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# Social worker or social administrator? Findings from a qualitative case study of a child protection social work team

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**Abstract**

This paper reports on data from a qualitative case study of child protection social work in one local authority. Ethnographic methods were used and constructionist grounded theory employed to collect and analyse 329 pages of historical documents about the local authority child protection service, 246.5 hours of observations of social work practice, and 19 interviews of social workers and their team managers. By interpreting the experiences of the social workers through the conceptual debates about the changes in the field of social administration, the social workers could be seen to want to perform a traditional form of social work but were required to perform a contemporary form of social administration. The aims and purposes of this form of practice could be considered to be distinct from those of social work as understood by the social workers and as such the social workers experienced the practice environment as constraining and often felt disillusioned. This paper conceptualises these forms of practice, contributing to the debates about what practice is and how we are to analyse and categorise it for the purposes of influencing the institutions that create and maintain contemporary practice.

**Key Words:** Practice, Social Administration, Compliance, Inspection, Child Protection

**Introduction**

Since the beginnings of social work as a profession, practitioners have turned their hand to a wide variety of tasks in their aims to help and support people. Social work is, therefore, by its nature an ambiguous practice (Parton, 1991). The actions of social workers have, however, not only been shaped by professional discourse and practices but also by political intentions and the consequences of being organised within hierarchical bureaucracies (Munro, 2011). Researchers, observers, and commentators of social work practice in the UK have been grappling with a way of conceptualising the resulting changing forms of practice, with Garrett (2003) asking if we are seeing an end of social work with children and families, Ferguson (2014) making a distinction between 'automated/dead social work' and 'alive social work', and Forrester (2016) arguing that we have seen a rise of 'zombie social work'. At the heart of these debates is a concern for the aims and purposes of the actions of social workers.

This paper contributes to these debates by reporting on findings from a qualitative case study of a child protection social work team. By interpreting the experiences of the social workers through the conceptual debates about the changes in the field of social administration (Page, 2010), the social workers could be seen to want to perform a traditional form of social work but were required to perform a contemporary form of social administration. The aims and purposes of this form of practice could be considered to be distinct from those of social work as understood by the social workers and as such the social workers experienced the practice environment as constraining and often felt disillusioned. This paper firstly provides a brief review of the literature on administration in child protection practice in England before outlining the research design and methodology. The findings are then detailed that provide the foundation for the analysis of these different forms of practice. Finally, a discussion on the implications and consequences of these findings for practice, policy, and theory is provided.

**Child Protection Social Work Practice and Administration: A Brief Review of the Literature**

Any form of social work may involve some form of administration. Indeed, Wilson argued back in 1887 that the methods of administration are a part of institutional and social life in the same way that "machinery is part of the manufactured product" (p.210). The amount and type of administration social workers have had to undertake, however, has been evolving. Munro (2004) argues that in the 1960s, other than for exercising statutory powers such as applying for a Court order, there was very little paperwork and what records were kept were used to improve professional practice through supervision. Satyamurti's (1981) ethnographic study of social workers in the newly formed local authority department in the early 1970s, however, details the increased administrative component of their work. Some even argued that much of the good work with children and families in the children's departments before the move to local authority social service departments was disappearing within these larger bureaucratic organisations (see Parton, 1991). Power (1997) argues, however, that the most significant increase in administration within public services was as a result of the increased use of auditing to measure and monitor performance and inspect services.

In line with Power's (1997) thesis, Munro (2004) argues that this increase in auditing had a significant impact on social work practice. A study by the Audit Commission in 2002 identified that social workers were leaving the profession because of bureaucracy, paperwork, targets, lack of autonomy, and unmanageable workloads. Wastell et al.'s (2010) ethnographic study described practice revolving around a computer system in an atmosphere of performance management, with highly formalised rules and procedures. Survey responses by social workers (Baginsky et al., 2010) supported such observations, highlighting the significantly increased amount of time social workers spent on administrative tasks. Munro's (2011) review of child protection in England argued that the reforms of subsequent governments, which rested on audit as a foundation for monitoring and measuring performance, had diminished professional discretion and created a distorted system that

focused social workers on "doing things right", i.e. following procedures, rather than "doing the right thing", i.e. checking whether children and young people are being helped (p.6). There have since been significant reforms of the child protection system (Munro, 2011), which, on the one hand has sought to relax some of the timescales and paperwork required, while on the other the drive for greater efficiency and effectiveness has increased the amount of work overall (Parton, 2014).

**Study Design and Methodology**

Thomas (2010) argues the purpose of case study research is to produce knowledge of an example understood within the context of the researcher's own experience. An example is used not because it is representative or typical of anything, but rather because it provides a specific representation within a specific context, which can be used to gain an insight into the area under study. The subject of this case study is child protection social work practice in England, while the object of this case study is the experience of the social workers who practised child protection social work. Pragmatism provided the philosophical foundation for this research, which believes that any situation is constituted by the environment and the individual (Mead, 1908). Research in this tradition is, therefore, interested in understanding both of these components through studying experience, problem-solving, and language (Emirbayer and Maynard, 2010). Furthermore, pragmatism believes that truth is relative to a conceptual scheme and is, consequently, more concerned with the practical effects of any object, idea, action, or theory (Peirce, 1878) than defining their ontology. Pragmatic research, therefore, investigates these practical effects and seeks to find a useful way of conceptualising social phenomena for future action. The case study followed constructivist grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2006), developed in the pragmatic tradition (see Strübing, 2013), albeit confined to the boundaries of the case and as such no generalisations can be made from the resulting interpretation. This paper reports on an inductive component of the analysis, and, as such, was not answering a specific research question, but rather simply exploring and explaining the

experience of the social workers who practised child protection social work within the case study site.

*The Case Study Site and Participants*

The case was an English local authority, referred to throughout the paper as the Council, with a 'good' inspection grading. After discussions with the team managers and then further meetings with the teams, every member of two child protection teams agreed to take part. Each team consisted of one team manager, two senior practitioners, five social workers, and two newly qualified social workers (NQSW). Overall, there were 19 social workers (2 part-time) and 2 team managers involved in the study. Experience ranged from less than one year to 24 years, age ranged from 24 years to 63 years, there was one male and the rest were female, and there was one Black-Caribbean social worker and the rest were White-British. To ensure anonymity, this paper reports on the data as if there was one team and all participants are reported as female and their ethnicity is not referred to.

*Data Collection*

Given that pragmatism calls for a return to experience (Emirbayer and Maynard, 2010), ethnographic methods were considered most appropriate to get close to the experience of the social workers and record the actions of the practitioners in context. I observed those within the teams for one to two days per week over a six month period in 2014, making fieldnotes in a notebook I carried around with me, which I typed up at the end of each day. Interviewing the social workers then enabled me to gain a better understanding of the meaning of their actions and their perception of the context. Open ended questions were used and the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. To gain an even greater understanding of the context in which the social workers' actions took place, I also sought data relating to the history of the service and the teams. In total, I collected 329 pages of historical documents about the Council and the service; wrote fieldnotes relating to 246.5 hours of observations; and undertook 19 interviews.

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*Data Analysis*

As in grounded theory methodology, data were collected and analysed in an ongoing iterative process. When data were collected, it was first coded line by line in a Word document (Glaser, 1978), enabling an identification of patterns and processes, similarities and differences, which then guided what data to collect in subsequent observations and discussions (Charmaz, 2006). As more data were collected and analysed the most significant codes were used to categorise the data (Charmaz, 2006). Contradictory data was sought to test out the categories as part of the iterative data collection/analysis phase. Some categories were developed and were later changed or merged into other categories as the analysis progressed. Memos helped in this process and were written throughout the data collection and analysis process (Charmaz, 2006) to consider possible theoretical explanations for the data, develop hypotheses, test these hypotheses in the field, and come to the most plausible explanation. This process enabled me to focus on the most salient components of the social workers' experience and consider my own influence on the emerging analysis and whether my own biases were skewing the collection and analysis of data. All memos were typed up and stored on a computer for later retrieval and sorting. The memos were sorted (and resorted) by using tables and diagrams according to different theoretical codes to create the best possible balance between the studied experience, the categories I had constructed, and my theoretical ideas about them (Charmaz, 2006). As discussed below, while I acknowledge that I influenced the data collected, this constant comparative method sought to keep the data and the analysis as close to the participants experience as possible.

*Ethical Considerations and Limitations*

Ethical approval was granted through the sponsoring University ethical review panel and the research was approved by the Council's research governance process. All participants, whether directly or indirectly involved, were informed of the study and their right not to be involved and all participants who were directly involved, including any parents involved in an interaction, signed an

agreement for me to observe and interview them. The social workers were very amenable to me

observing and discussing their experience and I felt they were very open about explaining their

thoughts, feelings, and actions. Indeed, there was a strong consensus in the teams that they wanted

other people to know about their experience and, therefore, welcomed the research and the

opportunity to show their work. The social workers were aware that they could ask for any situation

not to be included and, on occasion, did so due to their concern others within the Council would be

able to identify what they had said. No details about their day to day practice, however, were asked

to be excluded, although a social worker could prevent a situation from being included in the study

by simply not inviting me to observe. There were some situations where a parent did not want me to

observe and these were not included.

The limitations of the study are acknowledged. Indeed, I acknowledge that my presence affected the

situations I observed, both through my reactions and my questioning during observations. I, of

course, had my own interpretations of the situations which drove the interview questions and the

analysis of the data. These data can, therefore, be considered to be co-constructed between me and

the participants. Furthermore, the resulting analysis can only be understood within the context of

my interactions and interpretations within the teams, within the Council, at that specific time

(Thomas, 2010). Indeed, it is an ontological commitment within this study that the resulting theory is

interpretive, contingent, and tentative (Dewey, 1929; Mead, 1934).

**Findings**

The central issue for the social workers within the ethnographic and interview data was one of a

conflict between their expectation for practice and the expectations placed upon them to practise.

By contextualising these data with the historical documents and sensitising concepts from theory

(discussed below), the coding, categorising, and comparing constructed the following set of

categories and resulting theoretical explanation. The data presented below have been selected to

demonstrate and illustrate these categories and represent a spread of actions and opinions from the participants.

*Constructing administrative practice as performance*

As Ofsted (2012) report on the number of unallocated cases in their inspection report, which can lead to a negative evaluation of the service, the Council had a policy of having no unallocated cases. This normative association between the administrative practice of having all cases allocated to a social worker was supported by the moral foundation that this was necessary to keep children safe. This was then defined as "performance" for the team manager, who would not be performing adequately if they did not adhere to the policy, placing the team manager in an uncomfortable position of having to allocate work to social workers who were already overloaded, as one manager stated:

> "It's a bit of a difficult balancing act because… I will say to people you've got too much work on but I also have to say "I know you've got too much work on and I'm very sorry about this but here's some more" and that's not nice… because I've got to allocate" (interview)

The social workers, meanwhile, were provided with timescales to undertake the work allocated to them, which was defined as "performance" for them. Those within the teams were aware that failure to adhere to these policies would result in criticism and potential discipline, as explained to me by a team manager:

> "if I do something wrong, they'd sack me… I don't know if it's come from the government or what but this pressure that you're always being looked at to be sure you're doing it good enough, you know" (interview)

*Setting administration as the moral and cultural foundation for practice*

Such disciplinary threats supported cultural sayings that embedded administration into practice, such as the phrase "if it's not written down, it didn't happen". Being a good social worker meant

recording what they had done. Indeed, attempts were made by management to infuse the administrative work that the social workers were required to perform with long established and cherished social work practices, as explained by Amy:

> "[the senior manager] said in the training "If you don't do your paperwork, you don't have empathy"... she followed it by, "You don't have empathy, so you shouldn't be here, and leave". I just thought, my initial thought was, "Fuck off". Because paperwork is important, it's very important, but it doesn't mean you don't have empathy, it means you don't have time. I thought it was a disgusting statement, if I'm being quite frank. I thought it was disgusting" (interview)

Despite the social workers' resistance, administration had been set as the moral and cultural foundation for social work practice (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006). Consequently, the cultural practices within the teams were such that there was significant oversight of the administration of social work and very little oversight of the direct work with clients. Team managers not only had to read the paperwork the social workers produced but had to sign it off confirming it was of an acceptable standard. Team managers observed very little direct contact between social workers and children and families and what contact they did observe was usually a situation in which they had a formal role, such as chairing a meeting. The result was that social workers did not think that their team manager knew about their direct practice, as Lucy explained:

> "she [team manager] doesn't get to see the day-to-day practice and the engagement with children or anything like that.  But what she does get to see is the written side of things" (interview)

Consequently, administration was perceived to be more important and was, therefore, used to direct the social workers' actions in particular ways, as Linda's experience demonstrated:

> "She said that she had had an email from [the team manager] which had told her to do less visits to families and do more paperwork. She said she was upset getting it. I asked her what the upset was about. She said "I work really hard at home to get my paperwork done"" (fieldnotes)

*Setting administration as the primary task*

To avoid being criticised and blamed the social workers organised their time to ensure that they did not miss a deadline, embedding administration as the primary task of a social worker, as Lucy explained:

> "I'd like to spend a lot more time actually doing social work rather than typing minutes, typing reports, writing case notes, especially the direct work with the children… [but] we don't have indicators or targets to do that" (interview)

Consequently, in practice, a typical situation was of a social worker prioritising the administrative component of the work at the expense of the relational component, as demonstrated in a session between Donna, a Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) worker, and a mother:

> "As they discuss issues [Donna] spends the most of the time making notes with her head down while the mother and the CAMHS worker talk about her son. The CAMHS worker and the mother laugh at points while [Donna] continues making notes... When the meeting is over I ask [Donna] about the notes and she says that if she doesn't do them you get into the situation like she had the other week when [the team manager] accused her of not prioritising her minutes of meetings in front of the parents" (fieldnotes)

Donna justifies prioritising the administration of her practice as necessary acquiescence to organisational expectations to avoid being criticised. In so doing, Donna demonstrates that the primary focus of the work was on her relationship with the organisation. The experience of the parents or carers in such circumstances was considered irrelevant, as a team manager explained:

> "[the team manager] said workers become less sensitive as they progress in their careers but "we get measured on timescales not on not upsetting parents" and described the process as "bruising and horrible" for parents" (fieldnotes)

The team manager's comment shows how the sanctions, supports, and rewards within the organisation ensured that there was an explicit focus on the priorities as defined by the organisation. While acquiescing to these expectations offered some protection to the social workers from being

criticised and blamed, it also ensured that they displayed less empathy for the parents' experience. While the social workers all stated that they valued and sought to develop positive relationships with the people who used the service, given that protecting children was seen to involve difficult conversations, developing a positive relationship was not always seen as possible or even desirable. Sometimes this was seen as a barrier as it made it more difficult to find out certain information necessary to complete their assessments:

> "[Monica] said also she works for EDS [Emergency Duty Service] and that she finds it easier to ask "cheeky" questions on EDS because you know you are not going to see them again. She said it is harder when you know the family as it can be more embarrassing asking them difficult questions" (fieldnotes)

A relational distance to the parents and carers ensured that the social workers could complete their tasks with minimal discomfort while adhering to the timescales. Such institutional expectations changed the relational practice of social work, interested in building relationships in order to provide support and challenge to effect change, into a transactional practice, interested in discrete transactions for the purposes of collecting information or ensuring agreed obligations had been met as laid out in some procedure or plan.

### *Organising the physical environment for administrative practice*

The physical structure of the service resembled an administrative office with the social work teams working in a Council building, with desks, phones, and computers and with the teams working office hours where they were routinely engaged in administrative work, usually on a computer. When asked, the social workers generally stated that they spent about seventy to ninety percent of their time doing administrative tasks, which was supported by my observations. These arrangements, however, were not always considered satisfactory for the nature of social work practice, as demonstrated to me in a supervision session between Lucy and her team manager when Lucy was unable to organise someone to visit a family on a Saturday:

> "[Lucy] then asks the team manager why they work Monday to Friday anyway and why is it 8.30am to 5pm as social work doesn't stop at these times"

Indeed, the social workers had frequent issues relating to such a structure. There was insufficient parking meaning social workers had to park in car parks far from the office making it difficult when they have children, bags, or had to drop in for a short while and go out again. Some took to parking on the side streets but residents put letters on their cars asking them not to or even shouted at them not to park there. The primacy of the administrative role for the social workers was evident in the team rooms where the vast majority of the walls were covered by an array of policies and procedures, telephone numbers and contact details of services they could refer to or professionals they may need to contact, information on timescales, instructions on how to use the computer system, and other general administratively important information. Furthermore, the service was organised on administrative grounds. The child protection team received cases classified as high risk by another team and they either passed the case to the family support team when they considered there to be minimal risk or they passed the case on to another team if they went to Court for an Order to remove the child. The social workers complained that this was an arbitrary distinction that meant the family had to have another social worker and they did not learn from the decisions they were making, as Amy stated:

> "we used to take it all the way through court to the end, and all of that. But now we go to court, we remove, and then that's it... it's, like when I went off sick and I did loads of furniture. I was doing up loads of furniture, because I could see a good end result. We don't get to see that anymore"

*Experiencing practice*

Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) argue that identities describe the relationship between the actor and the field in which that actor operates. The historical and traditional discourses within the profession provided the social workers with a fairly common view of their understanding of their relationship to those they worked with and their place in society. The social workers found

themselves, however, typically completing assessment documentation, inputting data into a computer, making referrals to others to help the family, and coordinating the work of others. These changes in practice led the social workers to consider themselves as no longer being able to perform social work as they understood it, as Christine, a social worker with over ten years of experience, explained:

> "my ideal social worker is [Alice] on the [other] team. She is a social worker's social worker. She's somebody who would put aside paperwork and spend time, at her own detriment, really… she's old-style social work, where she'll go in and she'll spend the time, and she'll have a phone, and she's on-call to the family, if needed, you know, 24/7. And, you know, we've moved away from that. We can't be like that anymore" (interview)

The focus on administration at the expense of social work fuelled the social workers' sense of disillusionment with the profession because they felt unable to make a difference to the lives of the people they came into the profession for, as Melanie explained:

> "I think it's a bit hypocritical. I think you're saying this needs to be done but I can't do it cos I've got ten thousand other things to do, and I think that's not what social work is about that, isn't it? Social work is about social work, you know, going into people's houses, supporting them with this, supporting them with that and you don't do it so the role's very different" (interview)

With a feeling of being constrained in what they were able to do and how they were able to do it, the social workers felt they were losing, or not even acquiring, the knowledge and skills that they believed they needed to practise social work, as Helen stated:

> "I've done the work with families, asking questions for the assessment, but I've not actually done any work with them that I would want to do. I don't really know what work I'm talking about here, but, because I've never done it. But I'd like to just do some meaningful. Get to know the family more. Get to know what the problems are, rather than, sort of, guessing, really, what the issues are" (interview)

The complaints of the social workers could be seen as a response to the clash between their expectations for practice and the expectations placed upon them. This led some to question the foundation of contemporary practice, as Linda's comment showed:

> "Linda: So why do the academics teach us to communicate with children, teach us child development, because you're teaching us and it's not exercised
>
> Me: You don't need it to do the job?
>
> Linda: well, no, not the job that we're being asked to do… I'm scared for the profession" (interview)

The typical experience of performing child protection social work within the Council was neatly summarised in an exchange I observed in the team room:

> "[Christine] turns to [Jane] and says "they've taken what God gave us: free will"... [Jane] says they are just "highly paid admin workers" and [Christine] says that what they are doing is not social work and "they've taken what was attractive to the job"" (fieldnotes)

## A Conceptual Interpretation

A profession necessarily requires a particular knowledge base, skill set, and value commitments (Larson, 1979). For social work these developed within the field of social administration and matured after 1945 where it was incorporated into the welfare state under the ideas of Titmuss (1958) and Seebhom (1968). Social work was, therefore, a form of social administration specifically concerned with the practicalities of improving the quality of life and subjective well-being of individuals, families, groups, and communities (e.g. Biestek, 1961; Munro, 2011; British Association of Social Workers, 2012). Social work could be distinguished from other forms of practice by the use of a specific (1) knowledge base (the use of theory, method, and research in practice; the use of local and indigenous knowledge; the use of knowledge of individual, group, family, community practices), (2) skill set (analysis; interpersonal skills; therapeutic support; relationship building; direct work with individuals, groups, families, networks, communities; advocacy), and (3) values (respect for

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diversities; human rights; collective responsibility; social justice; well-being). The expectations of the social workers within the Council were to be able to work towards the aims of social work and use the knowledge, skills, and values that reflected the historical, cognitive, and practical traditions of the profession.

Page (2010) argues that the practice of social administration envisaged by Titmuss, which Page (2010) terms Traditional Social Administration (TSA), began to be challenged from the 1960s. Power (1997) identifies the New Public Management (NPM) discourse as a significant component of this undermining. The logic of NPM is that hierarchical bureaucracies are inherently inefficient, that they can be made more efficient using principles of the market, and that public services should be more transparent and accountable to the Government, the tax payer, and those who use the services (Power, 1997; Munro, 2004). Some within the field of social administration began to adapt to these new pressures, moving away from TSA to develop a scepticism about the motivation and commitment of public sector employees to provide what service users need (Le Grand, 2003), to diminish structural notions of change and adopt more individualistic accounts of social disadvantage (Field, 1997), and to distance themselves from ideologically driven policy to create an image of a dispassionate social science (Page, 2010). This led to calls to redesign public services to meet the needs of taxpayers and service users (Giddens, 2002), to provide more choice (Le Grand, 2007), while focusing on individual behaviour (Field, 1997). While this new form of social administration, which Page (2010) terms Contemporary Social Administration (CSA), was able to integrate the logic of NPM and gain legitimacy with successive governments, it has led to criticism that the thinking behind the policy and practice of social administration has become managerialist and mechanistic (Parsons, 2002).

The foundations for such a practice were created in 1982 with the establishment of the Audit Commission which measured the economy, efficiency, and effectiveness of public services through auditing organisations against a set of objectives, standards, and indicators of good practice. This

imposed a standardisation on social work, which Munro (2004) states were based on "a number of theoretical assumptions that have no clear authority from empirical research or professional consensus" (p.1083). Nevertheless, the judgements of the auditors were trusted, despite questions about the process and results of such judgements, elevating the audit process to the status of highest importance (Power, 1997). Consequently, public sector organisations, such as social work services, needed to implement new policies, procedures, and internal monitoring, recording, and data management systems in order to control what its employees did so that they were able to provide the evidence the auditors needed. Power (1997) argues that the effect was that these organisations were "constructed around the audit process itself" (p.51).

Within this context, the Council's child protection service was organised and structured to constrain, enable, and guide the social workers to perform particular tasks consistent with the ideas of NPM and CSA, which was then externally supported by the inspectorial/auditing regime. While the social workers expected some level of administration, they distinguished the practice that they believed they were expected to perform from that of professional social work. From the social workers' perspective, it was not simply a matter of balance between administration and social work within their practice, but rather a conflict between the meanings and expectations, i.e. the identity (Burke and Stets, 2009), of a Council employee performing that particular role.

Professional social work, as traditionally practised, may have been a form of social administration, i.e. TSA, yet with the creation and divergence of TSA from CSA, and the diminishing of TSA, social work can be considered to have decoupled from social administration, i.e. CSA. Consequently, the social workers were expected to use a different (1) knowledge base (well-defined roles; specific criteria; codified procedures; laws; regulations; public order and safety; government policy), (2) skill set (contracts; referrals to services; tools; documents; assessment), and (3) values (a focus on organisational needs; effective use of scarce resources; accountability/auditability) to those they understood to be social work. We could call this new form of practice, created in the image of CSA,

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contemporary social work. However, the social workers did not recognise it as such and instead categorised it as 'not social work'. Despite using the term administration, the social workers also categorised their work as distinct from the administrators within the Council. Their work was unique within the Council in that, practically, it was the administration of social issues, while theoretically this can be seen to be the practical realisation of CSA.

Of course the reality of practice was a complex one and the social workers could not be observed to be performing a pure form of social work or social administration. Using Weber's (1978) notion of an ideal-type, an analytical tool to express a hypothetical, abstract concept that can be used to analyse social reality, however, we are able to differentiate between these two forms of practice. The wants and needs of those embedded within traditional social work conflicted with the wants and needs of those embedded within CSA. This conflict could be observed within the community in which practice was founded i.e. the language; what was said and what was left unsaid; implicit relations; tacit conventions; subtle cues; untold rules of thumb; recognisable intuitions; specific perceptions; well-tuned sensitivities; embodied understandings; underlying assumptions; and shared world views (see Wenger, 1999). Distinguishing between these differing forms of practice can be represented in figure 1.

Figure 1: Distinguishing between social work and social administration



**Social Administration**

Well-defined roles
Specific criteria
Codified procedures
Laws
Regulations
Public order and safety
Government policy
Contracts
Referrals to Services
Tools
Documents
Assessment
Focus on organisational needs
Effective use of scarce resources
Accountability/auditability

**Practice Community**

Language
What is said and what is left unsaid
Implicit relations
Tacit conventions
Subtle cues
Untold rules of thumb
Recognisable intuitions
Specific perceptions
Well-tuned sensitivities
Embodied understandings
Underlying assumptions
Shared world views
(see Wenger, 1999)

**Social Work**

Use of theory, method, and research
Use of local and indigenous knowledge
Use of knowledge of individual, group,
family, community practices
Analysis
Interpersonal Skills
Therapeutic support
Relationship building
Direct work with individuals, groups,
families, networks, communities
Advocacy
Respect for diversities
Human rights
Collective responsibility
Social justice
Well-being

## Discussion and Conclusion

By accepting the need to reorganise the service and change what the social workers did, the Council was successful in creating a form of practice the social workers did not recognise as social work. The consequence of refashioning social work in this manner was to change the priorities and expectations of the task they were being asked to undertake. This created a perception of effective management of the risks posed to the children, yet the social workers complained that they did not spend enough time with the children and families to know enough about the issues and concerns. Furthermore, by refocusing the social work role on to administrative tasks, the social workers' capacity for empathy for the parents can be considered to have been reduced. Indeed, Larson argued in 1979 that where there is external pressure to perform non-client focused tasks professionals can develop an attitude of indifference towards their clients. And further still, in the context of administration being the dominant form of practice, what we might traditionally

understand to be social work practice can be considered not only a minor activity of the social workers, but also an activity of resistance. Indeed, a social worker could be criticised for spending too much time with families because this contradicted the new expectations for practice.

Of course, this is a study of one service at one particular time and no claims can be made about the wider applicability of the findings. Others may see similar processes and practices in other organisations and contexts, however. Indeed, this study resonates with a range of studies and conceptual analyses of contemporary practice (e.g. Parton, 1996; Munro, 2004; Baginsky et al., 2010; White et al., 2010; Wastell et al., 2010). Considering the changes within the profession from the 1970s to the 1990s, Parton argued in 1996 that "no longer are social workers constituted as caseworkers drawing on their therapeutic skills in human relationships, but as care managers" (p.12), monitoring and reviewing the packages of care they have put in place.

With CSA's commitment to move beyond the Titmuss paradigm (Page, 2010) by reducing professional discretion to create more uniform practice and bringing in multiple providers for public services, changing what social workers do and how they do it so that they 'accurately' assess and 'appropriately' refer provides greater opportunities to achieve such aims. Indeed, such a practice would make it easier to fulfil the current Government's agenda for local authorities to delegate more of their services to children and families (Department for Education, 2014). Within such arrangements, without the need for social workers to develop therapeutic relationships and undertake direct work with families it becomes legitimate to provide large caseloads and still expect compliance to rules on timescales and to request a social worker to spend more time on paperwork, organise other professionals, or attend meetings. Furthermore, it becomes legitimate to ask others to perform the traditional function of a social worker, such as a family support worker to provide practical help or parenting support, a counsellor to provide emotional and therapeutic help, or a community worker to facilitate groupwork. As the social workers involved in this study told me, social work practice was being done, just elsewhere, and not by people called social workers. It may

be that what seems like 'dead' or 'zombie' social work (Ferguson, 2014; Forrester, 2016) from a traditional social work perspective may actually be good contemporary social administration.

These policies created by the government, enacted by the Council, and monitored and policed by the inspectorate may have been argued to be intended to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of social work practice. Yet the unintended consequence may not only be, as Sieber (1981) argued, that such measures create a 'fatal remedy' through the construction of a dysfunctional system set up to satisfy the auditing system rather than the people it was intended to serve, but also that it fundamentally changes what organisations need from social workers so that they no longer need them to practise social work as traditionally understood. As researchers, observers, and commentators of social work practice in England grapple with a way of conceptualising the changing forms of social work practice, we perhaps need to also ask at what point is it no longer social work? Or is social work just a term used to categorise the work of any registered social worker? Given the findings from this study, there are clearly some in practice who are experiencing a diminishing of what they understand to be social work and a domination of a different, distinct, form of practice, even if they struggled to name it. This paper has simply sought to conceptualise and name this experience so we are better able to communicate about such experiences in our attempts to change our institutions.

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