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# **Crossing the divide between them and us: Using photography to explore the impact organisational space can have on identity and child protection practice.**

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## **Introduction**

This paper intends to draw on data from a comparative ethnography I completed last year which explored the ways in which social workers in England and in Flanders, North Belgium, constructed their professional identity (see Leigh, 2013a). My data collection consisted of using traditional ethnographic methods such as participant observation, interviews and document analysis but in addition to these, it also involved the use of photography. Rose (2007) and Banks (2001) argue that the meanings of photographs are 'arbitrary and subjective'; they depend on who it is that is doing the looking (Pink, 2007: 67). One photograph may be viewed differently by other audiences simply because the viewers are situated in different historical, spatial and cultural contexts. In recognition of this, my main aim was therefore to use photographs so that I, and others, could try to understand the individual, local and broader cultural discourses which surrounded those whom I was interviewing and observing.

Pink (2007) has noted that only recently has there been an increasing amount of ethnographic fieldwork carried out on the domestic interior. These intimate contexts, have, in turn, developed great opportunities for researchers 'to create data archives and reveal the detail of everyday experience and practice' (2007: 28). Therefore, by focusing

on the material and sensory prompts, individuals are also more likely to talk about their self-identities and experiences.

My aim in using photographs was to relate some of these theoretical concepts to the study by contextualising the everyday details of both settings and providing the reader with a visual dimension of what space and environment has embodied for me, the ethnographer. The plan for this article is to discuss what my interpretations may then represent for the participants in this study whilst at the same time presenting a visible phenomenon which will hopefully sharpen the senses of the reader. By drawing from the theoretical perspective of social constructionism the images presented here aim to show how work environments can provide a particular kind of back drop; one which encourages professionals to draw from a specific type of discourse which not only affects the way they construct their identity but also shapes the way they then build relationships with the families they are working with.

### **The use of photography in developing social work theory and practice**

From exploring visual methods literature in social work research, it is evident that documentary photography has been considered a powerful tool in both the present and the past century (see Szto et al. 2005). In fact, it has been suggested that social science research, in particular, has been 'enhanced' by the integration of creativity into methodology as it adds 'expression' to research findings (Russell and Diaz, 2013: 434). Loseke (2001) also contended that the use of images is especially salient for marginalized groups as they can be formatted in such a way so as to make the invisible, visible. They can also bring certain conflicting social problems to the surface and act as 'a catalyst to convey the human experience' by leading to policy change (Russell and Diaz, 2013: 486).

In Russell and Diaz's (2013) grounded theory study with lesbian women which aimed to explore participants' experiences of identity, culture and oppression, the authors found that using images not only increased access and offered opportunities in social work research, in terms of visual representation, but it also added an element of empowerment, which in turn supported social work practice. The authors go on to suggest that it was because of the use of 'adjunct photography' that their research method was supplemented and subsequently it contributed to 'an innovative and fresh perspective' for both the researcher and the participant (2013: 449). In addition, the reader of the research was also found to benefit from the use of visual images, since the majority of people in society are considered to be visual learners (2013: 449).

Chapman et al (2013) support some of the notions proposed by Russell and Diaz (2013). For in their study, which aimed to identify the ways in which images could support and facilitate difficult discussions, they used photographs with social workers to determine whether visual representations could shift assumptions and attitudes. Their findings were positive and demonstrated just how images can effectively engage participants in discussion, encourage openness and reflection, and increase a certain level of empathy which did not previously exist. They noticed that when social workers were shown photographs in combination with a description, this evoked empathy, concern and understanding for both the children and their families. So fundamentally, when images were presented in isolation they were deemed less effective; it was only when they were shown in conjunction with an explanation of the photographs' context that participants were then able to connect with the image being presented.

Using photographs is not just beneficial for research purposes but as Phillips and Bellinger (2011) have found, they can also enhance social work teaching. In their study, which examined photographic works on the subject of asylum seeking, they used the

work of Diane Matar to develop conversations which could provide texture and in depth understanding of others experiences. Phillips and Bellinger (2011: 96) discovered that Matar's visual representations forced them to consider the social relation of 'them to us, and us to each other'. It was, therefore, the use of visual images which prompted the authors to reflect on the spaces which they occupied; this then encouraged them to make connections between that of their own lives and the lives of those they were observing.

Collectively the findings from these studies support Haidt's (2001) claim that an understanding of social-environmental cues does prompt individuals to respond to a new stimulus in ways which are consistent with the experiences and expectations of others. Yet the images that have been used by these authors have been employed quite differently to the ones that will be used in this paper. The ones in this review tend to focus on the emotional impact that images can have on research participants, whereas the photographs that will be presented shortly will provide information about the relations between practice materials, the research site and people. In other disciplines such as anthropology, it is orthodox to study the way in which 'relationships flow constantly between persons and things' (Miller, 2008: 12). Yet this particular approach is more contentious in social work research due to the setting in which these relationships and things are situated: a context which needs to ensure confidentiality and data protection due to the deeply sensitive nature of work which is being carried out. Nonetheless this review does produce findings which provide a rationale for exploring how images along with interview extracts can reveal an inconspicuous 'them and us' rhetoric which can be present in certain organisational settings (Gibbs, 2009: 295). It is this particular kind of symbolic discourse which can hinder positive relationships from being built between social worker and service user.

## **Research context**

As mentioned previously, this study used comparative ethnography to observe two settings in Europe. The first setting was a statutory child and family agency in England where there were in total 36 social workers, 10 managers, 2 service unit managers and 1 Assistant Director in that department. It was a much larger department to that of the Flemish setting, which was also a statutory child protection agency but only dealt with high risk child protection referrals, whereas the England agency dealt with both child protection and child in need referrals. The Flemish team consisted of 10 professionals from different disciplines such as psychiatry, social work, mental health, ortho- and educational pedagogy, psychology and counselling.

Ethical approval to take photos in this study was granted by the University which funded the study as well as the organisations in both settings. As I did not want to take photographs of people, no consent was needed from the individuals who worked or visited these settings. The photographs presented here concentrated solely on the space and materials used by professionals, children and their families.

The data collection took place over the period of one year. In the England setting, I was what Taylor (2011) would describe, an intimate insider: intimately connected with the agency I was carrying out research in as I already worked there as a social worker. My observations therefore took place whilst I worked. It was because of this close connection that I chose to observe another setting in order to gain some distance and develop an objective view of that which was so familiar (see Leigh, 2013b). Every third week I flew to Flanders for a week, but rather than have to work and at the same time observe that which was going on around me, I was able to just be a researcher.

It was in Flanders that I first started taking photographs. On reflection, I think this was because as soon as I arrived I realised that visually the Flemish agency appeared so very different to that of my department in England. I knew that trying to explain these differences to future readers of my work would not have the same impact as if I were to show them photographs. I did not know it at the time but I now realise that I was about to use, what Rose (2007: 239) has described as, a 'supplemental' way of using photographs in my research; the visual qualities of the photos would be employed to supplement the data I had already collected.

As I had no 'shooting script' in place for the visual part of this research (Suchar, 1997: 34), I now recognise that taking the pictures of those things that most interested me in Flanders was led by more of an intuitive method rather than a particular research strategy. My tactic consisted of waiting until I returned to England where I would then seek to take a photograph of a similar object or place in the setting within which I worked. By doing it this way, analysing the photographs seemed much easier as I was able to compare them by exploring the differences between the two cultures. Coding through 'the process of comparison' meant that not only did further codes begin to emerge but I was also able to create a visual comparative element to my data and capture, in my opinion, the diversity of the two settings (Rose, 2007: 245).

Yet as an employee in one of these settings and a visiting observer to the other, it was also important for me to consider a certain 'reflexive vigilance' so as to try and ensure that a critical approach to the visual culture I was attempting to explore was taken (Rose, 2007: 253). It will shortly become evident to the reader that the way in which I have analysed the pictures in this paper clearly depict the Flanders setting as that of a preferential environment in comparison to the England site.

Pink (2007) has recognised that the ways in which individual ethnographers approach the visual in their research is inevitably influenced by a range of factors such as personal experience and theoretical beliefs. Even though I have maintained above that the way in which I took these pictures was intuitive, it is important to acknowledge, and possibly consider as a limitation, that elsewhere I have written confessional papers about the personal politics I encountered whilst I worked as a social worker within the England agency (see Leigh 2013b; Leigh 2014).

## **Comparing and contrasting the child protection settings in Flanders and England to develop meaning.**

### **The importance of the agency building**



Figure1: Exterior of the Flemish agency



This picture (Figure 1) is the exterior of the building I visited in Flanders in which the child protection agency is located. Although the building consists of four floors, the agency actually only comprises of the top floor. The three floors below it belong to a school. First impressions of this site do not suggest this child protection setting is the most beautiful of locations. Yet despite its lack of architectural glamour, this picture is significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, there is no big sign outside the building indicating that the child protection agency is even situated there. Instead a discrete plaque has been placed on the wall to the left of the main entrance. This can be used as a signal for those who are visiting for the first time. But secondly, it also demonstrates just how considerate the agency is in terms of trying to inconspicuously merge in with its surroundings. As the child protection agency occupies the offices on the top floor, parents and children who visit the agency enter the same front door as the children who attend the school. By purposefully blending into the school setting, there is no clear distinction to onlookers between those who are visiting the agency for issues of child abuse and those who are going into the school to be educated.

**J: Why did you decide to base yourselves here?**

**SW: When we were looking for somewhere to base ourselves, we knew it had to be of benefit for the families and not for us. They are the ones, after all, who are the most important and so we wanted them to feel comfortable when they come here and so that people passing by don't know why they are coming here.**

**(Day, 3).**

The choice of this setting therefore was not coincidental; it was selected carefully precisely because of its nature and its function. There are not many public buildings in the city which would allow a child protection agency to blend in as well as this one does. By considering how the very nature of their intervention is closely linked with issues

surrounding power and control, this group of professionals have attempted to try and understand how children and parents may feel when visiting the agency. Furthermore by recognising that families may experience discomfort when visiting a child protection agency, these professionals have tried to make this difficult experience into an easier one. In contrast, the building where the agency in England was based, was chosen by senior managers of the department for very different reasons.



Figure 2: Exterior of the England agency.

Similar to that of the Flemish agency (see Figure 1) this establishment (Figure 2) is also linked to education as it was once a former school. But the difference here is that the school has since closed down and relocated; it is now solely occupied by the Children's Social Care agency. The building is situated on only one level and is surrounded by a large car park. Although only part of the car park can be seen here, it does actually

extend around the side and to the back of the building. In England, a key part of social work practice involves visiting parents and children within their home.

In Flanders however, visiting the homes of service users is carried out by a different agency, called Kind en Gezin (child and family) agency. The Kind en Gezin agency consists of child and family nurses who are allocated to all families who have a child. Apart from their medical involvement, the main part of their role is to support families with aspects of parenting. Therefore, if any child in need issues arise, they are then seen as the professionals who are on hand to provide the appropriate support as they have already built a relationship with the family. As a result of Kind en Gezin involvement, Flemish child protection professionals (who work in Figure 1), rarely, if ever, visit their families at home because when a referral is made they rely on the observations of the child and family nurse who will always remain involved in the case. This is beneficial as it provides the Flemish child protection professionals with more time to spend working with their cases, in place of spending time in the car driving to and from families' homes.

Ferguson (2014:473) has argued that when social workers 'remain rooted in the office' it can lead child protection practice into 'static, sedentary, immobile and non-relational ways'. The photographs that are about to follow aim to demonstrate that this does not have to be the case. Although Ferguson recognises that child protection work involves human contact and relationship work with children and families, his argument focuses on the home visit, the traditional way of carrying out social work in the UK. However, the argument I am making in this case is that if the office space is used in an appropriate way it can make the difference between that of a static professional and a creative practitioner.

At the front of the car park in Figure 2, something that is not visible in this photograph, for reasons of confidentiality, is a large sign which identifies the purpose of the agency and the service. This is not only rather unfortunate but also stigmatises those parents and children who visit the centre as it identifies them to others as those families which are known to children's services. Understanding the perspectives of service users is vitally important in social work as it is an integral part in building relationships.

Goffman (1963) stressed how the subjective experience of social hurt can create shame and stigma for certain affected people. Goffman defined stigma as that which pertains to a person who has been discredited by society due to a personal failure or flaw. In this situation, the social stigma which has been so carefully pondered upon and subsequently avoided by the Flemish professionals, has not been, I believe, created in the England context as a result of maliciousness but from a form of pragmatic reasoning. By situating a sign large enough for everyone to see at the front of the building, no visitor to the centre would be able to miss it when trying to locate it for the first time.

**Manager: This building was chosen by the Assistant Director. She wanted one building in which all social workers in (names the borough) could be in one place and she thought it would be cheaper. But it didn't quite work out like that 'cos this building costs a fortune to heat and maintain. But it serves its purpose and it is good to be altogether I think.**

**(Field notes, Day 42).**

The main purpose for these premises was therefore to reduce costs and use resources effectively. But another reason for choosing it was so that all the children teams from across the borough could be located in one setting. Therefore, by being altogether, the sharing of information and offering advice would be made easier between teams. However, although this does sound like a good idea it is not always as effective as intended in practice. When exploring the impact of agile working on social work office

practices, Jeyasingham (2014) found that office space tended to be dominated by social workers having loud conflicting phone conversations with service users. He also noticed that ways of carrying out practice was not only created by what social workers were saying but also through the behaviours that were being conducted by them in offices. Therefore, the interactions that went on between social workers within that space subsequently affected the way in which cases were then assessed.

These kind of practices do not allude to the kind of information sharing environments that the manager in the England setting of my study hoped for. Yet these behaviours were also apparent in the offices I observed. Although it was useful for practitioners to be placed altogether, it was evident that this sort of environment enabled particular distorted behaviours to develop which I will go onto discuss in more detail shortly.

When children and parents enter the building in Figure 2, they find themselves in a reception area. Although this area in this agency is open plan, I have come across many reception areas in other agencies which are located behind glass windows implemented to protect employees from parents should any hostile exchanges occur, as the following extract demonstrates:

**SW: I don't feel comfortable with the reception area here. It is too open plan. I have worked in other places which are more enclosed and so we feel more protected.**

**J: Why would you need to feel 'more protected'?**

**SW: Because anything could happen. A lot of the people we work with are violent and have assaulted their partners. Here there is nothing to stop them assaulting us.**

**(Day 62, England).**

Although the reception area makes this social worker feel uncomfortable and vulnerable, having a protected area does more than safeguard employees from service users. It also establishes itself as the first barrier to building relationships, one which

serves to create a divide between 'us' and 'them'. Lonne et al. (2008:14) have argued that it is the moral concern about 'bad' and 'dangerous' parents which drives contemporary child protection practice in the UK today. In this setting this is articulated by the security doors, which separate the main building from the reception area and which can only be passed by those who have been provided with a security fob. As a result it presents itself, not as a social work premise, but as a fortress.

This fortress aids the alienation of families by encouraging authority and control differentials between the social worker and the service user. These power imbalances are further intensified because it is behind the security doors that all the information known about the children and families social workers work with is stored; information that these families are unable to access unless a formal request is made.

In contrast, the Flemish agency takes a different approach. Although there are security measures in place when children and parents enter the agency via the school's front door, there is no barrier in place when they arrive at the reception of the child protection agency. Children and families are instead invited to sit and wait for the professional in the office area, where there is no glass window to initiate the divide between staff and service users and no security door in place to then fortify that difference.



Figure 3: Corridor in Flemish agency

Visitors arriving at the agency will also see this corridor (Figure 3) which leads to the professionals' offices. These are situated on the right hand side and each has a caricature of the person whose office it is on the door (see for example Figure 4). There are, in between each office, what appears to be miniature coffins on stilts yet these wooden boxes are actually symbolic gestures which have been situated in this corridor to specifically welcome and reassure new visitors. When this agency moved from using paper files to using the computer, they asked a local artist to compress all the case files into these handmade boxes.

When families visit the VK agency for the first time, professionals at the agency show them these boxes to reassure them and make their visit more comfortable and less daunting. These boxes, or what Jane Bennett might call, cultural forms, 'can enhance receptivity to the impersonal life that surrounds and infuses us' (2010:4). In this instance, the message being conveyed to the visiting families is that they are not

alone, for as they can see, there have been countless families who have come before them and who, like them, have struggled with certain issues in their lives.



Figure 4: Caricature on door of practitioner's office

What is also significant about the use of organisational space in this setting is that each of the professionals working here has their own office. Parents and children can find the person they are visiting because they will remember the caricature on the door (Figure 4) which has been designed to represent the traits of the professional and ease what might be a tense situation. It is in this private and secure space that they can do their work and meet with parents and/or children as well as other professionals. Although these offices do not permit their practice to be simultaneously observed by others, the privacy they are afforded enables confidential conversations to emerge. The



'them' and 'us' situation is avoided as the professional and service user come together to work and discuss personal information; it also serves to encourage the building of relationships between both parties.

In addition, the information that is known about the family is stored on the computer that is situated in the same room as the professional which they have come to visit. In Flanders, participatory report writing in social work practice is advocated. This is a method where an active dialogue should take place between service user and social worker whilst the report is being written in order that the voice of the service user can be heard. Although the way in which this has been carried out has been criticised by Roose et al. (2009) for being tokenistic, it is a far more emancipatory process than the one carried out in England which instead involves the social worker writing the report alone and then sending a copy to the family.



Figure 5: Corridor in England agency.

Figure 5 is a photograph of one of the corridors in the English agency. All of the corridors in this building look virtually the same and are situated around a large office (on the right hand side of this picture) which accommodated one of the area teams. Although there are some pictures dotted around the corridors, in contrast to Flanders, there is not one image that has been added for particular significance. Urry (2007: 73) has defined 'atmosphere' as that which is in 'the relationship of people and objects'. Yet the inside of this building consists of plain and simple offices, full of desks and computers, with no inspired symbolic gestures around to stimulate creativity or develop meaning for the professionals who work there. There is no Urry atmosphere in this context, but what we are left with is an idea of how an organisation can easily create

the static, sedentary and uninspiring spaces that Ferguson (2014) was referring to earlier on in this paper.

### **The impact of the office space on identity and child protection practice**



Figure 6: Office in the England agency.

Also in contrast to Flanders, where the professionals each have their own offices, not all the social workers in this agency have their own desks, a few have to hot desk depending on the shifts they are working. Figure 6 is a typical layout of a social work office found in England today. It is an open plan office, which means that the privacy afforded to Flemish professionals and the families that visit them cannot be afforded to those working in this context. As a result families are not allowed to enter this office because of data protection issues, with so many people working on different cases, it is seen as inappropriate for a member of one family to overhear the personal details of another case.

As we can see, this room does not have any walls or partitions, apart from the two glass offices which are situated in each corner and are the areas where the managers are based. In 1975, Michel Foucault developed Jeremy Bentham's (1794) panoptican model for prisons by arguing that it was a method which assured the automatic functioning of power. Up until now, I have been discussing how power differentials can develop between the social worker and the service user but in this picture it would appear that this is not reserved solely for just that relationship. In this agency it has also been developed between social worker and manager.

Although it is not clear in this picture, each glass window has a venetian blind which can be altered so that the angle has a slanting effect, much like the blind in Bentham's model which was designed so that the prison Governor could see the prisoners but they could not observe him. In this context, these blinds also allow the manager to oversee 'everything without being seen' (Foucault, 1995: 195). They also further support Jeyasingham's (2014) argument that material aspects of spaces do matter in terms of how they interact and are interpreted by the users.

**Social worker: The offices here are practical but impractical also. Yes you get to see what your colleagues are up to and help them if needed, but you can also hear what others are talking about on the phone and this then prevents private conversations from being had. Then you've got the manager who can sit in their private office and see us, but we don't often see them because of the blinds so we don't know what they are up to but they know what we are doing. It's a way of them checking we are doing what we are supposed to be doing or rather, in their words, them making sure they are on hand if support is needed.**

**(Observations, Day 68).**

The concept of positioning from the perspective of social constructionism acknowledges how the power of culturally accessible discourses can frame experiences and yet restrain behaviour at the same time (Harre and Langenhove, 1999). These may, as the

social worker in the above extract points out, provide 'possibilities and limitations' (Burr, 2003:113). Practitioners can only behave in ways that are deemed acceptable to others within their office spaces, and in this micro culture the panoptican surveillance effect indicates that one message that might be conveyed by this sort of office setting is that authority is more important than support.

Featherstone et al (2014: 79) argue that these kind of assumptions have materialised from the flawed belief that 'a strong top down management is the key quality to performance'. However, although 'command and control assumes the need for extrinsic motivation', Featherstone et al argue there is plenty of credible evidence which contends the opposite is actually more effective in motivating people such as encouraging autonomous working and providing professional support.

Flanders epitomises the advice offered by Featherstone et al. (2014) in terms of meeting the authors' recommendation for an optimal system redesign, as all ten practitioners have their own offices. They are also encouraged to practice autonomously and but still have the opportunity to receive that professional support as they meet on a daily basis to conduct peer supervision sessions. It is in these sessions where they discuss their own cases and seek advice and support as to how they can best progress with some of the dilemmas they face.

### **Using symbolic gestures to build relationships with children and parents**



Figure 7: Little box of things, Flanders.

In terms of the materials that were used by social workers when working with children and parents within these spaces, there were a number of similarities and differences. Both countries were adept at using puppets to encourage conversations to develop when working with children. However, in Flanders other creative methods were also used such as this box of unusual items (see Figure 7). These bits and pieces were used as another symbolic gesture, another more intimate way of making a connection with a family, be that a parent or child, in order to reassure them, once again, that they were not alone.

**Social worker: When I have spoken with a child or a parent and they have shared something secret with me, I ask them to take something from this box. I ask them to keep it with them as a sign that they had spoken to me about it because it happens that they forget and this is the sign that there was someone who listened to them and who knows**

**from now on what kind of difficult things they have been through and that I am there to share these difficult moments with. (Observations, Day 13).**

Those who do take one of these social worker's possessions and in turn open up and share their traumatic experiences are not left to feel ashamed for what they have done or been through and they are not abandoned the moment they leave the agency. Daniel Miller (2008: 1) has related possessions to that of profound objects; he found that 'the closer our relationships are with objects, the closer our relationships are with people'. In this case the item the service user chooses serves as a reminder of what s/he has shared and thus forges a link between the service user and the professional; it enables relationships to be built between the two. This form of communication can begin to pave a new path for the service user to follow.

Featherstone et al. (2014) suggest that social workers in the current UK climate have two choices: to be part of an authoritarian demonization or to offer hope and support to families so that they may care safely and flourish. This agency demonstrates that to do the latter the 'shackles of individualistic and mechanistic ways of working' need to be broken first (2014: 35). It is through this new discourse that the agency, in turn, enables parents to take that first step towards making personal changes in their lives; for once they have recognised what they have been through, where they have come from and what new things lie ahead of them they can, with the support of professionals, look forward to making the changes that are needed for their children. Rather than parents being told what they need to do to meet the standards of the England child protection system, and being expected to make those changes as individual human agents in charge of their own lives and affairs, the philosophy of this Flemish agency is to take each family member by the hand and free them from their usual ways of viewing themselves and those around them.



Figure 8: Golem\*, Flanders

This is enhanced even more so with symbols such as Golem (see Figure 8). When the Director of the Flemish agency first came across Golem he knew that he had found a link between the agency and those children who found it difficult to open up and share the traumatic experiences they had encountered, a response he calls “freezing”. Golem represents the frozen child because he too is unable to talk about that which he has experienced and subsequently appears unaffected and impassive too. However, just like the children Golem also has a heart which in this picture is symbolised by the hatch in his chest and it is this, when opened, which leads to his inner world.

Golem is now situated on the flat roof of the Flemish agency. Those children who are unable to open up and talk about that which they have experienced are encouraged to go and meet the gentle giant. Once they are told the story of Golem, they are shown the steps which will lead them to his heart, which they can open and drop in whatever they like: drawings, notes or letters sealed in envelopes.



Whatever they do post, they are reminded that only Golem will ever know their secret for he is not just a static object full of secrets, but also a helper who at night, when everyone has gone to sleep, reads the messages he has been given and then visits each sender to soothe their fears and their nightmares. Yet children are then told that no one will ever find out about the journeys he makes because in the morning he is always back in his usual spot. It is evident that Golem has what Bennett (2010: 6) would call 'Thing-Power' because his mere presence has the 'curious ability' to produce effects in children which are both 'dramatic' yet also significantly 'subtle'.

## **Discussion**

These photographs offer insights into some of the similarities and differences between the Flemish and English approaches towards child protection practice. In Flanders, forming a visual dialogue with parents and children is considered vitally important. It ties in with their philosophy that abuse often occurs in families and those who are forced to intervene have the power and control. Yet in Flanders, to understand why people do what they do, professionals realise that they first have to accept that it is difficult for the parents as well as the children to have abuse in their lives. Thus by beginning with the aim of understanding why abuse occurs between people who share a family relationship, professionals work towards teaching parents how to change the way they interact with their children.

By practising with this approach in mind, they try to fully deconstruct their intervention by, carefully, considering aspects of space and environment with the parent and child in mind. Berger (1972: 9) argues that we never look at 'just one thing' because we are always 'looking at the relation between things and ourselves'. These professionals support his argument. By using art as symbolic gestures, they develop

ways of communicating to parents and children that they are not alone so that they may be freed from the pain they have experienced. And, subsequently, by considering the family, a different sense of professional identity develops for the practitioner. With professionals placing parents and children first, the power differentials that exist between them are recognised and addressed. As a result, a discourse which evokes compassion for the abusers emerges and this provides families with the opportunities to make changes in their lives.

In England, on the other hand, no consideration was given as to how the building might be seen by those who are forced to visit it as the practitioners' focus is on visiting the family within their home as it is 'the most fundamental act in child protection practice' (Ferguson, 2014: 478). This lack of contemplation has led to a fortress of social work being designed. Its functional structure only serves to alienate families by creating divides and developing power differentials between social worker and service user.

By framing parents and children as the objects of assessments, social workers in the UK are not encouraged to consider them as subjects of their own practice. If 'discourse disciplines subjects into certain ways of thinking', then we can see in this situation how the sense of professional self is made through the operation of this particularly oppressive discourse (Rose, 2007: 143). Yet, if we were to consider creating a visual dialogue between professional and service user, like our Flemish colleagues have, it may help 'recover what we have lost' and encourage us to pay attention to how 'language and, thus social work practice, is measured by words' (Bellinger and Phillips, 2011: 101).

However, the negative effect of the fortress does not solely affect relationships between social worker and service user, but it also impacts on the way in which connections are made between professionals within the agency. In contrast to the

Flemish agency where all practitioners and the Director have their own office, the panoptican model of surveillance in the open plan office in England suggests that having your own space is only awarded to those 'leaders...who do well', those who attend and adhere to 'the performance regime' (Featherstone et al. 2014: 79).

## **Conclusion**

By using photographs in this paper, I have attempted to contextualise both settings by providing the reader with a visual dimension of what space and environment has signified for me and may represent for the participants of this study. I agree with others (see Berger, 1972; Banks, 2001; Pink, 2007; Rose, 2007) that the way I see these photographs may be dramatically different to the way others may view them, yet images such as these still do record visible phenomena which can sharpen our senses. They also, hopefully, provide the reader with a better understanding of where this research took place.

By identifying the differences between these two child protection agencies, I have tried to demonstrate just how space and environment can impact on the identity of those who work in these settings and those who visit them as 'material conditions and social practices are inextricably bound up in discourse' (Burr, 2003: 118). These photographs demonstrate how work environments can provide particular kinds of canvases for both professionals and service users to draw from when constructing their own identities. For if 'our sense of self is made through the operation of discourse' then so too are the 'objects, relations, places and scenes' part of that very same discourse which undoubtedly surrounds us (Rose, 2007: 143).

## **Notes**

\*Figure 8: 'Golem' by Koen Vanmechelen. Situated on the rook of Leuven  
Vertrouwenscentrum Kindermishandling .

This picture has been taken with permission from:

[http://www.kindermishandelingleuven.be/VK\\_07\\_kunst\\_B\\_KoenVanMechelen.html](http://www.kindermishandelingleuven.be/VK_07_kunst_B_KoenVanMechelen.html)

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