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Temporal and moral orders of social work intervention: The accomplishment of relationship work in a case of physical abuse

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journals.sagepub.com/home/qswork**Alex Dennis**

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Abstract

This paper explores the employment of communication, engagement and relationship-based practice skills by a Flemish social worker working with a parent who was alleged to have assaulted his child. We deploy insights gained from ethnomethodology to analyse extracts from an ethnographic observation. We show how a respectful approach can be developed between two parties who seek to find meaning from the chain of events they are presented with. In doing so, we establish how practice can be conducted differently depending on the context in which professionals and families find themselves. We argue that social workers' identities revolve around being competent members of their professional community by working within the recommended guidelines and keeping children safe. However, this does not mean that organisational rules determine the activities that take place. Instead, we show how social workers can use their experience and skills to develop effective working relationships and still achieve their intended outcomes without blaming or shaming parents.

Keywords

Child protection, ethnography, interactionist, relationship, ethnomethodology, Belgium

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Introduction

Social workers are responsible for entering the lives of families, who have commonly encountered disrespect and deprivation, to make decisions about the welfare of their children (Featherstone et al., 2014). They are asked to solve problems which require them to make moral evaluations so that children may be kept safe from harm. This is difficult and contentious territory for professionals to operate in given that state paternalism and child protection have often been seen as processes which can legitimise authoritarian interference into a family's life and at the same time, minimise the rights of parents (see Fox Harding, 1991). Child protection practice in England has therefore been fraught with numerous complex moral and political issues for which there appears to be no right technical solution (Dingwall et al., 1983).

To make the situation more problematic, social workers in England have faced criticism for failing to avert injuries and prevent child deaths. This form of disparagement has fuelled the argument that child protection practice is firmly entrenched in a culture of blame (Jones, 2014; Leigh, 2017; Warner, 2015). As a result, social workers often talk about being situated in a defensive climate and caught between 'a rock and a hard place': damned if they do remove children and damned if they don't (Featherstone et al., 2014: 1). This uncomfortable dichotomy in practice has led many to argue that the child protection system is failing as there is a heightened moral concern about bad and dangerous parents and the risk they pose to children (Featherstone et al., 2014; Jones, 2014; Warner, 2015).

In Flanders, North Belgium, there is evidence which suggests that issues such as 'accountability' and 'blame' are secondary, if existent at all (Cooper et al., 1995). In contrast to England, Flemish professionals work in a 'welfare system', a system which inherently focuses on working closely with the child, their parents and other professionals so that joint mutual decisions are made that benefit the whole family (see Leigh, 2017). Practitioners focus on building relationships with parents which are based on trust and respect, rather than suspicion, in order that they can encompass the needs of the parent whilst also seeking to meet the needs of the child.

In this paper, we explore how such practice can take place by examining an interaction between a social worker and a parent who was alleged to have assaulted his child. The case we use was observed in Flanders, as Jadwiga Leigh conducted a comparative ethnographic study which took place in England and Northern Belgium (Flanders). To examine the interactions that took place, we deploy some ethnomethodological devices in an effort to describe how a Flemish social worker engaged with a father who in England may have been seen as 'dangerous' and a risk to his children. In doing so, we aim to demonstrate how a respectful approach can develop between social worker and parent, both of whom sought to find meaning from the chain of events they were presented with, which included the social and structural dimensions involved in raising children.

Our rationale for doing so is to explore how the concerns for that child's welfare were created and managed within that encounter. We also establish how practice can be conducted differently in other parts of Europe due to context in which professionals find themselves. In the following sections, we begin by briefly reviewing relevant literature that primarily relates to practice in the children and families' arena before then exploring how ethnomethodology can be used in social work research. We conclude with a discussion on the importance of communication, engagement and relationship-based practice skills.

Literature review

In Anglophone countries, where the term 'child protection' is most commonly used, services tend to be managerialised, with priority given to risk averse practices and highly legalized procedures (Lonne et al., 2008: 3). This means that when a child protection referral is made, the investigating team is focused on ascertaining whether the child is at risk of significant harm and whether there is a need to remove a child and/or charge the parents (or carers) for causing that harm. In doing so, the professional judgment of the social worker is frequently neglected, and relationship-based practice is replaced by case management-driven proceduralism (Lonne et al., 2008). In cases where there has been an allegation of abuse, the accusatory approach tends to dominate the situation which means that more often than not meaningful and respectful engagement with parents is overlooked. Instead, a 'them and us' dynamic can emerge, which leaves parents feeling 'othered' (Kedell, 2014) and hostile towards the social worker (Leigh, 2017).

Recent research has revealed that parents can feel anxious and powerless in such situations which may then lead to them feeling defensive and behaving aggressively towards professionals. Smithson and Gibson's (2016) study found that the power social workers had highlighted how little power parents felt they had, with many saying they felt threatened and feared if they did not comply with particular decisions their children would be removed. Parents also often felt they were expected to undertake too many actions with many being unrealistic and not clearly identifying what it was they needed to achieve (Smithson and Gibson, 2016: 570).

If parents expect to be blamed or deceived by social workers it becomes more likely that institutions, dominated by risk perceptions, will themselves be seen as untrustworthy. Equally, if social workers fear taking risks then they will be unable to place trust in the families they are working with. Yet, Webb (2006) has argued that social order and interpersonal harmony can emerge in the most unlikely of situations. When social workers are provided with the right conditions in which shared deliberation and participation can take place with parents who are trying to sort out their lives, opportunities to foster trust with professionals do materialise (Tobis, 2013).

In Flanders, North Belgium, including the parent in the process is an aspect of practice that social care professionals strive to achieve (Cooper et al., 1995; Desair

and Adriaenssens, 2011; Hetherington, 1998; Leigh, 2014, 2017). Situated in a social welfare system, the Flemish recognise that children who are referred to them for concerns relating to abuse and neglect often have parents who have also suffered significant harm at some point in their lives. Rather than, therefore, blaming the parent for the abuse, they seek to understand the experiences parents' have had (Desair and Adriaenssens, 2011). They also do not work solely with children but pride themselves on working with the family as a whole so that both parent and child can be supported appropriately (Leigh, 2017).

Despite it being recognised that the way forward for social workers is to work in partnership with parents (Roose et al., 2009), the notion of families as partners remains awkward and uncertain (Tobis, 2013). Primarily because the elements which impact on effective partnership working have been attributed to thorny issues, such as the lack of inclusion of fathers and gender construction (Scourfield, 2003) and the fact that social workers are holding parents responsible for the presenting issues, instead of taking into consideration the social and structural difficulties of raising children (Crittenden, 2016).

One factor that is also often neglected in literature and practice is the verbal nature of social work interventions and the way in which this activity can hinder families from understanding what is required on their part or indeed, what their rights are (see Holland, 2010). Hall et al. (2010) have argued that practice is mediated by language and interaction and that it is the combination of these two elements that leads to inferences being made by professionals about what parents should do and to what extent. Therefore, power can be reinforced through language and in turn, actively conceal the fears professionals have in relation to risk as procedures are duly followed and orders are enacted. The complexities of client–professional encounters can produce unanticipated and sometimes undetected outcomes (Hall and Slembrouck, 2009).

In the following sections, we discuss the nature of ethnomethodology in more detail and then deploy it to examine an interaction between social worker and parent in a case of physical abuse.

Ethnomethodology

As explained in the literature review, the organisation of social work intervention is typically construed in the context of approaches: strategic, organisational and ethical positions that a social worker should orientate to when working with families (Hall et al., 2010; Holland, 2010). Such positions are important for two reasons. Firstly, there are the professional requirements which allow social workers to demonstrate their competence as practitioners and their capacity to operate within relatively clear acceptable boundaries (HCPC, 2017; BASW, 2014). Secondly, these positions ensure the *rationality* of social work interventions is conducted by providing a rubric through which the good sense of those interventions can be assessed. By conducting themselves with an appropriate approach, social workers can defend their actions, choices and claims against possible future

challenges, organisational audits, legal claims and so on. Social workers' identities as competent members of the social work community and the good sense of their practice are both dependent on their working within the guidelines. Being a competent 'member' of the social work profession is tied up with knowing, recognising and taking for granted such matters (Garfinkel, 1967: 7–9).

A problem this raises is that the relationship between the specifics of what social workers do (how they respond to clients, how they frame the facts of cases, what alternative courses of action they lay down, and so on) and the principles that underpin those specifics is often unclear. As Bittner tartly points out, organisational rules do not govern the activities they are meant to shape—indeed, they *cannot* do this. Instead, activities are fitted to rules by competent practitioners *in situ*. Professionals can find 'in the rule the means for doing whatever needs to be done' (Bittner, 1965: 251).

Instead of analysing the principles underpinning social work practice, we suggest that a close description of a particular practice encounter might be a fruitful way of examining a different kind of social work intervention. Ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967) provides a framework for such an analysis, as its premises are most congruent with such a disinterested examination. In this article, we use an ethnomethodological lens to examine a social work interaction to see what principles, structures, rules are invoked, orientated to and *used* by the parties in the case study.

We suggest that using ethnomethodology in this way is useful when examining social work interventions for two reasons. First, it allows the specifics of those interventions to be described and analysed in their own terms, and their success or failure, utility or redundancy, ethical status, and so on can be considered separately. A close analysis of a single case thus provides a starting point for analyses of other interactions—to see if they are similar, different (and, if so, in what ways), typical, atypical and so on. In contrast to other approaches, the close description of single cases is central to ethnomethodology. As Schegloff (1991: 153) points out:

Work of this type has had a number of general concerns. One of these has been to enrich our capacity to analyse ordinary conversational interaction in a way that can account for the actual course that particular episodes of interaction take and that can capture the orientation of the participants to it. Another has been to develop a systematic explication of the recurrent and stable practices of talking in interaction that participants in ordinary talk-in-interaction employ to talk and to understand what is going on. Indeed, these concerns have gone hand in hand, one test of the adequacy of a description of some practice being its capacity to yield convincing analyses of singular episodes of conversation, and one result of incisive single case analysis being the formulation of recurrent practices of talking.

Second, it allows the competent, situated work of the social worker to be described as an artful, improvised encounter. As Garfinkel (1991: 11) argued, once an intervention has started, there is 'no time out' from its interactional aspects. Although,

in this case the social worker had an outcome to work towards and a framework to work within, much of what he did in interaction with the father was spontaneous as he could not predict what the father would say, how he would respond to suggestions or what reasons he would give for his actions.

Method

This paper is based on data drawn from a comparative ethnographic study which took place between 2011 and 2012 in Belgium and England. The interview used was chosen from a number of cases studies observed at the Belgium site. The reason this particular case has been chosen is because of the way the social worker interacted with the parent who was alleged to have assaulted his child.

The organisation which was observed, was one which prided itself on only working with child protection cases where families had a multiple of complex issues and there was a high risk of significant harm. The social worker who features in this context had 25 years' experience and was the only social worker on a team which consisted of a variety of professionals: social workers (1); psychologists (4); family therapists (2); social pedagogy professionals (2).

The social worker was interviewed immediately after the family consultation, and he identified this encounter as having both typical (with respect to the clients' poverty and different cultural expectations) and atypical (with respect to particular elements of the family's dynamics) features. We will not be addressing the typicality or representativeness of this case here but would make two observations. Firstly, identifying an encounter as one of a collection of similar encounters ('a case') is part and parcel of social workers' professional practice, and would be a phenomenon worth investigating further. Being able to classify events as 'not worth investigating', 'a typical case', 'an unusual case', 'an ambiguous case', and so on, is intimately tied to questions of how to proceed properly with those events, and so is a practical as well as an analytical matter. We are neither sceptical of the social worker's judgement nor seeking to advocate its 'correctness'; instead, we would argue that the judgement itself might be a fruitful area for further investigation. Secondly, while this encounter may be typical *as a case* that does not mean that the granular details of how it is produced and managed *in situ* are themselves typical. To determine the extent to which it is *interactionally* typical would require comparisons with other encounters, not a *post hoc* evaluation by one of the participants.

Data collection and analysis

The main aim of the study was to explore how organisational culture affected the social interactions and identities of social workers within the department. Ethical approval was granted by the University and the organisations which took part. To protect the identity of the organisation and those who worked for it, all the names have been changed. The main ethnographic approach used was that of

participant observation as this method allowed Leigh to explore participants' activities, beliefs, meanings, values and motivations and in doing so, develop an understanding and interpretation of the members' social world (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Participant observation allows the researcher to focus on the less explicit aspects of organisational life which can often include the kind of phenomenon that is only apparent in the back-stage regions of an agency such as jokes, complaints and arguments (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

While in-depth ethnographic approaches are common in organisation studies, this method does still have its limitations. At the time of this study Leigh worked as a social worker for one of the English organisations involved in the study. This position was beneficial in terms of access and prior familiarity with practitioners and systems. Although she did not work directly with all involved in the study, her role within the organisation did mean that she had contact with them at some point prior to the research. Taylor (2011: 8) has acknowledged that being an "intimate insider" is beneficial but when the narrative of the researcher and the researched become entwined it does mean that assumptions may be made by the author about what was meant by the other actors involved.

To maintain a sense of free thought and movement, Leigh used the Flemish sites as an opportunity to detach from her English position so that she could see her place of work objectively. By adopting an observation orientated fieldwork role in Flanders she was able to pay close attention to dialogue in informal and formal meetings. She recorded fieldnotes during the day, and typed them up the same evening. Observations of practice were focused on the participants understanding of how different events affected social interactions and sense of self. Observations of practice encounters were often audio-recorded, with the consent of the parent and professional, and tended to take place in a private office in the organisation and at different stages throughout the research.

The principal method for analysis was not to produce generalised results from a large widespread sample that would then apply to the whole population (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) but to interpret the repertoires which came from a small micro culture situated in a larger organisation. The fieldnotes, documents and interviews were transcribed and uploaded onto NVivo. In this context, the analysis was undertaken with respect to the ethnomethodological principle that encounters are self-organising. Participants display the sense of what they are doing as part and parcel of doing it, and—by recognising that sense—other participants are able to assemble their actions to make their sense fit.

This principle, that social activities are *accountable* (Garfinkel, 1967), means that, rather than using standard social-scientific methodological devices such as content analysis or grounded theory, analysis takes the form of a description of the methods participants use to generate and recognise sense *in situ*. The analysis of the case study used in this paper is not a 'pure' ethnomethodological one, insofar as we have particular professional and academic questions that we seek to use the materials to answer. However, we retained a commitment to only finding such answers inasmuch as the parties to the setting generate them themselves.

Interactional context and analytical rationale

The case study used in this paper came from a referral made by a school following concerns that one of their pupils had been seen with significant bruising to her back. When asked by the school doctor where this bruising had stemmed from, the child said that her father had beaten her. School referred their concerns to the agency and the family were invited into meet with the social worker. The interaction that subsequently followed took place when the father, mother and youngest sibling of the assaulted child attended the meeting at the office.

It would be possible to examine the encounter by considering each turn at talk in serial order to show how the opening expectations are transformed through the talk to the closing agreement, but this would make the analysis far too long. Furthermore, by focusing on the talk in such a way, it would be difficult to foreground the most pertinent features of the encounter.

Instead, we focus on three aspects of the discussion that are particularly salient for considering it a 'success' in a professional sense. These are, firstly, the search for an underlying pattern to the child's injuries; secondly, reaching a consensus on the moral considerations of the activities that led to the child's injuries; and, thirdly, using an 'outcome' to produce the justification for that outcome.

The search for a pattern to explain events

The following section explores extracts of a transcript that recorded the conversations that predominantly took place between a father and a social worker. The researcher (Leigh) was in the position of observer. After initial introductions took place between the father (F) and the social worker, Jens (J) asked the father why he thought he had been called into the centre:

- 1 J: Which do you prefer to speak Flemish or French?
- 2 F: French
- 3 J: And your wife? Does she speak any words in French?
- 4 F: She doesn't speak any French or Flemish so I will translate for
- 5 her.
- 6 J: Jadwiga is a social worker who is doing her PhD and she
- 7 is here because she is interested in our social system (notre
- 8 sociale).
- 9 F: Ah o.k.
- 10 J: She would like to listen to the interview but she also knows that
- 11 professional secrecy means she cannot talk about it.
- 12 F: Ah o.k. (Father then translates that to the mother who agrees for
- 13 Jadwiga to be present - 7 seconds)
- 14 J: I am Jens. I am a social worker and I work here. I want to ask you
- 15 first of all, what can I do for you?
- 16 F: Oh I don't know.

- 17 J: Why are you here?
18 F: Because I want to receive support with my children.
19 J: That's right. What kind of support?
20 F: Well my daughter told her teachers that she is punished by her
21 parents.
22 J: Punished. What does that mean to you?
23 F: Well she said that when she doesn't do her homework or any
24 housework she is smacked.
25 J: Do you have a problem with her not doing her homework?
26 F: Never.
27 J: I don't think I fully understand. I know the [school] which sent
28 you but normally when they are the ones that send you here then
29 there is a problem of maltreatment.
30 F: Ah.
31 J: And so I am asking myself why did they send you here to see me?
32 Do you know why they sent you here specifically?
33 F: Not at all.

At lines 20–21 the father provides a reason for his being invited to see Jens (social worker): 'my daughter told her teachers that she is punished by her parents'. This reason takes the form of an instance, an event, for which a search for an explanation is required. Not all parents are referred to social workers, not all punishments would elicit such a referral, and not all claims made by children to their teachers would necessarily be taken at face value. This presents a puzzle requiring a solution, which Jens puts to Father in lines 31–32: '... why did they send you here to see me?' This puzzle is informed by Jens' previous comment that 'the school sent you but normally when they are the ones that send you here then there is a problem of maltreatment'.

Here we have a candidate relationship between an event and a pattern: Father's daughter has told her teacher that she is being punished – 'smacked' (line 24) – and Father has been referred to see Jens through the route normally associated with problems of maltreatment. The two can be related to one another in different ways, however: the 'punishments' might constitute 'maltreatment' (a possibility that is not explicitly set out by Jens) but other explanations are possible at this stage. The punishments might be less severe than appropriate for such a referral, for instance, or there may have been an administrative mistake. At this stage in the encounter there is still an opening for the events (complaint and referral) to be construed in different ways, and much of what passes between Jens and Father can be understood as a search for an 'adequate construal' (Garfinkel, 1962).

- 35 J: That's a pity. It is going to be hard to explain to you then
36 because I am here to help you but I don't know what happened at the
37 school.
38 F: It was Monday when they told us that we had to come here.
39 J: Who told you?

- 40 F: Cindy Beech or something like that.
41 J: Cindy?
42 F: Yes. They called the other day...
43 J: Yes I know they called you but I don't know your history and what
44 exactly has happened at the school.
45 F: Well they called the other day and asked how we punished the
46 children. I explained that there is rarely a problem but if there
47 is I might smack them like that (shows tapping hand motion),
48 that's it. They asked if I loved my children
49 or if there were any problems and I told them that I loved
50 my children very much. I said my wife looks after the children, I
51 work very hard and we never punish our children.
52 J: Who is that? [points at boy in the room]
53 F: My son.
54 J: [to mother]I can see you play very well with him Madam, no
55 problem.
56 F: In two weeks he will begin going to school. In June he will be
57 three years old.

Between lines 45 and 51 Father offers a candidate pattern of activity that may account for what has happened: he does 'smack' his daughter (on the back of the hand) but in a way that should not require referral. He also introduces two apparently incongruous matters, which are nevertheless important and will be considered in the next section: 'I told them [the teachers] that I loved my children very much' and 'we never punish our children'. The latter seems to contradict the claim that Father smacks his daughter but can be set aside for the moment.

- 56 J: So [school] have sent you because of a punishment but you do not
57 know
58 what they are referring to?
59 F: Yes, yes.
60 J: I want to tell you something because they have told me a little
61 about it but I also want to know your story. They said that it is to
62 do with your daughter Rachel- how old is she?
63 F: She is 8 years old.
64 J: And is she at school at the moment?
65 F: Yes.
66 J: It's just that normally when the parents come here they bring the
67 child that is involved. They could not have asked you. Another
68 pity.
69 F: Yes, yes, it is that.
70 J: Anyway they explained to me that Dr LeBelle- you haven't seen Dr
71 LeBelle?
72 F: No, No.
73 J: Well he is the doctor at the school and he has seen your daughter

- 72 twice.
73 F: Twice?
74 J: Yes twice. Once about the back and once about the feet.
75 [Father then talks to the mother about it who replies in
76 Pashtun - 83 seconds].
77 F: My wife says that Rachel fell down the stairs at school. She
falls
78 often down the stairs there.
79 [His wife starts talking again - 77 seconds].
80 F: She says that Rachel told her that she fell down the stairs at
81 school. They are made of metal.

Jens initially suggests that Father's account may be problematic, very gently, in lines 59–61 where he invites him to state that he does not know what the school are referring to. This ties to Father's previous comment about 'smacking': if Father's daughter has not been maltreated but merely smacked then it is reasonable to state that Father cannot know why he has been referred. After all, if no maltreatment has taken place Father *could not* know why this has happened. Father's 'Yes, yes' at line 58 confirms this construal.

This places Jens in a position in which he is being offered an 'outcome': if Father does not maltreat his daughter, and is unaware of why he has been referred to a social worker, then one possible explanation is that the school have overreacted to Father's daughter's complaint. This could allow Jens to discharge Father (perhaps with an apology) and close the case. Jens is unwilling to do this, however, and so introduces new material that requires explanation: the school doctor has seen the child twice about injuries that are inconsistent with punishments being restricted to smacks on the back of the hand. These are left open: the nature of the injuries is not stated, but their *location* is: 'Once about the back and once about the feet' (line 74). Rather than introducing inappropriate level of force, therefore (which would be difficult to make objective claims about), Jens presents injuries in incongruent places as a further puzzle requiring solution. If Father does only smack his daughter on the back of her hand, injuries elsewhere thus require an explanation.

In consultation with his wife (in a language Jens does not speak), Father comes up with a second candidate explanation: his daughter 'fell down the stairs at school' (line 77-8). At this point Father's position has been significantly weakened. His initial claim, that the escalation to a social worker is inappropriate because his behaviour towards his daughter is not severe enough to warrant such a referral, has been shown to be incongruent with injuries about which that claim cannot be used to account. A candidate explanation has proved to be inapplicable.

- 82 J: Have you ever talked to school about it?
83 F: No never.
84 J: Why not? It is dangerous. Because there may be other children who
85 fall down these stairs.

- 86 F: No, we have never talked to them about it.
87 J: O.K. The school have told me something else.
88 F: Yes? What did they tell you?
89 J: That she was beaten.
90 [He talks to his wife again - 113 seconds].
91 F: My wife says that she fell down the stairs. That she has been
92 beaten is not what happened.
93 [His wife talks again - 114 seconds].
94 F: She fell down the stairs.
95 J: I have a problem. You see you have been sent here by the school
96 because of maltreatment but you are saying 'No, she fell down the
97 stairs' and that presents me with a problem and I don't know what to
98 do.
99 F: Oh yes.

Jens is able to move quite quickly towards two further matters: firstly, if there are dangerous stairs at the school it is incongruous that Father did not report this (lines 86–87) and, secondly, that Father's daughter has been 'beaten' (line 91) rather than just smacked. By introducing level of force at this point, Jens is able to push it forward in a way he could not have done earlier: the claim has more moral force, because Father's earlier explanations for both his referral to the social workers and his claim that his daughter fell down the school stairs have both been rejected. These rejections did not take the form of 'I don't believe you' but rather pointing out their incongruous relationship to the kinds of underlying patterns Father offered as means of explaining them (the referral was inappropriate; injuries witnessed by the school doctor were the result of accidents).

The temporal order of these matters is also important here. If Father's daughter had been seriously injured by falling down the school stairs, it is difficult to understand why this was not mentioned as an explanation for the referral: it would have been a more elegant and comprehensive account for her injuries, and would not have required Father to have invoked the punishments he administers. Because Father invoked smacking first, and the school stairs only after this was shown to be an inadequate account, he has made it more difficult to counter the allegation that his daughter has been beaten. Again, Jens' claim at line 91 – 'That she was beaten' – emerged from Father's request for information at line 90: 'Yes? What did they tell you?'. This is important because it can be offered as a response to a question rather than a claim in its own right: Jens' 'The school have told me something else' at line 89 is difficult to respond to with anything other than Father's question, but it allows Jens' claim to emerge as a response-to-a-question rather than as a claim that can be challenged.

To elaborate on this, if Jens had said 'Your daughter has been beaten' earlier in the encounter it could have elicited a refutation, excuses, alternative accounts, and so on. Because it is presented to Father (1) as an answer to a question, (2) asked by someone whose previous accounts have been shown to be problematic, and (3)

offered as something claimed by the school (not the social worker) on the basis of the school doctor's examination, its force as a candidate pattern of behaviour more successfully explains the referral, the injuries and Father's failure to report the school's dangerous stairs is further strengthened.

Jens has finally achieved the conversational right to provide a new candidate problem to be solved: the school has referred Father to Jens specifically *because of* his maltreatment of his daughter and Father's candidate account of how she received her injuries is less plausible than that explanation. Father's 'Oh yes' at line 99 is an acknowledgement that this is an explanatory dilemma. At this point Jens moves on to what seems to be a different topic, allowing the problem to remain unsolved for the moment.

- 100 J: Do you know what we do here? Would you like me to explain what the
101 confidential centre does? Can I explain?
102 F: Of course.
103 J: I think it will be really interesting for you to understand well
104 what we do. You see here in Belgium we promote the rights of
105 children. The rights of children are that they do not deserve to be
106 maltreated. So even though we feel that that is an injustice we also
107 do not believe in punishing those who have maltreated them but
108 instead we try and help them. That is the reason why we are here. So
109 our main goal is to understand what happens in families, what is it
110 that caused the violence to happen and how we can avoid it without
111 the intervention of the justice system, without the intervention of
112 the police. But there are conditions and the conditions are that we
113 ask for a certain safety for the children. One of these might be
114 that we ask that the violence stops and it is necessary to receive
115 collaboration from the parents. And if that happens, the judge will
116 not intervene. But if the parents are not prepared to do the work and
117 they continue to hit their children we
118 cannot leave it like that. If that happens it is necessary that we
119 go to the justice and that is the Children's Judge who we ask what
120 we need to do to make the children safe. Briefly that is what we do
121 here. But now my problem is that the school has said to me that
122 Rachel has been beaten twice but you say 'No she has fallen'. So if
123 it stays like that I can't ensure her safety and I may have to speak
124 to the Judge to find out what we need to do.

This 'different topic' reframes the conversation from a retrospective ('how did your daughter get her injuries?') to a prospective ('what is likely to happen?') set of concerns. Central to these, couched as telling Father how his service runs, is that it is an explicit alternative to police involvement. Thus, at lines 111–2, 'without the intervention of the police' opens up two possibilities for future developments: the police may become involved *unless* Father agrees to do what Jens is going to ask. By presenting these matters in the form of 'how the service works' it is possible to

avoid this being a threat or ultimatum, but its intent is clear. The disparities in Father's account are thus rendered consequential, at lines 121–4, where resolving those disparities is shown to be the condition of one line of action (participation with the service) or another (speaking to the Judge). The 'retrospective–prospective' possibilities of Father's situation (Garfinkel, 1962: 700) is here revealed: he can change a future course of action but must adjust his account of the past to do so. By allowing 'what has happened' to be changed, 'what will happen' can also be reconsidered. And, to predict our conclusion somewhat, what *will* happen can also be used to reconsider what *has* happened.

The moral considerations of the child's injuries

We will return to Father's claims in lines 48–51: that he loves his children and he never punishes them. This is used in the next phase of the encounter, along with Jens' account of what the confidential centre does (lines 105–123), to provide Father with a practical way out of the problem he has found himself having to deal with. As 'what will happen' has now been invoked, the next phase of the consultation centres on a negotiation about the *kind of person* who might require institutional intervention for their behaviour towards their child. In short, if Father and his wife are going to have to go through an organisational process to address their behaviour towards their daughter this necessarily has implications about what kind of parents they are. 'Someone who beats their daughter' is not an ordinary category to be in but could be construed as a 'master status' (Hughes, 1945), something that is the defining feature of that person as they are perceived and evaluated by others. To use Sacks's (1972) terminology it is a particular kind of category, entwined with moral considerations in the way that other kinds of category are not.

As well as finding a relationship between a set of observable facts (the daughter's injuries) and a pattern of behaviour that can account for those facts (how the injuries were caused), a second relationship has to be determined. This is the relationship between a set of institutional procedures (having to undertake a programme for people who may be violent to their children) and a category of person (the kind of person that beats their child). The issue for Father is that taking part in the programme means he will be seen as a particular kind of person—the moral connotations of being a child-beater are immense—while not taking part will have serious practical consequences: the involvement of the police and legal system. Much of the work Jens engages in in this later phase, therefore, is directed towards breaking the link between 'taking part in the programme' and 'being a particular kind of person'.

125 F: Yes, that is bizarre.

126 (He then talks to his wife in Pashtun -130 seconds)

127 J: How do you think we can resolve the problem?

128 F: I love Rachel. I love her.

- 129 J: I am not saying the contrary.
130 F: I love my children and if they have been naughty I have tapped
131 them.
132 J: Being tapped is different to being beaten on the back and on the
133 feet. That is not normal. And I think you find it difficult to talk
134 here in this situation.
135 F: No, it's not that.
136 J: Well it might be about you trying to work with us or another
137 option is that we go to the justice. We don't have any other
choice.
138 F: I love my children. I work very hard and when I come home I want
139 to rest, eat and relax. But if it doesn't work out like that I feel
140 irritable. I love my children and I would never harm them.
141 J: And Rachel how old is she?
142 F: 8 years old.
143 J: Is it possible for her back, covered in bruises, not to be
144 noticed by either you or your wife?
145 (He then talks to his wife again - 107 seconds).
146 J: There is a problem?
147 F: No there is no problem. But we have never seen her back black and
148 blue.

To return to the transcript, at lines 121–124 Jens presents the situation as a ‘problem’ of fitting together two contradictory facts: that the school says Rachel has been beaten while her father says she has fallen. The latter account is not good enough, and will mean that Jens will have to ‘speak to the Judge’ unless it can be altered. Father, therefore, is now faced with a new dilemma: he can avoid police and/or judicial involvement in the case, but in order to do so he must acknowledge that his daughter has been beaten. Someone who beats their daughter, however, is *morally* bad. The categories available for ‘parents-who-beat-their-children’ are disturbing and troublesome. Child-beaters are, in short, awful people.

The work that Father does from this point onwards is largely organised around staving off this attribution. He does not admit to having beaten his daughter, but presents a series of claims about his own character that are incongruent with the character of someone who beats their daughter:

1. I love Rachel (line 128)
2. I love my children (line 130)
3. I work very hard (line 138)

The point of these claims is not that they are evidence for Father not having beaten his daughter, but rather evidence for Father not being the ‘kind of person’ who beats his daughter. They are claims for moral legitimacy, and are capable of being used by Jens to move Father into the appropriate position to accept social

work intervention. Jens does not dispute these claims, but rather uses them as warrants to emphasise the incongruent severity of Father's daughter's injuries, in lines 132–4: 'Being tapped is different to being beaten on the back and on the feet. That is not normal' and the incongruent relationship between the injuries and the child's age at lines 141–142:

Jens: And how old is she?

Father: 8 years old.

Here further category work is introduced. While it is obviously not appropriate for anyone to beat anyone else, beating an eight year-old girl is far more morally culpable than beating a male adult. The child's sex and age are invoked to further emphasise the category 'child-beater' as a moral category. At lines 146–7 a further problem for Father is introduced with the question 'Is it possible for her back, covered in bruises, not to be noticed by either you or your wife?' Even if Father continues to deny having beaten his daughter, here he must acknowledge that, if she has been beaten, he and his wife have necessarily been neglectful by not having noticed the injuries. To avoid the application of the category 'child-beater' means it can therefore only be replaced by the category 'child-neglecter' for the purposes of this enquiry.

149 J: Monsieur, it is good that you have said that. But this is from
150 the doctor at the school. He examined her and found that her back
151 was black and blue. If you don't believe me then you need to talk to
152 the doctor at the school. If we involve the police, they will
153 interview the doctor who will say that that is what he found after
154 his examination.

155 (Father then talks to his wife extensively 212seconds).

156 J: It bothers you I can see that monsieur. What passes through your
157 head?

158 F: My head. It is possible that I tapped her and she has blue on
159 her.

160 J: I have a proposition for you and you can see what you think. I
161 have never seen her. Normally when we do an interview in this kind
162 of situation we would do an interview with Rachel & with the
school.

163 Then we can have a discussion about what they have seen. That has
164 not happened here. Also, I can see that you have been speaking with
165 your wife but I have not understood and I would like to understand
166 what she is saying and we could do with an interpreter who speaks
167 Pashtun and can translate for us. So, we can organise another
168 interview with a Pashtun interpreter.

169 F: Yes or if you want I don't mind you asking questions and I can
170 translate on her behalf.

- 171 J: Yes, I understand but on the other hand despite your efforts in
172 translating to your wife it might not be the same thing. Also, I am
173 not sure if your wife is telling you all that has happened.
174 Difficult, no?
175 F: Yes, it is difficult and I don't know what to do.
176 J: Try and explain to your wife. It is necessary that we find a
177 solution.
178 F: Well the solution is that on leaving here we do not punish our
179 children.
180 J: Perhaps. But that is if you believe the problems all exist at
181 home.
182 F: Everything I do, I do for the children. I want them to be a good
183 example for society. Perfect.
184 J: I understand that. You have come here today with your wife, you
185 have talked to me and translated for your wife. The majority of
186 people who come here and have punished their children severely also
187 love their children. But you need to understand that if her back is
188 bruised blue then you risk becoming involved with the justice
189 system. I don't want to mislead you.
190 F: My wife and I will never hit the children again.
191 J: That is a good promise.
192 F: And I will ask Rachel about this.
193 J: That is very kind of you.
194 F: I work very hard every day. I go to work at five a.m.
195 J: What do you do for a living?
196 F: I am a petrol attendant. My wife doesn't work but she is going to
197 school to learn French and Flemish.
198 J: Excellent.

At this point, even though Father does not openly admit to having beaten his daughter, he clearly moves towards the position Jens is asking him to occupy: someone who will co-operate with further intervention. Father's denial that he and his wife have not seen such injuries at lines 150–1 is unconvincing, and Jens' response that such a denial will result in the police and the school doctor working together closes it off as a space in which Father can avoid the choice he is faced with. His 'it is possible that I tapped her and she has blue on her' (lines 158-159) constitutes an admission that he has beaten his daughter. *This is enough* for Jens – no further admission is required – and Jens is able to move forward procedurally with respect to an interpreter, further meetings, and suchlike, on the basis of this admission.

The outcome is achieved between lines 182 and 184. Father's 'Everything I do, I do for the children' (line 182) is tacitly accepted by Jens between lines 184 and 188: 'The majority of people who come here and have punished their children severely also love their children'. Father's behaviour is reconstituted as 'severe punishment', and the category of person who administers such punishment is presented as capable

of not being discontinuous with the category ‘parents who love their children’. By giving Father this rhetorical win – that he will be treated as someone who administers (too) severe punishments but nevertheless loves his children – Father can agree to take part in the programme without taking on the category relevances of ‘child-beater’. This is how, in practice, Goffman’s notions of ‘retaining a sense of self’ or ‘saving face’ (Goffman, 1952, 1955) are achieved interactionally.

Conclusion

We appreciate that the extracts presented from this case may have different effects on the reader. They may evoke anger, frustration or despair. Or perhaps, they evoke the complete opposite. We also acknowledge that the social worker’s practice was not perfect; for example, the child who was alleged to have been assaulted had not been seen (yet) and the way in which information was shared about how the centre worked and what the social worker’s role entailed could have been disclosed much earlier on in the meeting. Each reader will have their own view on the interaction that took place and we hope that this paper provides practitioners with the space to reflect on their own approach and the dilemmas and concerns they encounter in everyday practice.

Our opening rationale in this context, however, was to explore how the concerns for a child’s welfare in a case of physical abuse could be created and managed in interaction between a parent and a social worker. We also wanted to explore the different ways in which practice could be conducted depending on the context in which professionals find themselves in. In England, when a child has suffered a significant injury a section 47 enquiry is carried out and social workers lead assessments under section 47 of the Children Act 1989 in partnership with the police and other relevant practitioners (Working Together to Safeguard Children, 2018). The focus of the investigating team is on making a decision as to whether or not to remove a child and/or charge the parents (or carers) for causing harm.

In this context, in contrast, the police were not involved despite there being evidence of physical abuse. Instead, the investigating team involved the school; the doctor and the social worker. Despite the obvious differences in contextual processes, there is still much that can be learned from this scenario. In place of an accusatory approach, that often takes place when there has been an allegation of abuse in England (see Leigh, 2017), the focus in this instance was about developing a more meaningful form of engagement between the social worker and the parent. Although all involved were, by the end of the meeting, fully aware that the social worker had the power to contact the police and start criminal proceedings, building a relationship based on respectful interactions rather than suspicious motivations meant that a better understanding of why the abuse occurred emerged. In adopting this approach, we see a social worker attempt to deconstruct his intervention and negotiate difficult territory with a migrant family, who were relatively new to Belgium, unaware of the country’s societal expectations and cultural rules. We also see a social worker manoeuvre his way through an interaction by using an

assisted story telling approach (see Lerner, 1992) whereby he introduced the facts and then invited the father to provide an account that both the social worker and father can agree on. Through this form of practice participants can arrange who will deliver the story and, in turn, concomitantly establish the other participant as a story consociate and thereby as a possible co-teller.

Social workers' identities revolve around being 'competent members' of the social work community by working within the guidelines and keeping children safe (Garfinkel, 1967: 7–9). However, organisational rules do not govern the activities they are meant to shape. Instead, activities are 'fitted' to rules by the practitioners (Bittner, 1965). And in this context, we did not see a social worker dominated by organisational procedures but rather, a social worker use his experience and communication skills to develop a working relationship with a parent who was alleged to have assaulted his child. The social worker still achieved his intended outcome. He learned who had assaulted the child but more importantly, he gained agreement that the parent would work with professionals so that this form of abuse could be prevented from happening again. Moreover, the social worker accomplished this outcome without shaming the father or labelling him a 'child beater'. As Crittenden (2016) has argued when parents harm their children, they almost never intended to. They do so, either because they do not understand the impact of what they are doing, or that the abuse was wrong in the first place.

It is highly likely that the issues at stake in children and families' social work practice will continue to cause controversy and concern (Hall et al., 2006). This case study demonstrates that social work practitioners, internationally, are often asked to solve problems which require them to make moral evaluations about the way a family functions in order that children may be kept safe from harm. However, what is also evident is that the way in which this work takes place is often different because of the context in which the parent and professional are located. Both the macro and micro cultures in which both parties are situated not only affect the way social workers perceive an issue but also how they perform in interaction with others (Leigh, 2017). The interaction that took place in this case study demonstrates that if social work practice does focus on and makes explicit the different rhetorical devices and interactional moves deployed in specific encounters, professional judgment and relationship-based practice can replace management-driven proceduralism.

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