is handwritten and certainly has been in the past. Even assessment reports have in the past been

handwritten by Social Workers on a basic, typed pro forma. Although this is now changing, it is only very recently that Social Workers themselves have had access to computers. Whilst material such as reports and letters, designed to be circulated beyond the social work service would be typed by secretaries, the 'DRs' were (and still are) handwritten. The main problem with handwritten material is that it is often difficult to read. This is a very basic point, but is critical in affecting the capacity of inscription to represent cases. The Child Protection Failure report noted that many of the materials from CFSW files were 'illegible' because of handwriting, and this was identified as a shortcoming in the record-keeping on that case. Social Workers in the CFSW also talked about the problem of handwriting.

"Well one of the biggest things is the handwriting. That's another thing on the team. No one says you have to type out detailed records, so some people do, but some people don't. The old records, some of the handwriting is illegible. But I tend to handwrite my case notes. Sometimes I do type them, if I'm on duty. But then, my writing is quite neat. But I don't know, maybe we should be told to type them." (PT5/SW2)

"Well, the reality is, although Social Workers would deny this, the standards of recording in the past were really very variable. They rested largely on handwritten, narrative records. And even where you had templates for recording, ... like having a template for a Social Worker's report, it might just be a blank sheet of paper with a heading on the top. And the same with the minutes, it might just have 3 or 4 headings, and would otherwise be screeds of handwritten notes, that nobody could read anyway (laughs)." (SW3/PTM)

The capacity of a file to represent a case is also affected simply by the way a file is put together. For example, one Social Worker complained that she struggled with files in which material is placed in the file with the most recent document last. She explained that she preferred to 'read' the file 'like a book'; starting at the beginning of the story, and reading through it chronologically.

"... people who file things back to front, rather than front to back. It does my head in. People build from the bottom up, whereas I like to start from the beginning and read through, so that it reads like a book." (PT1/SW2)

The putting together of a file, that is the ordering and sorting of enclosed documents, affects the capacity of the file to speak for the case. When examining Social Work files, I too struggled to make sense of the case from the file. In this

case, the file had been divided into sections with no overarching chronology. I spent a lot of time trying to understand what elements fitted in at what point of the case history. It was only because the file was for a case I was observing and had therefore been *told* about by the assigned Social Worker, that I was able to make sense of the documentation. Thus, my understanding of the *file* was facilitated by the contextual description given to me orally by the Social Worker who was familiar with the case. Clearly, I am not a Social Worker, and as such, my understanding of technical aspects of the case material was limited, but nonetheless, the struggle I had with understanding the case file was not only connected with my lack of familiarity of the processes of the case, but also with the representation of the case within the documentation.

Whether a file should be sorted from present to past or vice versa, or in sections is not really the issue here. What is important is firstly, that the way in which file documentation is presented has an effect on the capacity of the file to communicate the details of the case; secondly, that in this department, file keeping is individualised and patchy; and finally, that the file alone is not necessarily capable of representing the *sense* of the case.

Although all cases are constituted in the CFSW service by the creation of a file, and are represented through the object of the file, the case and the file are not interchangeable. The file is the documented representation of a case, which is *less* than the working knowledge of the Social Worker allocated to the case. Social Workers understand that the file does not fully represent the case and indeed are conscious that the file *cannot* adequately represent all dimensions of a case. This is a result of the challenge of translating the complexity and depth of knowledge a Social Worker may have about a case, through their working involvement with it over time. The representational capacities of a file are also limited by the Social Worker's ability to translate tacit, personal working knowledge of a case into a documentary form. This type of translation work demands literary skills which the Social Worker may not possess.

The file may also be an inadequate representation of a case because a Social Worker has simply not kept up to date with the work of documentation. Management intervention may force workers to take more care in their documenting of cases. For example, the arrangements for audit of CP files. There was the suggestion by some workers that in the Child Protection cases, they would make a special effort to keep the files and detailed records up to date. In such cases, Social Workers are aware that the casefiles are more likely to come under scrutiny, whether through the periodic child protection casefile audits runs internally by the department, or because there is a greater risk that a child might be injured or die, resulting in an external enquiry.

“There are certain things, you know, like Child Protection cases, and you know you have to keep them up to date. Then that will be the one you find you work on most, or you have more paperwork for, or filing for, because it can involve quite a lot of paperwork, quite a lot of meetings, minutes of meetings and that has to be up to date.” (PT1/SW1)

“I’ve just got a new case this week, and it’s a sexual abuse case, so I know there are going to be big issues with it, so I am trying to make sure everything, every phone call, is well documented.” (PT3/SW1)

Social Workers describe how generally they make a special effort now and then to bring the files up to date. This seems to be a process of periodic catching up, rather than on ongoing routine part of practice. This is often prompted as described above by an audit or external demand from the police or other authority to seize the files for a case which has resulted in some kind of problem. The other point at which a case file would be brought up to date and generally tidied up would be if a case was being closed or passed on to another worker. However, even in these circumstances, comments from interviewees suggest that this is not always done.

“I do keep on top of case notes. I know some people, go for months without writing things up. I don’t think I would sleep at night if I was in that position. But then I’m pretty untidy when it comes to keeping the file together. So I might be up to date with writing it up, but not when it comes to having it all neatly filed, and organised in such a way that it would be easily understood. I suppose my attitude is that, I know what I’m doing and that’s fine, what’s going on, and it’s my case. But that’s quite dangerous if I were off for some reason.” (PT5/SW2)

FOI is another issue that has sparked debates about the status of case files and the care taken over documentation within Social Work practice. The proxy role of documentation becomes particularly significant when the case file is accessed by the people who were experiencing the circumstances of the case. In effect, whilst a case is open, children are the *object* of a case; they are the object upon which Social Workers act, on behalf of whom they intervene; the child is the object of documentation. When a child returns as an adult to access the file, their status in respect of the file shifts; they become the *subject* of a case. The case files represent this person's life, or at least, a period of their life. This shift from object to subject changes the relationship the Social Work service has with these materials. One PTM described how the duty of care for the children within a case extended to the proxy representation of the case i.e. the file. She explained how she felt that the service should show respect for case materials in the same way that they were required to respect the lives such materials represented. In a way, the objectification of the case through inscription depersonalises and abstracts it. To reunite a person with their own case materials is to reinstate the personal character of the documents. Casefiles represent significant and often traumatic periods of a person's history. This PTM was insisting that casefiles are never just 'bureaucratic records'. Their role as a proxy for lives meant that they should always be treated with care and respect. According to her, shoddy or badly put together case files suggested a lack of care for the people involved in the case. This type of attitude was repeated by a number of workers.

"It' s[FOI access requests]certainly happening more. I spoken to seniors about it, How do we deal with it? It's again about respect. Here are adults, who we see as children, and they are coming to understand their life. People do that because they are at some sort of crossroads, they are at a point of wanting to reflect and they themselves may be parents. It's important and we need to pay attention to it.." (PT1/PTM)

The inscribing process renders a child and family subject to and eligible for Social Work intervention. However, the process of abstraction which accompanies the translation of details about a child's life may create a distancing effect. Those

reading the case materials may lose sight of the effect of this information on a child's experience of life. Although the abstracted versions of the case, i.e. the record, the file or the report, are necessary for the assessment and management of a case, there is the danger that they act to depersonalise the case. At one Children's Panel meeting, the chairperson circulated photos of the children who were the subject of the case, explaining that she thought it was important that the panel members did not forget that they were dealing with children's lives as they deliberated on the case. A PTM talked very passionately in her interview about the effect of written materials on the children who are the subject of the case:

"It's how you evidence it, but also how you hold people's histories. [...] And we as Social Workers become involved in children's lives, we go to hearings, there's a real intrusion into family life, in family decisions. People see us as having a lot of power and a lot of authority, and at times we do have a lot of power and authority. And I think we have to make that absolutely explicit. Where our ideas come from, where our assessments come from. And I think we need to do it well in relation to children, because a lot of it I think, can come from patterns in families, parents can have been chaotic when you look at their lives. And I think, what if a child comes in and says I'd like to look at my record, what message are we giving to them in relation to how we see them, how we value them, their history, how we have valued their parent's history, their grandparents, how have we held that, how have we perceived that, and I think ... I suppose I hold that in my head. It's something that I think about." (PT1/PTM)

REPRESENTING A CASE THROUGH THE SAF

The SAF has been introduced as an attempt to improve the representation of cases in documentary form. It is designed to overcome the limitations of a file of case notes and correspondence in providing a clear and comprehensive representation of a case. It is intended to give a summary of the circumstances of a case, of Social Work assessment of the case, of Social Work intervention in the case, and of any decisions or plans relating to the case. The SAF is intended as a proxy object for a case that can speak for the case in different circumstances. The hearing or case conference reports not only represent the case to the meetings and to other involved professionals, but they become a matter of record, representing the case within in the 'files'. In statutory cases, a SAF is required at the beginning of the allocation

period, to report either to a Child Protection Case Conference, or to a Children's Panel. In these cases, this inscribing device represents the case to a group of people with authority over the case. Decisions will be made about the case in part on the basis of this inscription. The object does not speak directly on behalf of the family; rather, it speaks *of* the family. The inscribing device speaks on behalf of the *Social Worker* who is making a professional assessment of the circumstances of the family and the risk to the child or children in that family. Knowledge of the family is mediated through the representation practices of the Social Worker. Without the need to produce a report, which pulls together descriptions and assessment of the case at a particular time, the knowledge of the case is dispersed through the narrative of the file documentation. It is only when a report is required to be produced, that an attempt is made to represent a case fully in documentation. The report then operates as a proxy for the complex material – documentation and otherwise, which goes into the case.

The SAF may have to stand alone in representing a case. It may be required to speak for the case to people who have no other knowledge of the case, whether through earlier personal involvement, or through access to additional documentation. In the case of a Children's Hearing, Children's Panel members will not have an ongoing knowledge of the case. The cases are allocated to a Reporter and brought to a panel on the basis of a timetable. Children's Panel members sign up for various time slots and consider whatever cases happen to be timetabled to that slot. Only rarely is a special arrangement made to ensure that a case is brought back to the same panel of people. Knowledge of the case is therefore delivered through the papers and reports about the case and through the discussions at the Panel.

The SAF may be supplemented by other reports, but it is expected to give an overview of the case. This reflects the central role of Social Workers in pulling together an overall assessment of a case, and their responsibility for a case. The Social Work report i.e. the SAF, constitutes the main report for the Children's Panel. This is generally supplemented by reports from other involved agencies e.g.

school, GP, drug or alcohol support workers (for the parents) and the police. My examination of a Social Work file suggested that these reports, although written, are less extensive than the SAF, and may simply take the form of a letter outlining involvement with family members. The Social Work report will also take an overview of the case, bringing in elements from reports by other agencies. One Social Worker explained that other involved agencies are only responsible for presenting an opinion based upon the professional involvement they have with or a child or family, whilst Social Workers are expected to pull all these dimensions together and provide overall assessments of risk and need, and make recommendations accordingly. So, for example, a GP will comment on health and child development issues. A Head Teacher will comment upon the attendance record or behaviour of a child in class. A police officer will provide details of contact with a child or family member in connection with possible or actual criminal activity, or may provide details of criminal records.

In practice, at Children's Hearings and at CP Case Conferences, the SAF is supplemented by oral representation of a case. Despite the importance of the written representations of the case, oral representation practices persist through the meetings. In the case of Children's Hearings, it is in fact the oral representations at the hearing which 'count' more than the written materials which are circulated before the session. The Children's Panel is a proxy court, with legal powers. A Children's Reporter explained to me that, as such, the decisions made by the Children's Panel must be made on the basis of 'evidence' submitted orally during the panel session. The reports are provided to inform the Children's Panel of the circumstances of the case, and the recommendations of the Social Worker but decisions are ostensibly made on the basis of the meeting and not the report. Of course, the representation of the case through the report effectively bounds the panel's knowledge of the case, as they have no other knowledge to draw on. Nevertheless, the recommendations made in Social Worker reports are not foregone conclusions. I was privy to a number of conversations amongst Social Workers, and indeed, with a Children's Reporter, about what they perceived as the challenge of 'managing' the decisions of the panel members, who are lay members

– that is, drawn from the general public – who do not necessarily have any professional understanding of the matters relating to Social Work cases. Social Workers explained how their recommendations were frequently ignored by panel members, who might, as Social Workers explained it, have a particular axe to grind, or were more naïve in believing the parents. I observed a Children’s Panel in which the recommendations of the Social Worker were rejected in favour of a decision which was more in line with the demands of the mother. The Social Worker was recommending that the mother’s access to her children, who were currently living with their grandparents, should remain very limited. The mother felt that she had done all that had been asked of her by the decision of an earlier Children’s Hearing, and that she should now be allowed greater access to her children. The Children’s Panel rejected the recommendation by the Social Worker and instead gave increased access to the mother. I was not permitted to read the reports submitted to the panel. I only observed the oral reports made by the Social Worker at the meeting. My observation was that the Social Worker was quite timid in presenting her case to the panel. I am obviously only speculating whether a more vigorous defence of her position might have swung the decision of the panel in the other direction, but I certainly observed that the Social Worker effectively allowed her report to speak for her, rather than making a convincing oral presentation. The oral representation of a case may have as much as or more impact than the report.

FORM AND FUNCTION

Inscription is used in the CFSWS to create proxy objects which can be used to represent cases. The challenge to the design and use of these inscribing devices is that such objects are required to fulfil a range of different functions. Each of these functions make different demands on the inscribing process and may create tensions in the design and use of standard inscribing devices. Inscription is used in the Social Work service to create objects which represent cases. These objects have different purposes. The demands of these purposes are often conflicting and produce tensions in the inscribing practices used to create such objects. Often, the

same objects, i.e. a form or a case file, are used for different purposes, and again, this can create conflicting demands on inscribing practices required to produce documentation. The purpose of the inscribing devices may affect the criteria for deciding the type and quantity of information represented through inscription. Issues such as utility, confidentiality, ownership and access to documentation all create different demands and different rationales for inscribing practices.

The multiple purposes of inscriptions devices may mean additional documentation work for Social Workers and as such have an effect on workload. Documentation may have to be duplicated in slightly amended formats or the comprehensiveness of inscription required for administrative purposes may be experienced as unnecessary workload by Social Workers who must carry out the work of documenting a case. However, attempts to reduce duplication, by creating a single inscribing device to fulfil multiple roles, for example the SAF, also create tensions in terms of the range and quantity of information contained in such formats. The functions of inscription are potentially in conflict. To accommodate such conflicts requires additional work in creating multiple versions of the documentation about cases, or somehow, to create a kind of inscribing device that can be flexible enough to accommodate different uses. This is clearly something that has been attempted through the design of the SAF, with limited success. The challenge for file-keeping within the Social Work service is that the different demands made on such inscriptions, are made on the same set of inscriptions. Is it possible to consider all these possible uses and audiences for this object, at the point of record-keeping?

A case is represented through inscribing devices essentially when the case is being represented externally to other agencies, to other authorities; equally, the case is represented through inscribing devices when, because of historical or personnel reasons, the case cannot be represented through the personal presence and description of the Social Worker who worked on the case. The most important characteristic of an inscribing device such as the SAF in representing the object of the case is that it does not require the presence of the Social Worker assigned to the case. The object can step outside the limitations of time and space and

represent the case in ways that the Social Worker cannot. The report can go in advance of the Social Worker, and be read by the Children's Panel members, by the Children's Reporter and by the participants in a case conference, reducing the time needed for such face to face meetings. The report can reduce the time required to represent the case, by summarizing and rendering the material more concise, than a narrative presented by the Social Worker.

In the absence of any requirement to represent the case externally, activity on the case is not necessarily translated into documentation, and certainly not formal documentation. Instead the knowledge of the case remains tacit, and representation of the case is done through oral discussion. Inscribing devices such as the SAF are used in order to speak for the case beyond the CFSW Service. As already described, one of the purposes of objectification of a case is in order to render it available for 'management'. In terms of ongoing Social Work practice, this is not necessary for the ongoing work on the case. Social Workers are happy to maintain working relationships with family members, and intervene or assist on the basis of personal, tacit working knowledge of the case. The ongoing assessment of risk occurs either through tacit processes, or through oral discussion in supervision, or, as observed during the research, through informal discussions with colleagues. During my observation of the 'duty' session, I was privy to conversations in the office between Social Workers who asked their colleagues advice about their cases. For example, one Social Worker was unsure what to do about a phone call she had just received from a primary school concerning a child involved in one of her cases. Apparently, the child's father had arrived to pick up the child from school, along with a male friend. According to the schoolteacher, both men had appeared drunk. The schoolteacher had allowed the child to leave with its father, but was now worried, and had phoned to report this to the Social Worker. The Social Worker discussed whether or not she should go to the child's house to find out whether the child was ok, but she was worried about facing the father and his friend if they were drunk. The father had by the Social Worker's account been aggressive in the past. The Social Worker discussed this with her two colleagues, and then by the duty Senior Social Worker who wandered into the office to check up on the

duty session. In the end it was agreed through this quite informal discussion, that the Social Worker should go and visit the family, but accompanied by a colleague.

Formal inscription of a case becomes necessary when the case is required to be rendered visible for external scrutiny, whether audit, public enquiry, or simply the process of a hearing or case conference. At this point the file must give full account of the work done on the case, decisions made and the evidence upon which such decisions were based. Again, the file must stand alone and speak for the case, but in this instance, the file speaks not only for the circumstances of the case, but for the work done and judgements made by Social Workers on the case. It becomes evidence by which the competence of the Social Worker is judged.

INSCRIBING DEVICES AS ARCHIVAL, CONTRACTUAL AND RHETORICAL OBJECTS

The SAF represents a case as a component of a file – representing a piece of work done on a case. It is also expected to function as a full representation of the case. The report is intended to be able to stand for the case without the background material of the file, or indeed without the tacit, working knowledge possessed by the Social Worker about the case. Using Garfinkel's concepts, the report is understood as an archival and contractual object. It records the knowledge held by the service or by a Social Worker about the case. It also is used to demonstrate work done on a case.

The SAF operates as an archival device – it represents the history of a case. When a case is closed, the file becomes the representation of the case within the Social Work department. It should be able to speak for the case, and the work done on the case, in the absence of the Social Worker who worked on the case. At this point the criteria for adequacy are based upon its function as an archival object. The purpose of the file is to represent the case as fully as possible, including the tacit, working knowledge of the Social Worker who has worked on the case. The criterion for adequacy here is the capacity of the file to represent significant aspects of the case

in order to allow other workers in future to understand the case and absorb any relevant material. This is in effect, an internal, practice-driven purpose. Social Work debates about this use of documentation relate to the capacity of such files to communicate the necessary information about a case, for them to use the information to do further work on the case, or to incorporate important elements of this case into work on a new case. If for any reason access is needed to knowledge of that case at a later date, the repository of that knowledge is the file. For example: for access under the FOI act; for scrutiny in the event of a later legal challenge; in the event of a case being re-opened because of further developments, such as the emergence of new concerns for the child in question; or in order to incorporate knowledge of that case into the assessment of a new case. The purpose of the file in such circumstances is to be able to represent the case in the absence of access to the tacit, working knowledge of the case possessed by the Social Worker who worked on the case. A report has an archival function which cannot be fulfilled by the practitioner themselves. The file, the report, can remain within the organisation and speak on behalf of practitioners, whether as an archival or contractual object, when they are no longer available in person to represent the case.

The report has an additional function within Social Work practice: that of a *rhetorical* device. It is designed to speak on behalf of the professional judgement of the Social Worker and to achieve a particular decision or outcome. This type of representation makes different demands on inscribing practices, particularly in terms of judgements about how and what information should be represented in the report. For the Social Worker who authors this report, the criteria here are rhetorical rather than archival or contractual. The aim of such a report is to produce a particular decision or outcome about a case, based on the Social Worker's judgement of the circumstances of the case. The Social Worker constructs a report which demonstrates a particular argument about the case and provides evidence to support the recommendations a Social Worker is making about the case. The aim is transparency, but only in as much as it is required to produce the conviction in the Panel members, or in the attendees at the case conference, that the judgement of the Social Worker is reasonable and appropriate. In such

inscribing practices, the aim is not necessarily comprehensiveness. The tension arises because, whilst the practice objective of the report is rhetorical, the design of the format is in accordance with the managerial aim to produce comprehensiveness and visibility of all dimensions of the case.

“ Just before you came, I was looking at a report from a Social Worker, going through text and chucking half of it out and saying: ‘these are the bits that are important’. If a child’s attendance at school has increased from 60 days to 90 days, what’s that actually telling you about the relationship with the parents, and is that as a result from intervention by a Social Worker?” (PT4/PTM)

As an archival or contractual object, the case file or report is required to be comprehensive in its representation. Not only is this at odds with the desire of Social Workers to be selective in their representation of case work in reports, for rhetorical reasons, it is, as Garfinkel identified, almost impossible to create records which can stand alone and over time as a full representation of casework. For example, what one Social Worker might feel was irrelevant to the case another Social Worker might see as being important to know.

“I can read a form someone else has written, and they’ve butchered it, missed out certain bits, but they might be the bits I think are relevant. I might think, it would have been good to know what the family’s home circumstances were, because it would be nice to know now whether they’ve changed. But someone’s been in a rush and missed that bit out. I might not have access to the children’s bedrooms, say. So I would write: ‘couldn’t get access so cannot comment.’” (PT1/SW2)

Documentation for archival use may also have to include documentation of the process of work, to render the information contained in the archival object meaningful for practitioners. One worker gave the example of whether or not a worker had recorded information about the state of a child’s bedroom, which is one of the criteria which might be included in an assessment of the child’s material circumstances. She explained that if there was no information about the bedroom, she wouldn’t know if the original worker hadn’t had access to the room, and therefore wasn’t able to make any assessment of the room, or whether the worker had had access, and thought there was nothing of significance to note. This is

actually an example of why documenting the process of information gathering is as important as documenting the information itself. Inscription inevitably demands selection and simplification in choosing what aspects of a case must be documented. The choice of what information is relevant reflects not only the perspective of an individual practitioner, but reflects the perspective of a case at a particular point in time. This perspective may change with the passage of time. An aspect of a case which seemed irrelevant at the time of the document might become relevant in retrospect at a later stage.

It is difficult to produce an object which can function effectively as an archival, contractual *and* rhetorical device. Inscription as an archival or contractual tool may be in conflict with inscription as a working tool. The fact that the same type of document may be required to fulfil different roles and be circulated amongst different constituencies at different times causes problems in producing criteria for the design of the documentation, and the judgement criteria for adequate documentation.

The readership for a document may change with the different functions of the document and this too will create tensions in the inscribing process. There may be tensions created because of the sense of ownership of an inscribing device as a working tool by a Social Worker and the potential readership of the documentation. For the Social Worker, the documentation is a tool used in casework, to achieve particular outcomes. However, reports and files may also be seen by the children and parents involved in the case, which affects the information a Social Worker may wish to document. The different functions of the documentation may change the ownership and right to authorship of the documentation, which raises tensions in the choice and selection of material to be represented in the document. This is a debate about who has the right to decide what material should be made visible to whom. The practice logic of Social Workers defines their perceptions of these criteria in respect of representations of the case. For instance, whilst an active case is allocated to a Social Worker, that Social Worker sees the case file as their working tool. It may contain material for

record and reference, but it is effectively based around the workers needs in respect of their work on the case. Whilst a case is open and allocated to a particular Social Worker therefore, their criteria for adequacy are based on their working needs. The Social Worker will deposit copies of reports such as the SAF, or letters relating to the case in the file. As already described, much of a Social Worker's working knowledge of a case remains tacit, because the worker has an ongoing familiarity with the case. Workers do make notes when working on cases, for example, when interviewing or visiting their clients, but these notes are in the Social Worker's own notebook, handwritten at the time of the meeting, or perhaps, noted down immediately after the meeting to make a note of action required. These notes are not necessarily written up into the 'DR' format and may not make it into the file at all. If the file is a working tool, then it might be argued that there is no problem in the limited inscribing practices undertaken by Social Workers. However, the file clearly does not only operate as a working tool for the Social Worker assigned to that particular case.

Workers admit that they are less likely to keep up to date in writing up notes for the file on the process of their work on the case, such as notes on meetings with the family, or telephone conversations with other professionals involved in the case, because this information constitutes their current working knowledge of the case. The ownership of the file and its contents are the perceived as the allocated Social Worker's and only need to be documented according to their working needs. That is certainly the attitude of practitioners. The files are situated in the Social Worker's own filing cabinet, and material is only placed in the file by the assigned Social Worker. However, an open file may be required to speak for the case to people other than the Social Worker assigned to the case, in the event of an audit or other type of external scrutiny, such as the seizing of case materials on legal grounds, or if the allocated Social Worker is off sick or away, and some event requires the service to take action on a case.

"They [the files] are for me but then, I have to be aware that if I'm off for two weeks, then anyone might have to come and look at them. And so my writing does need to be clear, and my files up to date and well organised, because someone really should be able to pick it up and understand what's

going on. So that's the bit I do need to think about, keeping up with the files, if I'm off sick or something." (PT5/SW2)

Social Workers are open about their shortcomings in respect of documenting case work. However they acknowledge the problem of poor record-keeping because they have suffered the effect of this when they access other workers' files. The limitations of their own documentation practices on their own cases are freely admitted and yet when they have to pick up old case files, they are vocal on the problems caused by inadequate documentation when trying to make sense of the old case. Problems may arise simply because of shoddy documentation practices by other workers. Social Workers complain that 'basic' information may be missing from casefiles, such as names and addresses, or minutes of significant meetings. There is a disconnect here in the minds of practitioners: on the one hand Social Workers complain that managerial attempts to standardise, expand and otherwise tighten up documentation work is driven by irrelevant bureaucratic concerns, and which for them seems unnecessary to Social Work practice; on the other hand, workers describe how important casefiles are in conveying knowledge of files, in the absence of the practitioner who has worked on the case.

REPRESENTING PRACTITIONER KNOWLEDGE

Inscription is used to translate the knowledge of Social Workers into a more explicit form, for the purposes of management, scrutiny and accessibility. This translation process presents difficulties for Social Workers, because of the nature of inscription, and also the specific demands of the inscribing devices themselves. One of the aims of the SAF is to produce a report which renders explicit the criteria drawn on in the Social Workers assessment of a case. This is partly to promote 'evidence – based practice and also to create a contractual document which could be used to defend Social Work practice in the event of a challenge. It is an attempt to render visible the (often tacit) process of professional judgement. The attempt is to create a proxy object for the work done on a case that can stand alone in representing this work. The explicit and detailed representation of dimensions of the judgements made on a case is intended to support the capacity of the object of

the report to speak on behalf of the case and on behalf of the Social Workers. However, Social Workers expressed doubts about the capacity of such documents to be entirely explicit. The challenge for Social Workers is in translating their deep knowledge of the case through this type of inscribing process.

Social Workers believe that the specific design of the form is ill-suited to the representation of knowledge about cases. Social Workers criticise the design of the form, its structure and subject headings. Workers explain that they often have difficulties in interpreting the prescribed categories in relation to the cases, or their own understanding of practice. They believe this limits the capacity of the form to stand alone as the representation of judgement on a case. The meaning of the information logged in the form was limited by the need for a professional understanding of the practice context of a case. This is significant in terms of conveying the important dimensions of a case to the lay members of a children's panel for example, or the other professionals involved in a case conference.

Practitioner resistance to the use of a standard form emerges again in the criticism of the capacity of the SAF to adequately represent a case. The attempt to enforce a standardised representation of a case, through the use of a particular form is resisted by Social Workers on the grounds that Social Work cases cannot be subjected to standardisation without the loss of important dimensions of the case. There is a strong discourse of individuality amongst Social Workers which relates both to the specific and individual nature of each case and also the individual approach taken by individual Social Workers. Thus, the standardising effect of the SAF (which is intentional on the part of Social Work management) is resisted on the grounds that it is incompatible with front-line Social Work practice, and is deemed unhelpful to the work with families. Whilst reports on cases have always been part of Social Work practice, the SAF is more detailed and more prescriptive (in principle at least) and is experienced by Social Workers as an attempt to reduce their discretion in the way they report cases. This is seen as reducing their freedom to tailor inscribing practices to the needs of each case and their own particular practice approach. This is not criticised as a political strategy of management to

bring Social Workers to heel, but rather is decried in terms of the, as social workers see it, the potentially effect on the case and on the children involved. For Social Workers, the attempt to create a standard representation of case is misguided, because of the individual complexity of casework. If standardisation is enforced through a format such as the SAF, it runs the risk of misrepresenting cases. Social Work is understood by practitioners (and to some extent, this extends from the front-line, right back up to the senior Social Work managers) as being too complex, too individual, too embedded in the dynamics of relationships to be successfully standardised. A standardising 'form' is seen as being inadequate to the task of creating a proxy object for a case, because a case is, as Social Workers describe it, not a collection of information, or a set of standard criteria, but a complex life'.

"But, you can't always put a child in a box. That's always one of my concerns. I always think the need to be that It's such an individualised piece of work that we do. It has to be for that particular family. That sometimes that tick-boxing culture is really quite restricting in terms of the work." (PT4/SW1)

Social Workers also resist the standardising effects of the SAF because it is seen to represent a desire by managers to standardise the way in which the CFSW service deals with families. The standardisation of representation is understood by Social Workers to be an attempt to standardise and impoverish the nature of practice. For them this constitutes as a lack of respect for individual clients, on behalf of whom Social Workers see themselves as acting. It reduces people to standardised objects, which is understood by Social Workers, not only as an impoverishment of Social Work practice, but as a lack of respect or sympathy with the people, particularly the children, who are the subjects of the case.

Social Workers expressed concerns that in using standard forms, they were required to mould the representation of the case to fit the form. There was the fear amongst practitioners, that the family would somehow be misrepresented or that the circumstances of their situation might be simplified, and that whatever did not fit into the standard form might 'get lost'. This is significant because of the importance of the report as a proxy for the case; decisions are made about the family on the basis of the report.

The fact that the SAF used more specific and detailed ‘headings’ than previous standard Social Worker reports generated anxiety amongst practitioners. Although the intention of the SAF was to ensure greater explicitness and more precision in the process of assessment by Social Workers, practitioners questioned the standardisation of such criteria. The lack of discretion in constructing the language and descriptive headings of the form was understood not only to dictate the way in which the case was represented in the form, but to dictate the criteria used to make the assessment of the case. In other words, that the form would dictate the legitimate grounds and evidence upon which decisions would be based. Again, this resistance is based on a practitioner concept of cases as being very individual. According to them, different cases might demand different assessment criteria. To limit the available criteria is to limit and impoverish expert practice. The criteria expressed in the SAF articulate a standardised object of ‘good parenting’ against which families are judged. Such criteria become reified through their incorporation into a standard model. However, whatever the discomfort of social workers, the criteria inscribed within the SAF have not been plucked from thin air or from a bureaucratic set of ‘tick boxes’. They reflect current practice thinking and have been designed in accordance with another standard model, the Department of Health Standard Assessment Framework, which Social Workers accept as a suitable expression of good practice. The DoH framework is drawn on explicitly by Social Workers, both in their training and in ongoing practice. For example, a Social Worker described how she kept the model pinned up on the wall to remind her of the important criteria to consider when assessing a case.

There seems to be a difference for workers in drawing on a standard model to make their assessment, and *writing up* the assessment within a *standard form*. The DoH standard assessment guidelines allow for individual discretion in the weighting and accommodation of factors in a particular family. There is still discretion in the construction of the object representing the family to decision-making forums and authorities. The framework is understood as supporting practice, by providing guidelines and benchmarks against which to make a judgement, without limiting judgement.

“I know about, you know, looking for the guidelines and boundaries a parent sets, looking at how successful their parenting is. That’s to do with child development. So the course did equip me well with that. But now, that’s still not automatic, you know, in my head. Which is why the thing we got on our course, the triangle, I use that to remind me.” (PT5/SW2)

The drive for more detailed and explicit documentation of cases represented by the SAF is experienced by Social Workers as a loss of professional autonomy. This is expressed in terms of its effect, not on the political status of the Social Work profession, but in terms of a loss of autonomy in casework. The detrimental effects are expressed in terms of the effect on the children and families who are the subject of the cases. The managerial drive is towards greater visibility and greater explicitness to improve and defend assessment, by demonstrating the evidence for recommendations and interventions by Social Work. From the perspective of Social Workers, this increased visibility reduces their professional autonomy and their freedom to make choices about what they include in a report, thereby potentially undermining the rhetorical effectiveness of the report. Some Social Workers also complained that this focus on comprehensiveness and visibility may affect the welfare of the children and families they are working with. Social Workers experienced this drive to more comprehensive documentation as a reduction of their discretion. They cited examples where it might be more beneficial to the case to minimise or exclude information about certain dimensions of the case. For example, parents may wish to restrict the access their children have to information about their own family history, or history of drug or alcohol addiction, or criminal records. Or, a Social Worker may not wish family members to have access to information about the judgement being made by the worker, because this might disrupt the working relationship between parent and Social Worker. Social Workers also talked about the effect on family members of seeing their lives, their histories laid out ‘in black and white’. This might have diverse effects: one Social Worker explained how they had used this process to ‘shock’ parents into taking the process seriously and doing something to improve the circumstances of their children; in other circumstances, they explained that they might soft pedal in a report, because they felt that it would be counterproductive to increase the anxiety of the parents. This degree of discretion around reporting

demands trust in the capacity of the Social Worker to make this kind of judgement. It also undermines the value of this kind of inscription as a comprehensive, archival record of work done.

The attempt by managers to use standard reporting formats to standardise the representation of cases is summed up by the term 'tick box' Social Work. This draws on a generalised contempt for measures in Social Work which are perceived as being driven by organisational or bureaucratic concerns, rather than 'practice' concerns. This is also manifested in the differentiation between the terms 'form' and 'tool'; the former is used to denote bureaucratically driven documentation and the latter to denote inscribing devices which are embedded in practice concerns. A form is the essence of 'tick box Social Work'. It reduces professional judgement about what is relevant, and is understood as an inadequate representational medium for the case.

"Youth justice assessment is going down the adult justice route. What I would rather unkindly call 'social work by numbers'. Now that is tick-boxy." (PT4/PTM)

"If you look at the Standard Assessment Format, it is very boxy, very tick-listy. It's not very user-friendly. It's certainly very difficult for children and parents to access it." (PT3/PTM)

"We're not working in a 'tick-box' environment." (PT4/SW1)

The 'tick box' approach is cited by practitioners as evidence that those 'on high' misunderstand the nature of Social Work on the front-line. Those 'on high' are ill-defined. It is a symbolic description of any measure enforced from 'above' – which can mean by more senior Social Workers outside the immediate practice team (i.e. PTMs are not designated as being 'on high', but are part of the front-line) or can mean the Scottish Executive. When pressed, front-line Social Workers and even Senior Social Workers (see below) are generally unable to identify the source of the initiatives they may dismiss as being bureaucratic.

"A lot of the time, a lot of the new stuff seems to come from 'on high'. So often we get caught up in the everyday stuff, it's hard to keep hold of where things do come from. Erm, is it the Scottish Executive, is it legislation, which may be one and the same? There's an obligation to record

information on children separately. I know the department is trying to do that. As to what's actually behind that, is it policy, is it law? I don't know To my knowledge, it wasn't practice driven." (PT5/SNR)

Narrative and analytical representation of cases

For Social Workers, the use of a form such as the SAF to represent cases means that some aspects of the cases are lost. The difficulty in representing the complexity of a Social Work case in any type of inscribing device is not to be underestimated. The interpersonal dynamics of a case, the historical development of events and the range of circumstances which could be considered as significant factors in assessing the level of risk to a child mean that the assessment, and representation of that assessment, demand sophisticated analysis and synthesis. However, there seemed to be a sense amongst Social Workers that in making the SAF on the face of it more extensive, something significant in conveying that complexity has been lost.

The tension seems to be between a format that is analytical in approach compared with a looser format which allowed a narrative representation of a case. In the same way that Zuboff (1988) contrasts 'analytical' reasoning with 'analogical' reasoning in her descriptions of the changes to practice brought about through the introduction of new technology, the difference between an analytical format (i.e. the SAF) and a narrative format, was experienced by practitioners as demanding a reconstitution of their working knowledge of a case. This means an additional process of articulation and translation is required, which Social Workers struggled with. Social Workers believe that in some way, the change from a narrative representation of case knowledge to a more analytical representation, caused the loss of important case knowledge. For Social Workers, the format of the SAF means that Social Workers lose the narrative 'flow' in representing a case. The separation of the information into categories and lists, precisely the techniques used to make the 'facts' about the case more accessible, had somehow undermined the overall sense of the case. There is a discrepancy between the analytical presentation of information, and the presentation of information through a narrative. The former is reductive; the latter holistic; the reductionism undermines the sense of the case that the narrative can somehow convey.

“You put something in, and then you go further down and think, no, it should have been there. You’re trying to break it down too much. That’s half the problem. Look at this – ‘child’s interests, hobbies’, but then you’ve got ‘routine’. To me, that doesn’t belong there. There’s no structure there. It’s all very relevant to your report, but the way it’s structured. It makes no sense.” (PT4/SW1)

This is also perhaps another dimension of practitioner resistance to standardisation. The SAF demanded conformity in the presentation of the case, rather than telling your own story in your own way.

“The only thing I hate about the standard assessment is that it doesn’t flow. You’re writing the background, talking about the child, and if I was writing a report, you know how some reports just flow; you go in chronological order. That doesn’t. You’re always having to stop and start. There’s just no flowing in that report. I can’t put it in more technical words, but that’s just the way I feel.

Researcher: Does that disrupt your flow?

Yes, I find that it does. It’s more of a tick box – have I done that question, right, that’s ticked. You just don’t seem to get to the sense of your assessment. I can’t think of the word I’m looking for. But, you know, you may be missing a lot by having to be that standardised. You may be missing a lot in that report.”(PT4/SW1)

“It was before we had PCs, so basically you wrote it up [by hand]. You had headings and off you went. You had more text per page in those days.[.....] As a Social Worker, you had a set of things you were expected to cover, and that would have been in headings. You wrote a paragraph about each heading. Signed the bottom and it would go off. And that would be that.” (PT5/SNR)

The disaggregated format of the SAF is designed to present more ‘information’, but for Social Workers, this loses the meaning conveyed in narrative representation. The form is designed to present ‘facts’, or ‘information’, which for Social Workers, is not the same of communicating the sense or the significance of the case. The sense of the case is communicated through story telling, which somehow preserves the overall meaning of the case, in a way that the disaggregated facts of the case do not. They believe that a narrative representation of a case presents a vivid picture of a case and is a means of conveying deep understanding.

“Sometimes I go along to a hearing to give support, if it’s particularly difficult. And I did this for this Social Worker, who will remain nameless. And I saw the report he was presenting, and I thought ‘Oh my God, he’s just written the story’. It was just ‘blah, blah, blah’. But the panel, they

loved it! He was just sitting there, just laughing really, and it was quite funny. But the panel were saying: 'Oh what a wonderful report! It's so vital and alive – it really shows us how you've worked with this child, and tells us about this child.' And it did! Which is of course the dilemma in terms of the report you write.”(PT3/PTM)

Social Workers struggle to represent history and chronology of a case in the SAF. Any summary report inevitably presents a ‘snapshot’ of a case. It is an assessment of that case at a point in time, in order that a decision can be made or action taken. However, the nature of Social Work casework and indeed the theoretical underpinning of Social Work assessment mean that the history of a case, the unfolding of events over time is of importance when representing cases. More than anything, it was this loss of ‘history’ of ‘story’ that troubled practitioners. For them, an analytical presentation of information was less able to convey the complexity of a case history over time.

*“For the next hearing, you would be expected to cover what had happened from the first hearing to that hearing, added on, and so it would go. So if it was an annual review, you’d say, so far this and this has happened and I think this and I think that. Now what happened from the Reporters’ Office side, previous papers would no longer be sent out to Panel members, so therefore we needed a composite report which would cover what had been done before in some form or other, and updates. Now we are still allowed updates in certain circumstances, but overall, it’s a new Social Work report, which is going to be **the** report which panel members have.” (PT5/SNR)*

“When I complete one of these forms [the SAF] I will, under ‘previous Social Work and other agency involvement’, I will be putting in quite a detailed description of what’s been done before. [...] I’ve always found it helpful to have the history. If I take on a case for the first time, I’ll always look and see if there have been assessment in this format, either from Child Protection or a Hearing, because that will give me a good overview of the history up to whatever point that form was completed. So if you don’t have that history in that last report, then you’re having to go back over previous reports to try and get your head around it, and also possibly have to read all the case notes.” (PT3/SW1)

There were arguments against the preferred narrative approach of Social Workers. Senior Social Workers and PTMs admitted that the ‘old narrative’ forms of representation were often lacking in clear assessments and recommendations. However there was also the sense that in moving towards a more explicit, analytical presentation of cases, the knowledge communicated about a case had been impoverished.

“What I like about the Standard assessment – beforehand, people would describe parental patterns, histories, behaviours, but that wouldn’t be translated in terms of what it means for the child. The reader would have to make that interpretation – I’m generalising. [But] we’ve lost the history of the parental situation, and we’ve got more of the parental interactions, emotional engagement, more of the effect, but we’ve lost the parental history.... It doesn’t lend itself easily to be recorded. But we need to broaden it out. Parent’s histories, what has happened to them, affects interaction with children. You have to understand their histories, experiences, dynamics, values, when you are working with them – that’s the tools to affect change.” (PT1/PTM)

The preference for narrative forms of description is partly an issue of custom and habit, but it also has implications for the representation of working knowledge of the case. The articulation of a case demanded by the SAF is experienced as disrupting the representation of the knowledge of the case. Social Workers feel that despite the fact that the SAF demands far greater explicitness and detail in presenting the ‘facts’ of the case, the loss of the narrative description of the case means that the sense and understanding of the case is lost.

There are practical workload considerations in abandoning a more narrative representation of cases. Social Workers are involved with cases over time and will have to produce updated reports of cases as part of the statutory processes of CP and the Children’s Hearing System. Because a report is expected to stand alone in speaking for a case, the report had to have the capacity to present the current situation of the case, in the context of its history – both in terms of the history of the family, and in terms of the chronology of previous Social Work involvement. The report has to provide this synopsis. On a practical level, a chronological report is easier to update. A ‘form’ is a snapshot which doesn’t allow for any unfolding dynamic as the case progresses. A narrative report can have a ‘chapter’ added on as an update; a form might have to be substantially rewritten, and then would represent another snapshot.

The SAF was designed to improve the comprehensiveness of documentation of cases. This was engineered through the design of a form which was far more detailed and prescriptive than earlier formats and reporting conventions. Whilst it might seem that the design of the form would ensure a far fuller representation of

the case, and this was certainly the intention behind the design, the experience of Social Workers is the opposite: that whilst the amount of 'information' had increased, the capacity of the form to convey the sense of the case, to convey knowledge of the case, has decreased. The layout of the format was experienced as undermining the process of communicating knowledge about the case, and as being at odds with the tacit knowledge and understanding of the case by Social Workers. Some of this discomfort can be attributed to the discomfort of change. A new format demands that Social Workers rethink the way in which they described the case, and demanded new types of articulation. However, even new workers seemed to struggle with the format of the SAF, which would suggest that it was not only a case of workers struggling to change working customs.

Brown and Duguid suggest that storytelling is a way of making diverse and complex information cohere (Brown and Duguid 2002). The use of narrative in reports allows Social Workers to represent the complex, dynamic and interrelated dimensions of family histories and circumstances. Narrative allows the incorporation of a history into the representation of a case, something which is significant for cases, not only because Social Work involvement with a family has persisted over time, but because the factors contributing to a current situation are understood to have partly been caused by historical events, often reaching back into previous generations. A more analytical presentation, in which the case is broken down into standardised, constituent parts, reduces the cohesiveness of the information and inevitable forces a temporal 'snapshot' of the case: this is the situation now, rather than, this is the situation as it has evolved over time. Although a narrative representation is sometimes characterised as being one of the shortcomings of Social Work articulation of cases, it may well be that it is a mode of representation which is particularly suited to the complexity of Social Work casework.

The concept of narrative also occupies an almost symbolic role in Social Work discourse. It represents the changes to Social Work practice instigated by the move to greater documentation, and is enrolled in debates about proceduralisation and

professional practice and identity. The use of narrative symbolises how things used to be done. New forms of representation, as typified by the SAF are interpreted as being at odds with practice and as a signal that managerial strategies betray a lack of understanding of the nature of front-line Social Work practice.

CONCLUSIONS TO THE CHAPTER

Inscription is the means by which Social Work cases are rendered available for intervention by the Social Work service. Inscription is used to create a material object which can be used within and outside the CFSW service to represent a case, and thereby act upon it. It is through the creation of official inscribing devices of 'the file' and 'the report' that children and families become constituted as cases and eligible for or in some cases subject to Social Work intervention. There are challenges in the use of inscription in Social Work practice. Inscribing processes do not necessarily provide a comprehensive representation of casework practice. Much day to day Social Work activity on a case remains outside the scope of inscription, existing as a series of actions undertaken by Social Workers, and articulated in oral exchanges with colleagues and children and families. Also, the translation work required to translate cases and case work into a file, or into a report, creates anomalies in establishing material, temporal, confidential and social boundaries around a case. These anomalies can be accommodated in action-centred practice (Zuboff 1988) and only emerge as problems through the process of inscription. Similarly, the use of inscription to create objects which fulfil a particular function in the organisation creates tensions in the choice of case knowledge to represent through inscription. There are tensions between the archival, contractual and rhetorical functions of inscribing devices, in terms of the comprehensiveness and specific content of information represented in the file or the report. The work of translation and the capacity of inscription to represent a case is something which is central to Social Worker debates about inscription and practice. Again, Social Workers resist the standardising effect of organisationally sanctioned inscribing

devices, experiencing them as a restriction of professional autonomy in representation. This restriction of autonomy is conceptualised as an undermining of the quality of Social Work practice which may adversely effect outcomes for cases. Social Worker responses to inscription and their analysis of the limitations of inscription are informed by professional discourses which privilege different types of representation. Most notably, a shift from a narrative form of representation to the analytical style of representation demanded by a highly structured format of the SAF, is experienced by Social Workers as an impoverishment of their working knowledge.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONSTRUCTING SOCIAL WORKERS

In this chapter I explore how new inscribing practices in the CFSW service are affecting the professional practice and status of Social Workers. Perceptions of inscription reveal deeply embedded concepts of practice amongst Social Workers. Greater emphasis on inscription in Social Work practice, and the introduction of inscribing devices which require a comprehensive documentation of the process and outcomes of work, are experienced by practitioners as demanding substantive changes in the working practices of Social Workers, and in the aim of practice. In this chapter I examine the status of inscription within the professional discourse of Social Workers, and the effect that this discourse has on the accommodation of inscription within Social Work practice. I consider how changes to the articulation of practice, stimulated by new inscribing processes, is disrupting concepts of practice for Social Workers, and undermining their sense of competence.

PROFESSIONAL CONCEPTS OF PRACTICE

The responses of Social Workers to the demands for increased inscription of work, and the introduction of the SAF in particular, provide an insight into practitioner concepts of their role and purpose as Social Workers. Inscription is not merely a neutral, technical process. It represents a particular professional discourse. For Social Workers, inscription represents a bureaucratic logic which, to some extent, is at odds with a practice-based logic which is central to their professional identity. As such, inscription constitutes a shift in the role and status of Social Workers.

The word 'practice' features regularly in Social Workers' descriptions of their work, and in explanations of the rationale for their work. However, it represents a very specific area of their work activity, and does not denote all the work *practices* undertaken by a Social Worker in the conduct of their job. In particular it does not include documentation activities such as the production of written reports or the writing up of case notes. The meaning of 'practice' for Social Workers reflects their perceptions of what constitutes the core role and aim of their work. The word 'practice' represents the logic which underpins practitioner concepts of Social Work and professional identity and is part of professional rhetoric. 'Practice-based' initiatives or concerns are differentiated from 'managerial' or 'organisational' or 'bureaucratic' concerns and according to Social Workers, the former should be privileged over the latter. It is perhaps because much of the paperwork is seen as primarily fulfilling organisational or bureaucratic needs, rather than practice needs, that it is not prioritised. Much of the criticism of the drive for increased documentation is couched in terms of its promoting organisational priorities over 'practice' needs, that is, the benefit of children and families. Practitioners feel that their work is dominated by the need to mediate between the 'practice' and the 'paperwork'.

Children and Family Social Workers understand their work in terms of child welfare. This is achieved through ongoing work with children, parents and other relevant family members, in order to stimulate change. The emphasis is on what Social Workers term 'direct work', that is, on working directly with the children and adults involved with the case: identifying their needs; meeting those needs wherever possible through the provision of support or service; assisting parents and children in managing themselves and their daily lives more constructively; and in the case of 'at risk' children, to improve parents' capacity to ensure the welfare of their children. Thus, interpersonal skills are prized. Social Work expertise is characterised by practitioners as the ability to create relationships, to inspire trust, and to be able to work with families in order to initiate change. Relationship building is perceived as the core skill of their work, enabling their work with families, irrespective of the statutory context of their interventions.

For Social Workers, assessment, and more specifically, assessment of risk, is an ongoing, often tacit process of professional judgement. It is not only the formal process of writing up an assessment report. The welfare of children is understood to be secured through ongoing, tacit processes of risk assessment by the Social Worker, supplemented by oral discussions of cases in supervision and with colleagues. Periodically, explicit, formal risk assessments (i.e. written assessment reports such as the SAF) are required and, where appropriate, recourse to the statutory measures of Child Protection and Supervision Orders. Along with the interpersonal skills therefore, practitioners prize the often tacit processes of risk assessment. Social Workers' perceptions of the role of documentation skills in Social Work are paradoxical. On the one hand, Social Workers understand the importance of documenting work and in producing written reports, and as such, they understand the importance of these skills. On the other hand, the *documentation* of practice is decoupled from concepts of what constitutes good Social Work practice.

"She's a good Social Worker. Very committed to the client." (PT4/SNR)

"I have a social worker, who I love to bits. An activist. Great, great social worker. Safe hands. Reads things very well, but oh dear, rugged individualist who has his own style and is the bane of my life in supervision." (PT3/PTM)

PTMs and Senior Social Workers acknowledge that a Social Worker can be a 'good Social Worker' irrespective of poor documentation skills or documentation practices. This is acknowledged by PTMs discussing workers, and by workers discussing themselves. Social Workers at all levels, including PTMs and Senior Social Workers, freely acknowledge their own shortcomings in file keeping or the writing up of case notes. There is even the suggestion from some workers that a focus on the 'paperwork' is a distraction from the 'real' work of Social Work, that is, contact with clients. A worker who is good at the paperwork might, be de facto, a poor Social Worker, because their work priorities are misplaced.

"A lot of it is in my head and not in the form, the case notes, and other organisational writing. And that would be very hard for someone like me

and other workers don't see the recording as the most important part of the job - it's actually what you do that's important." (PT1/SNR)

"Some people are much more rigorous in terms of that discipline, but I'd say they tend to spend less time with their clients because of that." (PT1/SNR)

This concept of practice reflects the professional identity and affiliations of Social Workers. Social Workers regard themselves as working on behalf of children and families, and specifically, families from socially and economically disadvantaged sectors of society and they order their priorities accordingly. They do not, in the main, construct their professional identity around loyalties to the department or the local authority that employs them. This focus on the welfare of their clients expresses itself in a discourse of altruism, which places individual professional and organisational benefit second to the benefit to children and families. So, for example, in interviews Social Workers apologised for sometimes discussing their work arrangements in terms of the benefit to *themselves* as practitioners, rather than in terms of the benefits they brought to their clients. They also explicitly criticised initiatives which are deemed to fulfil organisational convenience at the expense of clients.

FORMS VS TOOLS

Inscription is seen by Social Workers to represent a set of bureaucratic or managerial priorities which are at odds with the practice priorities of front-line practitioners. This affects the perceptions of inscribing devices amongst practitioners. There is a political dimension to the increased demands for documentation of work which partly explains the reluctance of Social Workers to embrace these new practices. It is seen to represent a particular set of priorities, of power relations, which are resisted by workers, because they are seen to be at odds with their understandings of the fundamental aim of Social Work. In Social Work, whatever the technical value of the SAF, it is seen to represent a particular approach to Social Work which is at odds with the ideology and identity of many Social Workers. The SAF is seen to represent a bureaucratic logic rather than the

practice based logic, by which Social Workers define themselves. As such it is categorised as a tool of ‘management’ rather than a tool of ‘practice’. These attitudes underpin the prevalent perspective of the SAF as a piece of ill-designed paperwork, which has little to contribute to practice. The SAF in this respect is designated as a ‘form’ i.e. a bureaucratic device rather than a ‘tool’ i.e. a practice device.

“The forms aren’t used as a tool with the client. It’s not a working tool. I think it may have been designed as a working tool, but it’s not used that way. And I think it’s not used that way because it was not well designed as a working tool.” (PT4/SW1)

“One of the tensions in trying to capture information and get standardization, thanks to increasing pressure from the Scottish Executive to have more information for the purposes of accountability and quality assurance, there is a tension about the purpose of the document. Is it to capture information, or is it for a social work purpose? Very often, practitioners and front-line managers feel that it [the SAF] tends too much towards the information gathering, to ‘the detriment’ of its value as a Social Work tool.” (PT2/SW1)

The labelling of the SAF as a ‘form’ is a sign of the lack of value attached to it by practitioners.

“You just sort of do things because you’re supposed to. You do get a bit like that if I’m honest. You’re just sort of, ‘oh all right’. They’ve just sort of changed x and y to make z in the forms, but all they’ve really done is mix x and y around a bit. To make it a bit more modern looking. ... You’re just sort of ‘huh’ [shrugs] another form.” (PT3/SW1)

It is also dismissed by some practitioners as one of many bureaucratic initiatives which have seen the number of forms proliferate. According to this reading of the SAF, the result of such initiatives is to increase the burden of paperwork for Social Workers, rather than improving the quality of Social Work practice. Social Workers decouple the role and benefits of the ‘paperwork’ from concepts of good Social Work practice. Its role in communicating knowledge is valued, and yet in Social Work professional discourse, it is often consigned to the status of an empty bureaucratic process, with little contribution to make to good Social Work ‘practice’. The documentation of work is therefore decoupled from practitioner concepts of good Social Work practice and expertise. Much of it is seen as, at best,

a bureaucratic chore which contributes little to the 'real' work of Social Work, i.e. direct work with people. At worst it is seen as something which is an obstacle to the 'real' work, because it eats up Social Worker time and organisational resources. Attitudes to documentation amongst Social Workers are defined by this perspective that practice is more important than, and potentially at odds with bureaucratic or organisational requirements. Thus, documentation which is understood to contribute to practice outcomes, that is, to secure child welfare, is valued more highly than documentation that is understood to have a primarily bureaucratic role.

Social Workers differentiate between documentation that is valuable in 'practice' terms, and bureaucratic paperwork. This differentiation is summed up in the opposition of the terms 'form' and 'tool'. Social Workers differentiate between a 'tool' and 'form' to describe types of documentation: a 'tool' is a type of document whose purpose is to achieve benefit for the client, either by securing particular services or outcomes, or by assisting Social Workers in understanding and assessing the requirements of a case; a form is designed purely for organisational means, and is felt to be a bureaucratic chore.

The dissatisfactions with the design of the SAF are interpreted by practitioners as revealing a misunderstanding by senior managers of the nature and pressures of front-line Social Work. What Social Workers see as basic errors in design of the SAF are deemed to represent a misunderstanding by 'senior management' of the nature of Social Work practice, which should not or cannot be reduced to standard procedures or 'tick-boxes' because of its diverse, tacit, interpersonal dimensions. There were comments by Social Workers that whoever had designed the form probably didn't understand Social Work, although the individual mainly responsible for designing the form had come up through the ranks of Social Work.

".....if it only becomes an organisational tool, then we've lost it. What is this organisation about? It's about people, and vulnerable people. And if we're not remembering that, we've lost it. (PT1/PTM)

"I think it's [the paperwork] just a bureaucratic thing. I need to have that to look back on. The important thing is making the decisions, seeing the families, working with the families and doing all the Social Work stuff "
(PT5/SW2)

CARE AND CONTROL

The increase in bureaucratic style of documentation has a symbolic effect and changes the status of Social Workers. The increased use of documentation and inscribing devices was felt by some Social Workers, both front-line and PTMs, potentially to affect the professional role of Social Workers. The increasing degree of inscription required in Social Work and also the particular style of inscribing devices such as the SAF, were understood to carry a symbolic force, which spoke of a particular political perspective. Bundled up in something like the SAF was the expression of perspectives, priorities, affiliations and professional purpose. A 'bureaucratic form', such as the SAF, was seen to represent organisational priorities rather than practice priorities. It spoke of the very core of Social Work. It represented an affiliation with the state, rather than with the children and families. One worker summed it up as the tension between 'care and control' in the Social Worker role.

The perceived shift of the Social Worker role represented by the SAF is partly due to an actual shift towards statutory work, because of recent legislation and not just a symbolic shift. The introduction of Child Protection arrangements and the legislative demands of the Children's Act mean that Social Workers operate increasingly within a 'statutory' context. Their work is to assess families on behalf of the authority of a legal system, and to enforce decisions made by this authority. Their role has indeed shifted towards 'control'. The burden of the workload associated with the statutory cases squeezes out 'voluntary' cases. According to PTMs, a burgeoning 'voluntary sector' has developed which provides the support to families which Social Workers would have once done. For some PTMs and Senior Social Workers, local authority Social Work is increasingly focussed on statutory intervention and case management, whilst other agencies provide the type of 'direct work' which Social Workers enjoy. Many Social Workers seem to regret the change of emphasis of their work, and the shift from care to control. Even new workers are still entering the profession motivated by the 'care' aspects of Social Work, the desire to help people change and live better lives. They do not speak of being motivated by the statutory role they must inhabit.

“There’s issues about the work that statutory agencies are required to take on. There’s a burgeoning industry in ‘vol orgs’ there that absorb the preventative side of work, that did used to give some easier, good outcomes to newly qualified workers, in the old days, but that populations going. Now it’s statutory, complex work.” (PT3/PTM)

The Social Worker is expected to occupy a more managerial role for a case, assessing the needs of clients and then delegating direct work out to other agencies, in response to the resource pressures on local authority social work services. During the Social Work supervision session I observed, the Senior Social Worker repeatedly probed the Social Worker about allowing other agencies to take on responsibility for aspects of the case, and in some cases used this as a reason why the Social Worker should close the case. The pressure of workload and the pressure to pass on activities to other agencies reduce the amount of ‘direct’ work that Social Workers see as the main focus of their expertise, and from which they draw their professional motivation.

The nature of local authority Social Work has changed owing to this increased focus on ‘statutory work’, that is, on non-voluntary cases, where families are required to co-operate with the Social Work services because of child protection measures or a supervision order from the Children’s Hearing System. The pressure on resources means that very few ‘voluntary’ cases are allocated to workers. Resources are devoted instead to the most urgent or high risk cases, or simply put, to the cases which the Social Work service are legally required to allocate. This shift is not welcomed by workers, because they have less involvement with ‘direct work’ or ‘preventative work’, and this is the reason why many Social Workers want to be involved in the profession – to do this type of work, rather than the statutory work. During one of my observation periods, I spoke briefly to a Social Worker, who had been qualified for 1 ½ years. We spoke about the burden of paperwork, and then I commented that there were quite a lot of Social Workers in the team who had qualified relatively recently. He replied:

“This is because people burn out and leave because it’s so shit. Occasionally you get some time to do some direct work and make a bit of difference. That keeps you going.” (Fieldwork notes. 10 February)

The increase in the proportion of statutory cases increases the amount of documentation work for Social Workers. The nature of statutory work, with the legal dimensions and the associated burden of evidence, of accountability and transparency, because of the power vested in the Social Work service in such cases, increases the demands for documentation of work. Procedures around Child Protection Cases, such as audit, for example, as we have already discussed, drive the proliferation of documentary materials, and the prioritising of this kind of work. Attitudes to ‘paperwork’ are therefore entangled in debates about the focus of Social Work and professional identities and affiliations.

The increase in inscription is seen by some workers to represent a shift in organisational priorities, and to represent an associated undermining of what Social Workers understand as their professional role and purpose: to help families change, for the benefit of children. The focus on documentation is seen as privileging a bureaucratic logic, which is about the ‘processing’ of children and families and adherence to procedures, irrespective of the specific needs of the people involved. Social Workers are feeling as if they are being required to shift from a ‘care’ role to a ‘control role’. They see themselves as increasingly being required to occupy a role affiliated with legal authority, rather than being in a role affiliated with the client.

Managerial concerns to increase the emphasis on documentation is seen by some workers as a back-covering exercise. It is not seen to be motivated by concern for the client, or for Social Workers, but by concern for the organisation.

*“There is much more of an investment in doing things more thoroughly. And with that standard form, you can **be seen to** have done it more thoroughly.” (PT1/SNR) [My emphasis]*

“If something goes wrong, we’ll be scrutinized. So we have to make sure everything’s nailed down. Some Social Workers and some managers thought that this was a bureaucratic response. It’s got nothing to do with providing a better service; it’s got nothing to do with supporting Social Workers. It’s about the department and the council protecting itself. (PT2/PTM)

Inscription has the effect of formalising relationships with clients. The cultural authority of documentation means that a heavily documented process is associated with state and legislative authority, formalising relationships between Social Workers and family members, which some Social Workers feel actively undermines their capacity to develop mutually trusting relationships with clients. This formalisation is seen by Social Workers to change the dynamic of relationships with children and parents. Social Workers fear that increased inscription intrudes into the relationship between Social Workers and families. For many front-line Social Workers, and in particular, those who have been in service for 5 years or more, the forms, the 'paperwork', represent a shift in organisational priorities and a shift in the core purpose of Social Work, and by association, their professional identity and professional expertise. Social Workers are now 'agents of the state', and their work is to move families through the legal and statutory frameworks, rather than to get alongside families and help them make changes.

Written material is understood by Social Workers to represent 'authority. The form represents the authority vested in the authorship of the form and the power - legal and managerial - to insist on the use of a particular form. This is not simply a symbolic association. Such forms do have the power to render a family subject to the scrutiny of a legal process. Although the SAF itself doesn't have statutory status, it is the mechanism through which families and children are subjected to the statutory interventions of the local authority and the Children's Hearing System. The family doesn't create the form, or decide what information can be represented about their history and circumstances. The family is the object of the form rather than the subject. They have no power of authorship. The Social Worker completes the form and as such has a power of authorship in choosing how a family is represented through the form. However, Social Workers also feel themselves subjected to a bureaucratic authority through the insistence on using this kind of form. The resistance of Social Workers to using the format in a standard way is a kind of maintenance of autonomy, which, as they would see it, is leveraged on behalf of the children they represent. Social Workers fear that by using this form, they will be seen as being associated with the authority represented by such a form,

and that this affiliation with authority will interfere with their affiliation with clients, and the client's perception that the Social Worker is acting on their behalf.

Inscription, for Social Workers, is implicated in a perspective that represents the 'control' side of their work, and which may act as an obstacle in working with the cooperation of a family. This perception creates a fear that Social Work is in danger of becoming, not about child welfare and instigating change for the better in families, but about 'policing' poor parenting. The more Social Workers are involved with producing 'big forms', the more they feel they will be identified as being on the side of authority, on the side of the state. This may well be somewhat naïve of Social Workers, in seeing themselves as being understood as being on the side of the family in the first place.

"Or they are uncomfortable with an authority roll. That is an aspect of things. We have a care and control role. And maybe the standardized assessment seems more driven by the control side... These days you can't start off from a position of being seen to be closer to the client, because these days, that would seem like collusion." (PT1/SNR)

The SAF was designed with the aim of making Social Work decisions more explicit and thereby more accessible to the families involved in statutory processes. Front-line Social Workers express doubts about this, instead suggesting that the type of form and the extensiveness of the documentation alienates people who do not have good literacy skills. They explain that the people they deal with in the most part are not likely to possess sophisticated literacy skills because of their status as socially disadvantaged. From this perspective, the increased focus on documentation and the explicitness and extensiveness of the type of documentation becomes a barrier for families trying to understand the process. This also may create a barrier between the Social Worker and the family with whom they are working. This is seen as being unhelpful in bringing families alongside and working *with* the Social Worker and the Social Work process. The SAF has been partly designed with the aim of increasing the transparency of the Social Work process. By producing more explicit documentation of the criteria for assessment and Social Work recommendations, the SAF is intended to improve the family's

understanding of the process to which they are subject. However, some Social Workers suggest that the design of the form has precisely the opposite effect.

“For families, the SAF must seem incredibly unwieldy. It must seem like a huge amount of information. And the fact that you have all these different boxes that say things like [reading from the form] ‘parents’ language and religion’ or ‘siblings in the household’ or ‘main carer’s racial origin’. And then there’s all these different boxes. You’re three pages in before you get to any sort of information about what’s happening and why you’re writing this report. So I think that’s probably quite unwieldy for them.” (PT4/SNR)

Because the SAF is structured to present information in a detailed and abstracted way – to break the story of the case down into ‘facts’, they suggest that the form obscures rather than explicates the process for the ‘layperson’. According to Social Workers, the use of what is seen as a bureaucratic perspective on the presentation of a case, i.e. the use of a ‘form’, not only alienates the family members, but reduces their ability to comprehend the process. The process of translation of a family’s story and experience into a ‘form’ somehow distances them from it.

“And if you look at the Standard Assessment Format, it is very boxy, very tick listy, not very user friendly. It’s certainly very difficult for children and parents to access it.” (PT3/PTM)

“Are the forms having any effect on the work that gets done or how it gets done? I don’t know. I suppose the people who also get our forms are the people who we work with. A large volume of information might be ok for us. We might use it. But for people who are less literate, they are alienated by it.” (PT1/SNR)

Without the opinions of the families about this, it is impossible to decide whether or not this is the effect of the SAF. In this study, it is Social Workers here who are speaking of their own perceptions of the effect of the SAF on families. What this does indicate is the perspective of Social Workers on the effect of the SAF on their case work, because of its design and what is seen by Social Workers as its representation of a particular type of bureaucratic attitude. This is cited by Social Workers as further evidence that senior managers lack real understanding of the realities of front-line work.

PAPERWORK AND PRACTICE

Shifts in the role of Social Workers, because of the increasing emphasis on statutory processes in CFSW express themselves in the need for greater inscription. It is this shift which mobilises some of the resistance to inscribing processes amongst front-line practitioners. Nevertheless, the importance of some documentation of work is readily admitted by practitioners, who are clear about its importance in representing cases in hearings and case conferences and in representing cases within files for the purposes of archive. The value of documentation in providing evidence for work done is understood, and if not valued, certainly accepted as a necessary evil within the current climate of local authority CFSW.

Yet in the interviews, practitioners repeatedly referred to the documentation practices expected of them by senior management as being of little or no benefit to clients. Experienced Social Workers admit that there has always been a certain amount of form filling and documentation work in Social Work. One PTM pointed out that Social Workers are employees of a local authority and not independent professionals. As such Social Workers are themselves part of the bureaucracy – what he referred to as “*shiny-arsed clerks*”. Although paperwork has evidently always been a part of Social Work, there was a consensus amongst experienced Social Workers that the quantity paperwork has increased significantly: “*exponentially*”. There is the feeling that forms were multiplying and the more and more Social Work tasks had forms attached to them:

“The number of forms and procedures are absolutely unending. There are such a range of problems to be dealt with in Social Work – truancy, Asperger’s Syndrome, drug abuse, accommodating children etc. And there are different forms and procedures for everything.” (PT4/SNR)

“There’s always new forms coming along. We’re talking about forms within forms now. They’re bringing in tagging for young people now, so there’s a whole set of forms about that about to be added to the risk assessment forms. And people are saying: ‘oh, no, not another form’.” (PT1/SNR)

Practitioners see this as driven primarily by the Child Protection Failure report in this authority and by similar cases in other local authorities. Paperwork is a large part of Social Worker activity and is important in securing good outcomes in cases. Although Social Workers de-emphasise the importance of documentation in their definitions of Social Work practice, 'paperwork' is of material significance in their casework, as the mechanism through which families are 'acted upon' in terms of the statutory processes of Child Protection and the Children's Hearing System. Social Workers spend a significant amount of their time producing reports and other documentation. In addition to the interpersonal skills and ability in risk assessment, they require rhetorical and literacy skills as part of their expert practice.

Some senior Social Workers wonder whether a form such as the SAF, designed to improve assessment by explicitly prescribing the components of assessment in fact undermines Social Worker judgement. Senior Social Workers and other more experienced workers were of the opinion that the demand for more extensive documentation of assessment had undermined the quality and depth of assessment. For them information gathering had taken the place of judgement. Plus, the work associated with information gathering was seen as being at the expense of time devoted to the tacit dimensions of risk assessment and relationship building. One Social Worker accused the Social Work service of focusing on information gathering, at the expense of effective intervention. The response to any problem within Social Work was to gather more information, unreflectively. The specific nature of the documentation, i.e. in requiring extensive gathering and writing up of information were seen by some experienced and senior Social Workers as eroding expertise such as judgement and risk assessment.

The quantity of information gathering and documenting this process is seen as diverting resources from more valuable (in 'practice' terms) work activity. The demands of information gathering were seen by some Social Workers to divert the Social Workers away from 'preventative work' and 'direct work', which would be more effective in protecting children and in improving the family circumstances of

children. Some of the reluctance to embrace more extensive documentation of work is the result of competing demands on the time of practitioners who feel beleaguered and under-resourced. New arrangements for documenting work effectively constitute a form of work intensification: additional duties which Social Workers were expected to find the time and the expertise for. However, the fact that documentation work was sacrificed rather than other types of work reveals practitioner priorities.

Despite the resistance to increased levels of documentation, therefore, there is an understanding amongst practitioners that documentation does have a role in ‘good Social Work practice’. This is the case when documentation is seen as having an outcome on a case – that is, when it is used as a ‘tool’ rather than a ‘form’. This is the rhetorical role of documentation, such as the SAF. Assessment reports can be used potentially to secure practice outcomes, for example: the registration of a child on the Child Protection Register, or deregistration; the accommodation of at risk children in appropriate foster care; support services for families with disabled children. The production of effective reports is therefore a core skill for Social Workers, who must have requisite rhetorical and literary expertise to be able to represent a case, and their assessment of a case in such a way that a Children’s Panel or a Child Protection Core Group agree to the Social Workers recommendations.

“Some people will give me a report and I will look forward to reading it. Some people, I brace myself and try and find my way through it. Even though there are standard forms and standardization in the writing thing, there’s still a huge variety in within what the end product is. People have their own styles and their own understanding about what they’re supposed to be writing about.” (PT1/SNR)

There is some acknowledgement of the value of the rhetorical and literary skills Social Workers might use in writing reports, and that this type of activity might be significant in achieving a particular outcome on behalf of the client. One senior worker explained that he held on to the hope that by producing a good report, he might just possibly increase the likelihood of his recommendations on behalf of the children in the case being agreed to.

“It’s frustrating but I think people still take pride in what they write, still do the best they can. These reports give you a chance to do that. I suppose as a supervisor you still retain the idea that by writing a good report you still might get the report resourced.” (PT1/SNR)

However, this type of reporting is contrasted with documentation work that is seen as being less relevant to the client, i.e. form filling. Specifically the documenting of the processes of work, such as the ‘Detailed Records’, is seen as a bureaucratic chore, or a ‘back-covering’ exercise, that has little to do with successful practice outcomes. This is perceived by practitioners as a necessary evil resulting from the current political and managerial climate, which means that Social Workers are not trusted to carry out work conscientiously or expertly.

What Social Workers do understand, and if not value then accept, is the importance of documentation in protecting themselves. There is an explicit and widespread sense of the necessity to ‘self protect’ by maintaining adequate records. This is to some extent for the purposes of audit but more significantly in the event of a legal challenge to a Social Worker decision or an inquiry if there is a child death. In this CFSWS, this anxiety has obviously been exacerbated because of the recent experience of the Child Protection Failure. PTMs described increased levels of sensitivity to the possibility of child protection failures.

“After the Child Protection Failure, people are a lot more sensitized to the risks. It’s not exactly oppressive, but there is an awareness. There are structures set up now and the forms are part of that.” (PT1/SNR)

“You have to be able to back everything up. Every action you take. You need to back it up and you need to write down the reasons why you take a certain action.” (PT4/SW1)

“Keeping the file up to date and making sure it’s detailed enough, that’s the most important thing. I think in this office it’s fairly relaxed. If my files are in a state, then they’re going to stay in a state. It’s not like my senior is going to come and look in my drawers at the files. I think the most important thing for me is making sure my detailed records are up to date, and making sure things are written down, Like, if I’ve made a decision, I need to write that I’ve run it past my senior as well. Say if something goes terribly wrong and I’ve not written down that say, I’ve phone the health visitor or whatever, then it will land on me.” (PT5/SW2)

PTMs and Senior Social Workers were of the opinion that the need to be up to date with record-keeping, was a significant cause of stress amongst workers. There were

numerous ‘scare stories’ told during interviews of Social Workers, not necessarily in this local authority who had been sacked or otherwise sanctioned because of their poor record-keeping. One Senior Social Worker told me a story about a Social Worker she knew who worked in a different local authority. A ‘very experienced woman’ who had been ‘brought to her knees’ because of a mistake in her documenting of cases. According to the Senior Social Worker I interviewed, the Social Worker had been working on two very similar cases concerning new babies born to drug addicted mothers. One of the cases was much more stable than the other, in terms of possible risks to the child. Because the Social Worker was short of time, she had made a choice to be more assiduous in documenting the case which she had judged to be higher risk, intending to catch up on the paperwork for the second case when she had more time. Tragically, in the interim, the baby in the second case died. It was later demonstrated that the child had died of natural causes, but in the meantime, the Social Worker’s cases had been seized and she had been reprimanded (‘hauled over the coals’) because the files were not up to date. The Social Worker was demoted as a result. What was significant about this story was that the distinction between the ‘practice’ and the ‘paperwork’ was sustained. The Senior Social Worker was making the point that the *practice* in this case was not at fault, only the *documentation practices*.

Despite the fact that record-keeping is understood to be an important element of practice in order to protect workers, almost without exception workers at all levels of seniority and experience admitted during interview that they did not keep up to their record-keeping. It was not prioritised, because, according to workers, their focus was on direct work on behalf of the clients.

“At any time in the last 20 years, if someone said can I see your case files, I’d be really toiling to produce what are proper standards of recording, because it’s not something that’s been a major strength for me..... But, I know my senior would say I don’t put enough information in my form for other people to read. But she knows that when I go along to a meeting, I will have all the information, it’s just I can’t be bothered to write it all down..... I think I spend more time with the client, and in terms of recording it, I rely on myself and my memory, which doesn’t suit the organisation. But I think it forms relationships” (PT1/SNR)

“Say if I got a case tomorrow, and it wasn’t going to a hearing for 6 months, well I don’t know I suppose I would just have thoughts in my head, and all the case notes, but I wouldn’t actually pull it together until I had to for a hearing report. I’d have it all in my head, and I would have case notes” (PT5/SW2)

INSCRIPTION AND JUDGEMENT

At the heart of Social Work practice is the ‘assessment’. Social Work intervention is based upon an assessment of ‘need’; and in the high-risk work of statutory Social Work which dominates local authority CFSW, the assessment of ‘risk’. Although this study has focused on formal assessment reports which are produced, for example for a Children’s Hearing or a Child Protection Case Conference, the tacit processes of assessment continue throughout Social Worker involvement with a case. Even without the formal report of an assessment, there is an ongoing process of assessment which relies on professional judgement. If a child is brought to the attention of the Social Work service through the ‘duty’ system, senior Social Workers must assess whether or not the family circumstances should be investigated further or brought forward for formal assessment. An assessment must be made whether or not to allocate a family and effectively constitute it as a ‘case’. These assessments are also being made through the Children’s Reporter system. Formal assessment reports must be produced for cases which are put through the Children’s Hearing System, at the request of the Reporter, or through the local authority Child Protection procedures. Underpinning the formal system of assessment is an ongoing process of assessment which constitutes the basis of Social Worker involvement with families. For voluntary cases, this process remains tacit, or the subject of an oral discussion with colleagues or in the setting of supervision. Social Workers describe their work as an ongoing process of risk assessment. There is a constant, tacit monitoring of the circumstances of the case. It is this risk assessment which, along with the facilitation of behavioural change, constitutes the core of Social Work expertise. The risk assessment is sometimes an ongoing tacit process, a low level monitoring of family circumstances. It is sometimes an explicit articulation of risk assessment, which is presented in a

report. A Social Worker needs to monitor changes in a child's circumstances, in its behaviour and welfare, and make judgements as to whether this means that action should be taken. This might be as simple as realising that the child needs referral for a support service. Alternatively, it might necessitate the calling of a child protection case conference to consider changes in the registration status of a child. In some cases it requires emergency action, such as the 'accommodation' of a child, i.e. the obtaining of a legal order to remove a child from its parents and accommodate the child in foster care or a care home.

The move towards greater inscription of work activity is creating tensions between explicit and tacit forms of knowledge in Social Worker practice. Social Work practice has relied strongly on interpersonal forms of knowledge and skill, and the tacit processes of expert judgement. These are being defended against what are seen to be bureaucratic and political demands for the codification of knowledge and work activity in documentation. Social Work activity is often tacit or action-centred (Zuboff 1988). Although there is an acceptance that good practice does include an element of documentation activity, when there is no requirement for a formal written assessment report, the ongoing process of a case remains largely tacit, relying on the practitioner's working knowledge of a case and contact with the families. Work on a case might consist of keeping in contact with families through phone calls, or visits; or securing agreed services; facilitating 'contact' between parents and children who are 'accommodated' i.e. in some of residential care or fostering facility; supporting families with aspects of their daily lives. Workers keep their own notes of meetings, particularly to remind themselves of action to be taken, but there were very few examples in this study of workers who did not admit to letting the record-keeping work slide.

The interpersonal characteristics of Social Work contribute to the personalised and embodied character of the working knowledge of cases. A case is allocated to one Social Worker who will, ideally, work closely with family members over a period of time – sometimes years. Practitioners acknowledged in the interviews that the working knowledge of a case resides primarily in the head of the Social Worker

assigned to the case. Social Workers are very attached to their cases and very familiar with aspects of the cases. This familiarity increases the tacit quality of the process. Assessment is based on ongoing personal relationships and close working knowledge of the case. Social Workers speak about their work in terms of personal interactions, relationship building and experiential, embedded knowledge. One Social Worker talked about the need for judgements, and often quite sudden judgments about a case, which were based on 'gut feeling' – although she describe this gut feeling as being entirely based upon her familiarity with a certain case or family, as well as her general experience as a Social Worker. Social Work still relies heavily on the personal knowledge embedded in the individual Social Worker, and there is the acceptance that the files will always be a pale imitation of that knowledge. There is also an acceptance that a lot of the knowledge cannot be easily translated into report format, and will always remain in the person. One Social Worker described the process of taking over an existing case from a Social Worker; although she talked about going through the files, she also explained the value of talking to the Social Worker who had previously held the case. This is partly because, as described, the files have traditionally been quite variable in quality, and not least the fact that they were handwritten and not always easy to read. But it also indicates an understanding that the knowledge within a person familiar with the history, circumstances and individual associated with a case would always be far superior to the written version in a file. One Social Worker said that often, she didn't realise how much she knew about a case until someone started asking questions about it and she would begin to draw on her store of experiential knowledge about the case.

Expert practice may in fact mean that work is more tacit, because it has become increasingly internalised. Experienced workers may translate less of the process of their judgement into documentation. This is partly because they have not traditionally been required to do this – it is not a habitual part of their working process. Additionally, they do not consciously go through a step by step procedure for their assessment of a case. Thus the practice of more experienced workers may be less visible than the work of recently qualified workers, the latter who will rely

more on external frameworks to guide their assessment and who will also have been trained to incorporate documentation more extensively into their practice. Overly comprehensive recording was seen by one senior as an indication of inexperience. Social Workers use the concept of explicit vs implicit practice to define the difference between experienced, expert practitioners and less confident workers. The explicit framework of assessment criteria, as provided by the SAF, is identified as being of particular benefit for less experienced workers, who have not 'internalised' the assessment framework. More experienced workers meanwhile, will have internalised the criteria for risk assessment to the extent that they become second-nature and implicit. They become a matter of professional judgement. Increased levels of inscription however, demand an articulation of these tacit dimensions of practice.

"I am still learning. Still in the process of learning. What I try and do is, not ramble, but be concise. But how concise? That's where the difficult is. And that's why I try and include evidence and say, for example, doing a contact, I don't want to give them 10 pages describing it. What you're doing is assessing the interaction between the children and Mum. Was it warm? Was there eye contact? And I would just say: 'excellent eye contact, natural interaction between Mum and baby. You don't need to go into any more detail. Two years ago I would have.'" (PT3/SW1)

It is acknowledged that the tacit status of much working knowledge of a case can cause problems if a case is reassigned, or if a Social Worker is off work. The documented version of the case, i.e. the case file, for reasons explored above, may convey only part of the extensive knowledge of the case possessed by the case worker. The tacit characteristic of working knowledge is partly due to the fact that Social Workers are not generally conscientious about the documentation of work processes, as described above, but it is also due to the nature of Social Work. The ongoing work with clients is based upon a series of actions, for example: keeping in contact with families by phone or through meetings, whether to support them or monitor behaviour such as drug use; securing agreed services for families; facilitating 'contact' i.e. visits between parents and children living away from home; or sometimes, supporting families with aspects of daily life, such as helping

them fill in benefit claim forms, or providing them with a diary so they can learn to plan and keep track of their own lives.

Increasing inscription requires Social Workers increasingly to textualise their work. The increasing demands for inscription are formalising and textualising assessment. The tacit, oral and informal dimensions of inscription, which characterise a lot of Social Work practice, are required to be translated into explicit codification of the criteria used for the decision-making process. The role of inscription in documenting Social Work is changing. Rather than documentation being used as a purposeful practice tool, for example as a rhetorical device, it is being used to document the process of work and to document processes which up to now have remained to a large extent tacit.

Social Workers are now expected to narrate the *process* of their work activity, not only the *outcomes* of work activity relevant to the cases. There is an increased focus on more extensive documentation of a Social Worker's activities. As well as the different standard reports (such as a SAF, IAR, SBR etc) there is increased pressure to keep up to date with and to expand the scope of the 'detailed records' ('DRs'). Previously, Social Workers may not have narrated the *process* of their work (e.g. phone calls), but would have only recorded details which they themselves felt were significant or important, for example decisions, or action, or responses to problems. Now Social Workers complain that they are expected to spend time recording 'non-information'. One Social Worker explained how he had phoned a school to ask about the truanting record of a child and discovered that the child did not truant. In the documentation of this case he explained that he now felt he should record the fact that he had made the phone call and established the fact that the child did not truant, rather than omitting this in his records, because there was nothing of significance for the case to record.

"The SAF, it's a much more comprehensive thing now. It's a heavy hammer to crack a small nut. The volume of information is more important than it was, then if anything happens, you can be seen to have covered everything. You can be shown to have excluded things for particular reasons, and that's explicit rather than being implicit. For example, the boy on the railway line, if you'd asked if there were any problems at school,

and they say he's fine, rather than just not including that, there's more details: 'I spoke to the school, the school said this'. So it's in black and white. Documenting information that's not particularly relevant to that particular meeting, but which might in the future become relevant, whether because of deterioration or whatever.” (PT1/SNR)

The Social Worker felt the need to document the process of his work, rather than merely document the important (as judged by the Social Worker) information that is a result of this work. Similarly, in the case of forms such as the SAF, Social Workers described the necessity, rather than leaving particular sections blank or removing them, to again document the fact that there is nothing to report in a particular section.

The perception of some Social Workers is that proceduralisation and inscription are a managerial approach to managing risk, which avoids more difficult issues about standards of professional expertise and judgement. The perception is that documentation is used to control processes and manage risk

“Before the Child Protection Failure, it was very, it was very easy-going, not very rigorous. But after the enquiry, it went to the opposite extreme. Panic, need more accountability. Every time people thought of something that could go wrong, or needed to be accounted for, they invented another form for it. We've got about 50 forms charting the child protection process.” (PT4/PTM)

There are limits to the capacity of the SAF to support assessment. It still relies upon experience and practice-based knowledge to make sense of the headings of the SAF, and to calibrate personal ‘thresholds’, which are an issue in establishing consistency between Social Workers. A standard format cannot replace Social Worker expertise and misrepresents the complexity of Social Work judgement.

“But in all the reports, the crux of what we're all looking for is more or less the same. It's just people do it in slightly different ways. It is sometimes worrying, because you do worry that everyone's got a I can't remember what you call it now, you know, a different level of acceptance, no matter what you learn at university. Something that I may think is unacceptable, the next Social Worker might think is unacceptable. Does that mean that the child gets to stay at home with one Social Worker and wouldn't with the next one?” (PT5/SW2)

The SAF is intended as a self-explanatory model for assessment (Suchman 1987). The capacity of such a representation of a case to convey adequately the knowledge

of a case, is limited by the nature of such representations. Without the backing of familiarity of the case, and understanding of Social Work, standardised reports may struggle to convey a rich enough picture of the circumstances of a case. This is also the case with the narrative of a case presented by the DRs in files. Despite attempts to minimise the need for judgement, judgement is always an important part of assessing cases; this judgement is based on expert knowledge, and experience, and familiarity and knowledge of the people involved with the case.

“In terms of child protection, people can provide all the lists, all the ‘oh, you must do this, must do that’ you want, but ultimately, it’s about making sense of the signals you’re getting, and you can’t do that with a checklist. It might help. It might help put it in a framework, but some of it comes from experience, and knowing the right questions to ask.” (PT4/SNR)

There was some concern expressed, particularly by more senior and more experienced Social Workers that the nature of Social Work assessments would be affected by the formal assessment format. In fact, there were diverging opinions about this. Some PTMs felt that the new styles of assessments demanded greater analytical skills from Social Workers. In the past, they suggested, Social Workers were able to take a narrative, chronological approach to their work – basically stating what they did with whom and when – without ever standing back and making a reasoned assessment of the situation. In contrast, other PTMs and senior Social Workers felt that the ‘tick box’ style of the SAF reduced the amount of judgement and assessment required by the Social Worker, who was just required to fill in the blanks with bald facts. Certainly, one of the complaints from basic grade Social Workers about the format was that it was ‘boxy’ and did not allow them to ‘get into a flow’ in creating a narrative which, from their point of view, would be richer than ‘bits’ of information. The role of the standardised assessment format in assessment and decision-making is not at all clear. For the most part, the Social Workers interviewed regard the reporting as separate from the ongoing processes of assessment, risk assessment and judgments that they make in their work with families. The report may be perceived as a challenging task, as something important in its own right, in that it has an effect on decisions made at court

hearings, case conferences and so on, but they felt that it was separate from the skills and cognitive processes they draw on in working with clients.

Tacit knowledge requires articulation and codification if it is to be available to the organisation. The tacit status of much Social Work practice means that it is unavailable for scrutiny and management. As discussed above, this causes problems in managing the quality and consistency of evaluation. Hence the attempts to increasingly textualise the process and content and outcomes of assessment, and other dimensions of Social Work practice. This textualisation demands new forms of articulation, which are themselves new dimensions of established Social Work practice.

ARTICULATING SOCIAL WORK KNOWLEDGE: ORAL AND WRITTEN PRACTICES

The inscribing processes embedded in a form such as the SAF requires not only documenting skills, but articulation or ‘describing’ skills. The articulation of work is challenging for practitioners, because it requires new and different articulation practices and skills, which effectively reconstitute the characteristics of practice. Traditionally, articulation work in Social Work is predominately oral, and where written, it is articulated in a narrative style which mimics oral articulation, rather than the analytical, disaggregated articulation which is demanded by ‘forms’ such as the SAF. Social Workers may complain about ‘drowning in paperwork’ but a significant amount of Social Work practice is based on oral communication. Once again, this reinforces the need for interpersonal skills in Social Workers. Direct work with families is done orally in person or on the phone. Workers engage in a lot of informal contact with other professionals, in and around the more formal processes of case work.

“The latest form I’ve got is a referral discussion form. So if I as a senior get a phone call say from school about a boy truanting or causing trouble, what I would do is write the information on a bit of paper. What I would do then is talk to the

police. Now we've got a form to record it on. Normally I'd make a note of this anyway, but it's form, to make sure it's all recorded properly." (SW1/SNR)

Even the formal, documented processes are often accompanied by oral discussion of cases. Alongside the formal, written processes of Child Protection work and work under the jurisdiction of the Children's Reporter, Social Workers make oral reports to meetings to supplement their formal assessment reports. In fact, the status of the hearings as a court means that only material discussed explicitly in the hearings can be used as evidence to support the decisions made by the panel. The written reports have a role in preparing the panel and other professionals, but the evidence for the hearing decisions is the oral report at the hearing.

The professional 'quality control' mechanism of the 'supervision' system is predominately oral in character. Supervision meetings are in the main based on oral reports. Some workers produce written reports, for the purposes of 'back-covering' as much as anything else, but the majority use the meetings to talk about their work. Notes from the meetings are produced by the Senior Social Worker, but these notes are a written record of an oral discussion of the work.

The orality of Social Work practice is a matter of established custom, and as such, changes may just require a period of adjustment. However, to expect such a transition to be easy is to misunderstand the importance of types of articulation in constituting practice at a deep level. New articulation practices are difficult to get used to, and may demand new skills. For experienced workers, the demand for increased written articulation of their work activity and working knowledge is not only a question of taking the time to develop new skills and new habits, but is changing the nature of practice. For them, Social Work is by its nature an oral and tacit process, and a documented approach is incompatible with the process of Social Work.

However these oral articulation practices seem to constitute more than simply practice habit. Oral articulation may be more suited to the complexity and dynamic quality of Social Work. Rather, the nature of oral articulation of work seems to be a means of communicating the complexity of case work. Oral reports allow a worker

to convey a sense of what's going on with a case more vividly and more holistically than a written report. The translation from oral to written descriptions of work demands new types of translation skills from Social Workers. This in itself is demanding and intimidating for Social Workers who are required to develop new skills. The fear amongst practitioners is also that something is lost in this process of translation. Zuboff (1988), drawing on Ong's characterisation of 'orality' (Ong 1967) links oral cultures to certain types of professional, action-centred practice, suggesting that orality is linked to the degree of autonomy enjoyed by practitioners. Orality also preserves a certain type of relationship to practice, which is linked to a "close, empathic identification with what is known" whilst writing "sets up conditions of objectivity, creating new distance between the knower and the known." (Zuboff 1988, p177). Thus oral representation is in tune with the interpersonal and involved characteristics of Social Work. To translate oral representations to written representations is an act which can be seen to reconstitute the practice of Social Workers.

Social Workers fear that a shift from oral to written articulation practices may have a detrimental effect on clients. Perhaps they are resisting the loss of professional autonomy in choosing what and how aspects of cases are articulated.

"You used to be able to tailor the report a bit better [in previous, less structured reporting formats]. I suppose in any report or any minute there are only so many important points. Other stuff might become important but at any point in time, there may be only certain important bits and you could highlight them." (PT1/SNR)

"[Before the SAF] I think for Children's Hearings there was a form. It gave a rudimentary structure. There was a form but it left more for the Social Worker to determine." (PT1/PTM)

Social Workers suggest that the shift away from oral culture may have an effect on casework, that is, the relationships with children and parents. They are wary of the demand to document a case comprehensively because of its potential effect on the families who are the subject of the case. For all the reasons why written material is increasingly privileged in Social Work practice, because of its power in constituting evidence, and constituting material which can speak with authority, it

is not a neutral instrument when being used to represent vulnerable families. Written information has a power that oral material does not. Written material is no longer private in the same way that material shared orally is, for example, between a Social Worker and a parent. Social Workers describe nervousness amongst some clients about the material which is being written about them – although not all. Social Workers also speak about the effect of people reading about their lives in black and white. Social Workers suggest that this can be positive or negative – and they might use it consciously to bring about certain practice objectives. But it is not neutral, not insignificant. The reduction of discretion in what Social Workers can include or exclude from a report reduces their flexibility in using inscription as a tool of practice. The implicit dimensions of a working relationship between Social Worker and client can be used within the casework relationship. There have always been reports made by Social Workers about clients, but it was felt by practitioners that older types of forms were more client friendly for two reasons. Firstly, because they were in a more open, narrative style, it was felt that this was more accessible and less intimidating than a ‘tick box’ approach; secondly, the Social Worker had more discretion to emphasise or de-emphasise aspects of a client’s history and circumstances, or exclude ‘difficult’ information – for example, many parents might have sexual or other forms of abuse in their own history, which they would struggle to be reminded of and if the Social Worker judged that this information was not relevant to the current situation, he or she might exclude this information from a written report. Despite the assumption amongst the Social Workers interviewed, that the form of documentation did not have any effect on the ‘work’ i.e. working with clients and helping people, this is an example when the nature of the documentation was believed to have a material affect on the people involved in the case. There were concerns expressed by Social Workers at all levels about what the level of documentation and therefore disclosure did to the clients, and to the relationship between the clients and Social Workers.

The perceived formality of the SAF also affected Social Workers. One newly qualified Social Worker explained how she had felt inhibited about putting certain details in a report on a case, because it was going into a formal document:

“I’ve just come from uni, where you write things in a particular way. And now, doing this, you have to use different language if you want to put in what’s really happening, if the families have said something. You have to use everyday language. If you wrote it like you were writing an essay, and used all this flowery language, people would be like, what was the point? On the form I was explaining that the mother used ‘inappropriate language’. But that could mean different things, to the person reading the form. Maybe not too bad. It could be really swearing, something not too bad. And I asked my supervisor about it, and he said, yes, I should put in exactly what had been said. And I was thinking, I can’t write that!”

At this point in the interview, the interviewee paused, looking at my tape recorder. I asked her what it was that she was uncomfortable about writing.

“The mother actually called her children ‘little cunts’. I didn’t know if I could write that – or if I should just say that she’d said something really bad. I think for me, having written essays where you have to write in a certain way, but in this, you have to write in the language they’ve used.”

When I asked why she concerned about writing this language in the form, the Social Worker said that she wasn’t concerned about the mother’s reaction and she wasn’t concerned about other Social Workers reading it. As she explained it, Social Workers would be accustomed to hearing such language. Rather, it was because it was being written in a formal form:

“You shouldn’t be writing these things. In my own notes and files, I would have written down what had been said, because you have to record things accurately. It was just because it was a formal ...” (PT 2/SW2)

Inscription demands articulation work that changes the nature of Social Work expertise and re-constitutes Social Work practice. Inscription is not simply a process of writing down an existing description of practice. Inscription requires an articulation of practices which have previously been mute (Zuboff 1988). Social Work practice knowledge of cases is deeply personal and often tacit. The work activities which form the core of what Social Workers understand as practice i.e. working directly with children and parents, are in effect, what Zuboff characterises as ‘action-centred work’. Although Zuboff’s concept is based on manual work, her description of the personalised, sentient, action-dependent and context-dependent nature of manual work is entirely appropriate to the work of Social Workers. The know-how related to skilful practice in this type of practice eludes codification.

If we understand that much of Social Work is characterised as ‘action-centred work’ as per Zuboff, the need to describe work demands a different relationship with practice. It becomes more analytical more intellectual (Zuboff 1988). It introduces new forms of practice. This is a shift into different types of practice, but it may also be a problem just because of the nature of action – that it doesn’t really render itself available for this kind of articulation. “One result of situated action is that we have little vocabulary with which to talk about it.” (Suchman 1987 p39).

One of the aims of increased inscription is to render the processes of work more visible and explicit. One of the aims of the SAF is to ensure that the criteria for assessment in Social Worker case reports are more explicitly stated, and that the process of judgement which feeds into the recommendations of Social Workers becomes more transparent. This is partly to provide clear paper trails, and partly to promote evidence based practice rather than recommendations based upon Social Worker ‘opinion’. The move towards greater explicitness does not only demand that Social Workers ‘reveal’ the basis of their judgements, but, because of the tacit nature of much Social Work practice, requires that Social Workers engage in new articulations of their practice. This can be problematic, because it calls upon new skills and new types of cognitive activity. It is also problematic because it disrupts practitioner concepts of expert practice. This (re) articulation is clearly very difficult for workers, because it disrupts the routines and practices of their work (Zuboff 1988). Significantly, this articulation is easier for new workers, who have been trained to articulate and document their work as part of good practice, and through the written work required academically. In order to accommodate requirements for increased documentation of work, Social Workers with more experience have to unlearn their established practice, much of which has been unarticulated, and re-learn new habits and skills in ‘describing’ and ‘documenting’ their work.

The SAF demands a different kind of articulation work, which demands a different kind of understanding and expression of the key issues of a case. It demands a much more explicit and specific outlining of the decision-making process of

assessment. For some workers, and clearly, in the opinion of PTMs, it was not only that the format demanded a more explicit articulation of tacit processes but also that it demanded additional dimensions of the assessment itself, i.e. the process of professional judgement about a case. In particular, the introduction of sections for explicit recommendations, timescales, default positions and contingency plans was seen as being an improvement on earlier assessment reports. This is of course why the SAF was introduced in the first place: to improve the quality of assessment and the standard of case management. Some Social Workers did acknowledge the improvement in their own practices through the introduction of the format.

Social Workers may lack the skills to make articulation of practice through inscription straightforward. Inscription may be an onerous task, which feeds into the perception that inscription eats into the 'real' work. The expansion of inscription does not only demand new IT skills, it demands a capacity to articulate the processes and outcomes of work, in a reflective way. Social Workers are expected to document their activities, their interaction with families and children and other people involved in the case. This is the work of description. However, they are also expected to 'assess' this activity and articulate this in writing. They have to document their thought processes and decision-making. This kind of codification demands a particular type of articulation of tacit, unconscious process – a kind of reflexivity. This is precisely the managerial aim of such initiatives, to render tacit dimensions of practice visible, and available for prescription and scrutiny, and also to shape professional judgement. What is ignored or underestimated is the new type of skill demanded and the new relationship with work that is instigated by such apparently neutral, administrative activities.

REPRESENTATION PRACTICES: NARRATIVE AND ANALYTICAL ARTICULATION OF WORKING KNOWLEDGE

Closely associated with the oral culture of Social Work practice is the preference for narrative articulation over analytical articulation. As described in the previous chapter, Social Workers are very critical about the design of the SAF, because it prevents a ‘narrative’ description of a case. The importance of ‘telling the story’ of a case seems central to Social Workers habitual and preferred articulation of their working knowledge:

“Some workers are more comfortable with a narrative presentation of information, telling the linear story, telling the journey.” (PT3/PTM)

“The only thing I hate about the standard assessment is that it doesn’t flow. You’re writing the background, talking about the child, and if I was writing a report, you know, some reports just flow. You go in a chronological order. That doesn’t. You’re always having to stop and start. There’s just no flowing in that report. I can’t put it into more technical words, but that’s just the way I feel.” (PT4 / SW1)

“It’s just that the format is crap. It’s so sticky, and duplicated, and there’s no flow, no flow at all. You don’t always feel like you’re presenting a good report because you’ve got so many itty-bits. And perhaps I’m much more of a story teller. I like to get a bit of the story into the report, give a few examples.” (PT1/SW2)

A narrative form of articulation is more suited to the representation of the complex, experienced quality of Social Work practice. The use of narrative to articulate Social Work cases allows workers to represent the complex, dynamic and interrelated dimensions of family histories and circumstance. Narrative allows the incorporation of a history into the representation of a case, something which is often very significant for cases, not only because Social Work involvement has often persisted over time, but because the factors contributing to a current situation are understood to have been partially caused by historical events, such as the circumstances of a parent’s own childhood. Chronology and history are important

in that they constitute a way of understanding a family, and a way of understanding progress on a case. Without the history of a case, how can workers represent the developments of the case in such a way as to be able to evaluate progress. The SAF is designed to create a snapshot of a case, in order to create a point of decision-making, which is entirely necessary and appropriate, but how can this be judged without having an understanding of the temporal dynamic of a case. Put simply, if you don't know what's gone before, how can you judge whether things are getting better or worse? A more 'analytical' presentation, in which there is an attempt to break down the representation of a case into standard, constituent parts, reduces the cohesiveness of the information, and inevitably enforces a temporal 'snapshot' of the case: this is the situation now, rather than this is the situation as it has evolved over time. Callon identifies the capacity of 'narrative' to accommodate the tensions inherent in representing complex situations which incorporate different actors (Callon 2002). A narrative is more useful rhetorically, as it is designed to produce a particular viewpoint.

A narrative allows a unfolding of a dynamic, it is a means of accommodating different perspectives, it allows for protagonists, in the way that a 'form' does not. A form demands definitive boundaries between categories (Brown and Duguid). The act of classification is an important aspect of a form, both for the people designing the form, and the people completing it. The telling of a story reflects the way in which the case has been experienced, as a series of events. To complete a form about the case demands a stepping back from it and a dividing up of the experience into information. There is something very challenging about this act of classification – 'real life' is difficult to classify in this way. A form demands objectivity, while perhaps Social Workers are involved in the cases in a different way.

The type of articulation demanded by the SAF disrupts practitioner's working knowledge. Again, this is partly an issue of custom and preference, but also has implications for the representation of the working knowledge of the case. The articulation of the case demanded by the SAF is experienced as disrupting the

representation of the knowledge of the case. Social Workers feel that despite the fact that the SAF demands far greater explicitness and detail in presenting the 'facts' of a case, the loss of a narrative representation of the case means that the sense and understanding of the case is lost. Social Workers prefer, and are more accustomed to, articulating their knowledge or experience of a case in narrative forms. This is closer to the oral articulation which characterises much of their work, and their reflection on their work. Narrative is an easier form of articulation for Social Workers. Articulation work is more easily accomplished in oral, narrative reports. It is a more 'natural' way of describing a case, and demands less translation work.

Social Workers are *involved* in a case, and have a subjective relationship with it, mediated through their reflection on experience of the case. Narrative is, for Social Workers, a 'natural' way of communicating that experience. However, the rejection of narrative by Social Work managers is an indication that perhaps Social Workers need to stand back more and analyse the dynamics of a case from a more 'objective' standpoint. They remain involved with the experience of the case, rather than standing outside it and objectifying it in order to make an assessment.

The concept of 'narrative' (both oral and written) occupies an almost symbolic role in Social Work discourse. It represents the changes to Social Work practice instigated by the move to greater documentation, and is enrolled in the debates about proceduralisation and professional practice and identity. Narrative represents how things used to be done. The new forms of representation as typified by the SAF are presented as being at odds with practice, and as a signal that managerial strategies betray a lack of understanding of the nature of front-line Social Work 'practice'. The word 'narrative' is almost a leitmotiv of Social Workers description of their reporting function. 'Narrative', 'story-telling', 'history' – these become technical terms to describe the ways in which Social Workers make sense of and communicate information about a case. Narrative is acknowledged to be linear and chronological – perhaps not 'analytical', but understood to be an efficient means of presenting rich forms of 'information'. It is contrasted with a 'tick box' approach,

for example in the case of the SAF, which although more detailed, more explicit, somehow didn't add up to a 'whole picture'.

CONCLUSIONS TO THE CHAPTER

The status of inscription within the professional discourse of Social Workers is an indication of practitioner concepts of practice which de-emphasise 'paperwork' in favour of other dimensions of work activity. Inscription is perceived by practitioners as representing a shift in the role and aim of Social Work – a shift which Social Workers are unhappy about. Inscription is understood to represent the shift of focus of local authority CFSW to statutory casework. Inscription is in deed made more significant because of the demands of statutory work. This reflects a change in the status of Social Work from a care role to a control role. Social Workers feel that inscription contributes to this shift. Inscription is seen to represent not only a technical response to the demands of statutory work, but a privileging of bureaucratic or organisation concerns, at the expense of the needs of children and families. Much inscription work is therefore labelled as unnecessary paperwork or back-covering, which constitutes a distraction from more important work activity i.e. direct work with families. The resistance to inscribing processes is as much a resistance to the new professional discourse enrolled in practitioner interpretation of inscription.

In addition to the status of inscription within Social Work professional discourses, the demand for new inscription activity is changing the nature of Social Work practice, and the skills required to accomplish the inscription work. The primary effect is on the articulation work required from Social Workers, in representing their practice knowledge within inscriptions devices such as the SAF. In particular, a shift from an oral to a written culture is requiring the development of new literary and analytical skills. The use of an analytical rather than a narrative representational style is also changing dimensions of Social Work expert practice.

CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSIONS

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The research study has explored the ways in which inscribing processes are being adopted in the research setting of a CFSW service, and the effect of inscription on the service and on individual Social Worker practice. The research study has established that inscribing processes are being introduced as a managerial strategy to improve the CFSW service and render it more accountable and defensible. Inscription measures are being developed in response to the increasingly statutory context of CFSW and in the face of concerns about the quality of Social Work practice, which are emerging from within the profession itself and resulting from criticisms in the wake of Child Protection failures. In this research setting, concerns about the effectiveness of the service, its processes and procedures, and the quality of Social Worker practice have been made more acute because of a recent Child Protection Failure in this CFSW service. It is in this context that inscription is being adopted as tool to manage the process, content and quality of CFSW services and practice.

Inscribing processes in general are being examined by managers in the service, in order to clarify and strengthen standard inscription procedures (i.e. the documentation of case work) *and* to use inscription to manage the process and procedures of case management (i.e. the progress of cases through the managerial and statutory systems of the CFSW service). There is greater emphasis generally on the importance of inscription as part of 'good practice'. The managers of the CFSW service have also developed a standard inscribing device, the Standard Assessment Format, with the intention of improving the process and content of individual Social Worker practice. Again, a standard inscription procedure is being used to manage both the inscribing processes themselves, and being used as a

mechanism through which other dimensions of the service can be managed (i.e. the content and process of individual social worker assessment) *through* inscription.

The objectives of this increased focus on inscription are: to *standardise* Social Work practice and to render it *visible*. The aim of standardization is to improve the consistency of the service, across Practice Teams and across individual practitioners, and to improve the quality of the service, by ensuring a baseline of good practice, which is codified in standard inscribing processes and devices. The value of rendering work activity *visible* is in making the content and processes of work activity available to the organization and beyond. Work made visible is available to the organization for the purposes of archive; it can be used to capture practitioner knowledge for use by the organization, rather than remaining in the tacit domain of the individual Social Worker. This visible work activity is then available for evaluation and scrutiny: by Social Work Managers with the aim of improving individual and organizational performance; by auditors and inspectors; and in the event of a legal challenge or public enquiry, for wider scrutiny. Work made visible can also be used to *defend* the service and individual practitioners, because there is an accessible record of work undertaken.

Whatever the intentions behind the increased use of inscription in the CFSW service, its effect is limited by a range of technical and political factors. The successful implementation of inscribing processes is limited by practicalities such as the need for better IT facilities and practitioner training. However most significantly, it is limited by the responses of front-line Social Workers to such initiatives. The professional culture of Social Work means that attempts to standardize practice are undermined by practitioners, who resist standardization on the grounds that it is incompatible with the individualized nature of Social Work practice. Resistance to standardization is justified in terms of its negative effect on children and families, rather than a political attack on professional autonomy. However, it is an attempt to defend the autonomy and discretion of the individual practitioner in representing a social work case, which is seen as being a necessary part of good social work practice, because of the demands of working with such a

wide range of family problems and circumstances. Inscription is also resisted because it disrupts established working practices and is experienced by Social Workers as 'getting in the way' of efficient and effective practice.

Inscription, through reports and through the production of a case file, is the mechanism by which children in need become subject to the intervention of the CFSW service. Inscription, in particular the SAF but also the object of the 'case file', is being used to create a proxy object which can represent the case, i.e. the child, in the formal processes of statutory social work. However, such standard inscribing devices and inscribing process in general are limited in terms of their capacity to adequately represent the file. In the case of the SAF, a formal inscribing device creates challenges in creating material, temporal, confidential and content boundaries for the case. Anomalies and ambiguities which can be accommodated in the everyday actions and interactions of Social Work practice, cause problems when the translation and representational work of inscription is attempted, which demands clarity and stability of classification. In addition, much social work activity remains outside the scope of inscribing processes. The ongoing casework activity of Social Workers is based upon interactions with children, parents and other welfare and health professionals and tacit processes of judgement and risk assessment. Practice norms do not yet include the documentation of the everyday processes of social work practice. As such, the proxy objects produced through inscription may not fully represent a case.

There are tensions between the different functions of the same inscribing devices, in their representation of cases. Case files and reports may be required to function as, for example: the working tools of social workers; as demonstrations of 'work done' for the purpose of audit or evaluation; as archival records for the storage of practice knowledge about a closed case; as the representation of a child's life or history, when accessed under FOI legislation. All of these different functions may create tensions in the scope and detail of information which is required in the inscribing device. The readership of the material, the rhetorical aim of the material, the symbolic status of the material as a representation of a vulnerable person's life,

and the need to use the material as a defensive strategy, all of these different considerations may mean that there are different criteria for the selection of what material should be subjected to the inscribing process. These criteria may be at odds with each other, making it difficult, if not impossible to design standard, multi-function inscribing devices.

The design of the SAF and its mode of representation are problematic for front-line Social Workers. The high levels of detail required in the form, and the highly structured format, create a barrier for Social Workers in representing cases. In some respects this is a sign of the disruption of practice that result from changes. Social Workers are required to accustom themselves to new types of inscribing device, and it takes time to incorporate these new activities into expert practice. However, there is also a suggestion that the highly analytical representation of cases demanded by the SAF, while improving the comprehensiveness of information included in assessment reports, undermines the capacity of the format to convey rich, working knowledge of a case. The analytical representation of case is compared negatively to a narrative representation, which is understood by Social Workers to be a more appropriate and effective way of representing a case.

Social Worker responses to the increased use of inscription in CFSW are affected by the professional discourse of practitioners and the status of inscription in professional concepts of practice. Social Workers value the aspirations behind some aspects of inscription, for example: the aim of creating an explicit baseline of good practice in assessment to guide and support Social Workers; ensuring greater consistency of practice across the service; ensuring Social Workers can be defended in the event of scrutiny of a public inquiry. However there is resistance to the introduction of increased inscribing processes. Documentation occupies a symbolic role in Social Worker practice. Certain types of inscription are dismissed on the grounds that they are responding to 'bureaucratic' demands, rather than being adopted for the purpose of improving Social Work practice and, most importantly, outcomes for children. Practitioner concepts of 'practice' designate activities other than documentation i.e. the interpersonal dimensions of practice.

Inscription is associated with a change in the role of Social Workers, a change which reflects the dominance of statutory work in CFSW and a reduction in the amount of direct work and preventative work a Social Worker can expect. For Social Workers, this trend means that they are increasingly taken away from what they regard as the 'real' work of Social Work, and indeed the work that motivates them as practitioners i.e. the direct work with families, and more therapeutic work, aimed at helping people change and improve their lives, rather than the 'policing' involved in statutory work. Social Workers also feel that the symbolic effect of increased inscription changes their professional affiliations. The increasing role of formal, comprehensive and standardized documentation in their work situates them alongside statutory agencies, as arms of the state or authority figures, rather than positioning them as working on behalf of the child and the family. Inscription both reflects and reinforces that shift in professional affiliations and role.

Social Workers also resist the standardizing aspirations of inscribing processes, on the grounds that this reduces professional discretion and may have detrimental effect on outcomes for children. The reduction of Social Worker discretion in terms of what and how much is documented is experienced as impoverishing the rhetorical strategies available to Social Workers. The mode of representation required by the SAF is changing the skills required to accomplish inscription work. Greater emphasis on inscription in general is moving practice from a primarily 'oral' culture to a written culture. This demands new documentation skills from Social Workers. The analytical rather than narrative mode of representation of the SAF also demands new skills. Inscription demands different and more extensive forms of articulation work from workers.

There is a tension between the professional discourse of front-line social workers which privileges abilities in relationship building and tacit judgement and the requirements for better inscribing practices and procedural conscientiousness, as demanded by a modern professional environment dominated by statutory work. It is not simply a question of conflicting myths or rhetoric peddled by 'practitioners' vs 'management'. As illustrated in Chapter 2 of this thesis, these perspectives are

enshrined in the documentation (i.e. inscribed) which defines professional concepts of social work, for example from the Scottish Social Services Council (see p49) and in the documentation which identifies the shortcomings in social work practice, e.g. the Child Protection Failure Report (see p56). Whilst the professional definitions of social worker expertise focus on interpersonal skills and tacit judgement, the failings of social workers are linked to poor inscribing practices such as record-keeping and report writing. If social workers are to be held to account on the basis of their inscribing practices in this way, then perhaps the profession based definitions of social work practice must be amended to reflect the reality of the environment in which they must operate and the skills they must have to meet the demands of that environment. Let us also not forget that the ‘failings’ identified in the Child Protection Failure Report are a response to a child’s death. It may be that the traditional skills of social work have to be updated to include better inscribing practices, not as part of a managerialist agenda to reduce professional autonomy or bureaucratised front-line practice, as some social workers may perceive it, but because this is what is required in order to protect children, and indeed protect social workers in the modern environment of Child Protection social work.

DISCUSSION

The empirical research draws attention to the disparity between managerial intentions behind the introduction of inscription devices and the emphasis on inscribing practices in social work practice, the interpretations of these tactics and the practices undertaken by front-line social workers and the effectiveness of inscription in action. The conceptual framework of the research, drawn from ANT, offers a perspective on the empirical data which can be used to understand the implications of attempts to manage practice through inscription in this CFSW service.

The use of inscription by managers in the CFSW service can be seen as the intention to improve the consistency and quality of social work practice through the

production of a series of proxy objects (Latour 1987). These objects are designed to represent aspects of the social work service, in order to stand for and speak on behalf of social work practice within the service and beyond. The SAF can be understood as an inscribing device designed to create a proxy object, which renders complex aspects of social work practice available for management and intervention. So, for example, the SAF this is the means by which a child at risk is represented within the service, so that they can be protected through the statutory processes of Child Protection social work. The phenomenon of the 'at risk' child is the subject of the process of 'translation' in order to become a case and an assessment. It is constructed through this translation process. The aim is to translate the complex phenomenon of a child at risk – which is not only a child, but a collection of relations - with people, e.g. parents or health professionals, with material circumstances such as housing conditions or disabilities, with culturally constructed concepts of risk or neglect – into a simplified and condensed report, which can more efficiently be managed within the service. The data indicates that this process of simplification is not only difficult but contested.

The visibility created through the greater emphasis on inscribing of the processes and outcomes of work activity does not seem to be part of a panoptical project on the part of social work managers (Zuboff 1988), and is generally not seen as such by front-line social workers. Rather, it is presented by Senior Social Work managers and by PTMs as a means of defending front-line practitioners in the event of public or legal scrutiny. However, from the perspective of front-line social workers, this defensive inscribing of practice is not valued within their professional discourses. It is dismissed by many as a dramaturgical device to ward off potential external criticisms of its management of social work services, so that it can *be seen* to have taken all appropriate steps to ensure the adequacy of social work practice, rather than having any real contribution to make to good social work practice.

Inscription is being used in the CFSW service in order to create objects which can be used to manage the doing of social work practice. These objects could be described as 'actigrammes' (Callon 2002), that is, pedagogical devices which can

control the content and conduct of the professional practice of individual social workers. The empirical research indicates that the SAF is being used to some extent as a pedagogical device (Czarniawska & Joerges 1998; Oakes et al 1989; Suchman 1987). The pedagogical intentions behind the design of the SAF have mixed success. There is evidence from the data that for some social workers, in particular, newer social workers, value the SAF as a framework for their assessment practices. PTMs also refer to it as being valuable in this way. However, for a large number of social workers, the pedagogical intentions behind the SAF are less successful. It is in particular the pedagogical intentions behind the SAF, aimed at standardising the content of practice, which are resisted and subverted. Thus, an object designed as a standard reporting format is ignored, or redesigned at will by individual practitioners.

The authorship function in inscribing is a focus of contestation in the service. There is resistance to the attempt to embed the authority to prescribe practice – inscribing practices and other dimensions of practice such as the cognitive process of risk assessment - within a standard inscribing device. The right to authorship conveys the authority to establish the official version of practice (Callon 2002; Foucault 1977). Many social workers subvert any attempt to reduce this access to authorship rights by undermining the standard version of the form and amending it and rewriting it according to their individual preferences. The justification offered by social workers for these subverting tactics is not couched in terms of a political battle for professional autonomy, but rather draws their professional discourse of client welfare. The question of whether this is a conscious tactic to strengthen the force of their argument – an altruistic appeal for client welfare, rather than a ‘selfish’ demand for autonomy – or a deeply held professional principle, is beyond the scope of the data.

It could be said that there are competing modes of ordering (Law 1994) in action in the CFSW service. A managerial or bureaucratic mode of ordering which sees the design and implementation of new inscribing practices as relatively unproblematic and helpful and a mode of ordering in which front-line social workers are enrolled,

in which inscribing practices have a different status. The mode of representation being introduced currently, that is, with greater emphasis on standard inscribing devices, and inscribing more generally, is at odds with the mode of representation with which front-line social workers have traditionally been more comfortable, a mode of representation which favours oral representation of practice and practice knowledge and a more narrative style of literary inscription, rather than the more analytical style embodied in the SAF.

The status of inscribing as now espoused by social work managers, within the 'mode of ordering' of social workers, and in particular the status of the inscribing device of the SAF, means that it is not constructed within that mode of ordering as a 'consequential object' (Garfinkel 1967). The network of allies within the social work service, and more specifically, amongst the front-line staff, is not strong enough to sustain the authority of the SAF, as it is used in front-line practice. Its power as an object designed to represent practice in a particular way is not stable or robust enough to mean that it can enact the intentions supposedly embedded in it by social work management. It is interesting to use the perspective of ANT to speculate, how managers might be able to strengthen the socio-technical networks of which the SAF is a part, in order to strengthen its effect in the organisation.

However the data suggests that, when inscribing can be enrolled within the mode of ordering in which professional concepts practice are situated, it can become an accepted part of practice. For example social workers may resist its function of the SAF as a standardising device, however they see its value as a rhetorical tool to use in the service of their clients, i.e. to secure a particular outcome for a child, whether CP registration, or other support services. Social workers sometimes perceive the SAF as a consequential object but not to the extent that was intended by the managers who introduced it.

The representational challenges of translation – the processes of simplification, of deletion, of reconfiguration – which are identified in ANT – are clearly evident in the struggles of social workers to produce inscriptions which can adequately represent cases. The translation work from tacit to explicit knowledge of practice

and cases, from oral to written descriptions, from narrative to analytical accounts, are experienced by social workers as a daily struggle which demands time and skills which many feel they do not have. Inscribing demands a re-construction of practice, not simply a re-presentation. This is the difficulty of introducing new inscribing practices, as seen in this CFSW service. Even without the political processes which mean that inscription is contested, resisted and subverted by some sections of the social work profession, the everyday work of inscribing is difficult and requires not only the political will of the profession, but new skills and resources.

CONCLUSIONS: DOING, DESCRIBING AND DOCUMENTING SOCIAL WORK

Examining inscribing practices in the CFSW service produces a definition of Social Work practice as a combination of: *doing*, *describing* and *documenting*. All of these practices are part of Social Work practice. What is notable from this study is that for Social Workers, the concept of ‘practice’ privileges the ‘doing’ aspects of work activity. Practitioners define ‘practice’ as the ‘doing’ of Social Work and understand the describing and documenting of Social Work practice, knowledge and expertise as beings secondary to what they see as the core role of Social Workers: direct work with and on behalf of children and families. The thesis explores the translations between practice (doing), articulation (describing) and textual representation (documenting). Social Workers consider practice as the ‘doing’ of work and describing of work through documentation is a bureaucratic task with no material effect on the core processes and outcomes of practice. However, the study suggests that perhaps professional concepts of practice should be widened to accommodate the notion that Social Work expertise is based on a range of activities, which include the articulation of working knowledge and the documenting of the process and outcomes of work. Social Work practice is the doing, describing and documenting of Social Work, and Social Workers require

expertise in all dimensions of this work. It is important for Social Workers to reconfigure their concepts of professional practice, not only because they have no choice, because of the shifts in local authority Social Work, and because of more general demands and pressures for accountability and transparency in public management. What is clear from the study is that inscription has a vital role in casework, in achieving the very practice goals which Social Workers themselves identify as their professional motivation: the welfare of children. Whatever the undoubted importance of the interpersonal dimensions of Social Work practice, within the local authority setting, the inscription of practice is important in representing cases, both rhetorically and archivally. Whatever the dissatisfactions with and shortcomings of the SAF, it is an attempt to address a series of important requirements: to create consistency of practice; to clarify and codify current professional concepts of good practice; to represent and speak on behalf of the Social Work case in a variety of circumstances. Despite problems with the SAF, and criticisms of its design and implementation, and the difficulty of accommodating it within established practice skills and practice knowledge, it is an important dimension of Social Work. The status of inscription in terms of the discourse of authority and bureaucracy it represents conflicts with the professional discourse of Social Workers. However, when the current status of local authority Social Work is considered, and its role in enforcing statutory powers, the discourses represented by inscription are perhaps more appropriate than established discourses of welfare professionalism. However important the 'doing' of Social Work, the 'documenting' is also one of the responsibilities of good professional practice. This demands new 'describing' skills, and a reorientation of professional concepts of practice. The reason for documenting practice is driven by the same core concepts of practice – child welfare – as the 'doing' of practice. Perhaps the biggest difficulty is that the documentation of practice does not remain a simple matter of 'the paperwork'. The struggle is for the identity and role of Social Workers.

Inscriptions are not merely neutral technical devices of organisation. They occupy a particular cultural and symbolic role, and represent particular discourses. For

Social Workers, inscription was taken to represent a bureaucratic logic which went against the practice-based logic central to their professional identity. As such it is seen to demand a fundamental shift in their understanding of what constitutes Social Work practice. It is this political dimension of the SAF as much as the technical shortcomings of the form itself which undermined its implementation. The professional concept of 'practice' provides the logic and rationale around which Social Workers orientate themselves, their role, their identity and their work activities. It is how they make sense of their work, how they establish priorities. It is the basis of their motivation to join the profession, and to stick with it, despite its difficulties. Anything which challenges this central concept of practice risks destabilising the identity and ethos of the profession.

CONTRIBUTION OF THE THESIS

The contribution of this thesis is as an empirical research study. The aim of the study was to explore the effect of inscription on practice in the setting of CFSW, by using the concepts of inscription of ANT. By using these concepts as a framework for the empirical study it has been possible to generate a richer understanding of the effect of inscription in empirical settings. The conceptual framework of inscription has also produced an understanding of the political and professional discourses which sustain and are sustained by inscribing processes in organizations. The findings of the thesis draw on and contribute particularly to constructivist concepts of inscription and practice which address: the representing of practice; the constituting of practice; the understanding of practice.

REPRESENTING PRACTICE

Inscription represents practice through the creation of proxy, material objects, which are assumed to be more amenable to management because of their mobile, visible and stable characteristics (Latour 1987; Law 1994; Callon 2002).

Inscription has the capacity to create such objects partly through the cultural and organizational authority of written records (Latour 1987). From this study, it is possible to observe how inscription is being used by CFSW managers to create proxy objects which constitute children as ‘cases’ which can be made subject to Social Work intervention. Inscription is also being used to create proxy objects which can represent Social Work casework activity, for the purposes of knowledge storage and also evaluation. However, the study also demonstrates that the representational capacity of such proxy objects is limited and potentially undermined by a range of social, political and representational factors. The formal processes of representation may demand the creation of boundaries and classifications which are at odds with action-centred practice (Bowker & Star 1999). The mode of representation may be inadequate for the representation of the richness of working knowledge. The simplification and selection which accompanies the translation processes of inscription may mean that dimensions of practice which do not lend themselves to inscription, may be lost or disregarded (Law 1994). The translation from one mode of representation to another may be experienced as an impoverishment of knowledge; a thinning of meaning (Zuboff 1988). Many of the Social Workers who participated in this study felt that it was difficult or impossible to represent fully the complexities of a case and their understanding of a case through inscribing devices, particularly standard inscribing devices. This was partly attributed to the limited capacity of a standard format, a ‘form’ to accommodate the richness of their lived experience of a case. I also suggest that this was indicative of Social Worker’s struggle to develop new articulation skills. The emphasis on inscription in the service and the style of standard inscribing device being adopted required new *modes* of articulation from social workers. This was demonstrated through the opposition of ‘narrative’ modes of articulation (preferred by practitioners) and ‘analytical’ modes of representation demanded by the highly structured format of the SAF. New inscribing processes mean that Social Workers are required to articulate knowledge that has previously remained ‘mute’ (Zuboff 1988). This too demands new articulation skills from practitioners.

The creation of proxy objects which are useful in practice is also affected by the different (often conflicting) functions of the objects. Garfinkel (1967) suggests that records in organisations fulfil archival and contractual functions. Archival records are used to capture organizational knowledge, rendering it available for future use. Contractual records are used to demonstrate that work has been done i.e. that practitioners have fulfilled the spirit if not the letter of their contractual obligations. The inscribing processes in the CFSW service are designed to fulfil both these functions (sometimes at the same time). Both the SAF as an individual report, and the file, which contains all inscription of a case, are used as archival and contractual objects. They are the repository of knowledge about a case and they are the evidence that Social Workers have fulfilled their practice obligations in respect of that case. The SAF also has another function. It is a rhetorical device. It is used by practitioners to represent their *assessment* of a case, and to convince other professionals that their assessment and their recommendations of a case are accurate, for example at a Children's Hearing or Child Protection Case Conference. For the SAF to function successfully as a rhetorical device, it cannot also fulfil the demands of archival and contractual devices. Rhetorical effectiveness is based upon the careful selection of information, as evidence to convince. Archival and contractual effectiveness demands greater levels of comprehensiveness in recording. These tensions in function are probably impossible to resolve within one inscribing device. These different functions are also enrolled in professional concepts of practice and this affects their acceptance as 'consequential objects' (Bowker & Star 1999) and their use in practice. For Social Workers, rhetorical devices rather than contractual or archival devices i.e. 'tools' rather than 'forms', are more in line with their priorities as practitioners. As such, inscription as a rhetorical device is privileged over other aspects of inscription.

CONSTRUCTING PRACTICE

Inscription is used not only to represent practice, but to constitute it by controlling the process and content of practice. Inscribing devices such as forms and protocols

are what Callon (2002) calls an 'actigramme' and what Suchman (1987) calls a 'self-explanatory artefact'. Organisational or professional definitions of 'good practice' are codified in the inscribing device. In the case of forms such as the SAF, the process of filling in the form becomes a participatory, pedagogical process, which enrolls practitioners in a system of actions (Callon 2002), thereby controlling work activity. The managerial aim behind the SAF is to use the inscribing process to manage assessment practice, and assessment documentation practices. This is intended as a means of standardising and improving practice across the service. The capacity of the SAF to operate as an 'actigramme' is limited by the practitioners resistance to the standardizing effect of the format. Practitioners subvert the format by re-authoring it according to their own preferences and editing out elements they do not wish to participate in, thereby undermining its capacity to define and manage good assessment practice across the service.

The attempt of managers to constitute practice through inscription is limited by resistance from practitioners and also by the disruption caused by the need to incorporate the inscribing device into established practice. The participatory nature of the SAF rather than improving practice is experienced by practitioners as disrupting it and therefore making it less effective. Heath and Luff (1996) describe how a standard inscribing device, such as a form, can disrupt the 'gestalt' of expert practice. Rather than matching and reflecting the established processes of work activity, such inscribing devices may impose themselves into practice in such a way as to make it less efficient. In the case of the SAF, this may be a fault in its design – which is the opinion of Social Workers. It may be that as a new inscribing device, it is new and therefore uncomfortable for practitioners, but this discomfort will disappear as practitioners change their practice to accommodate the new format. It is possible that over time, the capacity of the SAF to constitute practice may increase. At present, the SAF could be described by Bowker and Star's concept of a 'monster', i.e. a practice object which has been imposed upon practitioners and which is experienced as being at odds with established work practices and at odds with professional identities. As such, they are resisted.

However such objects may become naturalized over time, then accepted as professional tools and incorporated into practice (Ibid).

UNDERSTANDING PRACTICE

Inscription is implicated in the political debates surrounding Social Work, and is central to a tension between logics of practice and logics of organisation and bureaucracy. John Law suggests that organisations are characterised by particular modes of ordering, for example 'Vocation', 'Administration', 'Enterprise' and 'Vision' (Law 1994). These modes represent discourses which order power relations and privilege certain values, perspectives. Each mode of organising relies upon particular technologies of organising to represent these values and perspectives, such as documentation. These modes of ordering dictate how people embody practice and expertise. In Social Work, inscription draws on particular modes of representation, which are enrolled in these logics, and which represent power relations and affiliations with implications for organisational priorities and the professional status of workers. Front – line Social Workers operate within a mode of organising we might call 'Practice'. It is similar to Law's 'vocational' mode, in that it is defined by professional rather than economic rationality and value systems, however it is characterised by a focus on client benefit and an altruistic discourse. Expert practice is dominated by tacit knowledge and processes, and there is a preference for the representation and articulation of work through oral and narrative forms of representation. For Social Workers, concepts of practice exclude or minimise the role of inscription. Irrespective of the fact that Social Workers do actually incorporate inscribing practices into their work activities, the status of inscription is less important than the status of other types of work activity which, according to Social Workers, *are* their professional practice. New and more extensive forms of inscription challenge that fundamental understanding of practice.

To limit the debates around inscription and proceduralisation in Social Work to political issues of professional status and autonomy is to ignore the fact that

inscription represents a mode of ordering which configures practice. The resistance to inscription, is not simply an issue of defending professional autonomy or avoiding scrutiny and judgement, but is resisted because of the disruption to the knowledge and articulation practices of Social Work. New and more extensive forms of inscription require that Social Workers create a new relationship with their own practice, and with the affiliations that characterise their concepts of their own professional identity. Rather than just being a technical tool of organising which facilitates or represents practice, inscription constitutes the content and routines of practice (Zuboff 1988). Technologies of representation reify certain approaches to practice (Suchman 1987). Inscribing devices, such as the SAF, produce a particular approach to the work of assessment and representation of cases. The inscribing device constitutes the processes of 'knowing-in-practice' (Nicolini et al, 2003) which are at the heart of Social Work practice. Changes in the degree of inscription or the types of inscription therefore demand changes to the nature of practice.

The status of inscription in public sector organizations, as a response to the modernization agenda of NPM and its demands for performance management and accountability means that it is being increasingly adopted as a managerial strategy. As such the effect of inscription on practice, as explored in this thesis, may have widespread implications for the management of professional expertise in public sector organizations and associated policy initiatives.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX ONE: STANDARD ASSESSMENT FORMAT

SOCIAL WORK**Standard Assessment (Child in Need)**

for
Child in need

Part 1- (Essential and Family Information)

This *Standard Assessment Part 1: Essential and Family Information* and the attached *Standard Assessment: Part 2 - Individual Child Record* have been prepared following the child's referral to the Social Work Department.

The Information and Assessment cover events to the present time. They exclude information from third parties unless they have specifically agreed to its inclusion. It will also exclude, on occasion, information which, if disclosed in this way, the writer believes could lead to significant harm to the child or other persons.

This copy released to (recipient's name) Relationship to child
On (date) / / Recipient's signature

CHILD'S DETAILS

Forenames	Family Name	(Also known as)	Date of birth	Gender	CI Number
			/ /	Male	
Home Address			Current Address (if different)		
Postcode		Tel No	Postcode		Tel No
School			School contact person		

CHILDREN'S HEARING DETAILS

Date	/ /	Time	. pm	Place
Date report sent to Reporter		/ /	Method of sending	Internal Mail

SOCIAL WORKER DETAILS

Name	Designation
Workplace	
Telephone	
Date assessment completed / /	

BASIS OF ASSESSMENT

PARENT

Mother Title Forenames Surname(s) Birth surname if different: Other names/surnames used: Date of birth / / Marital status - Married Parental responsibility? - Full Address Postcode Tel No CI No. <i>if a service user</i>	Father Title Forenames Surname(s) Other names/surnames used: Date of birth / / Parental responsibility? Full Married to mother? Yes If yes, date / / If divorced from mother, date of divorce / / Address Postcode Tel No CI No. <i>if a service user</i>
--	---

PARENTS' LANGUAGE and RELIGION

	First language (include signing)	Can this person speak/ understand English (Y/N/NK)?	Interpreter needed?	Religion (and sect where appropriate)	Practising/ Nominal
Mother	1 English	Speak Yes Understand Yes	No	0 Not recorded/ NK	Not known
Father	1 English	Speak Yes Understand Yes	No	0 Not recorded/ NK	Not known

PARENTS' ETHNIC/RACIAL ORIGIN and NATIONALITY

	Ethnic/racial origin	Nationality	Residence Status
Mother	01 White		1 British
Father	01 White		1 British

SIBLINGS/MEMBERS OF HOUSEHOLD

Title	Forenames	Family Name	Date of birth	Relationship	Address <i>if different</i>	CI No
			/ /			
			/ /			
			/ /			
			/ /			

MAIN CARER/S (if not a parent)/ SIGNIFICANT RELATIVES/OTHER ADULTS

Title Forenames Surname(s)		Title Forenames Surname(s)	
Date of birth / /		Date of birth / /	
Relationship to child/YP		Relationship to child/YP	
Parental responsibility? Full		Parental responsibility? Full	
Address		Address	
Postcode	Tel No	Postcode	Tel No
CI No. if a service user		CI No. if a service user	

MAIN CARER/S LANGUAGE and RELIGION

Carer Name	First language (include signing)	Can this person speak/ understand English (Y/N)?			Religion (and sect where appropriate)	Practising/ Nominal
	1 English	Speak	Yes	No	0 Not recorded/ NK	Not known
		Understand	Yes			
	1 English	Speak	Yes	No	0 Not recorded/ NK	Not known
		Understand	Yes			

MAIN CARER/S ETHNIC/RACIAL ORIGIN and NATIONALITY

Carer Name	Ethnic/racial origin	Nationality	Residence Status
	01 White		1 British
	01 White		1 British

PROFESSIONALS/OTHER AGENCIES INVOLVED WITH FAMILY

Hospital Paediatrician		Never/Now/Past	Educational Psychologist		Never/Now/Past
Community Paediatrician		Never	Voluntary society or club		Never
Health Visitor/Community Nurse		Never	Social Worker		Never
Physiotherapist		Never	Care/help at home		Never
Speech/language Therapist		Never	Care/help away from home.		Never
Occupational Therapist		Never	Others (specify)		Never
Teacher		Never			Never
					Never
Details					
Role/ Name of Agency	Contact person	Phone number	Family member concerned	Consulted for this assessment?	
GP				Yes	
				Yes	
				Yes	
				Yes	
				Yes	
				Yes	
				Yes	

PREVIOUS SOCIAL WORK OR OTHER AGENCY INVOLVEMENT

FAMILY AND ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

General background/history

Family/household's physical circumstances

Family/household's financial/economic circumstances

Employment; income; any significant financial issues

Family functioning and social relationships

PARENTS'/CARERS' CAPACITIES TO RESPOND TO THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN

Basic (physical) care

Ensuring safety

Emotional Warmth

Stimulation

Guidance and Boundaries

Stability

Other

ISSUES AFFECTING PARENTS'/CARERS' CAPACITY TO RESPOND TO CHILDREN'S NEEDS

RESPONSIBLE AUTHORITY

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<div></div>	Contact Name
	Tel No

Date Assessment requested	/ /	Date Assessment allocated	/ /
Date Assessment started	/ /	Date Assessment completed	/ /

PERSON COMPLETING ASSESSMENT

Signed	Name	Date	/ /
Designation	Location	Time	. pm

SOCIAL WORK**STANDARD ASSESSEMENT
(Children and Families)
Part 2 -INDIVIDUAL CHILD RECORD**

This copy released to (recipient's name) Relationship to child
On (date) / / Recipient's signature (whenever possible)

This *Standard Assessment: Part 2 - Individual Child Record* and the attached *Standard Assessment Part 1: Essential and Family Information* have been prepared following the child's referral to the Social Work Department.

The Information and Assessment cover events to the present time. They exclude information from third parties unless they have specifically agreed to its inclusion. It will also exclude, on occasion, information which, if disclosed in this way, the writer believes could lead to significant harm to the child or other persons.

CHILD

Forenames	Family Name	(Also known as)	Date of Birth	Gender	CI Number
			/ /	Male	

CHILDREN'S HEARING DETAILS

Date	/ /	Time	am	Place
Date report sent to	/ /			Method of sending

SUMMARY OF REASON FOR ASSESSMENT**BACKGROUND TO REFERRAL****CHILD'S LANGUAGE and RELIGION**

First language (include signing)	Can this person speak/ understand English ?	Interpreter needed?	Religion (and sect where appropriate)	Practising/Nominal
1 English	Speak Yes Understand Yes	No	0 Not recorded/ NK	Practicing

CHILD'S ETHNIC/RACIAL ORIGIN and NATIONALITY

Ethnic/racial origin	Nationality	Residence Status
01 White		1 British

DISABILITY

Does this child have a disability? 1 No disability and not affected by another's

Details

Is this child affected by the disability of another person? No

Details: , , .

Is this child?	(a) on a child protection register? No		
	(b) looked after by a local authority?	At home No	Away from home No
Details			

Role/designation	Contact person	Agency	Present or recent involvement?	Contacted about this assessment?
			Now	Yes
			Now	Yes
			Now	Yes

PARENTS'/MAIN CARERS' VIEWS

General background/history

Family/household's financial/economic circumstances

Family functioning

SIGNIFICANT EVENTS IN CHILD'S HISTORY

Health

Education

Personal Identity and Self Esteem

Child's personal relationships
(a) With Parents

(b) With other family/household members

(c) With others

Social presentation

Emotional and Behavioural Development

Self Care Skills

Interests, hobbies, use of free time, particular interests and abilities

Routine

Any other issues

PARENTS'/CARERS' CAPACITIES TO RESPOND TO CHILD'S NEEDS

Basic (physical) care

Ensuring safety

Emotional Warmth

Stimulation

Guidance and Boundaries

Stability

Other

ISSUES AFFECTING PARENTS'/CARERS' CAPACITIES TO RESPOND TO CHILD'S NEEDS

PREVIOUS SOCIAL WORK OR OTHER AGENCY INVOLVEMENT WITH THIS CHILD

The following four sections apply to case reviews and review hearings and case conferences only. Delete if not required.

DATE OF LAST HEARING/CONFERENCE etc

DECISIONS MADE AT LAST HEARING/CONFERENCE etc

WORK PLAN MADE FOR LAST HEARING/CONFERENCE etc

PROGRESS ON WORK PLAN

ASSESSMENT AND ANALYSIS

Areas of strength

Issues causing concern

**SUMMARY OF PRIORITY NEEDS OF CHILD AND FAMILY
including RISKS AND VULNERABILITIES**

IMMEDIATE ACTION

OPTIONS

ADVICE/RECOMMENDATION

WORK PLAN

Date Assessment requested/became necessary	/	/	Date Assessment allocated	/	/
Date Assessment started	/	/	Date Assessment completed	/	/

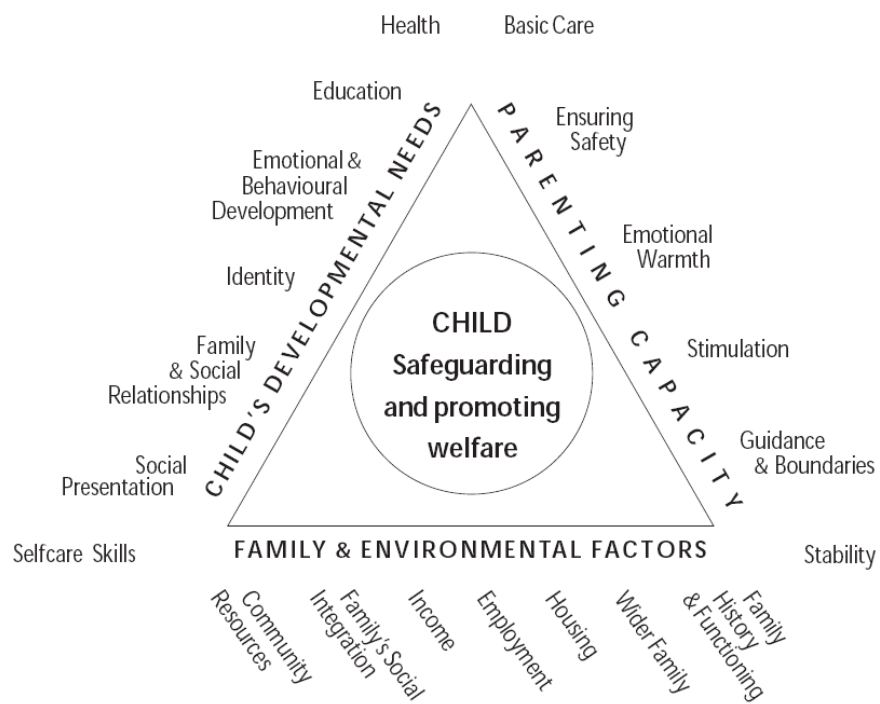
PERSON COMPLETING ASSESSMENT

Signed	Name	Date	/	/
Designation	Location	Time	.	am

--

APPENDIX TWO: DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH STANDARD ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK

The Assessment Framework



APPENDIX THREE: INTERVIEW OUTLINE: SOCIAL WORK MANAGERS

Introduction:

- Explain nature/aim of research:
 - o to investigate the way that standard assessment tools are used by social workers.
 - o PhD thesis about 'inscription' and 'professional practice' in public sector
 - o My background: general public sector management rather than social work; interested in the way that the particular challenges for public sector professionals (e.g. political, resources, risk) can be managed; how to balance quality issues with accountability and efficiency demands; what this all means at the 'frontline'.
- Purpose of interview:
 - o To understand how standard assessment tools are actually used by social workers, in practice
 - o To find out how they affect the management of social work practice
 - o To hear social worker views on the use of such management tools – problems, benefits, possible improvements
- Confidentiality issues:
 - o names and identifying details of the interviewee, and any client they may mention, will be removed from any reports; (NB client identity is not required in this interview – the social worker can themselves protect client identity in his/her responses)
 - o names will be removed from transcripts of interviews (which in any case, will only be seen by me).
- Request permission to record interview.
- General comments about the interview: "feel free to disagree with anything I might say! – you're the expert in this case."
- Questions before starting to record.

Question areas:

1. Professional Background:
 - a. How long have you been a social work manager?
 - b. What is your training and background?

2. Use of Standard Assessment Tools
 - a. What standard assessment tools are used do you used? (Prompt: client assessment; risk assessment; supervision; external reporting)
 - b. On what occasions are they used? (Prompts: by you as a manager; by social workers)
3. Standard Assessment Tools in Practice
 - c. Could you describe how you would use the assessment tool in managing practice ?
 - d. How do standard assessment tools affect the way you work with your staff?
4. Organisational issues:
 - e. What is the role of the assessment report in social work management?
 - f. What are the most significant issues around the use of standard assessments for you as a social work manager.
 - g. How much does IT play a role in this sort of area?
5. Final Remarks:
 - h. Is there anything else you would like to add?
 - i. Is there any one else you would suggest I talk to about this issue?

APPENDIX FOUR: INTERVIEW OUTLINE PLANNING & COMMISSIONING OFFICERS AND PRACTICE TEAM MANAGERS

General Introduction:

- Explain nature of research
 - To investigate the way that standard assessment tools are used in social work and their effect on social work practice
 - Part of a PhD thesis looking at the effect of standardisation and documentation on social work practice
 - My background: general public sector management rather than social work specialist; interested in the particular challenges that face public sector workers (politics, resources, risk etc); how to balance demands of quality/accountability/efficiency; what all this means at the frontline

- Purpose of interview
 - To find out more about the way in which such tools are used in the management of children and family social work services
 - To hear views about the effect such tools have on social work practice
 - “Feel free to disagree with anything I say – you’re the experts!”

- Confidentiality issues:

- Names and identifying details of speakers will be removed from any reported materials
 - Names will be removed from transcripts (which are only seen by me anyway) – you are welcome to see them if you want
 - All names and identifying details of clients mentioned by the social worker will be removed in any reports. (NB interviewee can manage client confidentiality – no need to use names or identifying details in interview)
-
- Permission to record interview
 - Any questions before beginning the interview?

Commissioning and Planning Officers

- Could you briefly introduce yourselves
- What standard assessment forms are in use?
- How were these forms developed? ('off the shelf' or produced in-house; involvement of different levels of staff; involvement of other agencies)
- How are they used?
 - "Talk me through the process" (pick an example)
- How did things work before these standard tools?
- Are there any particular areas where non-standard practice/tools persist?
- What has been their effect:
 - On your work, managing the services?
 - On the the work of individual social workers?
 - On the experience of service users?
 - (PROMPT – could you give me an illustration?)
- What is their role in:
 - Standardization of practice/service
 - Quality management
 - Risk assessment/management
 - Information Management
 - Resource Allocation

- Performance measurement / audit
- How have the social workers responded to the introduction of these tools?
- Is there any formal evaluation of their effect? If so, any changes as a result?

- Could you briefly introduce yourself – what your role is, how long you've worked in social work
- What standard assessment forms are in use in your team?
- What sort of role did you have in their development?
- How are they used?
 - "Talk me through the process" (pick an example)
- How did things work before the introduction of these tools?
- Are there any areas where non-standard approaches persist?
- What has been their effect:
 - On your work?
 - On the the work of individual social workers?
 - On the experience of service users?
- What is their role in:
 - Standardization of practice/service
 - Quality management
 - Risk assessment/management
 - Information Management
 - Resource Allocation
 - Performance measurement / audit

- How have the social workers responded to the introduction of these tools?
- Further participation: interviews with social workers

APPENDIX FIVE: INTERVIEW OUTLINE: SOCIAL WORKERS

Introduction:

- Explain nature/aim of research:
 - o to investigate the way that standard assessment tools are used by social workers.
 - o PhD thesis about 'inscription' and 'professional practice' in public sector
 - o My background: general public sector management rather than social work; interested in the way that the particular challenges for public sector professionals (e.g. political, resources, risk) can be managed; how to balance quality issues with accountability and efficiency demands; what this all means at the 'frontline'.
- Purpose of interview:
 - o To understand how standard assessment tools are actually used by social workers, in practice
 - o To find out how they affect social work practice
 - o To hear social worker views on the use of such management tools – problems, benefits, possible improvements
- Confidentiality issues:
 - o names and identifying details of the interviewee, and any client they may mention, will be removed from any reports; (NB client identity is not required in this interview – the social worker can themselves protect client identity in his/her responses)
 - o names will be removed from transcripts of interviews (which in any case, will only be seen by me).
- Request permission to record interview.
- General comments about the interview: "feel free to disagree with anything I might say! – you're the expert in this case."
- Questions before starting to record.

Question areas:

2. Professional Background:
 - a. How long have you been a social worker?
 - b. What is your training and background?

3. Use of Standard Assessment Tools
 - a. What standard assessment tools do you use? (Prompt: client assessment; risk assessment; supervision; external reporting)
 - b. On what occasions do you use : XXXX (choose a particular type of report – repeat with different examples if time)?

4. Standard Assessment Tools in Practice
 - a. Could you describe how you would use the assessment tool in practice – perhaps you could think of a recent example and describe it to me?
 - b. How do standard assessment tools affect social work practice, if at all?

5. Organisational issues:
 - a. What is the role of the standard assessments (etc) in social work?
 - b. How much of a role does IT play in this type of assessment?

6. Final Remarks:
 - a. Is there anything else you would like to add?
 - b. Is there any one else you would suggest I talk to about this issue?

APPENDIX SIX: LIST OF CASE FILE CONTENTS FOR CASE 1:

NOTES FROM RESEARCH FIELD NOTES

The file was reviewed by the researcher on: 16th March 2006

The file is a dull red manilla foolscap folder – the sort in which papers are fastened in with a clip (i.e. not a ring binder). This means that papers are fixed in position and order and it is quite difficult to move things about, or file things anywhere except on the ‘top’. There are some separate sections made by the insertion of buff coloured manilla folders with tabs at the top for the section heading. These look like standard types of stationery – rather than something the social worker has created – although the section headings are handwritten.

I couldn’t work out whether the file read chronologically front to back or vice versa – different sections seemed to date from different eras, and the current Social Worker’s involvement in the case began to be documented in a separate section at the back of the file. However, I should note that there was really very little documentation about the current Social Worker’s work on the case. NB she did explain to me that she wrote things in her own notebooks and rarely had the time to ‘write up’ work in the file. The contents are basically letters and reports, with only a small section of ‘DRs’ dating from a period when the family were involved in a duty case – the DRs were handwritten (and very illegible!) by different people.

The file contained the following:

Unfiled documents

- Letter from ‘NHS’ about lack of attendance at bloodscreening appointments – copied to ‘all professionals involved’ - SW, GP, Reporter, Paediatrician.
- Copy of benefit claim – filled in by the Social Worker (this is the form she filled in with the father when I was on the visit).

Documents fastened in the file:

- Type of front sheet form – titled “Personal Details”, on yellow paper. Filled in by hand, dated 1/5/02 (i.e. from earlier involvement with a previous Social Worker²²).
 - P1: names, addresses etc. box for:
 - “Relevant Background Information, including physical description of ‘Looked After Child’) [n.b. very little space for description, and very little information]
 - P2 “Key Contacts” i.e. SW/ GP & other agencies/ Relatives and friends.
 - P3 “Summary of Key Events” – also heading for ‘Legal Sections’ – sections for Unit/Resources; Review Dates; Hearing Dates [NB. All blank].

The rest of the file is divided into subsections with handwritten headings on the divider pages:

1. Section: “Child Protection Review - the Boy”

[NB this section reads back to front – i.e. most recent material at the top of the file]

- Minutes of the Child Protection case conference – standard format; “Summary of Discussion etc. To be read in conjunction with all previous sections”; “This conference resulted in a decision to de-register.”
- Section to indicate conference type: “initial”, “review”
- In the “summary of discussion” section (which is a blank space – not ‘boxes’) part of the minute is a note of the recommended decision made by each professional at the meeting, and the reasons for their recommendation

²² The Child who is the subject of the case was also the subject of earlier Social Work intervention under Child Protection Measures, along with his sister.

- (e.g. Social worker, paediatrician, GP, Health Visitor) (i.e. not the parents) – i.e. complete accountability.
- Section at the end: “Recommendations and agreed tasks”
 - Box Section for: “Area of Abuse and Level of Certainty” – nb space for more than one. (In this case grounds entered were: Neglect/ At Risk).
 - Section for “Care Plan” – and four items filled in:
 - Appointments must be kept
 - SW support for parents in getting children to nursery
 - Diet
 - Medication
 - Section for ‘referral to the reporter’ which is filled in with details of need to pass minutes to the reporter, and there is a specified section for “If yes (i.e. sending minutes) who will provide report/minute” (which is blank in this minute).
 - Box for “Other Details”
 - Section for “dissent” (empty on this sheet)
 - “Note to addressees” – about parents being able to access these minutes except for material in ‘Restricted Access’ section.
 - Box for “minutes prepared by” and signatures for minute taker and chair.
 - Instruction that: All present must sign and return the minutes within a certain time period (to be entered), with any amendments.
 - A ‘Review Case Conference’ form – seems to be a further report on the de-registration meeting, but it is just a record of the decision and actions.
 - A completed Standard Assessment Format report. This looks as if it was for the review meeting (it is dated 5/8/03) – and there is reference in the minutes of the case conference to the comprehensive report by the social worker.
 - Pages 1-2 – information boxes filled in – name, address, family details etc.
 - Page 3 – this is simply a long narrative. There are headings, but they are typed as part of the narrative. It looks as if the second half of the form has been dispensed with – and the social worker has just created space for a long narrative report. NB. Only part 1 used.
 - Headings provided in the amended report are:
 - Summary of the reason for assessment
 - Previous social work or other agency involvement
 - Background to the referral
 - Family Background: Boy; Girl²³ [NB this report is on *both* children].

²³ All names have been removed to protect confidentiality. In the original reports, the first names of the children, their parents and their parents’ partners were used.

- Assessment
- And then signature of completing social worker [NB this is not current Social Worker].
- Background to the referral. This is a first person narrative from the social worker: “I was so alarmed by how ill Girl was and that she had not been seen by a GP ...”; “Dr X informed me”; “However the mother and her new partner and the father have all managed to maintain a friendship and I frequently see them out together within the community”. [NB note Social Worker’s familiarity and knowledge of the people and the community].
- There is a narrative of the case in terms of the social worker’s involvement – the *story* of the case, and the social workers thoughts and actions. Then there are separate sections with an assessment of the two children.
- The report has lots of very specific details. For example when describing the children’s diets, there is repeated mention of the consumption of “wotsits” i.e. not just “crisps” or “snacks”.
- The language is quite colloquial, often because it is reporting speech of others: e.g. “Boy is a very happy wee boy” – quote from nursery worker.
- The ‘Assessment’ section contains a short summary of the case, and the social worker’s recommended action, in this case, de-registration.
- Form called ‘Invitation List’ – a standard form filled out by social worker to be sent to administration to send out invitations to a case conference.
- Pro forma report request – (in this case, letter to the GP) – the letter of invitation to the meeting includes reference to a pro forma report, which accompanies the letter, and quite strong instructions for it to be filled in: “*It is essential to use the attached sheet for a short report on your contact with the family as this will form the basis of a minute of the meeting and as an aid to discussion.*” NB. These forms do appear, filled in, throughout the file, from GPs and another health visitor.
- Report from nursery: standard form with headings (nb – not boxes – just paragraph spaces for each heading): Emotional, Personal and Social Development; Communication and Language; Expressive and Aesthetic Development; Physical Development and Movement; Knowledge and Understanding of the World; The way forward for your child.
 - Section for parents comments [blank in this case]
 - Section for child’s comments - typed in, not just in child’s words, but in child’s vernacular - e.g. “I like ma teachers and Denholm, he’s ma best friend”
 - There’s also a space for a child to draw themselves – blank in this case.

- Attendance analysis – spreadsheet print out with dates/attendance, and a statistical analysis of ‘reasons for absence’ n. b. in this case most are ‘unexplained’.
- Copy of standard format of Case Conference minutes

2. Section: “Case Notes”

- Form – “Contact Sheet”. This is actually what the Social Workers call the ‘Detailed Records’ – supposedly a kind of summary of contact/events etc. It is formatted as repeating sets of boxes: “Type and Purpose” [of contact] “Date”, “DR” and “Name of Worker”. This worker has ignored the format, and used it effectively as lined paper on which a narrative has been handwritten over as many lines as needed. The only indication of a new entry is the date written in the left hand Date column. In other words, the Social Worker has ignored the format completely. I wonder why she didn’t just write on ordinary paper! A lot of the handwritten stuff is very difficult to read – infact, I give up. It is actually written by various Social Workers.
- **JLO form:** [Justice Liaison Officer] this is a report about the incident where the grandmother was drunk and incapable of looking after the Boy. NB: The Boy’s name appears at the start of the form, but it is never mentioned in the report. Instead, he is referred to as ‘the subject’ – which is presumably a police convention.

It looks as if this is all records of a ‘duty’ case – it has not yet been allocated. [NB what is the date of all this? Where does it figure in the story? I think, after the period on the register, in the lead up to the current Social Worker becoming involved.

3. Section: Correspondance

[At this stage I am a bit confused by the chronology of what happened when. This section now seems to be the current Social Worker’s work – but it also has old stuff in it. I can’t see any SAF for the current round of contact i.e. with current Social Worker from 2005].

- Letter to father, asking him to meet with her because of the referral from the paediatrician.
- The ‘initial referral’ is a copy of the report by the paediatrician, to whom the Boy has been referred by the class teacher. [NB the report is a letter not a form – a narrative of the paediatrician’s findings when he saw and examined the

Boy. No headings.] The report has been copied to the Social Worker involved when the children were subject to Child Protection procedures.

- Form/letter (not quite sure whether this is standard or not – it is a letter, but it also has standard formatted elements) – headed “Scottish Children’s Reporter Administration Request for SBR”. This seems to date from the forwarding of the minutes from the CP case conference – and is a response to these minutes. It is complaining that there was not enough information in the minutes for the Reporter to be able to make a decision. It requests a “full social work assessment” – and mentions that other involved professionals are also being asked for reports. [*The letter from the Reporter is very snippy!*]: “I note that I have not yet received it [the report]”; “I have written to all of the professionals involved that have submitted reports that the delay in a decision being reached as to whether a Children’s Hearing is necessary for the Boy and the Girl is due to your report not having been available.”
- There are also a lot of reports from paediatrician, nursery etc about the Boy’s current progress – which have been requested by the current Social Worker – Nov 2005. But, there is no record of any *decision* about what to do – i.e. supervision /voluntary etc. There is also no SAF in the file.
- A duty referral sheet about an incident which involved this family and another one – basically, an accusation from the father that the Boy (aged 2 at the time I think) had been interfered with by a child from the other family. The name of the other family is included, but on a separate sheet headed ‘Restricted access’. There is a note on it saying that the family is known to another social worker, and a record of a file number. There is also a JLO associated with this case.

NB No ‘Detailed Records’ or case notes from the current Social Worker i.e. no documentation of the current process and progress of the case.

4. Section: Financial and Change of Circumstances

- A number of blue standard ‘change of circumstance’ forms.
 - Allocation of Girl to a Social Worker (10/05/03)
 - Above case closed (17/09/03)
 - Boy – case closed (17/09/03)
 - Boy – case allocated to current Social Worker for assessment [NB Where is this ‘assessment’? (2/6/05)]
 - Change of address of Boy (17/6/05)