

**Constructing Professional Identity in
Child Protection Social Work: A
Comparative Ethnography.**

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Abstract

This doctoral study explores what being a professional in child protection social work actually means to those working within this context. In an attempt to unravel the meaning of professional identity for social workers, I carried out an ethnography 'at home'. But in order to create that passage of space and time between me and the discourse I currently employed, I also decided to observe the Flemish child protection system. This study has, therefore, a comparative element.

My analytic focus has been drawn towards certain cultural factors which impact upon and influence the ways practitioners construct their identities. By considering where professionals are located, in the North West of England and Flanders, I wanted to explore the systems for which they work; systems embedded in unique yet diverse cultures which collectively impact on the practitioner in some shape or form.

Data analysis has involved material from interviews, naturally occurring talk, electronic information (case notes, reports and emails), photographs, organisational policy and procedures. The findings demonstrate that social workers in England are firmly situated within an incongruent agency which is entrenched in a context of blame. Subsequently, a blame posture has been established which further encourages various forms of destructive discourse to emerge. Practitioners also find they are stigmatised and labelled as professional failures by both society and the agency they work for. In Flanders, however, by drawing from a discourse which evokes compassion for abusers, child protection professionals perceive themselves differently. As well as feeling confident and passionate about their practice they feel valued and revered by their agency and society.

If our identity is constructed out of the discourses which are made culturally available to us then this comparative ethnography shows just how and why the practitioners from these two settings perceive their own professional identities so considerably differently.

Glossary of terms used in the analysis chapters

The terms 'child protection' and 'safeguarding' will be used throughout the following chapters to define the work that aims to prevent, respond and resolve issues relating to children who experience abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence.



England

'England' is used, in this thesis, to refer to the area in which this study took place.

'UK' is used to refer to the national points of discussion.

Fenton department: the children and families department in England where I carried out the study

SW: social worker

Manager: for all managers in all tiers of the organization

Client: a term used for parents/carers or children who are in receipt of a service from a Children's Services.



Flanders

VK agency: Vertrouwenscentrum kindermishandling (the child protection agency where I carried out the study)

K.G: Kind en gezin (child and family agency)

CPP: child protection professional (to represent all professionals in the agency)

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Once upon a time (in the early 1900s) social workers in Britain were considered by members of the public as 'inspirational' practitioners. They were 'deeply respected' and 'valued' for the work they carried out with children and their families (Ferguson, 2011: 25). When a child died, it was not the fault of the social worker but a failure in what was known about child protection practice. These practitioners were referred to as 'experts' and saw their work as a science; furthermore they quashed public doubts by reporting on the successes in their social work practice (2011: 28).

These tales are hard to believe given what social workers are known to experience today. The reputation and standing of the profession has declined in recent years (Ayre, 2001; Ferguson, 2011; Lonne et al. 2008; Wattam, 1992; Wise, 1988). Social work is now regularly subjected to superfluous repudiation and vilification from a myriad of agencies within society. Gagged by confidentiality, social workers are unable to report on the good practice they have carried out with children and families. They not only feel the pressure from 'countervailing forces' outside of their own profession (see Freidson, 1986: 202) but also have to deal with hostility and control evident from within their organisation (Ayre, 2001; Cooper et al. 1995; Ferguson, 2011; Hetherington, 1998;). This not only has a negative impact on the way they conduct their practice (Cooper et al. 1995; Hetherington, 1998) but also distorts the way they construct their identities as social workers within this context.

As a practising child protection social worker within a statutory setting in England I feel acutely aware of how my decision making is often controlled by the fear of reprisal from another audience which Cooper et al. (1995: viii) have poignantly characterised as 'a feeling of stuckness'. The possibility of being blamed for my actions is an element of practice that I believe restricts the effective use of my

experience and skills. It also has an extraordinary effect on how I perceive myself as a professional and how I construct my identity within a culture which is entrenched in blame.

In Flanders (Northern Belgium), however, there is theory to suggest that social workers are revered and respected (Cooper et al. 1995; Desair and Adriaenssens, 2011; Hetherington, 1998; Marneffe, 1996), much like they were in Britain in the early 1900s. These professionals work within a 'welfare system', a system which inherently focuses on working closely with the child, their parents and the judge so that joint mutual decisions are made; issues such as 'accountability' and 'blame' are secondary, if existent at all (Cooper et al. 1995).

Although there are many other authors who have discussed the subjective experiences of the social worker within the context of child protection (see Cooper et al. 1995; de Montigny, 1995; Ferguson, 2011; Wise, 1988) and others who have analysed the impact the media has had on the child protection process (see Ayre, 2001; Collins, 2000; Edwards and Soetenhorts, 1994), this study does not intend to repeat these forms of investigation but instead contribute to the debate by exploring how professionals, in a culture which is deeply 'entrenched in blame', construct their own identity (Ferguson, 2011: 34). Hicks (2008) has argued that contemplating an individual's identity is important within the practice of social work if it is to teach practitioners something interesting and innovative about the way we think of human relationships, intimacy and care. If this study can also encourage others to contemplate the identity of the child protection social worker in this same way then that 'surely has to be a good thing' (2008: 78).

1.1 Research focus

The main focus of this study is the professional identity of child protection social workers. The epistemological position that I draw on throughout this project is that of social constructionism. By approaching literature with the view point that 'without culture we could not function'- humans do not only inhabit a pre-existing system but become inhabited by it (Crotty, 1998: 53). By using this perspective I have developed the following three aims:

1. To establish the meaning of professional identity for child protection social workers. That is what being a social worker actually means to those working within this context by gaining an understanding of how they perceive themselves as professionals.
2. By drawing from the theory of social constructionism, I also want to consider where the social worker is located. In this context it is the child protection system in the UK and the social welfare system in Flanders. These systems are embedded in separate cultures which are made up of certain agencies and influenced by various discursive regimes, all of which collectively impact on the social worker in some shape or form.
3. Furthermore by understanding where social workers are located, I then plan to use the method of ethnography to explore how certain circulating discourses which they find themselves subjected to, affect their thoughts, feelings and meaning making practices. There are so many studies which focus on what child protection social workers can do better but this is not the aim of this study. For I believe that most practitioners are oblivious to the origins and meanings of the various discourses that they use and are unaware of how

these symbolic codes not only impact on their own professional identity but also influence the way they behave and practice.

The empirical basis of this doctoral study is that of a comparative ethnography which took place in two child protection settings, one here in England, UK and one in Flanders, Belgium. Foucault (1972) contended that it is impossible for a person on the inside to see the discourse they use and are subjected to and the only way to understand it would be through a period of time and separation. I argued above that practitioners are oblivious to that which goes on around them, yet I too am a practitioner and part of the very same culture I wish to explore. Therefore to create that passage of space and time between me and the discourse I employ, I have chosen to observe the Flemish child protection system and use it as a comparative element to this study. In doing so, I wanted to find out the following: what does it mean to be a social worker in practice today? How do professionals describe the context within which they work? And how does their culture influence the way they then perceive their identity?

1.2 Rationale for the study- why this? And why now?

Over the years there have been a number of commentators (see Adams, 1998; Adams et al. 2002; Davies and Duckett, 2008; Munro, 2002) who have attempted to find ways to improve child protection social work practice in the UK. As a student I would often read their theories and promise myself that I would endeavour to follow their ideals and implement their suggestions once I was qualified. My incentive was to be a critical but fair social worker, one who would do 'right' by families, one who would protect children from harm. My main motive, on the other hand, was to ensure I did

not end up like Lisa Arthurworry: the last social worker to have worked with Victoria Climbié, the professional found culpable for her death.

It is easy to miss the story of Lisa Arthurworry when, in my experience, you are starting out as a newly qualified eager to make a difference. For it isn't a story that was shared with me when I was studying social work and it isn't one that I was told when I started in my first post as a social worker. I learned about what happened to Lisa purely by chance one day when scouring the internet for more information on the Victoria Climbié case. When Lisa Arthurworry started in her new post at Haringey Social Services she had no idea that just some weeks later she would not only be dismissed from her job but barred from practising social work altogether. Lisa had only been qualified three months when she was allocated Victoria's case. Following the Climbié Inquiry Lisa was also placed on the Protection of Children Act list (PoCA)². Later that year she was referred to a psychiatric service for 20% loss of faculties and was sectioned under the Mental Health Act. Her weight dropped to five and half stone. Out of all the professionals involved in the tragedy of Victoria Climbié, only Lisa Arthurworry lost her job (Taylor, 2007).

So becoming a social worker post- Climbié Inquiry (2003) significantly shaped the way I constructed my identity as a newly qualified practitioner. Not only was I, as a student, taught to scrutinise the Laming Report (2003) for the "errors" that were made by all professionals at that time, but on the very first day in my new post as a qualified social worker, I was also asked to read it again in order to "refresh" my memory as well as to prepare me for what lay ahead. My practice was thereon subsequently shaped by the vigilant decisions I went on to make whilst working with the knowledge and apprehension of what might happen to me if one of those

² Protection of Children Act (1999) is a system which has been created to prevent persons considered 'unsuitable' to work with children.

decisions turned out to be the “wrong” one. I also found that by trying to draw from and implement the “ideal” social work theories I had learned during my degree, in the hope of becoming a “better” social work practitioner, was not as straight forward as I had originally thought it would be. I was not naïve as to what lay ahead. I was fully aware that ‘the role of social work in society’ had been ‘a matter of controversy since its inception’ (Dominelli, 1996: 154). Yet despite the debate that the profession had become ‘deprofessionalized’ (see Dominelli, 1996; Healey and Meagher, 2004; Orme, 2001) I remained hopeful that ‘post-professionalization’ would prevail and persuaded myself that due to the resilient nature of social work, this profession would be one which would be able to resist professional decline through the process of ‘restratification³’ (Randall and Kindiak, 2008: 351).

Despite this hope, I found that I was, instead, in a profession which had to deal with certain unexpected pressures, tensions which were evident and seemed to take precedence both within and outside of the organisation. It started to occur to me that the original path I had chosen had somehow changed en route and was no longer the path I was following. Doing what I wanted to do, ‘social work’ with children and families, had turned into a distant memory, for somewhere along the way I had become lost and confused. I soon realised that no matter how many text books I read to try and improve my practice, my views of safeguarding children remained the same: significantly distorted. Protecting my reputation and defending my practice were now the primary ‘social work’ activities that seemed to take priority over that of building relationships with children, learning to trust parents and taking informed risks.

³ Restratisation is a term used here to define how a profession can evolve and expand its scope of practice.

The reason for this study, therefore, is to contribute to the wealth of research already in circulation in the child protection field by *not* aiming to find a better solution for the way social workers currently practise. Instead its relevance is to understand the composition of those who do 'do' social work. My argument will be throughout that if we do not understand who social workers are and where they are located, we will never be able to understand why they practise in the way that they do, for as White (1997: 6) has argued 'social workers may be free and purposeful but not in conditions of their own making'.

By employing an infrequently used method in sociology and in social work, that of a comparative ethnography, this study hopes to contribute to the field by showing how other child protection practitioners in Europe go onto assemble their professional identity in a different way to the social workers in the England. This thesis is also concerned with the construction of the images, reputations and stereotypes of child protection social workers in the UK. Its findings will therefore contribute to the profession's debate by demonstrating that professional 'social shelters', a concept first developed by Freidson (1970-2001) and later Pithouse (1998) hold different meanings to those intended for some practitioners working in the child protection field in the UK.

It is important to note that this thesis will focus primarily on the literature relating to the 'sociology of professions' and to 'social work'. Whilst I do acknowledge that there are other professions involved in child protection, such as the police, members of health and education professions (and literature from these professions will be included at certain points throughout the thesis) my main aim in this context is to explore the professional identities of social workers.

My plan, therefore, as a writer, analyst and narrator for all those who have taken part in this study and who still do practise in the field, is to explore their experiences from the stories they have shared with me and the day to day activities which I have also observed. I will form arguments as I go along, assertions that I hope will persuade the reader just how and why social workers from England construct their own professional identities so considerably differently from those in Flanders.

1.3 The structure of the thesis

The remaining part of this chapter will focus on the background of the professions debate and discuss how certain defensive techniques and discourses can emerge within certain professional fields. I also plan to explain my use of particular social constructionist concepts within the forthcoming text and I will summarise how this theory can be used to understand how professional identity may be constructed.

Chapter two is a literature review that explores and analyses research which has been carried out in the child protection setting in the UK and abroad within the past 30 years. Key themes will be discussed and summarised with a particular focus on professional identity in social work practice.

Chapter three outlines the methodological orientation of this project and delineate the research process I have undertaken in this study. I also explain how the data for this study was generated and detail why the preferred approach of a comparative ethnography was selected.

Chapter four is the first of the analysis chapters. 'Constructing culture in child protection social work' aims to set the scene for the subsequent chapters by exploring the wider contextual element of child protection practice. This chapter is concerned with the way in which certain external agencies, both in the England and in Flanders,

perceive child abuse and how they hold certain expectations of the professionals who then carry out the work of child protection practice.

Chapter five uses visual imagery to analyse the space and environment in which child protection practice is carried out. In 'The use of space and environment' photographs have been used in order to create a form of visual dialogue with the reader by drawing attention to the difference in settings in which the two agencies in England and Flanders are located.

Chapter six focuses specifically on the micro culture of England participants. In 'The impact of an incongruent micro culture on the professional identity of the social worker' I explore how certain cultural factors impact on the way professionals construct their identity in the Fenton department.

Chapter seven, the final of the analysis chapters, focuses on the same theme as that of chapter six, but in relation to the Flemish professionals. In 'The impact of a congruent micro culture of the professional identity of the social worker' I continue to use social constructionist theory to examine the culture of the two Flemish agencies and how these impact on the practitioners from these organisations.

The thesis will end with a conclusion of the findings.

Professionalisation, discourse and identity.

1.4 The nature of professions

Child protection is a specialist area within the profession of social work. Only by appreciating how social work has become a profession and how child protection as a practice has evolved within various contexts of adversity, change and uncertainty will we then be able to explore what professional identity means to social workers working within this field.

The study surrounding the development of professions has always tended to be on the periphery of conventional sociological theory and research. As Burrage and Torstendahl (1990: 2) highlight, Karl Marx and Max Weber, two of sociology's founding fathers said virtually nothing about it during their lifetimes. For Marx (1818- 1883) the professions were insignificant participants in the class conflicts of capitalist societies. Sometimes he aligned them with the bourgeoisie and at others, the proletariat. Weber (1864- 1920) on the other hand ignored professions altogether, making them indistinguishable from any other work group. However, Marx and Weber did provide society with two powerful concepts: class and bureaucracy, which as social phenomena have haunted the study of professions ever since. By Marx and Weber simply placing the professions in a class system and identifying them as a ruling class with a service class attached, future sociologists had two powerful concepts to confront and overcome when seeking to introduce a new theoretical or conceptual paradigm for the meaning of profession.

The professions debate has continued over the years with various authors developing specifications to argue for a set of criteria that could fit all (see Cogan, 1953; Goode, 1960; Millerson, 1964) or identifying a process of professionalisation which white collar occupations could aspire to (see Wilensky, 1964). It was not until Freidson (1970) that a new perspective to the argument was introduced. In his seminal study *Profession of medicine*, Freidson challenged the belief that certain criteria needed to be met before an occupation could be deemed a profession. He created a distance from previous opinion by arguing that a 'profession' was an occupation but it was different in that it enabled particular practitioners the capacity to create social shelters in the labour market through the monopolisation of educational training and specific credentials.

1.5 Defensive techniques of professions

Trist and Bamforth (1951) recognised that in developing a profession, or a social organisation, interacting components such as structure, culture and mode of functioning were required in order for it to perform its tasks and meet the psychological needs of the members. Following on from this concept, Freidson (1986) broadened his initial focus and in doing so noticed that in England and the United States there was a tendency for each profession to develop its own movement for recognition and protection for the needs of its members. In turn this created an occupational distinctiveness, one that held exclusive and elite memberships for those involved and led to members forming groups within their professions as a means of defending their discipline.

These group formations served to *exclude* all those who failed to possess the required credentials but *include* all those who did. Freidson (1986: 202) referred to this formation as a 'social closure', which he described as a defensive technique, one which rewarded its members, not through financial gain or peerage, but by meeting their cultural, social and psychological needs. This 'social closure' created an elite membership, which Flexner (1915: 156) had also identified many years earlier, when questioning whether social work was a profession or an occupation, but back then he had referred to it as 'a brotherhood' or 'a caste'. In 1998, Pithouse also observed this form of social closure in his ethnography of a child protection setting and described it as 'a social world that is a structure of meanings and relationships that provide *secure* boundaries and a creditable identity' (p. 27) [own emphasis added].

By forming a social closure, the knowledge of these professionals, their skills and their work, consequently became institutionalised as boundaries created a divide between the discipline community and the public; for as Freidson argued (1986: 202)

‘without closure there can be no discipline’. This elite group also provided a social shelter for professionals by encouraging formal bodies of knowledge to develop, be nourished, practised, refined and further expanded upon. Freidson argued that these defensive techniques were used by professional institutions, not to exploit or dominate outsiders, but as support devices for growth, refinement and quality for insiders.

It is important to note that prior to Freidson’s work Menzies-Lyth (1960) carried out a study which explored the profession of nursing in hospitals. She found that socially constructed defense systems were being developed over time through collusive interaction and agreement, often unconsciously, between its members. These defense mechanisms became an aspect of professional reality which old and new members adapted to and embraced. Menzies Lyth found that these defensive techniques appeared not only in the structure of the organisation itself but also permeated through the whole of its functioning.

The defensive techniques identified by Freidson (1986) and Menzies Lyth (1960) also created a shared language that was unique to that specific social group. This rhetoric was rich with codes and meanings, which Flexner (1915) recognised absorbed the social and personal identities of its members. This language has since been phrased by other writers as ‘discourse’ (see Burr, 2003; Foucault, 1972; Holloway, 1984; Parker, 1992). The concept of discourse is defined by Parker (1992: 5) as ‘a system of statements which construct an object’. In this instance, discourse refers to a shared rhetoric introduced by a profession for the use of its elite members to create codes or signifiers that support the construction of new identities.

I will go onto explore the concept of discourse and identity in more detail shortly. But before moving on it is important to highlight one more point made by

Freidson (1986). He felt that critics who attacked the professions faced a futile task because challenging the elite did not evoke serious changes within institutions, it actually effected the reverse. For Freidson (1986) found that these elite groups were not designed to crumble when confronted by countervailing forces but encouraged to rely upon and use their defensive mechanisms in order to survive.

1.6 Constructing professional identity

In contrast with essentialism, or rather Cartesian or post-Darwinian belief, where identity is conceptualised as something that is always already present within a person, anti-essentialism argues that there can be no unitary notion when it comes to identity formation. Instead anti-essentialists from the sociological, structuralist and post-structuralist approaches assert that identity is 'variously fragmented and de-centred' as well as being 'endlessly interrupted' by external discursive practices or positions which are made available in language or wider representational regimes (such as photography which is used in this thesis) (Du Gay et al. 2000: 3).

In this thesis I will draw from some of these anti-essentialist theories (Althusser, 1971; Bourdieu, 1987; Davies and Harre, 1999; Foucault, 1972/1976/1977/ 1979; Rose, 1996; Sausurre, 1974) as a means of explaining how those working within the child protection arena construct their professional identity by taking the position that this cannot take place without considering the discursive regimes that circulate and permeate the culture of child protection. For as Burr (1995; 2003) has argued identity does not come from within us but is constructed as a result of the discourses we are subjected to. Discourses are not, therefore, simply abstract ideas but significant symbols which are intimately connected to the society within which we are located and the institutions within which we work.

Child protection discourse has emerged from a number of complex ethical issues. Freidson (1986: 230) analysed the impact a profession might have on its workers by using the term 'professionalism'. He recognised that through 'the process of professionalism', otherwise known as 'professionalization', the professional's attitude and their commitment to their career became that of their own identity. Freidson went as far as saying that 'professionalism' could not actually exist independently of the professional thus inferring that professionals *are* their areas of practice; they represent their profession through who they are and what they do.

Payne (2006: 29) has described 'the identity of social work' as that of a welfare service which aims to provide services for those in need (through problem solving, liaison and coordination) and to bring out social change and human empowerment with the use of social and psychological knowledge. For the professionals involved in the field of child protection, learning to make difficult decisions and handle conflicting values during pressured times is a stressful process, one which has been referred to by Cooper et al. (1995:viii) as a 'feeling of stuckness'. In trying to understand how professional identity might emerge during such times of change, uncertainty and persistent restructuring, Bernstein (1996) refers to the narratives of retrospective identities. These are told in the form of narratives by practitioners who have experience of what has happened (those already present within a social shelter) as exemplars for new arrivals to conform to in the present and the future.

By adopting the anti-essentialist view that identity cannot be considered without contemplating the context within which the participants in this study are situated, I have attempted to clarify my perspective, one that will be taken throughout this thesis, that there is no person who is 'an entirely, free independent being' (Elias, 1978: 222). My argument will be, therefore, that in order to understand how a

particular person composes their identity, we must first consider, in depth, the macro and micro cultural context within which they work.

1.7 The inauguration of child protection social work in the UK.

Having identified and unpacked the meaning of profession with the support of Freidson and others, I now want to explore the meaning of professionalisation within the profession of social work, in particular the child protection discipline. As we shall see, much of what Freidson (1970-2001) has described can also be applied to the field of child protection practice which, as a profession, often finds it has to defend itself against certain 'countervailing forces' (Freidson, 1986: 202).

Whilst Freidson was defending the status of professionals, the social work profession found itself defending its own credentials following the tragic death of Maria Colwell. In 1973, Maria was killed by her stepfather, William Kepple, after being returned to the care of her mother. For the thirteen months before she died, she had been cruelly mistreated, starved and used as a scapegoat (Munro, 2002; Parton et al. 1997). Following her death, this 'individual tragedy' soon transformed into a 'public scandal' as media reportage condemned the social services department whom they felt were culpable for her death (Butler and Drakeford, 2012: 5). This form of sensationalism captured the public's awareness and culminated in national outrage.

As well as being present in the public gallery and in the queues outside on certain days, the 'public' were to be 'represented' at the Inquiry through the evidence provided to it by family members and by the Kepples' neighbours on the Whitehawk Estate. The neighbours, in particular, contributed to the construction of one of the most important commentaries on the events surrounding Maria Colwell's death. They can be understood to represent the voice of the proverbial 'man on the Clapham omnibus', the voice of Everyman (although, in this case, they were almost all women), the voice of

'common sense' against which the practice of social work would, in part, be judged and found wanting.
(Butler and Drakeford, 2012: 91)

In order to make sense of Maria's death, after a number of 'putative heroes and villains' had already been populated by the public, an inquiry was set up to investigate the practice of the professionals who were involved in her case (Butler and Drakeford, 2012: 94). The outcome of the inquiry led to a modern child protection system being introduced into this country. It established child protection registers⁵ and created case conferences. It also recognised that social workers had failed to identify the classic signs of neglect (Munro, 2002; Parton et al. 1997; Parton, 2004).

Prior to these events, social work had operated as a generic profession but following the Colwell Inquiry a specialist discipline of 'child protection' was created. As well as a number of changes being effected into the practice of social work, it was also the first time a social worker was seen as culpable for the death of a child. For despite setting up an inquiry to try find out exactly what had happened to Maria, 'from the outset ...public perception was shaped, and determined, by the prior knowledge of the events themselves'. Media reportage represented a disgruntled public who were not only threatening and aggressive towards the mother of Maria Colwell, Pauline Kepple, but also towards Maria's social worker, Diana Lees (Butler and Drakeford, 2012: 113). Maria's social worker was not only castigated by those heading the Inquiry for trying to keep the family together, despite this being general policy at the time, but was also vilified by the public for failing to protect a child (Munro, 2002). The social work profession suddenly found itself in unknown

⁵ A child protection register is a confidential list of all children in the area who had been identified as at risk at a child protection conference. The term 'register' is now no longer used, instead they are referred to as 'plans'.

territory, defending itself against public outrage and finding it was now accountable to a new agency: the media.

1.8 The emergence of a defensive, blame culture.

On the panel of the Colwell Inquiry was Olive Stevenson, a qualified social worker and academic, who did not agree with the consensus agreement of the core narrative which emerged from the Inquiry. Her main struggle had been with the Chair of the panel, Mr Field Fischer, whose focus she felt had been on the excessive use of 'purple prose' - phrases she thought had been included simply to provide the papers with headlines (Butler and Drakeford, 2012: 161). Her point was that the facts of the case were clouded with a media sensationalism, contributed to by not only the public's interest but by the lead person of what was supposed to have been an informative process, the Inquiry. The outcome of the Colwell Inquiry was to have an everlasting effect on the profession of social work with the Government implementing the Children Act 1975, not only to ensure 'better communication' and 'strengthening of the safety-net' but also to put social work back 'in its place', 'reined in and confined within a forum where other more mature voices could not be sidelined or ignored' (Butler and Drakeford, 2012: 174).

In a bid not to miss a single case of abuse, child protection practice has become, over the years, skewed towards investigations of any allegation of maltreatment (Parton et al. 1997). In addition, media coverage has often been centred on 'criticism of the competence or motivations of child protection workers' by generating reports which portray the social worker as 'sometimes too weak, sometimes too strong but never to be trusted'. These reports did little to improve the public's confidences in child protection services (Ayre and Calder, 2010: 41).

Members of society could be forgiven for believing that the world has become a more dangerous place, that there are more child abusers around now than there ever has been before, especially when 'moral panic' episodes occur which add 'cultural strain and uncertainty' and 'threaten communities' cherished values (Cohen, 1972:50). However, Giddens (1999) has pointed out that this does not reflect the true state of affairs within society but instead demonstrates that society has become progressively more preoccupied with risk and safety. And when these two factors start to affect the political and social climate, Adams et al. (2002: 271) argue that critical social work thus becomes a challenge:

In a blame culture there are pressures to proceduralise how uncertainty is dealt with, to ensure that there is always something or someone to blame when things go wrong. Workers can be blamed for not following the procedures correctly, or, if procedures were followed, the procedures can be blamed for not being adequate.

In recent years a growing number of authors (see Ayre, 2001; Campbell, 1988; Franklin, 1989; Ferguson, 2011; MacDonald, 1990; Munro, 2002; Parton, 2004; Reder et al. 1993; White, 1997; Wise, 1988) have written about 'the atmosphere of blame and criticism' which surrounds the public inquiries set up to investigate the death of a child which has been known to children's services (Reder et al. 1993:1). In June 2010, Professor Eileen Munro was invited by the Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, to conduct an independent review of the UK child protection system. The first part of consultation involved, amongst other things, actually talking to social workers. Although countless reviews and inquiries have taken place over the past 30 years in an attempt to understand why 'mistakes' have been made, none have genuinely considered the views of the practitioner. Munro's review was, therefore, different.

In the final progress report, *Moving towards a child centred system* (2012: 3), Munro concluded that child protection had become too focused on compliance and procedures and had lost its focus of children's needs. She called for a 'fundamental change' in attitude towards social workers, reminding readers that child protection work involves uncertainty, having to work alongside 'expectations' that have become 'unrealistic' and, as a result, have strengthened the belief that if a tragedy occurs 'some professional must be to blame'.

Munro also recognised that the practice of child protection social work had developed into a 'defensive culture' focused on compliance, targets, rules and procedures and failing to consider whether the services that were actually being provided were even effective in supporting children and families. To overcome these issues, Munro made a number of recommendations that have been accepted by the Government. They include: reducing statutory guidance to provide more scope for professional autonomy; the removal of fixed assessment timescales and the plan for Government to appoint a Chief Social Worker and for local authorities to appoint Principal Social Workers (advanced, experienced practitioners).

In addition to the Munro report the Social Work Reform Board⁶ aims to 'drive up the quality of social work' practice in order to improve services for children and families whilst the College of Social Work⁷ is focused on building relationships with certain agencies by acting as a powerful voice for social workers in order to develop a strong profession with a clear sense of value, ethics and purpose.

⁶ The Social Work Reform Board (SWRB) was set up to take forward the recommendations of the Social Work Task Force for the reform of social work. Reform is led by the social work sector itself. Employers of social workers, educators, regulators, service users, government and the social work profession itself have worked collaboratively to develop tools that will drive up standards of social work practice and improve services for children, adults and families.

⁷ In 2009 the Social Work Task Force called for the creation of an independent and strong organisation which would represent the profession. It has been called the College of Social Work.

At the time of writing this thesis, although the College of Social Work has been established and the Social Work Reform Board's agenda is being implemented within universities across the UK not all of Munro's recommendations have yet been implemented within local authorities nationally. Parton (2012: 158) has argued that these recommended changes are 'far from auspicious' due to the current political, economic and social context and has warned that the size of the challenge faced by the Review should not be underestimated due to having to deal with an over proceduralised defensive and bureaucratic system. Yet there is sign of another change, one that has taken place without any of the Boards or Reviews mentioned above.

A new and innovative framework developed for child and family social work which has not yet been fully accepted nationally is the Reclaiming Social Work Model; an approach which was set up by Isabelle Trowler and Steve Goodman, who were at the time of its inauguration both senior managers within a local authority and both tired of dealing with a system which was 'entrenched with problems'. They realised that 'nothing less than a whole systems change' would create 'fundamental and sustainable progress' and so, with a lot of drive and determination they developed a strategy that would see units of experienced multi professionals work together as teams which were divided into units, each led by a consultant social worker who, although having the sole responsibility for all the units' cases, does not work a case alone but together with other members of a team (a social worker; a children's practitioner; a unit coordinator and a clinician). Their aim is to provide a context in which families would gain enough confidence to be self regulating and manage difficulties on their own (Trowler and Goodman, 2012:15). Although not all national local authorities have taken up the Reclaiming Social Work Model (at the time of

writing approximately 30 have) and the Government have not, yet, made the model mandatory, a recent evaluation carried out by Cross, Hubbard and Munro (2010) described it as successful and have recommended others follow suit. It is significant to note at this stage that the Fenton department, the local authority observed in this doctoral study, is one of the 403 local authorities in the UK which has not adopted this model.

Although the model has been praised by Professor Munro (see Cross, Hubbard and Munro 2010) it has been criticised by others for trying to make one model fit all (see Measures, 2012) and for being unable to handle organised child abuse (see Davies, 2013). The only concern I have is that, in contrast to the Flemish approach, there is still only one person, the consultant social worker, who is 'accountable for all the work in the unit'. Given the reputation of social workers today this is a risk for the whole project should a tragedy occur (Mason, 2012:114). Although, in my opinion, this model is the first positive possible change for child protection social work, it is still uncertain at the moment whether this model will prove to be effective and provide all local authorities nationwide with the confidence to implement this new way of thinking and working into their own organisations.

Whether the Munro Review, the College of Social Work and the Reclaiming Social Work Model will work effectively to promote the profession and make it stronger, as they hope to do so, is therefore not yet known at this stage but the future does look bright. However, at this point it is also important to consider that recently there has not been a case like that of Peter Connolly or Victoria Climbié which has hit the news and created a media sensationalist storm. Until that day comes, which it inevitably will, we are unable to assess how these positive changes and new

advocates will respond to the pressure that will be wielded upon them, and the profession, by society.

1.9 The Flemish approach to child protection

In March 2012, at the European Social Work Conference in Basel, Switzerland, Professor Sue White gave a key note speech to the audience in which she discussed the current state of child protection services in statutory authorities in England. It was, for many British academics who attended, “a powerful” presentation. I agreed with them; it was indeed compelling, for as Sue White talked about hot desking, parents making complaints about social workers, managers trying to deal with ever rising referrals and the premature closing of cases, it felt as if she were talking to me about the daily chaos which ensued from the department I worked in.

During the break, however, I bumped into one of the Flemish participants from this PhD study. He had also been present during the presentation but, I was surprised to find, held dramatically different views to me and the other British listeners. He confided that he had been “unable to relate” to a lot of what Sue White had said. He understood that what she had said may have had significance in the UK but, he went onto explain, he had never personally experienced, or heard of, such practices being present in Flanders.

This difference in opinion led to two revelations: it confirmed that I had definitely chosen the *right* country to compare England with and it also made me realise that ‘social work’ life was indeed different elsewhere. Yet finding literature to prove my point, to demonstrate that there is a system which exists and operates without having to blame someone is not an easy task. This is most probably because there is no need for Flemish academics to report on this type of material as for them it

is rather unremarkable news. Desair and Adriaenssens (2011) confirm this in the section of the book they wrote for editors Gilbert et al. in *Child Protection Systems: international trends and orientations*.

In it, they begin by providing the reader with a synopsis of the Belgian system and its background. In principle, the Belgian approach aims to meet the requirements of the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child as this highlights the duty for Government to intervene, prevent, and 'repair in cases of child abuse and neglect' (Desair and Adriaenssens, 2011:206). As an agency they do not believe in categorising abuse, they instead work with a model which does not focus on forms of abuse for they believe that 'victims suffer a couple of mutually related forms of violence and neglect' and they feel that this 'insight can be lost when a system is organized around categories' (p.214). The authors believe their approach to child protection practice to be 'located on a continuum between a disciplinary or criminalising and an emancipatory or caring system' with judicial intervention being regarded as the last resort in prevention (p.206). They also go on to discuss the Dutroux⁸ case which they describe as 'a traumatic experience for Belgium' (p.216). However, the ending of the Dutroux affair is not one the British reader would anticipate. For the authors state that '[e]ven though the Dutroux case was horrible and traumatic for the whole country, it did *not* lead to a witch hunt or a moral panic' (p.217) (own emphasis added). Although there was a protest in October, 1996, which saw some 300,000 people walk the streets of Brussels to express their indignation at what had happened with the Dutroux case, the aim of their march was to send a message to the Government that changes were indeed needed in Belgium *but* that it

⁸ Marc Dutroux is a Belgian serial killer and child abuser who was convicted of having kidnapped, tortured and sexually abused girls during 1995 to 1996, ranging in age from eight to nineteen, four of whom he murdered (Desair and Adriaenssens, 2011).

was ‘the judicial authorities and the police [who] should pay more attention to “the child”’ (p.217). It was because of the ‘worthy responses of the parents of the missing children and the symbolic power of the White March’¹⁰ that constructive changes were subsequently made in *favour* of the protection and well being of children in Belgian Society (own emphasis added).

So why is it that the Flemish approach to child protection seems to be so very different to the one we follow in Britain? Green (2008: 212) would argue that it is ‘the significance of events [which are] contingent and can only be interpreted with an appreciation of the event’s cultural context’. When comparing the Bulger (1993)¹² murder with the Norwegian Silje (1994)¹⁴ case, Green (2008) found that although the two cases shared remarkable parallels (they both involved the death of a young child, a child who was murdered by children) the main difference was that in the Silje case child welfare professionals intervened and took over the case, instead of the police. In contrast to Jon Venables and Robert Thompson, the Norwegian boys were not punished in any way but were returned to school and supported by teachers and psychologists to enable them to come to grips with, and get past, what they had done.

Green (2008) asserted that there were four differences between the two countries responses to the tragedies. The first was the different construction of childhood. In Norway the murderers were treated as children, in Britain, on the other hand, they were seen as evil and thus treated as criminals. The second difference was the level of faith each society had in their system. The Silje case was left to the social

¹⁰ It was called the White March as everyone carried something white: a balloon, a coat or their faces were painted white as a symbol of hope (Desair and Adriaenssens, 2011:217).

¹² James Patrick Bulger was a two year old boy from Kirkby, England. He was abducted, tortured and murdered by two ten year old boys in 1993 (Green, 2008).

¹⁴ In 1994, Trondheim, five year old Silje Redergard was murdered by two boys aged 6 years old (Green, 2008).

welfare professionals to deal with whereas in Britain, where there is a lack of public trust and confidence in the social care system, it was left to the criminal system to deal with. The third difference was the competitive newspaper market in Britain compared with 'the two large circulation national dailies in Norway' (p.213). With many papers competing to get the best story, the British practice in journalism often leans towards there being an emphasis on the sensational rather than the factual. The fourth difference is the way in which moral panics are created through alarmist rhetoric used in politics in Britain in comparison with Norwegian political culture which is based upon a consensus model, 'as power is shared amongst political parties, there is less to gain by using crime as a political issue' (p. 213). In Britain, on the other hand, the public witnessed opposition politicians become motivated in exploiting this tragedy by using it as 'a political weapon to discredit the party in power' (p. 211).

If these reasons for such differences provided by Green (2008) are veritable, then it suggests that in order to understand why the approach to child protection is so different between the UK and Flanders we need to first appreciate and consider the political-cultural context in which these two systems are embedded. For it appears that when society's anxieties become heightened during a child abuse inquiry these are conditioned by not only the levels of confidence the public have in their institutions, but also by the motives of certain politicians who politicise such events for biased reasons. Clapton et al. (2013: 810) have also argued that although child protection concerns originate with individual tragedies, they are then 'fuelled by [a] claims-making process' which is 'ever sensitive to new alarms' that are often upheld by, 'at the very least, flimsy' evidence.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

I have carried out this literature review by focusing on empirical material from Flanders (and other European countries which use a similar social welfare system). I have also searched for literature from the UK, and other English speaking countries whose model of child protection practice we often refer to and adopt within child protection practice here in the UK, such as the USA, Canada and Australia in order to build a larger and more comprehensive picture of the settings I wished to study.

I did not limit the literature search and therefore searched for all publications (theses articles and books) which were in circulation prior to June 2012. In order to get broad range of literature I used the following key words: 'child protection', 'children', 'social work', 'discourse', 'defensive', 'profession', 'identity', 'blame', 'culture', 'ethnography', 'qualitative/ quantitative' and 'moral panic' in conjunction with one another when searching academic databases, journals, theses and grey literature (see Appendix A). These words were chosen to reflect: the area of social work I was interested in, the substantive element of the study, the methodological aspect of the research and the themes I thought might emerge from the data from the literature I had previously read.

The ways in which databases operate are all different, and as Holden et al. (2010) highlight there will always remain a shred of doubt that some studies will be missed. Whilst I accept this comment, to overcome this doubt, if an author was identified in a study as having written key articles I also checked for his or her particular work. There are a vast array of studies that have been carried out on child abuse and the child protection system. Yet the aim of this thesis is to explore a different area: the identity of the social workers who work within these arenas. By exploring references of previous research studies, articles and books I did come across a theme I had not

previously considered, that of defensiveness (which I then used as a key word). It became a prominent theme within the child protection context and as a result, is covered within this review.

From the mass of literature on child protection, a total of 22 sources, consisting of nine articles, four theses and nine books were selected and assessed as being those most closely related to the specific focus of this empirical research. Using the method advocated by Wallace and Wray (2011: 41) each of these were read and then scrutinised with the 'critical synopsis of text' template. By using this tool my aim was 'to evaluate the logical coherence of theories, methodologies and findings in a context of informed scholarship' (Hart, 1998: 44) and not to judge one piece of work as 'better than another' (1998: 45).

A comparative critical summary of all the texts was then created and I identified the following themes:

1. Agencies influencing the culture of child protection
2. Organisational culture
3. Defensiveness and discourse
4. Personal agency
5. Constructing identity
6. Categorisation and processing
7. Messages from the social welfare system.

For the purpose of clarity and structure each theme has been considered separately. The themes that have been identified in this context have not always been referred to in the same terms or explicitly by the authors but this will be discussed in

more detail at the end of the review. The studies reviewed explored aspects of the child protection system, the culture within which this system is located, the discursive regimes that emerge from this setting and the impact the media has not only on child protection practice but also the professionals who find themselves subjected to an episode of moral panic.

Although the sources collectively provide the reader with a better understanding of the child protection system, they tend to focus on how the competency of the practitioner can be improved or how the system can be made more rigorous. They do not consider how professionals within this setting might construct their social work identity.

2.1 Agencies influencing the culture of child protection

Wise (1988), Edwards and Soethenhorst (1994) and Ayre (2001) analysed the roles of certain external agencies which not only influence the culture of child protection but manipulate it to create an adversarial process that has negative implications for the professionals and families who find themselves subjected to it. I use the word 'external' in this context to represent those organisations which are outside of the local authority agency (within which Children's Services are located) but which nonetheless impact on the culture of child protection.

In her PhD thesis *Child abuse procedures and social work practice: an ethnographic approach* Wise used the method of 'institutional ethnography'¹⁶ to carry out her research. In this study, Wise reflected on her experience of being a social worker by referring to notes she assembled when she was a practitioner. She also textually analysed data from two media stories which reported on the deaths of

¹⁶ A methodology which was developed by Dorothy Smith (1985) and can be translated as a tool for observation, interviewing, recollection of work experience, use of archives and textual analysis.

Tyra Henry (1985) and Heidi Koseda (1985) and examined the theoretical account from the Commission of Inquiry into child abuse following the death of Kimberlie Carlile (1986). As a result, her research provided an account of the different voices within child abuse discourse that affect the culture of child protection.

Through her analysis of various texts and media excerpts, Wise developed a number of theories. She suggested that for a story to become popular in the press and snowball into a moral panic a child needed to have first been known to social services and been allocated a female social worker; secondly, the mother needed to be involved in a monstrous relationship with the child's (step) father. Wise recognised that Cohen's (1972) notion of 'moral panic'¹⁷ and Becker's (1963) work on 'moral entrepreneurs'¹⁸ were also both concepts which were usefully employed in the discussion surrounding child abuse.

The notion of moral panic is also the theme that Edwards and Soethenhorst (1994) focus on in *The impact of "moral panic" on professional behaviour in cases of child sexual abuse*. Their aim was to explore the notion of moral panic by using discourse analysis to examine the narratives from a number of media sources which reported on two child abuse epidemics: the Cleveland Inquiry in the UK and the Vlaardingen Inquiry in the Netherlands.

The authors noticed that, with the Cleveland incident, the media created an image for Dr. Marietta Higgs as a 'She folk-devil' symbol by describing her as a militant, feminist with radical views (1994: 117). The chain of events from both inquiries identified a spiralling effect synonymous with that described by Cohen

¹⁷ 'a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interest' which are then 'presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion by the mass media' (Cohen, 1972: 9).

¹⁸ 'get involved with specifying what the problem is and how to deal with it' (Wise, 1988: 23)

(1972). Both demonstrated how the moral panic began with a shocking story which was sensationalised by the media, enforced further still by society and culminated with the 'She folk- devil' scapegoat being dismissed from practice.

By using the metaphor 'She folk-devil' Edwards and Soethenhorst successfully highlight that in both inquiries the scapegoats were women simply by inserting the word 'she' in front of the term 'folk-devil'. By exposing the gender of the guilty party, they are then able to draw on the feminist perspective which considers the unequal power imbalances within families and society in general (see Stanley and Wise, 1983; Tong, 1995).

Unfortunately, although their original aim was to examine the impact these incidents had on 'all professionals' their focus throughout the text remains firmly fixed on only medical professionals. By drawing explicitly from the feminist perspective and exposing the media as a gender biased form of reportage, they inadvertently contradict their own epistemology by eliding the experience of the social workers who, in the case of Cleveland, were also known to have been ostracised by their profession and subjected to taunts from the public. Subsequently, the context of this phenomenon and the impact it had not only on social workers but on the political reaction following the Inquiry in respect of the child protection culture is overlooked.

However in her examination of the theoretical account from the Commission of Inquiry following the death of Kimberlie Carlile, Wise (1988) does focus on the social worker and effectively highlights that although the explicit aim of the Inquiry promised to be 'open and investigative' so as to learn 'what went wrong in the failed efforts of a few people attempting to protect a little girl from abuse', the implicit aim was primarily interested in blaming one professional: the social worker (1988: 263).

Throughout her work, Wise referred to the concept of 'textually mediated relations of ruling' ¹⁹(1988: 181) and used this to demonstrate how the NSPCC use their 'ideological dominance' in a public field where they are revered as 'the expert of child abuse' mainly as a result of marketing and fundraising strategies (1988: 130). Wise revealed how their powerful and established positioning not only exploits the vulnerable by making promises to society that they cannot keep but creates unobtainable and unachievable goals for the local authorities- the agencies that actually carry out the majority of direct work with children who have been abused.

By highlighting who the main agencies and influences are (the Government, the Media and the NSPCC) in the child abuse debate, Wise carefully illustrated how these organisations have created a dominant rhetoric for child abuse, promoting themselves in the eyes of the public as helpers not hinderers in uncovering 'the facts' (1988: 105), and in doing so, have successfully managed to damage the reputation of social workers by perpetuating themselves as a rather 'discordant cacophony' overriding and ignoring the voices of the real experts in child abuse: the child, the parent and the social worker (1988: 6).

However, so focused is Wise on these three organisations and the detrimental impact they have effected upon the profession of child protection she inadvertently overlooks another significant agency which plays an instrumental part when considering the rhetoric and subsequent discourses circulating child abuse- the Social Services Department for whom she worked (more commonly known today as the Local Authority in which Children's Services is located). Although Wise is explicit in her work about her bias towards this agency, she does not appear to consider the implicit function of this institution and as a result does not separate the Local

¹⁹ A concept developed by Dorothy Smith (1985) which refers to a practice which is more often than not produced by those who are removed from the actual experience of child protection practice.

Authority from the Government, as it is an agency which not only takes direct instructions from the Government but could not survive financially without it.

Ayre (2001), on the other hand, has a different perspective to Wise (1988) and does explore the function of the Local Authority in his article *Child protection and the media: the last three decades*. Through the use of discourse analysis,²⁰ Ayre examined a variety of theoretical sources that he felt identified the different climates affecting the culture of child protection work: fear, mistrust and blame. Ayre's argument contrasted with that presented by Wise in several places.

First of all, by analysing the explicit role of external agencies, such as the press and central government, he demonstrated how these organisations can create an adversarial system which places professionals *against* their families instead of *for* them. But by also identifying the implicit role of the internal agency, the Local Authority, he has presented a valid argument in how this organisation can also play a key part in the same process. Ayre identified that there is a distinction between the Local Authority and the social worker. The copious amounts of policies and procedures written for professionals to follow play an implicit part in creating a culture of blame as the local authority can then use these standardised processes to fall back on in child abuse inquiries: by exonerating themselves from any accountability and then pointing the finger at the practitioner who failed to follow the routine drill.

As a consequence, Ayre contended, workers lose their confidence as they rely on being told what to do by a system that is so wrapped up in policies and procedures that it loses sight of its own original aims and objectives. This means the worker is

²⁰ Discourse analysis is where accounting practices in interviews or in naturally occurring talk is an important topic for investigation (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007).

much less likely to think about the client as they become more concerned with protecting the system than protecting their own clients.

Secondly, Ayre held a different perspective of the role of the voluntary agency (such as the NSPCC). He suggested that they actually have a beneficial impact on the culture of child protection. Whereas Wise (1988: 21) argued that the NSPCC is a 'discordant cacophony' when it comes to the debate on child abuse, Ayre believes that the NSPCC has actually been successful in providing the public with an awareness of what child abuse is and, in doing so, have also created an exemplar for other child protection agencies, as to how the media should be managed.

However, whilst I agree with much of Ayre's argument, I do believe that in focusing on the benefits of voluntary agencies he has overlooked the point Wise was trying to make and ignored the false hope some of their marketing incentives can instill in society. An example of this is the 'Full Stop' campaign that is rallied by the NSPCC and creates the belief that child abuse can be brought to end. Although some years later Ayre did admit that this campaign has been 'unhelpful' in swaying the public's perception of front line social workers (Ayre and Calder, 2010:40).

Nevertheless, in analysing the role of the media Ayre created a valid argument by demonstrating the integral part they play in shaping the culture of child protection; through enforcing myths and stereotypes and preferring to focus on the rare hazards in daily life, their stories can, in turn, create a climate of fear. Ayre has maintained that policy makers and professional groups side with the public against social workers by buying into the media frenzy and actively responding to the tabloid witch hunt. As a result this climate of mistrust has created an 'adversarial character in the child protection system' separating an 'us and them' scenario with an invisible

line. This influential style of discourse has created a 'who dunnit?' style of reporting (Ayre, 2001: 890).

But Ayre does create a solution as to how this dilemma can be overcome. He recommended that the Local Authority start to defend its professionals by learning to manage the media. He recommended the methods used by the police and the NSPCC and argued that when a story does break the agency needs to respond quickly and effectively rather than slowly and defensively. In doing so, they would be the ones in control of the media rather than the other way round.

The three authors in this theme collectively identify the media, the Government, the NSPCC (and other voluntary agencies) and the Local Authority as being the main agencies influencing the culture of child protection. Instead of producing a positive effect on child protection practice, these agencies have together had a negative impact by introducing 'unhelpful biases and misplaced emphases' (Ayre, 2001: 887). All the studies have indicated that through their reportage a certain style of child protection discourse has emerged, one that can create instances of moral panic and lead to a 'She-folk devil' character being generated who is then subsequently dismissed from practice. However, all three articles have limitations of their own, shortcomings that may have emerged as a result of the methods that have been chosen. Through primarily the use of discourse analysis, or textually mediated analysis, not one of the authors has interviewed a social worker: a vital agency whose voice needs to be considered when discussing the culture of child protection and one, I argue, will, as a result, impact on their professional identity.

The next theme aims to explore one of these agencies, the Local Authority and the main setting for where all child protection social workers find themselves located,

in more detail in order to gain a more thorough understanding of how the organisational culture of this profession might be constructed.

2.2 Organisational culture in child protection social work.

The following three studies by Dingwall et al. (1983), Pithouse (1998) and White (1997), have been grouped together under the theme of organisational culture as, individually, they all carried out ethnographies within various local authorities in England. Although they approached each of their settings with different aims, their chosen methodology has enabled them to create an informative picture of what actually takes place within the culture of child protection social work.

From these three studies, only White in *Performing social work: an ethnographic study of talk and text in a Metropolitan Social Services Department* (1997) carried out an ethnography 'at home', or as Taylor (2011: 8) has described it, as an 'intimate insider', a term used to denote carrying out research in one's own backyard, having regular ongoing contact with friends and colleagues and being deeply embedded as a social actor in a setting where the narrative of the researcher and the researched become entwined. The difference between them being that at the time of the research, only White worked for the authority, as a Team Leader, whilst carrying out her research.

White's account is therefore, in contrast to mine, given from the perspective of her managerial position within the authority, a role she acknowledged herself meant she gained access to departments with ease and was wholly accepted by other managers. However, when it came to observing/ interviewing the frontline workers she did feel they were more suspicious of her intentions due to the fact they thought they were being evaluated for their work performance. Although White recognised

this, there is little exploration as to how her actual role may have impacted on the data that emerged from the social workers. It is possible that practitioners may have been aiming to please her by saying or doing what they thought a manager may have wanted to hear, rather than saying what they really thought.

As a Team Leader White wholly identified with Pithouse (1987) who found team leaders, in the setting he observed, to be loyal and protective towards their team. White shared this view, as we will go on to see shortly, but she also spoke of how a collective identity could be affirmed through 'story telling sessions' that were carried out through routines and linguistic practices conducted within the department (1997: 194). These stories were interspersed with humour, which could have appeared rather inappropriate to outsiders, but within the service enabled workers to detach familiarity 'with the dirty and dangerous as well as affirming their mandate as protectors of children' (1997:233). Although White focused mainly on collective identity, she skillfully described the professional identity of the social worker as that which consisted of detective, scientist-lawyer, moral judge, seasoned intuition, watching my back and child expert (1997: 332).

Although Dingwall et al. (1983), in *The protection of children: state intervention and family life*, did not clarify which professional background they originate from, Pithouse (1998) did and explained that he had been a former social worker of the authority where he was undertaking the ethnography. I purposefully make the position of the researcher explicit as their location not only has a different effect on the way they collected, collated and displayed their data but, as we will see in the methodology section of this thesis, their stance also plays an important part of the researcher's own experience of ethnography as a research tool.

All three studies focused primarily on the performative and rhetorical features of talk that were collected from participant observation, interview data, formal policy and procedures, case notes and legal reports/ strategic planning documents.

Dingwall et al. carried out their study first in 1983 and what is of particular interest is the noticeable change in discourse and relationship within the hierarchy of the organisations over the years up until White's study in 1997.

For example, Dingwall et al. referred to 'the rule of optimism' (p. 23) as a term to explain the way child protection professionals respond to an incident of child abuse. They found that it was only when several different agencies (such as the doctor, the social worker and the police) were all convinced that an injury was non-accidental that the clear definition of mistreatment would then prompt compulsory action. This delay occurred as a result of the moral character of a person (who in most cases was primarily the parent) playing a large part in decision making in child abuse and neglect. Dingwall et al. felt that it was their behaviour, as the perpetrator of abuse, which could strengthen their own moral character by doing one of the following three things: disputing the facts; claiming impairment or seeking to conceal their behaviour or the evidence.

They therefore asserted that the 'rule of optimism' acted as a filter of moral character defending and accepting the upper/ middle/ respectable working class parents, ethnic minorities and the mentally incompetent whilst leaving women and the roughly indigenous working class group as the most vulnerable to compulsory measures (Dingwall et al. 1983: 101.) Although Dingwall et al. agreed that the interests of the child can easily become obscured by the interests of adults, often to the degree where maltreatment can be misidentified, interestingly, they attributed this error to the absence of counter pressures from the professionals' moral

accountability (1983: 105). An interesting argument but another example of how child protection discourse has changed as this position would be difficult to sustain given the current climate where social workers are considered accountable professionally for any error or misjudgement.

This is demonstrated by White and Pithouse who, in contrast to Dingwall et al. both found that social workers in their studies responded to a culture that had become entrenched in blame. Rather than referring to the 'rule of optimism', White instead found that social workers were treating parental accounts with 'routine skepticism' as practitioners had clearly evolved from 1983 to become 'the practical mistresses and masters of unpredictability' (1997: 177). White discovered descriptions in case records and assessments which read as a process in which the practitioner struggled 'to assign culpability to a particular individual' (1997: 253).

In Pithouse's study, he revisited a setting where ten years earlier (1987) he had conducted a previous ethnography. In 1998, he returned to find things had changed considerably and discovered a child centred approach 'where paradox, unpredictability and blame appear far more pronounced than ever witnessed before' (1998: 2). This change led to a 'threatened' and 'spoiled identity' for professionals. This term was first identified by Goffman (1963) and referred to as stigma, a means in which individuals could be discredited. In this context, Pithouse argued, 'spoiled identity' derived from a climate which consisted of unduly vindictive and sensational attention of the media and the acceptable political game of bashing social workers. Rather than seeing professionals ruling with optimism he saw their 'spoiled identity' lead to a greater emphasis on 'watching your back', a compelling feature not simply because of the psychology of the practice as a form of 'dangerous work' but also as a prominent element of administrative control (1998: 33).

When trying to understand how the organisation was structured, all three studies agreed that social work is a profession where 'hierarchical bureaucracies ... are under lay control' (Dingwall, 1983: 108). The data from White, Pithouse and Dingwall et al. showed how the line of accountability stemmed right up from front line social worker to the Area Director and demonstrated that the pressures of accountability were indeed widespread throughout the organisation. Dingwall et al. felt this related to 'political defensibility of agency practice' rather than resources or financial pressures; an interesting comment and one that contradicted their earlier argument about there being a lack of pressure on professionals' moral accountability (1983: 111).

Pithouse's observations of the organisational culture in which social workers found themselves located were also extremely revealing. He found that the social work environment was 'surrounded by an uncomfortable and sometimes hostile world' that as a result, created a safe haven for those on the inside, one that he described as a 'defensive formation' (1998:75). As mentioned earlier, professions sociologist Eliot Freidson (1970; 1986) was first to discover this amongst the professions and referred to this as a 'social shelter', one which protects professionals. For when hostile elements, or 'countervailing forces', from outside the organisation assault the profession, it forces professionals to look inwards and intimately share their occupational experience by transforming their office into a social world that holds a structure of meaning, provides secure boundaries, trusting relationships and creditable identity. So when a new recruit arrived they too were 'socialised into the organisational culture' (Pithouse, 1998:15).

This is an interesting argument but one that failed to consider the permeability of the social shelter within the child protection arena and how changing discourses

can penetrate and subsequently affect it. Whilst I agree with much of the argument presented by Pithouse, these days the defensive formation he refers to is considered a rarity as research, including that of my own, has found that practitioners have become astute at developing individual coping mechanisms and defensive behaviours to deal with the countervailing forces that are not only present outside of the organisation but on the inside of it as well (see Ferguson, 2011; Leigh, 2010; Leigh, 2013a, Leigh, 2013b).

Whilst Pithouse did recognise that, despite the defensive formations, there was 'organisation disaffection' on the inside of the agency, he felt it occurred only between senior management and team managers (who acted in defence of their front line workers) as a result of the 'organisational hierarchy' (1998: 21). A point which was also supported by White (1997) who argued that a shared professional identity meant that it was imperative for managers to continue to display 'caring' values if they were to avoid the accusation of being an 'unfeeling bureaucrat'. She referred to this loyalty as 'identity talk' and contended that the imperative to care was 'a fundamental aspect of collective identity' (1997: 165). But White also recognised that the (humanist) imperative to display caring and commitment, whilst evident throughout the hierarchy in her department, did not sit easily alongside the rationalist managerial discourse (1997: 179).

Both studies were carried out in the late 1990s and represent a period of time when Team Managers in social work departments felt a duty to care for their staff rather than be more concerned with protecting themselves. However, since then the child protection setting has continued to evolve and more researchers have now identified that the 'caring' relationship once shared between team manager and social

worker is rarely witnessed in practice today (Ayre, 2010; Ferguson, 2011; Leigh, 2010; Leigh, 2013b; van Heutgen, 2011).

These ethnographies have demonstrated that when researchers are directly located within a research setting a broader and more in depth understanding of the child protection culture emerges, simply because the views of the practitioners are considered. They also show how child protection discourse and organisational culture has changed since the Dingwall et al. (1983) study which depicted an era of child protection that existed prior to two significant events within child protection social work: the Cleveland Inquiry and the Children Act 1989. Rather than witness practice ruled by optimism, post 1991 child protection became dominated by the need to allocate blame to a particular person and appears to have been led with a degree of scepticism about the parent/ carer. This form of defensiveness and the impact it can have on the professional, is a subject that is discussed in more detail in the next theme.

2.3. Defensiveness and discourse

This theme begins with Parton et al. (1997) but will also include Ruch and Murray (2011), Trevithick (2011) and Whittaker (2012). All have recognised that there is an increasing level of defensiveness within child protection practice. Parton et al. set the scene by providing a historical context for how child protection discourse began and how it can then lead to certain defensive behaviours evident amongst front line staff. *Child protection: risk and the moral order* (1997), by Nigel Parton, David Thorpe and Corinne Wattam, reviewed a large number of studies and inquiries on child abuse that affected policy and procedure dating from the 1970s up to the early 1990s which were all found to be mainly quantitative. The authors' main purpose in doing this was

to understand what the essential elements of child protection discourse were and how they all related to the wider changes in the relationship between the state and the family.

Although they clarified their focus at the start of each chapter and related all their findings to child abuse studies, how they actually undertook the review is unclear. There is no mention of the key words used or an explanation of how the research studies were then found. Yet despite the lack of qualitative data, the main message to emerge from Parton et al.'s study is that 'scientific research is far from neutral and value free'. They believed that the studies they reviewed paraded 'extraordinary value positions' under the guise of objectivity (p. 66). Beginning with the 1970s, they tracked how at this time social work was doing well and was respected before the emergence of the medical model which was introduced in the early 1980s where the term child abuse replaced the 'battered baby' syndrome found by Kempe in the 1960s. The authors found that it was in the late 1980s that a significant shift happened as a direct result of the Cleveland Inquiry.

However, what interested the authors most was just why this event had such an impact on child protection and our society. They attributed its cause to it involving the element of 'sexual abuse' as it touched a range of sensitivities which were rarely evident in earlier concerns about physical abuse and neglect. It was also a form of abuse that seemed to permeate 'normal' families and destroy the theory that the upper/ middle/ respectable working class parents were exempt from being subjected to an investigation (see also Dingwall et al. 1983).

The authors concluded that child abuse is a social construction,²¹ but that this concept is not acknowledged effectively in child protection practice. As a result they found that the operational child protection perspective appeared as a mixture of 'paternalism/ protection', a far cry from the practice observed in the 1970s where the service was 'essentially benign but maternalistic' (p. 22). They felt that this form of paternalism authorised intervention and directed it to when injuries had occurred, in contrast to the laissez faire approach of the 1970s which acted to defend the birth family and invoke support and partnership work with the parent. This confusion of role between 'paternalism and protection' seems to have haunted child protection ever since and the following authors look at the impact this form of discourse has had on the identity of social workers.

In *Anxiety, defences and the primary task in integrated children's services: enhancing inter-professional practice* (2011), Gillian Ruch & Cathy Murray explored the findings of research undertaken with a group of childcare social work practitioners by examining their experiences of the Every Child Matters and Integrated Children's Services agenda in their everyday work. Their research involved undertaking eight monthly sessions which were attended by four to eight practitioners for an hour and a quarter. Thematic analysis was then used to identify the emerging themes.

Although the authors stated they were carrying the study out with child care practitioners, the comment is rather misleading as they do not specifically identify the participants as child protection professionals and we learn later that some of the findings actually focused on adoption practitioners (see p. 439). However, despite this

²¹ Freeman (1983) and Taylor (1989) both hold the view that child abuse is a social construction, recognising it as a label rather than a condition, whose meaning has arisen from 'the value structure of a social group and the ways in which these values are interpreted and negotiated in real situations' (Taylor, 1989: 46).

lack of clarity they did find that in an inter-professional context, the motivations underpinning professional behaviour were rooted in personal responses to anxiety. They identified three significant barriers to effective integrated working: partial information sharing, disproportionate burden bearing by social workers and the personal dimensions of inter-professional practice (p. 434). By adopting a psychodynamic-systemic theoretical perspective that embraces the psychoanalytic concepts of repetition compulsion (Bower, 2005)²³, workgroup and basic assumption mentalities (Stokes, 1994)²⁴ and the systemic concepts of the 'primary task'²⁵ and anti-task behaviour (Zagier Roberts, 1994)²⁶ and mirroring (Mattinson, 1992)²⁷, Ruch and Murray believed it was possible to develop an enhanced understanding of the individual and collective dynamics in operation and to make recommendations to improve the effectiveness of integrated working (p. 435).

Participants referred to the 'emotional toll' of social work and described it as being like an 'emotional rollercoaster' with the associated feelings of both personal and professional vulnerability generated by their experiences. Ruch and Murray found that these processes were not only defensive but experienced initially on a personal

²³ Repetitiously compulsive behaviour, usually associated with victims of trauma, is characterised by avoidance of the anxiety-provoking aspects of a situation (p. 436).

²⁴ Taken from Bion who identified three types of common basic assumption behaviour: basic assumption dependency, flight/fight involving avoidant or confrontational responses to difficult work-related issues, basic assumption pairing (baP), when current difficulties are displaced by locating their resolution in a future event (p. 437).

²⁵ The normative primary task reflects the broad aims of the organisation/group; the existential primary task – what professionals think and say they do; the phenomenal primary task – what professionals actually do 'do' (Lawrence, 1977, cited in Zagier Roberts, 1994).

²⁶ When anxieties about achieving the task are insufficiently addressed the likelihood of 'anti-task' behaviour is increased (Zagier Roberts, 1994).

²⁷ Mirroring is a recognised phenomenon, particularly within supervisory contexts (Mattinson, 1992) where the dynamics of the practitioner–family relationship can be reflected in the relationship between the practitioner and their supervisor (p. 437).

level only then being shaped by professional identity. They suggest that without an understanding of both the personal and professional sources of defensive behaviour and their manifestations in professional networks, the focus of efforts to enhance integrated working is misplaced and the likelihood of integrated working being 'on-task' is diminished (p. 442).

The impact of this form of behaviour is explored further by Pamela Trevithick in *Understanding defences and defensiveness in child protection social work* (2011). Using psychoanalysis from the British School of object relations, Trevithick explored the use of defensiveness in child protection social work literature and stated that the concept of defences in this context is linked more specifically to an enduring range of behaviours that are designed to protect the individual from an awareness of thoughts, feelings, memories or actions that produces anxiety (p. 391). This behaviour has also been identified elsewhere by other child protection researchers (see Cooper et al. 1995; Ferguson, 2011; Reder et al. 1993).

Trevithick began her critical commentary by explaining that all human beings have defences but that these may be represented differently depending on the culture a person finds themselves subjected to. Some defences are conscious, that is, the person is aware and they are used in ways which are deliberate and intentional. Other defences are unconscious, that is, they lie beyond our immediate awareness and control and have two key features. One is to guard us from further harm whilst the other has the ability to distort our perception of reality.

By using psychoanalytic techniques Trevithick's approach is more that of social constructivist, rather than constructionist, as she aimed to show the impact culture can have on individual social workers and how they can then learn to use certain behaviours to aid, rather than hinder, their practice. For when professionals

feel safe they are more likely to lower or loosen their defence, but this is only possible in a situation with an appropriate setting. Trevithick therefore called for social work to be organised differently so that social workers are provided with the reassurance and containment they require and can return to meeting the service users' needs.

Both Trevithick (2011) and Ruch and Murray's (2011) papers are ambitious and extremely useful for all those who have prior knowledge and experience of psychoanalysis. Unfortunately, not all social workers do and although it is exceptionally valuable many might not be apply these kind of tools to practice- especially if they too are finding themselves located within a defensive culture, and are also trying to deal with much of the 'emotional toll' (see Ruch and Murray, 2011). Yet what the authors do do, that I have criticised others for overlooking (see Ayre, 2001; Edwards and Soetenhurts, 1994; Wise, 1988), is consider the identity of the social worker and argue that without understanding their emotional, or rather personal, position within practice, the culture of child protection can never successfully address any of the issues it currently faces.

Andrew Whittaker continues this theme of defensiveness with his article, *Social defences and organisational culture in a local authority child protection setting: challenges for the Munro Review?* (2011). His study had an ethnographic design, combining observation, interviews and documentary analysis and in this paper Whittaker presents his findings from fieldwork that was carried out over an 18-month period as part of his PhD, involving direct observations of strategy meetings, child protection conferences and home visits, combined with 17 individual interviews with practitioners and managers. His approach was to use a 'practice- near' stance (adopted from Froggett & Briggs, 2009) that focuses upon the lived experiences of

frontline practitioners and looks at how the anxieties provoked by child protection work are managed within contemporary children's services.

Referring to Menzies Lyth's (1960) study on social defences in nursing, he critically analysed her findings to see if there was anything transferable to child protection. Whittaker found that there was an element of social workers using upward delegation in order to avoid having to make sole decisions on cases so that workers could feel safe from blame and criticism, irrespective of the consequences of those choices. A behaviour Dingwall et al. identified in 1983 and which they referred to as a form of bureau professionalism, where the professional's decisions are not purely autonomous as they are always considered and reviewed by their superior.

Whittaker also found that there were some social defences that were not present, because they had already been recognised and subsequent reforms had limited the extent to which these were available to practitioners and organisations following the Laming Report (Laming, 2003)²⁸. Whilst I appreciate that Whittaker's article only refers to findings from early on in his study, there is still a distinct lack of discussion relating to the individual defence techniques that practitioners have developed; an important subject especially as the study aimed to focus specifically upon social defences within organisational culture. For my argument maintains that without understanding why practitioners behave the way they do, issues within child protection practice will continue to prevail.

From these studies it is evident that discourse has evolved in child protection social work and been subjected to other dominant professional ideologies. A variety of methods have been used to map this evolution from an extensive review of the

²⁸ Lord Laming (2003) criticised local authorities for having an insufficient clear line of accountability and as a result, additional legislation, policy and guidance was implemented.

literature to qualitative methods. All the authors agree the conflicting discourses have left the culture of child protection confused as social workers struggle to find the balance between paternalism and protection and negotiate their own role and identity within the workplace.

2.4 Personal agency

The next two authors, de Montigny (1995) and Ferguson (2011) looked closely at the meaning of personal agency and the impact it can have on social work practice.

Although Gerald de Montigny (1995) carried out an ethnography in child protection practice in Canada and not in the UK or Flanders I have included it because it is an ethnography of child protection social work. Also it is important to highlight that 'by the early 1990s evidence was emerging in *all* the Anglophone countries that there were significant problems with their child protection systems' (Stafford et al. 2011:38; Lonne et al. 2008) [own emphasis added]. De Montigny's aim was to explain what being a social worker was actually like and he goes on to describe it as a practice where in order 'to administer, manage, govern, order and make sense out of the lives of clients, [he] had to develop a professional attitude towards the world' (p. 8). It was the conflict between organisational hierarchy and social injustice that he struggled with as a practitioner and he used research as an opportunity to reflect upon the wider cultural expectations of social workers whose primary aim is to protect all children.

Although de Montigny reported on the findings from his own PhD research (what this actually entailed is not detailed in his book) which was supposed to be ethnographic, there is very little in the form of actual data from other parties as he remained entirely focused on his own subjective practice experiences. His work

therefore, resembles that of an auto ethnography, an approach to research that aims to describe and analyse the personal experience in order to gain an insight into the cultural experience.

Nonetheless he did promise, through this method, to trace the practical ways social workers struggle to produce a world that is ordered, systematised and subjected to their powers by closely examining specific forms of practice used by practitioners: ideological practices, professional location, discursive realities, scientific practice and professional good sense to produce distinctive 'reality'.

De Montigny found that being a professional demanded 'a synthetically smooth self not racked by the pains of doubt, anxiety and self betrayal' which was directed by commands, forms of order, relevancies and discourses that transcend the spheres of immediate experience (p. 13). He also found it to be a full time occupation that involved constant sense making and accounting practices by social workers who are embedded in extended social relations, themselves marked by dynamics of unequal power and authority.

Whilst I agree with most of de Montigny's argument, there are aspects that are problematic. Although de Montigny was acutely aware of the impact this conflict has on the parent, he does not reflect on how the 'power' and 'authority' of the organisational hierarchy might impact upon the social worker (p. 60). Also, even though he referred to his status collectively by predominantly using the term 'we' throughout, he did not provide any data from others creating the sense that he is speaking on behalf of his colleagues with the assumption that they feel the same way as he does.

De Montigny concluded his argument by advocating a change in the social worker and client relationship. Although he presented a valid argument, and one

many practitioners may agree with, he does not provide an example of how this change can be effected. But he does instead suggest that liberating social work is dangerous due to the fact that social workers are constricted and restricted by the rules and regulations of the organisations they work for and are deeply entrenched in a culture of negativity and blame (p. 225).

In contrast to de Montigny's argument for transformation of child protection social work due to a power imbalance between social worker and parents, Ferguson argued for change by promoting the use of 'good authority' in practice, a new way of thinking about social work which he refers to as an 'intimate child protection practice' (2011: 4). In *Child Protection Practice*, Ferguson argued that not nearly enough attention is given to the detail of what social workers and other professionals actually do, where they do it and what their experience is of doing it. He felt there was room for a practice which involved thoroughly investigating a situation tactfully, and with the cooperation of parents, which would then lead practitioners to have 'deeper relationships with themselves and their own experiences' (2011: 4).

In this ethnography Ferguson aimed to place the social worker at the centre of the child protection process in order to explore the feelings and emotions they are faced with in practice, in the office and in public, implicitly constructing a picture of what professional identity is like and providing examples of what it should be like. Unfortunately, however, there are no methodological details provided such as how long he undertook his work for, what it exactly involved and what type of authority he observed. As a result it is difficult for the reader to contextualise his findings.

Nonetheless Ferguson's work is still compelling. He sets the scene by providing an historical context and describing how child protection work used to be handled without self recrimination. Although deaths were always regretted in the

early 1900s the public tolerated them as they recognised that practitioners were not organisational dupes who simply followed agency rules but social actors who actively constructed the foundations of modern forms of knowledge and professional culture of child protection practice that would endure for most of the 20th century.

Social workers back then were inspired with a vision of work which held value to children and community, and led them to be deeply respected by others and considered experts of their field. Ferguson documented how this revered image changed and continued to deteriorate from the late 1960s as the identity of the child protection social worker moved from that of inspector to someone who worked in partnership with professionals, wearing their own clothes instead of uniforms. Ferguson recognised that partnership working may chime well with the social work value base of empowerment but in reality it is impossible due to hostile, resistant parents and an over bureaucratized procedure and policy lacking clarity around power, authority and achieving partnership.

By analysing information from the Victoria Climbié case report (Laming, 2003) Ferguson found certain material that Whittaker's (2011) research lacked. Ferguson identified how psychological defence mechanisms had been developed by the professionals from the Haringey Local Authority which was held accountable for Victoria's death. These mechanisms were created as a result of a blame culture which was evident both within the organisation and outside of it and which subsequently led to a hostile team culture where 'distorted and abusive patterns' were acted out with one another (p. 134). In one example, Ferguson described how he found details which suggested that one manager had behaved like a head mistress, creating internal politics that provided little comfort and no safe or nurturing space for the social worker to operate in. The impact of this hostile environment left social workers

feeling like hostages in the 'Stockholm Syndrome'²⁹ and encouraged a defensive form of behaviour which only contributed to the practitioner losing focus of the child (p. 134).

What is interesting about this theme is how both ethnographies have focused on the personal element of a professional exercise. They do develop contrasting perspectives with de Montigny focusing intensely on his experience of the social injustice in child protection practice and the impact it has on the family and Ferguson exploring, more objectively, the injustice of the organisational hierarchy and the impact it has on the social worker. Both confirm, nonetheless, that there are two main themes in child protection social work: social injustice and organisational hierarchy. They both dominate the profession and have a significant impact on the subjective experience of the professional.

These authors also believe that changes to the system do need to occur, yet, despite the differences in their approaches, they both recognise that if the system is to improve then the emotional and personal aspect of the social worker's identity must also be the primary consideration of these transformations. For if the social worker is overlooked then the focus on the child will also be lost.

2.5. Constructing identity in child protection practice

Exploring the theme of identity further, the next authors D'Cruz (2004), Scourfield (1999) and Scourfield and Pithouse (2006), continue the debate by aiming to analyse just how this concept can be constructed in child protection. Each study chooses a different perspective with the first, *Constructing meanings and identities in child*

²⁹ Stockholm syndrome is a psychological phenomenon in which hostages express empathy and sympathy towards their captors, sometimes to the point of defending them.

protection practice by Heather D’Cruz (2004) aiming to explore how official meanings and identities within this domain are constructed. D’Cruz used the method of ethnography to understand how meanings and identities are constructed in practice. She read sampled case files, interviewed practitioners who were the area managers at the time of the interview and then transcribed the taped interviews. The participant observation took place over twenty days at two sites in Australia, which she names as Urbania and Suburbia, ten days in each.

By using a ‘fractured lens’ D’Cruz drew from the theoretical work of Foucault, Bourdieu and Potter in order to bridge a gap between practice and academia to offer what might be both ‘critical yet familiar’ (2004: 13). Her work is written primarily for practitioners. Yet, in order to understand and be able to follow her work one needs to first fully understand these philosophers’ theories which might, for the novice, be subjects that are difficult to grasp. D’Cruz’s work may therefore be more appealing for the academic audience, those who might be more familiar with these three chosen philosophers. However, D’Cruz does not appear to recognise this and is explicit that her intended audience is only the practitioner: the one who is embedded within the culture she planned to deconstruct and then reconstruct.

D’Cruz uses the metaphor of the ‘fractured lens’ throughout her work. ‘Fractured’ is used to represent the extremely ‘messy and complex’ realities she has engaged with and signified. ‘Lens’ is depicted as a way of seeing literally and figuratively. And by using social constructionism as her epistemological perspective, her lens acknowledged that the researcher also generates and constructs knowledge. By then placing ‘child protection’ under her fractured lens, and drawing from Foucault, Bourdieu and Potter, she discussed how each of these theories and approaches contribute to and give meaning to this concept (2004: 15).

D' Cruz found that identity is defined through discourses that represent particular cultural ways of being and can only be meaningful if in relationship with a complementary identity e.g. woman can only be understood when considered in relation to man. She also found that the culture of child protection is patriarchal and witnesses women, in cases of child protection, being harsh on women because of a patriarchal assumption that the mother is responsible.

Yet despite considering how the identities of the clients are constructed and drawing from the theoretical perspective of social constructionism to allow for her own role within the research, she overlooked the personal and historical experience of the social worker and does not consider how their identity might impact on their practice. For example, when describing dominant cultural prescriptions of mothering, D' Cruz argued that this is often shared by 'mothers-as-clients' and by 'women-as-caseworkers', but does not mention 'mothers-as-caseworkers' and thus overlooked another possible identity that could have been held by the worker (p. 193).

In *The construction of gender in child protection social work* (1999) and *Gender and child protection* (2003), Jonathan Scourfield also found that child protection in the UK is underpinned by a patriarchal culture. Scourfield used ethnography as a tool to examine gender discourse in the occupational culture of a child care social work team. Scourfield spent three mornings a week for three months doing 'participant observation' and reading case files. He found that there was indeed a gap between what people said they did and what they actually did in practice.

Motivated by the belief that the failure to engage men should be seen as a problem, Scourfield recognised that social workers expect women to do most of the caring because of a societal expectation. The issue that emerged, therefore, was not

just about practitioners ignoring the father in an investigation but about an injustice to women who bore the scrutiny for their absence.

Through his use of interview extracts and ethnographic notes, Scourfield found that 'women clients are constructed in relation to a notion of client masculinity' (1999: 134). He also found that 'tacit knowledge' was very important in constructing social work professional knowledge and he described it as 'largely unarticulated, contextual understanding that is often manifested in nods, silences, humour and naughty nuances' (1999:37).

Although Scourfield's study explored the identity construction of clients in depth, the identity of the professional and how this may have been constructed is largely overlooked. This is a significant factor if we are to agree with White (1997) and assume that identity is constructed through routines and linguistic practices. Yet, Scourfield does return to the professional and their identity when he revisits his study in another article, which he wrote with Pithouse (2006) entitled '*Lay and professional knowledge in social work: reflections on ethnographic research on child protection*'. By expanding upon the gender bias concept discussed above, Scourfield continued the argument by proposing that in practice tacit knowledge is actually privileged over professional knowledge, despite there being a drive for the opposite to occur.

Scourfield and Pithouse found that social work and theory are separated in practice because theory seemed, to the workers, distant from the grass roots of what was actually being done and therefore social work practice was not theoretically informed when it should have been. They found that, rather than referring to theory, social workers were relying on a shared tacit knowledge. When it came to neglect and the bare minimum standards, social workers were replacing the occupational

guidance in favour of common sense and personal standards. This aspect of personal agency, and the role it can play in professional practice, is an issue that D’Cruz (2004) overlooked in her own work. But in this context, Scourfield and Pithouse (2006) recognised that social workers do import and apply their past and present experience, from present and former identities, as they are members of society with everyday reasoning and decision making.

Both of Scourfield’s studies here agreed that the culture of child protection is a patriarchal one as fathers are ignored and mothers are scrutinised for their absence. This form of parental scepticism was also observed by White (1997) and Pithouse (1987). It is therefore interesting to note that despite regional and temporal variations of the workplace, and despite focusing on one specific setting, ethnography can be used, to some degree, in the form of universal generalisation as certain similarities in child protection practice emerge from different studies.

Another important theme to surface, when considering identity construction, is ‘tacit knowledge’ a concept that has been described as an important tool and is used in developing professional awareness and experience. It is a concept that is considered so powerful it has been seen to replace approved governmental guidance in favour of social workers’ subjective experiences of everyday reasoning and decision making; a point that will be explored further within the next theme.

2.6. Categorisation and Processing

Tacit knowledge also appears as an important subject within this theme, with Wattam (1992) and Hall, Slembrouck and Sarangi (2006). In *Making a case in child protection* (1992), Corinne Wattam examined decision making in child protection practice by carrying out two ethnographies: one in a social work setting and the other in the

crown prosecution service (CPS). The study was carried out between 1988 and 1991, and even though the length of time actually spent carrying out the research is not clarified, Wattam is clear about the tools she used to undertake this chosen method: participant observation; document analysis of files, video recordings/ taped interviews and interviews were conducted with teachers, social workers, police CPS personnel and children.

Although Wattam aimed to explicate the process of constructing a child protection case in order to provide practitioners with a base on which to make informed decisions following the inauguration of the Memorandum of Good Practice framework,³⁰ what she actually found was in practice this guidance was often replaced by another set of rules. These were deemed more important by professionals in determining whether a case was categorised as a case or not, by using a method more commonly known today as ‘tacit knowledge’ (see also Pithouse, 1998; Scourfield, 1999; White, 1997)

In Language practices in social work: categorisation and accountability in child welfare (2006), Christopher Hall, Stef Slembrouck and Srikant Sarangi used a theoretical framework they had formulated to expand on this concept by demonstrating how categorisation can actually take place amongst professionals. They argued that certain categories reveal how institutional arrangements influence (and are influenced by) the establishment of case groups by professionals. Their framework utilised discourse analysis to explore professional talk and texts by drawing on particular themes and categories such as: professional and institutional; argumentation, membership; action work etc (2006:25).

³⁰ The Memorandum of Good Practice (1992) framework was, at the time, new guidance for professionals interviewing children in a legally acceptable way.

Hall et al. through the use of categorisation, developed some interesting ideas and demonstrated ways in which social work practice can be deconstructed through the analysis of talk and text. In their de-construction of a case conference, the authors revealed how social workers and other professionals can turn the inadequate parent into an inadequate person by simply emitting a 'strong moral overtone' (2006: 95).

Although their theoretical framework is useful in highlighting how this characterisation process can take place in practice, it does not, unfortunately, offer an explanation as to why this has actually taken place. By focusing on a few extracts of talk and text, they missed what goes on behind the scenes, that which is not visible to the outsider, such as the implicit forms of communication that occur between senior management and staff in the office setting: the actual talk or discourse that constructs the micro culture where these social workers find themselves located and are subjected to which I will duly attend to in Chapter six.

Their research not only missed the voices of the social workers but also pertinent aspects of why the culture functions in the way that it does. Despite the authors recognising that the social worker needs to learn how to navigate 'professional, legal and institutional definitions and discourses', unfortunately, no links are made between these discourses and the reasons why professionals may have behaved and categorised in the way that they did towards 'the inadequate parent' (2006: 24).

Wattam, however, did try to explain how professionals categorise and did so by explaining how they take accounts of child abuse at face value rather than requesting a formal procedure, such as a medical, to ascertain the facts of the case. But by advocating that medicals should become routine procedure Wattam, has ignored the concerns raised by others (see Cooper et al. 1995; Parton et al. 1997) in

relation to the overzealous behaviour of professionals exhibited during the Cleveland Inquiry. Wattam asserted instead that social workers need to be accountable for their cases by building factual records to replace what she felt was just a 'gloss of a discussion' (1992:70).

I understand that Wattam's aim was to strengthen social work evidence gathering procedures so that it would improve the reputation of the profession and so that cases could stand up in court and justice could be served for children who have been subjected to abuse. But I believe that the role she advocates for the social worker is one that is already available and takes shape in the form of a police officer.

It is evident throughout the study that Wattam recognised that this is a contradiction and as a result she appeared to struggle with trying to balance child centred practice with the need for gathering evidence. Although Wattam did not directly refer to this struggle herself, she did often notice that children who are 'the subjects of the offence' are also 'the objects of evidence' (1992: 29). Therefore, despite Wattam recognising that legal discourse dominates in child protection work, she, in turn, effectively promoted it herself. Gaining justice for the child is not always in the child's best interests. Medical examinations are invasive, lengthy processes; they can also be traumatic experiences for children. This conflict is not only an issue social workers grapple with (see de Montigny, 1995; Cooper et al. 1995; Parton et al. 1997) but one which Wattam also struggled to explain.

These authors show that different methods bring different issues. Although Wattam used an ethnography and in the process, gained an understanding of the social worker's perspective, she struggled to find a reasonable way of strengthening the practice of child protection social work without bringing unwarranted, inappropriate and excessive attention to the child. With similar aims to Wattam but

through the use of discourse analysis, Hall et al. (2006) attempted to draw social workers' attentions to the way that clients can be characterised in the child protection process. However, by focusing primarily on discourse they ignore the identities of the social workers and so lack the insight and understanding of why social workers are doing what they are doing.

Within this theme the issue of social injustice has also emerged, once again, as professionals are depicted, by both studies, as struggling with balancing their patriarchal paternalistic role with their protective one in child protection cases (see also Dingwall et al. 1993; Parton et al. 1997). This common theme appears to be a re-occurring issue within this area of social work in the UK but it is not seen as a problem for professionals working within the same framework but a different system of the next theme: the social welfare system.

2.7.Messages from the social welfare approach

The way in which child protection work is carried out in the social welfare system, is an approach to children and families social work that is used in France and in Flanders. It is also a major theme for Cooper et al. (1995), Hall and Slembrouck (2009), Hetherington et al. (1997), Marneffe (1996), Roose et al. (2009) and van de Luitgaarden (2011). In the 1990s Andrew Cooper, Rachael Hetherington and their team recognised that the child protection system in the UK had become systematically 'stuck' (Hetherington, 1998: 73). They acknowledged that it was futile re-identifying the same problems and proposing similar solutions for a child protection system that was clearly in trouble and decided instead to aim for something new that would introduce contemporary ideas and perspectives as a means of changing the way people thought about child protection and its process.

They decided to take their research abroad and focused specifically on Western Europe; an area previously ignored because of language differences but one they felt was worth considering due to its close proximity and its original approach to working with children and families. As we are about to see, much of Cooper and Hetherington's work, appeared in the 1990s and continued to provoke debate well into the early 2000s³¹ but then it ceased and little has been heard from either author in this particular field since.

In *Positive child protection: a view from abroad* (1995), Cooper, Hetherington, Baistow, Pitts, Spriggs, used qualitative research methods, in the form of focus groups, to compare the child protection system process in the UK with that of the French welfare system. Groups of social workers from England went to visit French social work organisations and groups of French social workers came to England to do the same. Although there is little description of how these focus groups were constructed (such as the quantity of practitioners in each group, their levels of experience and how often they visited each other's countries) they are clear about what each focus group did: discuss, observe and analyse the differences between their two systems over the period of one year.

Using a similar approach to Cooper et al. (1995), Hetherington, Cooper, Smith, and Wilford, in the *Protecting children: messages from Europe* (1997) study adopted a qualitative approach which involved structured conversations set as a four part study that also analysed documents (such as articles and statute books) and used participant observation to observe practitioners and other researchers. The focus groups contained five social workers from Flanders, Francophone Belgium, France,

³¹ In 2003 Rachael Hetherington, formal director for the centre of comparative social work at Brunel University, appeared on Woman's Hour alongside Margaret Hodge to discuss alternatives for proposals outlined in the Children at Risk Green Paper.

Germany, Italy, Netherlands and the UK they used one case study to understand how individual social workers might approach the case. Their aim was twofold: to learn about child protection in other countries and to elicit views from social workers about each other's approaches.

Hetherington et al. (1997) were worried that their study had taken place just after Dutroux. They were concerned that the Flemish achievements could have been placed at risk as a result of the author's experience of what happened to the English child protection system following the Cleveland Inquiry. However, as we shall see from Hall and Slembrouck (2009), despite the Dutroux affair having a huge impact on the way Flanders viewed child abuse it did not change the way the social welfare system operated, as rather than focus attention on the child protection agencies the methods used by the police were instead scrutinised.

Hetherington et al.'s study found that the discourse emanating from a particular culture can act as a mechanism of control on those who are subjected to it. This notion is supported by the social constructionist theorist Geertz (1973) who maintained that culture can be seen as the source rather than the result of human thought and action and that language emerges as a means of programming not only behaviours but emotions as well. Hetherington et al. demonstrated that discourse has profound repercussions on the child protection system, in turn affecting the social workers' perspectives. The English participants often expressed confusion over balancing the rights of the parents with the needs of the child in contrast to the Flemish and the French who were clear that their client was the child only as there were other professionals available to meet the needs of the parents.

Yet what I felt was most significant, was the impact these discourses impressed upon the emotions of the social workers. The data found that those from

Western Europe were confident, clear and decisive but their professional judgment was supported and strengthened by their agency. In contrast, the English social workers not only came across as the most anxious but the most unwilling to intervene. Hetherington (1998) showed that the child protection system does not just affect the thoughts and actions of a practitioner but, and as Harre (1986) has argued elsewhere, those subjected to it have to also be prepared for the effect a culture can have on the social construction of their emotions.

By using a comparative element to their study, Hetherington et al.'s findings are illuminating and strengthen Foucault's (1972) argument that separation and comparison is a benefit in research and can produce extraordinary results: only through a passage of space and time can we see the discourse we were subjected to. By using the element of comparison, the study demonstrated that cultures in Western Europe do respond differently to their practitioners and as a result the professional identities of social workers do differ depending on their location.

In Cooper et al.'s (1995) study, the main differences to emerge were the way each country worked with regards to their families and each other as professionals. The French saw the child as part of the family whereas the English sought to criminalise the parent and focus on the child, a theme we saw emerge earlier on this chapter (see Pithouse, 1998; Scourfield, 1999; White, 1997). The French social workers worked as part of a multi agency team (similar to that in Flanders) which consisted of psychologists, educatrices, legal agencies and the Judge who is considered to be the head of the professional group and referred to as the 'super parent' (1995: 6). It is this, the Judge's role and relationship with the social worker, that the authors believe is most significant. In France, the Judge is the one held accountable for all the decisions made, whereas in England it is the Judge who decides

what will happen but then passes the responsibility on to the social worker. When the French participants saw how the system operated here, they were not only shocked but argued that this approach led to oppressive practice and simply strengthened organisational hierarchy.

The authors also noticed that whilst the English agreed with the French and were also very critical of their own system they felt unable to apply what they had learned from the research exercise to their own situation due to heavy bureaucratisation and a lack of control over their actions, a term formerly referred to in this chapter as 'bureau professionalism' (see Dingwall et al. 1983). This, the authors felt, was as a result of managerialism, an approach which was introduced during Thatcher's political reign and which both Dingwall et al. (1983) and Whittaker (2011) recognised in their studies.

However, although the authors acknowledged this was an issue, little consideration was given as to how this issue could be addressed or overcome. Subsequently, the authors appear to have found it as difficult to apply their findings to the UK setting as much as the UK social workers struggled to integrate the findings from partaking in the study into their own practice. It might be, as a result of this limitation, that Cooper and Hetherington's research from abroad did not go onto create new concepts for practice here in the UK as it had intended to but instead became just a good idea which simply faded away into obscurity.

But I do acknowledge that being subjected to an inquiry is a possibility that haunts every social worker in child protection practice today and an aspect of their profession that will inevitably impact on their professional identity. It was also a concern for Hetherington et al. (1997) who worried that the Dutroux Inquiry would have a detrimental effect on the Flanders approach to welfare. The next article,

'Professional categorization, risk management and inter-agency communication in public inquiries into disastrous outcomes' by Hall and Slembrouck (2009) used two Inquiries- Climbié and Dutroux- to compare and contrast the communication that took place between multi agency professionals prior to the child's death in order to highlight the flaws and subsequently aim to improve professional practice. Hall is from the UK and Slembrouck is Flemish, and together they hold the belief that child protection involves talking about cases, labelling them and putting them into categories- procedures they refer to as 'processing' (2009: 280).

In agreement with Wise (1988) and White (1997), these authors also felt that child abuse was a process which involved a lot of 'talk', these authors aim to demonstrate that statutory inquiries undermine the complexities of communication; however unlike Wise who felt these complexities meant only those who led the Inquiry could comment with the benefit of hindsight, Hall and Slembrouck attributed this communication error to the professionals who are inherently driven by the need to process.

By taking extracts from the interviews reported on in the two Inquiries, the authors tried to show how communication can fail between professionals by using textual comparative analysis. They began with the Climbié Inquiry where the referral from the hospital was initially treated as emotional abuse by the social worker as this was the box that was ticked on the paper form submitted by the paediatrician. They then go onto examine the Dutroux Inquiry which focused predominately on the failures of the police and their digressions of discourse. The police were criticised by the Chief of the Inquiry for not breaking down the walls in the home (where the children were concealed) of Dutroux. To explain this oversight, the police reasoned that when looking for the children, they thought of them as 'missing' and not

'abducted for sexual exploitation purposes'. The main criticism from the Inquiry was that if they had thought outside the box, they would have been able to make the relevant connections and saved the children.

The authors concluded, following the analysis of both Inquiries, that contextual factors are used as rhetorical devices. By using the term, 'contextual factors', they are referring to the social worker who could not see beyond the ticked box of 'emotional abuse' nor the detective beyond the 'missing person' category. The barrister in the Climbié case who had the benefit of hindsight then used 'rhetorical devices' to strengthen his argument and demonstrate how the social worker, despite not having the luxury of this information prior to Victoria's death, had failed to protect her as a result of not asking the right questions.

Carrying out a textual comparative analysis of both Inquiries is an interesting angle to use within this context. The authors recognised that the sharing of information is an interactional process and recommended that there needed to be 'a conceptual shift in the approach to understanding materials made available through public inquiries' (2009: 295). Whilst I agree with most of their argument, what I struggle to understand is what this conceptual shift is and how it might occur as the authors do not explicitly explain how or what is needed exactly for this change to occur.

They did, nonetheless, present a valid argument in relation to how professionals do categorise and that this idiosyncrasy can be at the root of all miscommunication. Yet by focusing primarily on the two who were subjected to the Inquiry they overlook the fact that not only does the professional categorise a case in a particular way but so do those who undertake the Inquiry. Although the authors recognise that an Inquiry is explicit in identifying the flaws in professional practice,

Wise (1988) would argue, they fail to see that it also has its own intended outcome that is an implicit but integral part of the process: to find the one most culpable for the professional failures.

Catherine Marneffe's article, '*Child abuse treatment: a fallow land*' (1996), takes the form of a critical commentary. Marneffe begins the article by asking readers, those who are not directly connected to the practice, to pause and think about how their thoughts and opinions are distant, judgmental and indifferent towards abusive parents.

Marneffe's argument is similar to one made by Potter (1996) as she recognises that discourse is laced with stake inoculations which uses superficial words, rules and guidelines all in the name of child protection. However, Marneffe proposed that this form of discourse is actually used to protect the personal interests of society as it creates a method that enables this agency to form a detachment from the notion of ever falling so low to become or live like the families who are subjected to the child protection system. In doing so, the basic principle of the whole process is overlooked: the best interest of the child is also linked to the best interests of the parent (1996: 380). By focusing solely on the child it is inevitable that the parent will be excluded.

Marneffe takes a more intimate approach in her work by provoking the uncomfortable and forcing readers to reflect on their own life and contribution to child protection discourse. She challenges the reader by asking, 'we think, we write, we give conferences but how many of us are really and practically pre-occupied with the fate of the deprived families we claim to know so well?' (1996: 380). This question leads her to defend the social welfare system, one which she is part of, and one that attempts to understand the social and psychological dynamics which inevitably lead to the destruction of children by their own parents.

What it is particularly significant about this well crafted article, apart from being evocative and compelling, is that Catherine Marneffe once worked for the Flemish agency I observed in the comparative element of this study. As a result of being a practitioner and an academic she sees both sides of the story and groups social workers alongside children and their families by arguing that the UK child protection system oppresses this set collectively. For how can a social worker provide a meaningful service when they find themselves entrenched in a culture which is full of antipathy for those providing the service and those receiving it? By making this separation, and creating an 'us and them' scenario (see Ayre, 2001) she surreptitiously identifies another agency that inevitably impacts on the culture of child protection; an agency which is influential in shaping policy and government incentives: society.

In contrast to Marneffe (1996), Cooper et al. (1995) and Hetherington et al. (1997), Roose et al.'s (2009) findings demonstrate that even social workers from a welfare system can struggle to execute this anti oppressive approach effectively when working with their clients. In *Participatory social work and report writing* (2009), Rudi Roose, Andre Mottart, Nele Dejonckheere, Carol van Nijnatten and Maria de Bie analysed the partnership report writing that takes place with looked after children in Flanders by examining twenty files which provided fifty six reports from ten different services in order to explore if this form of practice did really encourage the social worker to represent the voices of their clients well.

The authors used contents analysis when de-constructing the reports and found that the social welfare approach does lead to a practice which is not tokenistic but takes the form of a pedagogical process: to teach the client how to participate and to encourage the social worker to learn with them and together share the power.

They explain this as being more beneficial for clients and social workers as it encourages both parties to engage in the goal of participation with one another, as opposed to the approach used in the UK which sees a client's reluctance to work with services as suspicious thus creating concern for the social workers who are working with them.

However, the authors found that even when actively employing the participatory method of report writing- where an active dialogue should take place between client and social worker in order that their voice be heard- there was little evidence, in reality, that this actually took place. The social workers who incorporated what the clients said tended to use their quotes to strengthen the professional's views rather than client's perspective. The imbalance in power was also still seen as an issue as professionals often resorted to social work discourse to strengthen their own theoretical argument. This method of reporting served to empower the parent but disempower the child.

This article is particularly significant as it highlights an important factor: advocating a form of practice does not necessarily mean, in reality, it will be executed in the way in which it was meant to. As the authors show here, being subjected to a social welfare culture does not necessarily mean that the social workers who are subjected to it will go on to transmit the techniques acquired on their journey through their social agency in the way that was intended. These findings push the boundaries of the social constructionist view that 'without culture we could not function' (Crotty, 1998: 53) and force us to recognise that the power of personal agency should never be underestimated when considering structuralism.

Before concluding, there is one more study I wish to review within this context by van de Luitgaarden (2011) *Knowledge and knowing in child protection practice: An*

empirical exploration of the role of knowledge in constructing service user identities at the point of first referral. By using Actor Network Theory (ANT), van de Luitgaarden aims to understand how service user identity is constructed by professionals who work in the Flemish agency I have observed in this doctoral study. By doing so, his plan was to produce ‘critical insights into interactions between judgment and decision making processes’ in order to analyse how this type of knowledge contributes to the process of identity construction (2011:5).

Actor Network Theory is a way of thoroughly exploring the relational ties within a network (Latour, 2005). In this instance van de Luitgaarden used interviews and observation techniques to identify actors within the Flemish child protection agency in order to understand the way in which they acquire knowledge by analysing how they negotiate, interpret, understand, stabilise and alter the ways in which they work.

Although the method chosen is qualitative, for some unexplained reason, van de Luitgaarden presents his work through the lens of a positivist by ignoring his own position and referring to himself throughout the study as ‘the researcher’. By writing in the third person van de Luitgaarden appears to be exerting a form of ‘experiential author(ity)’ within the text (Van Maanen, 1988: 46). This style, more commonly associated with authors of realist tales in ethnographic work, assumes that by absencing the ‘I’ the authority of the narrator will become enhanced within the study thus eliminating any suspected bias and mooting any ‘worries the audience may have over personal subjectivity’ (Van Maanen, 1988: 46). Yet when this stance is taken, Emerson et al. (2001: 360) argue that there is a danger the researcher assumes an ‘omniscient point of view’ by assuming that he/ she has a privileged access to the actor’s thoughts, feelings and motives. And as Hicks (1998:91) points out, even if the

'all knowing, objective researcher' aims to tell us the truth, '[t]exts do not tell "the truth", they tell versions from which the reader will make sense'.

Although van de Luitgaarden does not appear to make any *explicit* claims of omniscience he does reach the conclusion that professional knowledge is not applied to certain situations in Flemish child protection work but is constructed from a process of fact gathering about a child's circumstances. Therefore rather than use theory and research to inform practice, van de Luitgaarden suggests that child protection workers explore referrals and cases by gathering information from referrers and transform these into facts or 'so-called antecedent' conditions (2011:3).

However, in addition to overlooking the role he played within the study and removing his own presence from the text, van de Luitgaarden also disregarded the identity of the professionals who took part in this research; a significant element to omit especially as his aim was to explore how their knowledge as professionals is constructed in child protection practice. Although the ANT method does not often seek to explain 'how' or 'why' a network takes the form that it does (Latour, 2005), by not considering the impact of an organisational culture on the identity of participants van de Luitgaarden does not consider how this culture may have subsequently affected the construction of service user's identities as well as the professionals' knowledge. And it is this aspect which I firmly believe is needed if we are to fully comprehend how they go about constructing 'knowledge and knowing in child protection practice' (van de Luitgaarden, 2011:80). As de Montigny (1995) and Ferguson (2011) have previously asserted, in order to comprehend the way in which child protection practice is conducted we must first seek to identify where social workers are located and then recognise how their environment impacts on who they are.

In summary the studies in this section collectively show that the social welfare approach does not only aim to have a different impact on the clients receiving the service but also on the professionals who are delivering it. The professional identity of social workers is much stronger and one of the reasons for this is because the multi agency approach removes the sole accountability measure that practitioners here in the UK experience.

All the studies recognise that there are serious issues with the UK child protection system and some propose that if the social welfare approach were to be adopted certain issues could be resolved. Nonetheless, despite all agreeing that the social welfare system is the best way, it has been suggested that at times this approach can still be considered difficult for professionals to execute effectively.

2.8 Conclusion

In this chapter I have attempted to outline and analyse the key articles and research studies that I believe underpin and subsequently frame this study. By doing so, I have drawn upon some relevant themes within child protection literature and have then attempted to relate these to the focus of this study.

Firstly, it is noteworthy to highlight that the methods chosen by the majority of studies are qualitative. All who have used this methodology have wanted to explore a particular aspect of practice within the culture of child protection. Some have taken up different positions, others have conveyed different perspectives depending on their relationship to the study, but whichever stance they have taken, they have collectively managed to create an intriguing argument by not focusing on just one particular characteristic of child protection social work but by considering (in most cases) wider socio-cultural and historical influences of the culture as well.

As a result, a more informative picture of the culture of child protection has emerged. The literature has collectively shown how child protection social work revolves around two main conflicting themes: social injustice and organisational hierarchy, issues which have haunted and continue to haunt the profession today. It is because of this uncertainty that particular issues have arisen within practice and made social work into an object which is easy to criticise.

Certain authors have defined how external agencies influence the culture of this profession from a safe distance. Yet despite their physical level of detachment from the direct work, it is evident that their impact is still significant and consequently affects the behaviour of front line social workers, their organisation and other agencies. These studies also demonstrate that discourse has changed over the years and as a result practice has evolved from one ruled by optimism to one ruled by a degree of scepticism.

It is not surprising, therefore, that as a result of this change in attitude, defensive behaviours have emerged within statutory organisations. These behaviours have also impacted on social workers both personally and professionally and implied that social workers will do whatever they need to in order to protect themselves when operating within a hostile climate, much to the detriment of the child and their family. All these studies signify that child protection social work in the UK has deteriorated over the years and the future still looks bleak.

Yet, in contrast, studies which have explored the European child protection system hold a different message for readers. Over there the social welfare approach appears to understand that practitioners are at the heart of child protection practice. These studies show that the social welfare approach has recognised that if professionals do not have a strong, positive identity within society, families will suffer

and render practice futile. They also suggest that the troubled practice that emerges from the UK is not indicative of the way social workers practise but is as a result of the punitive system practitioners in the UK work within.

This leads me to the point of this research. For whilst all the existing literature in this chapter offers many informative insights there is not one example of a research project which has solely focused upon the way in which professionals construct their identity. The research on which this thesis is based will fill that gap by investigating how this may happen, not just in the UK but in Flanders. By choosing a diverse system to that of the UK, the social welfare context, I hope to identify why these settings are different, why it is European professionals are valued for who they are and what they do and if this reverence does impact on the identity and culture of the Flemish child protection profession.

A few of the studies in this literature review focus on how UK child protection practice could be improved or become more effective, if the social worker were to behave differently, think more coherently and/ or take specific details into consideration. Yet there are also a number of authors who identify with social workers and recognise that by being *central* elements in the process of protecting children, their position, their behaviour and their attitude needs to be understood if positive changes are to occur.

This doctoral study therefore begins with the participants and their location whilst making explicit, rather than attempting to hide it, the role I, as a researcher and a social worker, have played throughout. I propose that only by exploring their situation in depth and understanding and interpreting their views of their culture and their identity, can we then appreciate why the current UK child protection situation is

in the troubled state that it is. The next chapter will follow on from this one by explaining the process and methodology of the research undertaken in this study.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter explains how the data for this doctoral study were generated and discusses the reasons why the preferred approach of a comparative ethnography was selected. It is also the part where the epistemological (how we can know anything) and the ontological (the nature of what we know) assumptions that underlie this chosen qualitative methodology are discussed as well as how these suppositions were employed in the hope of achieving particular substantive and methodological outcomes (Mason, 2002). Traditionally in social research, the methodological choices section should also examine the intricacies of how the study was actually carried out; therefore the design of this project will be divided into different subheadings, from the research design through to the dissemination with a discussion on ethics. Each area will be discussed in elaborate detail and I will often use extracts from interviews or my own observations to support or expand upon a point I wish to make. Such evidence is important in demonstrating the decision making process behind the theoretical and practical design of this project.

3.1 Research Design

Within the history of social science research there has been a predominant emphasis on the use of quantitative methods as a means of producing a greater scientific rigour. This positivist approach has led to some impressive outcomes and may have proved more popular, in recent years, due to being located within the culture of western capitalism, a society which is interested in and benefits from measuring and counting (Crotty, 1998). Positivism, therefore, is interested in collecting facts which have developed from an 'explicit, standardized set of data elicitation procedures' as it is

only from the exercise of physical or statistical control variables that a body of knowledge can be viewed as valid (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 6).

Naturalism, on the other hand, proposes that the social world should be studied, as far as is possible, within its 'natural' state as it cannot be properly understood in environments which are controlled and under surveillance. To understand human behaviour, naturalists argue, we need to accept that this is not performed in the mechanical way that positivists expect. According to the naturalist account, one way in which the learning of human behaviour within different cultures across society can be carried out effectively is through the method of ethnography (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 7).

3.2 Why ethnography?

During the 'Ethnography' module which I undertook on the Social Research Methods Masters degree I came across Phillippe Bourgois' (1995) ethnographic study of social marginalisation in an inner city borough of New York, entitled *In search of respect: selling crack in El Barrio*. In order to carry out his research Bourgois moved to Harlem with his wife and child and lived in an area which was notorious for being one of the roughest ghetto neighbourhoods in Harlem yet, at the same time, was just a short distance away from some of the richest districts of New York City. His story depicted that of an anthropologist who had for the first time gained the trust and friendship of some of the street level drug dealers who operated there and as a result, his eyewitness account managed to portray a different perspective of their problems. It was the first time that I came to realise how an ethnography could create a theoretical discussion that was not only open and evocative but could also give detail to the violence, substance abuse, sexual abuse, domestic discord and crises

experienced by the participants: those who lived there every day, those who found it difficult to leave. Bourgois' provocative study has most certainly inspired my choice of method for this study but it also enabled me to consider how I could actually 'be' there in a setting, accept my own presence whilst I observed participants and use both of these positions to understand what was happening in the culture I worked in.

Ethnography is a form of qualitative research that can allow for social processes to be understood (Coffey, 1999; Crotty, 1998; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Mason, 2002). It is a method which involves the use of a set of methods, which collectively allow for 'people's behaviour to be studied in their everyday contexts', for data to be gathered from a range of sources, for the approach towards data collection to be both flexible and sensitive to the context in which the research is taking place, for focus to be on 'a relatively small number of cases' and for the analysis of the data to involve an interpretation of 'the meanings and functions of human actions' (Hammersley, 1998: 2).

Ethnography is also a method in which the immersion of the researcher, their physical and emotional presence, is considered and permitted, even if she is observing a familiar group or setting, in order to construct an account of culture from within it. Rather than see this insider positioning as a negative, ethnography considers this positioning as an opportunity to capture something that might be uniquely different (see Blackman, 2007; Coffey, 1999; Labaree, 2012; Nilan, 2002; Taylor, 2011).

Ethnography furthermore accepts that emotional experience and intellectual autobiography is not only constructed and reconstructed through research (Coffey, 1999; Nilan, 2002; Taylor, 2011) but inevitably what draws you to the study in the first place (Labaree, 2012; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). By this I mean that

'choosing to see myself, my social actions, interactions and performances as part of the phenomena under investigation and not as someone distinct from it' not only 'grounded me in the field' but additionally enabled me to magnify other self interactions and 'critique the seemingly mundane' (Taylor, 2011: 16). As a practising social worker aiming to explore how identity is constructed within a culture of child protection, it seemed not only natural but also appropriate to adopt a particular approach that would enable me to unravel and critically analyse a setting which I was already a part of. By using ethnography, I wanted to explore and understand the meaning of professional identity for child protection social workers whilst in their natural setting in order to, not only listen to what they have to say, but to see what it is they do within certain situations. This study, therefore, involved four elements: participant observation, in depth interviews, documentary analysis and photography. The idea of this combination was to assess the varying patterns in organisational culture and behaviours of professionals within the different circumstances to see how they compared and contrasted with one another

As this doctoral study is underpinned by the theory of 'social constructionism' (see Crotty, 1998; Burr, 2003), where the social worker is located will be considered as vitally important as I assert that certain factors will collectively impact on the social worker in some shape or form. As we have seen from the literature review, these factors emerge from a system which is embedded within a culture which is made up of certain agencies and is influenced by various discursive regimes. Ethnography is a method which I can use to explore some of these emerging discourses, ones which may affect social workers thoughts, feelings and meaning making practices.

3.2.1 The intimate insider v the professional stranger

Taylor (2011: 8) acknowledged that being an 'intimate insider', that is, carrying out research in one's own backyard, having regular ongoing contact with friends and colleagues and being deeply embedded as a social actor in a setting where the narrative of the researcher and the researched become entwined, does not mean the position will be entirely unproblematic. But as Labaree (2002: 102) has described, it is the key to delving into the crevices of an organisation, and using your position to gain access 'to hidden truths that the public is unaware of'. Of the child protection ethnographies that have been carried out by social workers (see D'Cruz, 2004; de Montigny, 1995; Dingwall et al. 1983; Ferguson, 2011; Pithouse, 1998; Scourfield, 1999; Wattam, 1992; White, 1997; Whittaker, 2011; Wise, 1988), only one, that I can find to date, has been conducted by an 'intimate insider'. *Performing Social Work: An ethnographic study of talk and text in a metropolitan social services department* by White (1997) is an ethnography that was interested in the performative features of talk and text in social work practice. As noted in Chapter 2, White focused primarily on the collegial discourse that took place between child care social workers and managers whilst she worked for the organisation as a team leader at the same time.

White recognised that her insider position led to her gaining access more easily and being wholly accepted, in her dual role, by other managers. Although she did face some challenges as a professional/ researcher, relating her role to mirroring that of a 'spy in the camp' who aimed to be non-judgmental but could not guarantee that those whose actions she had represented would 'feel no sense of betrayal', she did capture information that, I believe, was distinctive yet original (White, 1997: 331). By drawing attention to the benefits of insiderness and discussing how her identity as a researcher and her relationship with the researched, as part of the world

that was being studied, White was able to capture something uniquely important about the study of social work.

Ethnography is a method therefore that can not only encapsulate the emotional texture that quantitative approaches neglect but also use the position of the ethnographer to draw upon the different cultural perspectives from the field within which the researcher also works. It is as a result of this that I decided to carry out a detailed ethnographic study of a local authority child protection setting where I also worked as a social worker.

However, although I have argued that my insider position could be used as an opportunity in ethnographic research, the notion of objectivity still needed to be considered within this context. It has been suggested that by approaching ethnography as an outsider, the researcher can obtain knowledge of an external world that exists independently of the researcher and the research process thereby reducing distortion and bias to a minimum (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995/ 2007; Silverman, 2013).

To maintain reflexivity and validity, in her insider ethnography White looked to Geertz (1973) and applied his framework of 'experience near' and 'experience distant' and argued that sociology can be properly carried out by persons who belong, as long as they recognise that in some ways they are also outsiders in their own culture. Yet Nilan (2002: 366) has contended that moving between the two subject positions of insider and outsider has not always been easy in her 15 years experience as a researcher. She admits that she has at times struggled with being an objective 'detached researcher', in one context, and then moving to the 'subject position of emotionally immersed researcher' in another. But she has learned, over the years, that these difficult moments are 'valuable [and] reflexive' as they create an

opportunity for the researcher to shine a 'brilliant spotlight' upon an epistemological problem (2002: 374).

3.2.2 So why a comparative ethnography?

Drawing from White's (1997) experience I wanted to achieve a similar reflexive approach to hers, but I decided to do so in a more physical sense, by consecutively experiencing 'distance' and 'near' through a change of place. Ethnography is a method that can also successfully be used as a comparative method as it allows researchers to connect human beings in their experiences of similar situations from across cultural settings. It is a process that enables participants to respond by either 'converging on their cultural similarities' or 'conserving, even emphasizing, their cultural differences' (Gingrich and Fox, 2002: 7).

Although I cannot find a comparative ethnography which has been conducted in a child protection setting, there are some which do appear to have been successfully carried out within other professions such as: comparing how teachers used reform-based science in education (see Carolne et al. 2011); measuring how organisations coped with imposed institutional change in mental health social care (see Bjerregaard, 2011) and comparing how the same internet based self monitoring tool is used for asthmatics in a general practice setting (see Langstrup and Winthereik, 2008). Together they have collectively found that by juxtaposing two diverse settings simultaneously, the differences between the two have made the data more obvious or visible. However, Langstrup and Winthereik (2008: 382) do caution comparative researchers to refrain from 'doing away with discrepancies between effects found in one setting and those found in the other' as this leads to a hierarchical relationship between the two.

Taking all of this advice on board, I decided that in order to create that passage of space and time between me and the discourse I employed in England, I would observe the Flemish child protection system and use it as a comparative element to this study. I chose Flanders, specifically, because as I noted earlier there is data to suggest that social workers in this part of Belgium were more likely to be revered and respected by their profession, as well as their society, than their British colleagues (see Cooper et al. 1995; Desair and Adriaenssens, 2011; Hetherington, 1998; Marneffe, 1996). Data collection, therefore, took place in two child protection social work settings one here in England and one in Flanders, Belgium.

3.2.3 Applying social constructionism to ethnography

Ferguson (2011) has argued that the writing around social work practice lacks a certain atmosphere, as it largely fails to capture the texture, the feel, the lived experiences of where the work goes on and how this impacts on perception and what does (and does not) get done. Ethnography is a method that is able to do this as it is also a form of inquiry that can produce descriptions and accounts about the ways of life of those whom the study is about, including that of the author (Denzin, 1997: xi). Ethnography may be one way of exploring culture but it is also a method that does not exclude the presence of the writer whose whole sense of purpose is to explain to her audience that which she has seen and experienced. As Geertz (1973) explained:

Chartres is made of stone and glass. But it is not just stone and glass; it is a cathedral, and not only a cathedral, but a particular cathedral built at a particular time by certain members of a particular society. To understand what it means, to perceive it for what it is, you need to know rather more than the generic properties of stone and glass and rather more than what is common to all cathedrals. You need to understand also- and, in my opinion critically, the specific concepts of the relations between God, man and architecture that, having governed its creation, it consequently embodies. It is no difference with men: they, too, every last one of them are cultural artefacts (Geertz, 1973: 50-1)

Geertz did not see Chartres as simply a building but as a 'meaningful reality', constructed in and out of all the interactions that occurred between human beings and their society during a particular social context (Crotty, 1998: 42). At the heart of this reality was an idea, developed and created from a relationship that existed between man and God. By relating this philosophy to the setting studied within this particular social context, it was important for me to recognise that the child protection culture I wished to explore did not simply appear as an object waiting before me to come upon it and seek meaning from it, but it existed and functioned for a long period of time prior to me and this study.

For me to understand how practitioners in this context perceived themselves as professionals I needed first to consider their location. From the constructionist viewpoint, therefore, meaning cannot simply be described as 'objective' or 'subjective' but by recognising that both these concepts need to be brought together and bound together forever. For however far apart subjectivity and objectivity may seem, they are always united (Crotty, 1998: 44-45).

Social constructionism holds the perspective that not all objects are found but are made, therefore, the meaning of these institutions which already precede us and in which we find ourselves embedded within, not only inhabit us but lead us to construct meaning with them (Crotty, 1998). Geertz (1973: 49) refers to these meanings as 'a system of significant symbols' which create, what we all know to represent, a culture.

In child protection social work, practitioners work and experience their profession through their own system of significant symbols by, for example, carrying out assessments, building relationships with families, adhering to legislation, policy and procedure and being part of a team. They depend on their culture to direct their

behaviour and organise their practice. It prescribes a certain way of life which they come to see as 'the norm' with particular customs, traditions and idiosyncrasies that are specific to their own cluster. Within their cluster these professionals will also be subjected to various discursive regimes and it is within and from these that the construction of one's own identity can emerge (see Burr, 2001; Foucault, 1972; Holloway, 1984; Parker, 1992).

It is clear that social constructionism is a philosophy which takes the object seriously, and in this context the object under observation is the culture of child protection. However, in order to understand how this culture then impacts upon and constructs the identities of the professionals who find themselves subjected to it, a certain subjective perspective is required as an interpretive measure. Bringing objectivity and subjectivity together and holding them together is not an easy process, especially, when as in this instance, the author is located within the same culture as those she is observing. My main aim in using my positioning to explore a setting in which I am a part of was to be sensitive and aware of this status, not to exploit it or devote the whole study to it. Whilst I appreciate that there are studies which focus entirely on the writer, and I believe they do have a place within research, this is not what I plan to do here. Although I cannot ignore (nor do I wish to) my presence, it is not the sole focus of this study. It is however an important part to consider if I am to interpret the individual's thoughts, feelings and actions as 'I' see and understand them within this context.

Interpretivism is an approach which aims to look for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social world (Crotty, 1998; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Mason, 2002) and in this context, it is the philosophy I used when analysing the data. However, at this point it is important to emphasise that I did

not approach this study as a 'marginal native'. Being on the edge of the setting with which I was deeply familiar with was not a status I could relate to within the English aspect of the study. Therefore my 'interpretation' of the reality seen with both groups of practitioners from England and Flanders has not aimed at blending my identity in with theirs but in highlighting the two as separate entities in order to see the difference and the similarities between one and the other. As I mention elsewhere, so many studies focus on what the child protection profession can do 'better' but that is not the aim of this project. This study is primarily for all those who have been, and still are, child protection professionals, for academics and other agencies within society who are interested in learning how social workers in England, along with their European counterparts, view their own professional identity.

3.3 Preparation

Although Mason (2002: 44) does not advise against pilot studies when using qualitative methods she does recommend that one's research design should not be guided entirely by them. Instead she believes the researcher should plan carefully what can be achieved and take into consideration resources, time, transport and so on. As mentioned previously, I had already conducted narrative interviews with eight child protection social workers in the same authority in a preceding study (Leigh, 2010; Leigh, 2013b).

In this study, I became aware that narrative interviewing relied entirely on the participant's story, or rather in that context, their perception of events that led them to understand their professional identity in a certain way. As a practitioner in the same setting, I was in a position where I was able to witness the participant's behaviour following an interview and what I soon became fascinated with was a

realisation that a lot of what they had said to me, in the confidential environment of the interview, was different to what they actually did in practice. By highlighting this point I do not mean to suggest that I went on to chose ethnography in order to elicit the 'true' account of what really happens in the work setting but rather, I became intrigued by 'the voices of the other' and how these multiple voices when interaction with the researcher can come alive together and create a different picture of events (Denzin, 1997: 33). As a qualitative researcher, it therefore felt only natural to progress from interviews to ethnography if I were to learn and understand more about the direct link between an experience and then the performance.

Once I had established that I was going to conduct a comparative ethnography I was able to organise how my time would be divided between England and Flanders. As I worked on the Out of Hours team my hours were part of a three week rolling rota. This meant that for two weeks I worked extended hours in order to have the third week off. It was during this time that I planned to visit Flanders. I was aware that the financial implication, of flying to and from Flanders every third week for a period of six months and having to stay in a hotel whilst over there, would prove to be costly. Fortunately, as I continued to work throughout the study I was able to use my bursary to pay for the cost of the travel and the living expenses whilst abroad. I was also able to purchase items needed for the data collection such as recording equipment, a camera, note books and so on.

Mason (2002) also advised that preparation should lead to the researcher developing the appropriate skills and partaking in the relevant training. Applying this advice to my situation meant that I needed to extend my knowledge of ethnography. Although my Masters degree did involve a module on ethnography, during the first year of my PhD studies I also attended ethnography sessions that were made

available to post graduate students at the University of Salford. This cultural perspective proved to be most beneficial, if not only to learn more about the method itself but to talk through the plans of my own project with other students and lecturers. This was complemented by my own analytic review which consisted of reading the relevant substantive literature, featured in the previous chapters. The whole process of preparation enabled me to approach data collection as a more aware researcher, comfortable with the challenge that lay ahead and sensitive to some of the theoretical aspects of the study.

3.3.1 Access

As I mentioned earlier I was fortunate in my quest to gain access to the local authority setting in England as I was at the time a social worker who worked for the agency as a child protection practitioner. Therefore unlike Scourfield (1999) and Pithouse, (1997) gaining access was probably the simplest aspect of the whole study. Yet at the same time, I have to admit, I was not aware that staying in my 'own nest' might present complexities I may not have previously considered (Roberts, 2007: 15). I chose to carry out the ethnography in this particular setting as I wanted to explore the identities of statutory child protection social workers. As an intimate insider of the setting, I hoped that my unique positioning might discover new information that could prove to be a beneficial insight in the field of social work research.

I still ensured, however, that I approached the relevant gatekeepers in the correct order. Having been a member of the organisation for close to three years when the data collection began I was aware of how the hierarchy functioned and how

not to offend certain parties. I therefore informed my direct line manager of my intentions first of all. He was extremely proud of my project and immediately gave it the “go ahead” and he advised me who I should approach next: the Assistant Director of Children’s Services. Yet I found that he was not as interested as my direct manager had been and forwarded on my email to the Service Unit Manager of my department so that he could deal with it instead. Although he responded warmly, he passed it around the other Service Unit Managers asking if they would like to “handle the matter”.

I soon realised that the lack of willingness towards my project did not stem from certain individuals because they could not be bothered with helping me gain access but came from a confusion as to what I meant by ‘an ethics committee’ and who it was, in fact, who actually held the authority to grant me approval for the study to commence. This issue eventually emerged during one email exchange between two senior managers, who fortunately copied me in as it was only then that I was able to address the matter and explain what was needed in order for the study to progress. We eventually agreed that a letter addressed to the University of Salford would be enough to suffice the University’s ethics committee and once this was established, the first service unit manager in charge of handling the matter was then more than happy to write this. This initial confusion leads me to believe that others who have experienced difficulties in gaining access to local authorities (see D’Cruz, 2004; Pithouse, 1997; Scourfield, 1999) may have done so, in part, because there is simply no such thing as an ethics committee in a local authority setting. A benefit of being an intimate insider, in this instance, is that I was in a position where I was privy to the

'mumblings' of the managers and able to assist appropriately when the confusion arose.

Despite being an outsider, gaining access to Flanders was again a very smooth process. Having read a book by Cooper et al. (1995) about the Flemish agency and its effectiveness with child protection and positive impact on professional identity, I used the internet search engine 'Google' to find the lead author, Andrew Cooper, and contacted him by email requesting his help. He kindly gave me the details of a contact he knew from one of the district agencies (which I will refer to in this context as District 2) and suggested I write to her.

Unfortunately, this social worker was away working in another country for a few months so was, at first, unable to help. I therefore used 'Google Translate' to contact one of the other district offices in Flanders. I then simply filled in a 'contact us' form and waited for a reply. It was not long before I heard from a social worker who asked that I visit him in Belgium to explain my research in person. This proved to be extremely beneficial as not only was he able to 'check me out' but I too was able to check that I was going to be observing the right kind of agency, one which could establish a good comparison with the England setting. My visit to his agency (which I will refer to here as District 1) proved to be successful and after discussing my proposal further with his manager it was agreed I could start in September 2011.

However, after a couple of visits, it emerged that there was only one social worker at the District 1 office. When pausing to consider validity and rigour, I realised that this was going to be too small a number as in England, the service I worked for had an army of practitioners in comparison. In total, at the time of writing, there are

36 social workers in the whole building. In the District 1 office of Flanders, there was only one social worker but another six child protection professionals who all came from various backgrounds such as social pedagogy, psychology and psychiatry. When I talked to my contact, he suggested I contact the other district offices in Flanders to see if I could extend my project and visit them as well. The only contact to respond to my request was the social worker from the District 2 office who I had contacted originally but who had been working away at the time. She agreed I could visit her and suggested that she would introduce me to the other social workers who worked with her at the same agency.

The process of gaining access to the District 2 office involved emailing my proposal to my contact, who subsequently forwarded it onto her Director who granted me consent to start. I then flew over to meet the team. Upon reflection, I believe that access to both Flemish agencies was uncomplicated because, as I will discuss in more detail later, research plays a large part in the way that Flemish child protection professionals work. Therefore, they did not appear remotely concerned that I was an outsider but, instead, rather proud that I wanted to observe them above their other European counterparts.

Although there were no issues with access to any of the agencies, it soon became apparent that there were marked differences between how the two districts functioned in Flanders and also issues within the English culture, all of which presented me with an ethical dilemma. I have subsequently been concerned with regards to how I should attend to these sensitive aspects within my analysis without breaching confidentiality and revealing identities of certain individuals. In order to conceal participants' identities I have used generic terms so the title of 'manager' has

been used for all senior members of staff in England rather than 'team manager' 'service unit manager' or 'director'. In Belgium I use the term 'CPP' for child protection professional, a term which represents all professionals from different disciplines.

3.4 Research strategy

I have divided this section into two parts as the way I carried out research in each setting was slightly different and I argue that this is as a result of my differing position, of either an intimate insider or outsider. Social researchers have long since discussed the concept of being an 'insider' and whether this status can truly be described as one static position or, rather, relate more appropriately to that of a simultaneous process, oscillating between the two most extreme points on the ethnographic research continuum: insider and outsider (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Styles, 1979). Some dismiss the notion of insiderness altogether by arguing that the researcher is always located somewhere thus preferring to equate the insider experience to that of an ongoing process of evaluation (Griffith, 1998) or rather 'a continual process of introspective inquiry that researchers can use to monitor their access to the community' (Labaree, 2002: 117).

Collecting large quantities of data from separate agencies and travelling between two points simultaneously was not an easy task to undertake. However, these two different positions have enabled me to gain a certain insight and focus that was sharper than I had ever expected. By experiencing the 'strange' and the 'familiar' repeatedly over a period of six months, I was able to understand just how the outsider role can complement the function of the insider researcher. For whether it be insider or outsider, the stance of the researcher will undoubtedly prompt diverse

information as both positions become acquainted with contrasting methodological issues.

3.4.1 England

This part of the study took place in a child protection setting within a local authority in the North of England, which as I mentioned earlier is not one which, at the time of writing, has adopted the Reclaiming Social Work Model (Goodman and Trowler, 2012) in practice. The borough is an off shoot of a much larger neighbouring metropolis and is an area of social deprivation with 35.2% of its citizens having no academic qualifications at all.

All the child protection social work teams work in the same building and divide the borough up into patches. There is a duty team and two long term teams. Once a case is felt to be in need of a child protection plan or legal proceedings have started or are going to start, the case is passed onto one of the long term teams. Each social work team consisted of one manager, two assistant team managers, eleven social workers and ten support workers. The Out of Hours team covers the whole borough from 5p.m. every weekday evening, all weekends and bank holidays. As well as dealing with emergencies social workers on this team also carry out initial assessments and the safe and welfare checks which are requested by the allocated social worker to families who present a concern for them. This team consists of three social workers and a team of eight support workers who work on the rolling rota.

As I mentioned before there were 36 social workers, ten managers, two service unit managers (SUM) and one assistant director (AD) who worked for the department, which I will refer to in my writing as the Fenton department. There were only seven males in the department at the time. The level of experience of the social

workers and managers ranged from one year to 25 years. The ages ranged from early 20s to late 50s.

Table 1: Table of professional experience in the Fenton Department.

Professional	0-5 years	5-10 years	10 years +
Social Workers	24	8	4
Managers (inc SUM and AD)	4	6	3

As I worked on the Out of Hours team on a rolling rota which consisted of two weeks out of three, I began my observations from this point (all included in Table 1 were observed in this study). I first introduced my research in a team meeting in the presence of my team members and my manager. It was here that I explained how I planned to carry out my observations and explain how further interviews could take place. I explained that data would be collected over a period of six months and whilst I was working I would leave the audio recorder on my desk or put it in my shirt pocket or bag when I moved about. This would enable me to continue working and observe what was happening whilst relying on my recorder to catch what was being said in the office environments through collegial interactions and telephone conversations.

Initially I planned to do the same with each team but as time went on it became only natural to appear at certain events when the moment arose. As I carried out initial assessments I was involved in many cases and I was therefore invited into various meetings, informal discussions, presentations, training sessions to discuss certain issues. I chose these moments to continue carrying out my observations as it created more consistency and allowed a certain degree of continuity. The majority of

the documents analysed in this study also stem from these encounters. This was not only helpful for me, to keep certain themes alive, but also more natural for those being observed as it was expected that I would attend these events as I was involved in the case.

Table 2: Table of documents analysed in England.

Documents	Number
Case notes	96
Assessments	15
Emails	64

In contrast to Scourfield (1999), Pithouse (1997) and Ferguson (2011) however, I did not sit in on any supervisions. I emphasise this point as it appears to be an integral part of most other child protection ethnographies, however, for me as an intimate insider it felt too personal and perhaps highlights another disadvantage of my 'close' position to the field. Supervision is an opportunity for social workers to discuss and reflect on cases they have been involved in. It provides practitioners with the time and space to analyse their own behaviour and actions as well as gain an insight into what they might do differently next time.

As a fellow worker, I was involved in some of the cases of my participants. The position I am in on the Out of Hours team means that I carry out a number of safe and welfare checks on behalf of some of my 'day time' colleagues. On occasion I have made different decisions to that of the allocated social worker, as is my duty given what I find the evening I visit. I am aware, from my own supervisions, that some of these decisions have been challenged by the allocated social worker or their manager and has proved to be a sensitive issue for some of the practitioners at times. It therefore felt inappropriate to interrupt a supervision in order to carry out some data

collection. The British Sociological Association Statement of Ethical Practice (2002) stresses, it is the researcher's role to discharge the collecting of data when there are situations of social conflict or competing social interests. I refer to this statement in order to explain my reasoning for not sitting in on supervisions. However, during interviews I did ask participants about their supervision experience and this is discussed in more detail in the analysis chapter.

3.4.2 Flanders

Flanders is one of three communities in Belgium and occupies the northern part of the country. It is evident, from a historical perspective, that the Flemish are accustomed to fighting for egalitarianism and recognition from their French counterparts and have been doing so for a number of centuries, more so since the First World War. With a population of around 6 million, Flanders is the Dutch speaking region of the country. Although Brussels is situated in Flanders, it is considered to be the capital of the whole of Belgium and a large proportion of citizens do speak French as a second language (Stevens and Tixhon, 2010) [own translation].

The Vertouwenscentrum Kindermishandeling agency which I observed in this study has been divided into six different agencies to cover the whole Flemish region. I visited just two of these; although I did try and contact the other four districts, they did not reply. The way in which data collection was carried out in both these settings was very similar and so I will describe both within the same context. Nonetheless before I do continue, it is important to discuss the important issue of language and how I expected this would impact on the data collection. Prior to starting the study I anticipated that this would be the most difficult challenge to overcome as although I wished to carry out data collection in Flanders I did not speak Dutch. It came as a

relief therefore, when I learned that professionals from the first district were bilingual and also spoke French as this was a language I could converse in reasonably well.

The second district however, did not speak French but did speak English well and therefore conducted their meetings in English so that I could understand. When professionals from this district met with their families with me present they did speak in Dutch and I was therefore not able to understand what was being said during the meeting. However, I audio recorded all appointments and had them later translated and transcribed by a Dutch researcher.

The teams consist of multi professionals who all deal with child protection referrals. They are not dominated by social workers but range between educational psychologist, psychologists, pedagogues, orto-pedagogues (family focused specialists), social workers, mental health nurses, family therapists and social nurses (the Flemish term for community nurses). The teams tend to be led by a Director who is trained in either psychiatry or paediatrics. The Districts varied in the size of the teams slightly but generally had ten professionals on each team. There were in total six men. They ranged in age from late 20s to late 50s. The majority of the professionals had over ten years experience (with three having 25 years experience each). There were a few students and one employee who had less than one year experience.

Table 3: Table of professional experience in Flanders (including students).

Professional	0-5	5-10	10 years +
Social Workers	0	0	4
Psychiatrist	0	0	1
Psychologists	0	3	0
Pedagogue	3	0	3
Nurse	0	0	2

In both settings I first introduced the project in a team meeting in the presence of all the team members and the Director. I explained to all professionals how I planned to carry out my observations and explained how further interviews could also take place (all professionals included in Table 3 were observed in this study). I explained that data would be collected over a period of six months and would involve me visiting every third week in the month. I also explained that as I would be focused on observing and making notes I would leave the audio recorder on the table in front of me or put it in my shirt pocket or bag when I moved about. This would enable me to continue to observe what was happening whilst allowing my recorder to catch what was being said in the office environments through collegial interactions and appointments.

It materialised that in the mornings I would be asked if I wanted to shadow a particular person and literally follow them around all day. In Flanders it is an atmosphere where everyone seems 'on the go'. I rarely saw anyone sitting at their desk typing up notes, filling in assessments or being tied to their computer in any way. The Flemish professionals tend to use their computer as a reference point, a quick reminder of who they are seeing next and what the plans are for the next meeting. Although I was able to access these and was shown these notes on a regular basis by professionals, they were not in English but in their native language of Dutch, and I was therefore unable to understand what had been written. I was not given permission to take these documents with me due to data protection issues and this is an aspect of data that is subsequently missing from the Flemish part of the study.

Table 4: Documents analysed in Flanders

Documents	Number
Emails	6
Cases (in Dutch and translated verbally into English)	23

I noticed that the Flemish practitioner tends to make notes during the appointment with a particular family member and this information is then loaded onto the system by their secretary later on in the day. As a result of this constant movement and lack of stagnancy I was therefore able to see professionals 'in action' the majority of the time. Prior to sitting in on an appointment with a family, the professional would first ask them for consent and if they agreed (although none refused) I would enter and explain my role and the purpose of my audio recorder. This was an area of research material I was not privy to in England and again, in this scenario, demonstrates a distinct difference between the data that has been collected due to my research positioning.

3.4.3 Document analysis

These days all social work files, in both England and Flanders, are computerised. In England, these consist of dense reports completed and different stages, influenced by various outcomes along the way. In Flanders, they are simply running dialogues with regular contributions from the professionals involved in the case about what has been discussed and agreed for the next encounter.

The analysis of formal documentary data only took place in England due to language differences and not having the necessary passwords to access the files in Flanders. The documents in England therefore consisted of the reports that could be

accessed on the computer which were related to situations I had observed or heard about. Other documents include emails that were sent between colleagues and from senior management to frontline staff. Information from presentations I attended in England is also included in the documentation that was gathered (see Table 2 England and Table 4 Flanders).

3.4.4 Observations and reflexivity: searching for the golden nugget.

Table 5: Number of days observations were carried out in each country.

	England	Flanders
Total number of days	102	31

The way that observation was carried out in England and Flanders varied slightly due to the fact that I was also working as a social worker in the setting in England. In England therefore from the outset, I had to use my audio recorder all day as I was concerned that I would miss that golden nugget, that special moment, as a ‘researcher’ if I was involved in it as a ‘practitioner’. Therefore I turned my recorder on as soon as I entered the office and left it on the corner of my desk. It also followed me around the building and outside of the premises, either in the top pocket of my shirt or in my bag. At the end of the day I would return home and write up my observations. My ethnographic notes were recorded by hand and at times when I was involved in a particular situation as a ‘practitioner’ I would also listen to the recording from that day to ensure I was aware of what had happened and it was similar to that which I had observed and was later analysing in my notes.

I was aware that my aim as an ethnographic researcher was ‘to fully observe naturally occurring phenomena’ that would relate to, in this study, professional

identity (Nilan, 2002 366). In my case, I had to work alongside collecting the data so in those first few weeks I found myself adjusting to my 'new role' and making everyone else aware of what the study would entail and what my latest position would involve as well. However, trying to insert a square peg into a round hole was not as easy as I thought it would be and I found myself starting to struggle with the characteristic of 'being simultaneously detached and yet intensely engaged' (Wilson, 1995: 255). As a professional/ researcher I could not at first achieve a balance, finding myself either consumed with being focused entirely on research or too busy to even consider it due to the fact I had too many child protection referrals to deal with and like White (1997: 83) I am sure I missed 'lots of juicy exchanges' as a result.

In Flanders, I did not have this dual role to contend with and it therefore felt much easier to concentrate solely on my research. I used a similar approach and turned my audio recorder on at the start of the day and only turned it off when the day had come to an end. I initially found 'observing' exhausting as it was a familiar but strange setting for me and I felt I had to be on constant alert for fear of missing that golden nugget. The work they carried out was similar to that which I did at home, but the way they carried it out and the way the team/ organisation functioned was entirely different. I also had the issue of the language difference to overcome. During instances when the team were talking in Flemish, I felt reassured that my recording could later be translated and transcribed. I therefore used these moments to observe body language and try and decipher what was happening even though I could not properly understand what was being said.

Through this method it became apparent that there were issues within the Flemish agency and that these may have arisen as a result of a change in manager which had then subsequently affected the professional hierarchy.

During lunch, I was invited to gather round a table with the other practitioners. They told me that they all like to spend lunchtime together so that they can catch up on what is happening with each other personally. There was talk of weddings, christenings and parties. Occasionally they slipped into Flemish and sometimes I got the feeling it was to say something that they didn't want me to hear. I saw a couple of practitioners leave together, enter one of the offices and close the door. The others, who were sat with me, looked and stared, and I wondered if they too were curious to know what they may have been talking about. When they caught me looking at them, they smiled and continued to ask me questions about the way child protection works in England.

Field notes, Flanders: Day 4.

At the end of a day in Flanders, I was also able to 'retreat back to the reassuring safety' of my hotel and write up my observation notes and listen to my recordings (Nilan, 2002: 365). I did not have to worry about any of my Flemish colleagues' dilemmas with the same intensity as I did with my own. I realised that using ethnography as a comparative methodology did allow researchers to connect human beings in their experiences of similar situations from across cultural settings (Gingrich and Fox, 2002: 7). But it also enabled me to reflect upon my own subject position, and view myself and location, in a 'variety of local mirrors' (Herzfield, 2001: 260).

In both cases, in England and Flanders, following a week of observations I would extend these notes into a more reflexive account incorporating literature from previous authors who had carried out ethnographies and using social constructionist theory to enable me to explore and understand some of the behaviours I had observed. As well as the ethnographic field notes and the further reflexive analysis account, I also kept an electronic methods diary which would enable me to keep extracts of case notes and other records I could use as an index system and refer to at a later date. This was initiated at the start of the whole PhD process so that I could systematically map each step that I have taken during this research journey.

3.4.5 Interviews

Table 6: Interviews carried out in England and in Flanders.

	England	Flanders
Total number of interviews	45	32
Total number of professionals interviewed	36	15
Number of managers	5	3
Number of social workers	26	3
Number of other professionals	0	6
Number of support workers	3	0
Number of students	2	3

In both England and Flanders, interviews with individual professionals tended to take place either in the car, the office, the kitchen and/or even in the toilet. However in England, more in depth interviews took place away from the work setting at a location chosen by the social worker such as their home or a nearby café due to, I believe, a former familiar collegial relationship already being present prior to the research commencing.

As Scourfield (1999: 52) highlights, social workers are ‘arguably one of the easiest professional groups to interview’. Talking and listening to their clients stories makes it only natural for them to then go on to tell their own. I used the interview process in both contexts to probe further into certain events that had occurred with that specific professional of which I had personally observed or heard about from someone else. By going ‘elsewhere’ to talk more in depth about something that had happened, I was able to gain a better understanding of how that professional felt and due to the private nature of the setting, that is, just me and them, the participant appeared more relaxed and able to talk more freely about their perspective. Although I did not have a structured agenda of the questions I wished to ask prior to the interview, I did have a topic which I wanted to explore and often informed them of

this before our meeting. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007: 117) point out, ethnographers do not tend to enter into interviews with pre-structured agenda but with a more flexible approach that allows for discussions to 'flow in a way that seems only natural'.

What was interesting from most of the accounts that I later listened to and transcribed was that often what I had observed and made notes about in my ethnography diary was different to that which the participant remembered when I came to interview them about the subject at a later date. Take the following extract as an example:

SW: Well I wasn't told I wasn't to contact anybody but I know that all my colleagues were told that they weren't allowed to contact me.

J: So you weren't told?

SW: No.

J: I thought you were.

SW: No I wasn't.

J: Yeah you were because you told me when we spoke that first time when you said that they told you don't contact anyone.

SW: Sorry yes you are right actually, yeah. What they said to me was that I wasn't allowed in any of the district buildings and I wasn't to have contact with anybody without the express permission of the managers, of senior management.

Interview with social worker, Day 26.

This extract strengthens the reason why I chose to use ethnography as a method instead of narrative interviewing. It shows that there is a difference between that which participants think happened and that which actually happened after an event has occurred. Some critics may argue that this participant had forgotten what happened due to the shock of being suspended, and I agree that this may have been the case. Yet this perspective only further supports my argument that the unexpected, often insignificant, encounters, which naturally occur every day in our lives, can have an impact on our memory and the way we remember certain events.

However, I also want to clarify, that I have not made this point to undermine the value of interviews. Scourfield (1999: 53) points out that 'interviews are obviously a forum where the official version of professional work might dominate'. It is important to see, therefore, how social workers use different rhetoric in different circumstances as a way of understanding how different discourses dominate depending on the task in hand. Consequently, I did not, as a result, see any version, whether it be observation, interviews or documental evidence, as being the truer one of all the accounts, but rather a collective perspective of what was happening within this particular context at this particular time.

3.4.6 Field relations

In England I was aware that as an insider, a member of the team I was planning to observe, I would approach the research with an 'assumed position of knowing' but I felt confident that my esoteric knowledge and shared identity would only be of benefit from having previously established relationships within the field (Coffey, 1999: 33). I was convinced initially that my status would enable me to generate data that would be rich and original in content in contrast to that of an outsider researcher who would remain detached from the setting being studied and therefore lack that intimate knowledge that can be so difficult to attain for the professional stranger (see Merton, 1972).

I was adamant, when I began my research, that my approved stance and required role of 'marginal native' would be a relatively easy position to take up, providing I followed the rules, never felt too 'at home' and remained on constant alert for the danger signs of feeling too 'comfortable' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 90). However, in contrast to Pithouse (1998) and Scourfield (1999) who were both

marginal natives in their study, as an insider I could hear the majority of what social workers were saying in the office as I was involved in most of these discussions. In my previous role as a practitioner, I had always felt comfortable to join in with office banter as well as be privy to and, at times, involved in any general gossip. But in my new role, I wanted my colleagues and managers to see me differently; someone that they would feel able to confide in and whom they could trust would not to share their personal thoughts and feelings with others. In my new dual role, I found it hard to decipher how much I should partake in these informal discussions compared with how much I should allow them to happen without my involvement.

This new persona brought a new meaning to the notion of ‘impression management’ (Goffman, 1959; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Although I had read literature about the general aspects of the ethnographic researcher’s self presentation in fieldwork, I had not fully considered just how much I would have to constantly monitor my own demeanor in the workplace in order to create and manage the intellectual research poise I was keen to aspire to. Trying to conduct a smooth metamorphosis and achieve this steady balance was initially difficult and I often found myself remaining silent during informal discussions, wondering if anyone had noticed I was saying nothing at all.

Once away from my home setting and in a field where, although I was wholly accepted as a social worker, I was still considered an outsider was I able to slip into the role of the ‘emotionally detached researcher’ in Flanders with ease (Nilan, 2002: 365). I went to ‘work’ everyday at 9 a.m. and was consumed with the business of observing the lives of the Flemish child protection professionals. But, in this context, impression management held another meaning for in this setting I did not feel I had to strive to impress my participants by achieving that certain ‘intellectual poise’ I was

desperately trying to accomplish in England. Instead I noticed they were trying to impress me.

It was only when I was in Flanders during that lunch break (the extract I referred to earlier) that I realised I was not yet 'in the loop' as to what others knew about each other nor was I privy to all the political dynamics of the organisation. This realisation encouraged me to use my privileged position as an insider in England to gain access to those informal discussions that occurred in the office that I had previously tried so hard to abstain from. Remaining silent and quietly observing my surroundings was, therefore, no longer an option. I needed to know how practitioners were feeling with regards to what was happening around them.

Pithouse (1998: 21) made it explicit, when he carried out his child protection ethnography, that he purposively avoided the accounts that social workers provided about the shortcomings of senior management as he viewed gossip and criticism as a means of informal social control. However, in my situation, I began to appreciate the importance of not avoiding the informal discussions that took place in the office. For like Goffman (1963) I recognised that there were tensions between front stage and back stage appearances. The informal discussions that occurred between colleagues in my office, out of ear shot of management, appeared to manifest within teams as a form of defensive behaviour. This coping mechanism that developed as a result of the culture in which they were located, was subsequently used as a method for this specific group of professionals to manage that which was happening around them (see Menzies- Lyth, 1960).

3.5 Analysis of the written word

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007: 158) suggest that there is no distinct stage when it comes to analysing data within ethnography and argue that there is 'no formula or recipe' that will guarantee the final product will be a success. In this part, I will elaborate on all the stages of analysis I took after I had collected the data in order to allow the reader to observe the path I took and understand why particular themes emerged and were then subsequently covered in this thesis. There were two stages to analysis: the first involved analysing the raw data by drawing out themes and the second entailed analysing the extracts, field notes and other documents once they were inserted into the text.

In the first stage, analysis began, therefore, whilst I was transcribing the data. Reflective notes were added to the transcripts as I went along. This proved to be valuable at a later date when I returned to the text, saw my note and was reminded by something I had thought of previously but had since forgotten. Once all the transcripts were completed, these were loaded into the software application known as 'Saturate'. Saturate is a simple web based qualitative analysis tool. It allows for research orientated individuals and groups to add text, audio and tabular data in order to carry out a systematic review of the data. For those who are not aware of the package, it is very similar to that of NVivo but with one big difference- it is free!

My data included field notes, transcripts, interview notes, official and unofficial documentation, as well as photographs. Each of these was individually coded and then the codes were grouped under emerging themes. They were categorised under two separate headings: England and Flanders. Once analysis of the data was completed, I carried out a cross comparison between the two sections to find similarities and differences between both countries. Initially the amount of data I had

collected was unorganised and messy but by using Saturate I was able to create order.

How I did this is demonstrated in the following diagram:

Table 7: Table to demonstrate how the data was coded and themed.

Extract	Codes	Themes
<p>England</p> <p>Well his manager has said ‘Why haven’t you done this this and this?’</p> <p>And he has said ‘Hang on a minute I am working like a dog’</p> <p>I mean he was always last out of the building and first in and last out and they get him in, I mean this summarises them in my opinion.</p> <p>And this is a fella who is 65 in September, do you get me? This is despicable.</p> <p>They get him in a supervision and they say ‘I want to address this, this and this’</p>	<p>Attitude: Blaming/ the bully</p> <p>Emotive/ attitude: Defensive/ the bullied</p> <p>Culture: Long hours</p> <p>Attitude: the bully</p> <p>Culture/ values: bystander/ defending peers</p> <p>Attitude/ culture: Confrontation</p>	<p>Organisation & culture</p> <p>The bullied, the bully and the bystander</p>
<p>Flanders</p> <p>J: And can I ask? If this child is then murdered by the father at a later date what would happen to your team.</p> <p>CPP: Me and this team? They would check if we worked properly...</p> <p>J: Who is they?</p> <p>CPP: If we took all the measures that were required for the safety of the child. And I don’t think we would get in trouble for this case.</p>	<p>Culture: joint accountability</p> <p>Culture: team work, sharing the responsibility.</p> <p>Difference: joint accountability.</p>	<p>The way we function as a team</p> <p>Differences between England & Flanders</p>

By using cross sectional indexing, the first cycle coding method involved using 'affective methods' coding (Saldana, 2009: 86). This method has two parts and investigates the subjective qualities of human experiences. I chose this method of coding as it seemed the most appropriate as it allowed me to explore the intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences of social workers' experiences and actions within their profession. The first part involved 'emotion coding' and 'values coding' and enabled me to focus upon the emotive parts of the participants' repertoires as well as reflect upon their values, attitudes and beliefs.

The second part involved 'versus coding' (Saldana, 2009: 93). Versus coding is appropriate in qualitative data sets when strong conflicts within, among and between the participants are apparent. As I mentioned earlier, there is a clear indication that social workers are located within a culture of blame and therefore this method of coding enabled me to identify where the conflicting power issues were arising within this setting.

Once initial coding was completed, I needed to then group the data and to do this I used the method of 'focused coding' (Saldana, 2009: 155). This method is particularly useful for ethnographic methods as it encourages the development of major categories without focusing too much on their properties or dimensions. I developed the following categories from the data:

1. Internal agency;
2. Falsehoods and myths;
3. History- the way we once practised;
4. How society sees us;
5. Other professional agencies;

6. The way the profession impacts on us;
7. The way we view our practice;
8. The way we see the media, the Government and other agencies;
9. Our views of our families.
10. Similarities and differences between England and Flanders

This method helped me to retrieve the themes I needed when writing up the analysis chapters as they now appeared in a coherent order. These categories enabled me to begin the process of analytical thinking and from these codes I was able to distinguish four main areas which will be covered in this thesis under different analysis chapters. The first that features in this report is called: 'Constructing culture in child protection social work' and draws from data which focuses upon the external agencies that influence this theme.

The second stage of analysis, was to carry out a proper analysis of the talk that appeared in the extracts provided. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) suggest that there is no need to privilege any particular form of data, be that field notes, interviewing or documents, for it is just important to recognise that spoken discourse takes shape within different forms of action and performance. To examine the emerging forms and functions of talk I used 'narrative analysis' whilst bearing in mind that narratives should only be studied within the 'context of the overall ethnographic strategy' and not as if they occupied 'a different, special and privileged analytic space' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 171).

There are many ways to analyse narratives but in this instance I chose to use thematic analysis. This version focuses exclusively on the content of the story and primary attention is on "what" is being said but consideration is also given to "how",

“for whom” and “for what purpose” it is being said also. Narrative thematic analysis is a useful tool for those who wish to theorise about inequality and broader social structures that weigh heavily on the lives of the participants. By deconstructing the text, the researcher can unpack the metaphors and explore their functions within the story (Riessman, 2008: 58).

This method was used in this context to understand the story that was being told by the social worker. It does, however, mean more than ‘telling one’s story’ as it also involves a second party- the narrator or researcher- who gives the narrative analytic attention. In this study, that researcher is me and I analysed the material by asking specifically: for whom was *this* story constructed, how was it made, and for what purpose? What cultural resources did it draw upon or take for granted? What does their story accomplish? Are there gaps and inconsistencies in what they have said and should I be suggesting an alternative explanation? (Riessman and Quinney, 2005: 392).

These questions framed the way I approached the extracts, they enabled me to see beyond the written word and encouraged me to explore what had been said at the time in more detail. I was also able to use my field notes to develop the analysis and support my interpretations. However, analysing my own role, the part I played in this ethnography, was not as straight forward but instead a challenging experience, one which I will discuss in more detail within the next section.

3.5.1 Using visual methodology and analysing photography

Rose (2007) and Banks (2001) argue that the meanings of photographs are ‘arbitrary and subjective’ and that they also depend on who it is that is doing the looking (Pink, 2007: 67). One photograph may be viewed differently by other audiences simply

because they are situated in 'diverse temporal historical, spatial and cultural contexts' to the one I am located in. As an ethnographer, my aim in Chapter 5 entitled 'The use of space and environment in child protection practice' is therefore to use photographs to understand 'the individual, local and broader cultural discourses' which surround these pictures, in both 'field work situations and academic discourses' with the support of the written word (Pink, 2007: 68).

Flanders was the setting in which 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 the Fenton Department where I worked. I knew that trying to explain this verbally to my colleagues, or future readers of this thesis, would not have the same impact as it would if I were to show them photographs. I had, therefore, no pre-planned schedule or research strategy of what exactly I was planning to take pictures of. But after being shown around the building by a Flemish participant one day, I later found myself returning to the places which I had found particularly interesting and taking photographs accordingly. When I came back to the Fenton department, after having been away, it was easier to then see the contrasting differences between these two cultures. My strategy in England was, therefore, to take pictures of similar objects or areas to the ones I had taken in Flanders in order to create a visual comparative element and capture, in my opinion, the diversity of the two settings.

I do believe that visual materials in ethnography are important and agree with Rose (2007: 12) when she argued for 'a critical approach to visual culture'. This entails researchers taking the images they are exploring seriously by examining them carefully as these representations of a culture do have 'their own effects'.

Photographs, such as the ones I have taken and selected for this study, can represent

'social inclusions and exclusions' of particular cultural practices and a critical account is therefore needed to address these meanings and effects. The photographs used in this study do, I believe, connect the themes I have developed and, I hope, give the reader a sense of context for each of the settings studied.

In order to understand the locations in which I carried out this research I have followed Emmel and Clark's (2011) example of using visual methodologies in research by adapting and developing five reasons for why I feel it is important to include photography in this ethnography. These are firstly, to recognise and identify the difference between two child protection settings; secondly, to consider the impact of the environment on the identity of those who may be working in the place or visiting the place; thirdly, to look for ways in which the environment might be experienced by those who visit or work there; fourthly, to explore how the services provided are delivered and received there and finally, to understand the motivation behind the selection of each setting. The photographs that have been selected to appear in Chapter 5 represent different aspects of the micro cultures which I observed. They also show ways in which child protection professionals' work.

Recently, at a conference I attended, I used the photographs in this chapter in a presentation I gave as a means of creating a form of visual dialogue between myself and the audience in order to try and convey my experience of two different child protection settings within a small time slot. One critic, in particular, voiced his concerns about whether there was "any point" to using photography in research. It is, perhaps, a valid point, and one I have dwelled upon and analysed ever since, for what is the point of using photographs in ethnography when we have the written word?

Therefore I would like to make it clear that Chapter 5 focuses exclusively on images, this is not planned in a way as to suggest that the written word is less

significant but rather the opposite. My aim in using these photographs has been to add to the written word as 'visual representations bear an important relationship to, but cannot replace, words in theoretical discussion' (Pink, 2007:6). By using visual evidence in ethnography I instead want to demonstrate how the two can go hand in hand and be employed as a 'pedagogical tool' to analyse, and eventually become, data (Phillips and Bellinger, 2011: 87). I also want to show how even the most mundane photographs can bring ethnography alive.

3.6. Writing

Ethnography is that form of inquiry and writing that produces descriptions and accounts about the ways of life of the writer and those written about.
Denzin, xi (1997)

Van Maanen noted (1988: 46) that the most striking characteristic of ethnographic text was 'the almost complete absence of the author from most segments of the finished text'. Writing up the analysis chapters has been the most difficult task for me, as both an intimate insider in one setting and as an outsider in another. Most ethnographies, like Van Maanen commented, lose the author as soon as the analysis chapter begins in order, I think, to appear objective and instill a sense of rigour and validity into their accounts of others (cf. van Luitgaarden, 2011). However, Hicks (1998: 149) has argued that by ignoring the researcher within the text, readers cannot interrogate them and the 'biggest lie' that can be told is 'to absent this self through notions of objectivity'.

As Denzin's quote clarifies in the introduction of this section, the method of ethnography is not just about the lives of those who have participated in the study but also about the life of the writer. And so, after much angst and turmoil, I finally decided

to follow the sage suggestions of these authors. I have therefore included in my writing my own self reflections and analysed myself, when I appear, in the extracts from interviews and naturally occurring contexts. My aim has always been however, to keep my text anchored in the worlds of my participants' lived experiences and through writing about their lives, I have learned not to ignore myself, but to accept my own interpretive position as part of that data.

Derrida (1981) commented that the theory of the social is also the theory of writing. Theory, writing and ethnography are separate practices which have become entwined to create the conditions needed in order to locate the social inside the text. For 'those who write culture also write theory' (Denzin, 1997: xi). As an interpretive ethnographer I have entered settings that have been both very familiar and also very strange and attempted to link together the different biographical experiences of the participants. When I was carrying out the data collection, I was constantly looking for that 'golden nugget', that extra special bit of data that would make my thesis different. At that time, I had no idea what would be used in the final thesis nor did I know what themes might emerge. The extracts that do appear in this final edition have, therefore, not been selected to suit a predestined aspiration but been carefully chosen to try and reflect the experiences and poignant moments of some professionals' lives in order to understand how they construct their identity.

3.7 Validity

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007: 182) have suggested that 'the value of respondent validation' rests on the fact that the participants involved in the events may have access to supplementary knowledge of the context that is not available to the

ethnographer. Yet they also warn that there are limitations to respondent validation for no one can assume that there is 'a privileged commentator on his or her own actions', in the sense that there is no other truth but theirs. Schutz (1964) argued that meanings are constructed on the basis of memory, meaning that participants' actions were often grasped retrospectively. I would add that we, as researchers, can not always assume that our participants are fully aware of that which goes on around them; or why certain people behave the way they do and why particular decisions which affect them are made by others whom they work with.

Although all the above points relate to the issues I faced in this study, it is the latter that has troubled me the most. As I have discussed earlier, some of the participants that took part in this comparative ethnography held very strong views about why some of their superiors behaved the way in which they did. Some thought that their behaviour was underpinned by a degree of personal maliciousness and that this then influenced the belief that their actions were generated from malevolence. As I was in the rather unusual position (which I have discussed in depth throughout this chapter) of having information from *all* tiers within an organisation, I recognised that much of my data was that of 'personal' views, all of which were pertinent but not representative of the bigger picture.

This is not to say that my view is therefore more valid or more true but that it does have the benefit of having heard the 'other side of the story', an element which has consequently created a different picture of certain events that took place in all the settings. This matter, therefore, presented me with a yet another dilemma to consider when it came to validating my material, a predicament which Morriss (in preparation) has poignantly described as 'a dirty secret'. In her research with mental

health professionals Morriss found that she was not just betraying the social workers she interviewed by subjecting their words to *her* critical analysis but that she was also opening them up to the scrutiny of people they had never met before.

In this context, my dirty secret involved not wanting to show participants my analysis of their words for fear (or shame) that I would disappoint them or fail them in some way. Most of those who spoke with me wanted to do so so that I could convey to others, outside of their world, what it was they were experiencing. Yet my analysis has involved taking a meta-view of their experiences and subsequently I have formed different conclusions to those which they hold. Hence showing my participants the analysis of their data has been a complex step for me to take.

Validation of the data in this study has therefore involved different techniques, other than just seeking substantiation from my participants. As well as asking some of those involved, I have also asked new members post data collection, who have joined the organisations involved in this study, to read through my analysis. The response from the participants in this study has been positive but some have said they found it “difficult” to read. One said it made him/her want to leave and another said that he/she hoped this research would change the future of social work in child protection. New members to the organisation confirmed that they were unable to recognise participants from the extracts used. They also identified with some of the themes I have highlighted but then added that they had come from other agencies where similar practices were taking place so they were not surprised by what they had read.

Given these sensitive issues, it is important to highlight that the analysis of the data is only my interpretation of that which I have observed, read and listened to throughout this study. I recognise that 'there is no way in which we can escape the social world in order to study it' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 16), therefore in order to be as transparent as I possibly can where there has been disagreement or divergence between the participants I have included all conflicting data to give both views. I have employed Weinberg's theory (1993) relating to blame cultures to support my interpretations and I have also used photographic images to give the reader a clearer picture of my representation of that data. Moreover, to conclude, I have included two full transcripts in the appendices from both settings, England and Belgium, so that others may have the opportunity to read the interviews in their entire form and develop their own interpretations and opinions of the data I have collated.

Validation has, in addition, involved presenting my work to audiences at conferences and seminars both here in the UK and internationally. In some cases the feedback has been positive and productive, mainly from British listeners who have a strong understanding of the child protection culture and the way the system works. In one instance, however, it was quite critical. A Flemish academic, who I have referred to previously, was overtly disparaging about this study and unsympathetic towards its intentions. His rationale was that there was little point to such a project and argued that it did little to contribute to what the Flemish would call research. Whilst this feedback was difficult to ingest initially, it has been useful during the analysis when trying to understand certain Flemish attitudes towards qualitative research (see section 7.3) and it has also enabled me to focus upon my aims and

objectives, more of which will become apparent to the reader in the subsequent analysis chapters.

3.8 My own biography and the research

The aim of this ethnography was to explore what being a social worker actually meant to those working within this context. As a practising child protection social worker it is important to recognise that it is my own positioning and biography which is what inevitably drew me to the study in the first place. This section will explore certain aspects of my own biography that have been relevant to particular dimensions of this study, namely field relations and limitations.

Taylor (2011: 8) acknowledges that being an 'intimate insider' does not mean the position will be entirely unproblematic. But, as Labaree (2002: 102) described, it is the key to delving into the crevices of an organisation, and using your position to gain access 'to hidden truths that the public is unaware of'. It is my social work background and experience on the job that has undoubtedly affected the way this research has been carried out. When data collection in England began I had been working for the agency for two years and been qualified as a social worker for five years. Prior to working for this local authority, I had worked for two other agencies, however it is important to note that it was only when I started practising in this agency that I became acutely aware of how my decision making was often controlled by the fear of reprisal from another. I recognised that being blamed for my actions and possibly leaving a child at risk had become elements of my practice that were restrictive, stifling my experience and not allowing me to use my skills effectively.

I am not sure, nor do I wish to infer, that it is because of *this* agency that I started to feel 'differently' about my profession. There are other factors that need to be considered such as the post graduate study I began part time alongside my work after having been qualified for two years as well as the ongoing changes to policy legislation and continuing child protection debates that were occurring socially and politically. However, whatever the nature of this catalyst, the more I considered my own trajectory within the profession of child protection the more interested I became in understanding how my colleagues within the field not only perceived themselves as professionals but attempted to construct their own identity within a 'powerful blame culture' (Ferguson, 2011: 34).

Strangely, in my experience, how a social worker feels about their profession and their identity is not often the focus of discussions amongst professional colleagues. Of course it does happen, but not consciously so, and I have therefore never experienced a situation where we have all decided to go and sit down and share with one another what social work means to us individually. Nor have we ever collectively considered how we might go about constructing our own identity, or reflecting upon those interactions with certain agencies which may have affected our thoughts and feelings.

My own identity and what it would mean to this research was therefore also not an issue that was overtly discussed with my colleagues. However, it only became apparent when starting this fieldwork just how important my own biography actually was as a white, married woman with children in her late 30s who was doing her PhD, living in a more affluent borough to the one observed in the English part of this study. It had never occurred to me, previously, that I may be different to my colleagues, the majority of whom lived in the same borough as they worked and some of whom had

struggled academically. It was only when other outsiders joined the authority that it emerged in conversation, that some had seen my arrival as a quest by senior management to bring in “new talent” to an authority which was struggling with certain cultural and organisational issues (more detail of this observation will be explored within the analysis section). Therefore some people did not feel entirely happy about my arrival to the authority initially. But as I became more accepted by the Fenton department, over time this view of me changed as the following extract demonstrates:

J: So what happened then?

SW: Well (names social worker) arrived and she knows me well and knew what to do to calm me down so it worked out ok. If you had come it may have worked out totally differently.

J: How do you mean?

SW: Well now I know you and I know we work well together but back then I wouldn't have been able to talk to you like I do now.

Day 32, interview with social worker.

By the time this research took place (which is two years after the event the above social worker is referring to) I do believe I had comfortably bedded into the department. This extract does demonstrate however, that had I started this research earlier, when I was a new recruit to the Fenton department, the data I have collected may have been completely different. Yet of interest, this knowledge of how others perceived me only came about as a result of this research and further enforces the argument made by White (1997) that even as insiders within our own culture we can still be outsiders.

3.9 Ethics

There are several areas of ethics that will be discussed in this section. Firstly I shall deal with the ethics committees I approached in order to gain access to the field. I will then go on to discuss the ethical dilemmas I faced with my research participants, the organisation and my own position as practitioner/ researcher.

3.9.1 Ethical approval

In the first year of the project, I completed and submitted an ethics approval form to the University of Salford Research Ethics and Governance Committee. Two issues were raised following submission. The first related to how I would inform the participant that they could withdraw from the study if they so wished to and the second asked how I planned to store the data once it was collected. These two points were both addressed (and will feature in more detail later on in this chapter) and subsequently ethical approval was granted (see Appendix B) for this study to go ahead.

After this had been formally received, I then approached the Flemish child protection agency with my research proposal. Although they have no formal ethical research panel in place, the Director of the agency did consider my proposal and provided me with his approval. This same process was repeated when later on in the study I chose to visit and spend time with another district office which is part of the same organisation. Once again, the agency did not have a formal ethical research panel in place and after the Director had considered the idea, approval for the study to take place was once again granted.

As an already practicing social worker for a local authority, I used established contacts within the agency and proceeded to seek consent from the Service Unit

Manager of the Safeguarding Children Department (see Appendix C & D). As there is no formal ethical procedure for research access, he simply asked other senior managers for their approval and together they agreed that I could carry out my research within the child protection department of the organisation.

The issue of respect to research participants is an area of research which has raised some important questions for this study. In the British Sociological Association Statement of Ethical Practice (2002) particular emphasis is placed on giving due consideration to the relationship that will be formed between the researcher and the participant. It stresses the obligation the researcher has on treating the rights of the participant both delicately and sensitively:

Members should be aware that they have some responsibility for the use to which their data maybe put and for how the research is to be disseminated. Discharging that responsibility may on occasion be difficult, especially in situations of social conflict, competing social interests or where there is unanticipated misuse of the research by third parties.
(British Sociological Association, 2002)

3.9.2 The ethics of being an intimate insider

When considering my position in England as an insider, how I handled relationships with my participants/ colleagues was a particularly important matter for me. In contrast to Scourfield (1999) and White (1997), I did not get the sense that the social workers in my study considered that I was there to evaluate their practice. I believe this is in part due to the nature of the project, as I was in the fortunate position where I was asking social workers how they felt 'about' their profession and was not like others (see D'Cruz, 2004; Slembrouck et al. 2006; Wattam, 1992) analysing their behaviour in order to make recommendations as to how they may be able to 'improve' on their practice. It might also have been because of my position as an equal

or rather another social worker and colleague who still had front line work to do despite having to carry out research 'on the side' as the following extract demonstrates:

J: You look awkward, do you feel uncomfortable? Under the spotlight?

SW: Yeah, no, it's not that it's the recorder. I saw the red light and it feels real now.

J: And it didn't before?

SW: Well no, and I know you had it on before when we were out and about I just didn't see you turn it on and now I'm worried I am going to start stuttering (both laugh). You know what I get like when I think it's formal (both laugh).

Day 105, interview with social worker.

My tactic therefore, was to make it abundantly clear that I wanted my colleagues to feel comfortable and know that I was keen to listen to how my colleagues viewed their professional identity in the child protection context. To spread the word, I sent an email to the manager of each child protection team in England and asked that they forward this onto all members within their team. My email explained that I was there to see how they constructed their professional identity in various settings. However, this would not involve observing them interact with their families.

Like Scourfield (1999), I recognised that as a professional and a researcher imposing upon families whose parenting was already the subject of scrutiny might be distressing. I also specifically requested that should any professional object to me being present and observing them 'at work' that they notify me personally so that I could act swiftly and ensure they were no longer the objects of my attention. This offer of abstinence, or the opportunity to withdraw, was not taken up. Although I did not receive a reply from everyone, I did receive a few emails expressing gratitude that this form of research was taking place and that they would be more than happy to take part.

However, when it came to carrying out one-to-one interviews not all participants were willing to accept my offer and elaborate on their views in private. It appeared that, although some felt comfortable being observed in a group setting, when I asked certain individuals if I could speak to them in more detail in an interview they declined stating they felt they had nothing else to contribute to what they had previously said and/or that they did not feel comfortable sharing their personal thoughts/ opinions with me. This was an unusual experience, and one I had not anticipated prior to starting data collection. However, it was in an interview with a manager that an insight into why this reply was given became more apparent.

Well this is the difficult thing because you are now asking me questions that I want to answer but I am still aware that I am your manager and should not share this information with you as you are a practitioner on my team.

Day 43, Interview with manager.

Working for the organisation I intended to observe meant I already owned a passport which I could use to bypass border control with ease. It also meant I had a claim to a certain degree of prior knowledge possessed only by those of us on the inside: the active members of the agency. But being an insider did not mean I was privy to all information held within the organisation and in certain contexts within my micro culture there were aspects of intelligence I was not privy to, areas where I may even have felt more outside than an outsider would. White (1997:68) also found in her ethnography 'at home' that 'the insider/outsider dualism is extraordinarily difficult to sustain empirically'.

3.9.3 Ethics and emotions of doing ethnography 'at home'.

Who I am and the role I played in this research was more complex than I had ever anticipated prior to making the decision that I would carry out an ethnography 'at home'. For in England I did encounter one issue which I was not expecting and which did trouble me greatly throughout the study. It is an issue which will be explored in more detail in section 6.1, from the participants' perspective, but in this section it is important to discuss the impact it had on my identity.

Ethnography is a demanding activity that requires the researcher to use diverse skills as use their ability to make decisions in situations where there is considerable uncertainty (Hammersely and Atkinson, 2007). Being an insider to the child protection profession was undoubtedly my main motivator for using the principles of ethnography as a methodology. However, as much of a benefit my position was to this study it also presented me with some considerable challenges. Despite feeling confident and more than prepared at the start of this study, I had not fully contemplated just how the complexity of my position would also create personal and professional predicaments I had not previously foreseen or rather properly understood when reviewing the methodological literature, especially in relation to the hidden dilemmas of being an insider that can often relate to issues of unintended positioning, shared relationships and disclosure (Labaree, 2002).

I came to realise that the perplexities I actually encountered would not only affect the established relationships I had already made within the field but impact on my own professional identity as a practitioner and, in effect, become data as well. For it was not until I received a telephone call from one of my colleagues late one evening, telling me that he had been suspended, that I realised the role of being an intimate insider was about to become more complex. When the call ended I recall feeling

paralysed with fear and anxiety. I knew this sensation was paranoia simply because I had recognised one of the names he had mentioned: it was a child I had also been involved with after I had taken over from him one evening at work. I remember I immediately started mentally analysing everything that I had done with the case, the part I had played in this sequence of events that had led to his dismissal and could possibly trigger that of my own.

Plummer (2001) has described how the permeability of boundaries between our own lives and that of others is a predestined feature of qualitative research; the teller of the tale as well as others implicated in that tale may find themselves disconcerted by the end- product. The aspiration of attaining that certain intellectual research poise I had initially yearned for had been replaced with the new subject position of an 'emotionally immersed researcher', a status which implied vulnerability and lack of situational control (Nilan, 2002: 366). It did not help when the next evening I received a call from my manager to tell me she had just been given notice due to 'poor decision making'. The loss of two colleagues in such a short space of time had such a significant impact on our team that it sent everyone into a blind panic. The anxiety continued to increase as the paranoia spread amongst the team members.

Our manager told us before she left to watch our backs because there is a 'hidden agenda'. So today everyone is looking for a new job. The office is eerily quiet and when a senior manager walks into the room you can hear a sigh of relief when they walk back out again.

Field notes, Day 3.

Like my colleagues, I was just as consumed by the panic and the paranoia that was circulating swiftly around the office. I was also waiting for that tap on the shoulder for it felt inevitable that my time would come if my colleague had been

suspended and my manager had been dismissed over a case I had also been involved in. But I knew that as a researcher I also had to 'get a grip' and understand what was happening and why. I needed to explore how this incident would impact on the professional identity of my colleagues and take into consideration how it was affecting my own identity. But knowing how to handle the situation for the best and make the right decisions in a situation where there was 'considerable uncertainty' (Hammersely and Atkinson, 2007: 4) was unclear as I realised I had personally become so emotionally entrenched in an event that seemed to be spiralling out of control, I could not 'see the wood for the trees'. The unpredictable nature of this fieldwork situation had not given me the opportunity to practise any reflexive techniques. Instead of feeling in control, I felt I was losing focus as the emotional impact of being an intimate insider was affecting me more than I had ever anticipated.

Although my intimate insider status meant I was privy to 'insights that are difficult or impossible to access by an outsider' (Labaree, 2002: 100) due to having established a level of trust with certain informants which had led to a more open exchange (Haniff, 1985), it dawned on me for the very first time that I had also placed myself in an extremely vulnerable position: one which could lead to the demise of my entire professional career. For this dual role of 'practitioner/ researcher' that I had willingly accepted meant that I, like my colleague, could face suspension from practice at any given moment. It was not until these two team members left the team that I realised that in reality, this very event could not only be of detriment to me as a social worker but affect me as a researcher as well: for how would I be able to continue to gather data for my own study if I was not even allowed onto the work premises?

Fortunately, this did not happen but at the time I was not to know it would not. This turbulence in work culture has undoubtedly influenced the data that has

subsequently been collected. As a result, and an awareness that that which happened to my immediate team may very well have had an effect upon my findings, I also, for a period of time, felt apprehensive that the data I collected would re-shape my study from that of a PhD thesis into that of a whistle blowing report due to the certain behaviours and malpractice issues that emerged during this stage. However, I hope that my analysis of the data has sufficiently attended to the reasons why certain situations occurred during this period of time. I have, admittedly, at times been tempted to not write about all that did take place but I believe that to deny that which happened to my 'self' and the experience of others would be 'epistemologically wrong' (Coffey, 1999: 13). It would also have rendered the findings of this thesis as futile and only served to ignore the voices of those who have kindly taken part in this study. I have therefore, instead, used my position as a key to delving into the crevices of my organisation in order to gain access to the 'hidden truths that the public is unaware of' (Labaree, 2002: 102).

3.9.4 Experiencing the other side of the coin

It was only when I left for Flanders that the answers to some of the questions I posed above gained more clarity. Once away from my home setting and in a field where I was considered an outsider was I then able to slip into the role of the 'emotionally detached researcher' with ease (Nilan, 2002: 365). Separating myself from my original setting and creating that passage of space and time, as Foucault (1972) suggested, between me and the discourse I employed, did bring a further degree of clarity to my own position and identity within the field. Prior to my trip to Flanders, the decisions I had been faced with had eluded me and only became more

transparent once I had moved away from my 'experience near' to my other position of 'experience distant' (Geertz, 1973).

In Flanders, however, I experienced the other side of the coin. Approaching this setting as an outsider, I did not expect to encounter many professionals who I thought would be willing to share their personal experiences of their organisational politics and was surprised to find that it only took two days before someone did. Blackman (2007: 99) notes that 'rarely in sociology is the emotional contact between observer and participant made explicit', mainly because academics fear their research may lose legitimacy or be discredited in some way. But I draw attention to it here simply because when I did literally experience that 'close the door' moment, so that one participant could share something personal with me, I was stunned as I honestly did not think this would happen in a setting where I was an outsider.

Yet although I used the same approach as I did in England, the teams in Flanders were much smaller therefore not only was gaining consent relatively straight forward but getting to know team members was also much easier and more personable. I was therefore able to follow, observe and talk to one professional at a time. Even though I explained that I did not need to meet with their clients, professionals in this setting were keen for me to see them in action and this involved their interactions with children and families. Therefore before each encounter, I provided all present with information on the nature of the project and asked that they sign a consent form, clearly explaining that their identifying details would be anonymised and informing them of their right to withdraw.

3.9.5 Managing confidentiality

In this thesis, in an effort to keep all information as confidential as possible I only refer to participants in England as 'social worker' or 'manager'. In Flanders I refer to them as 'CPP' (child protection professional) to further obscure their identity. In parts, I do indicate their professional background by, for example, identifying whether they are a psychologist, pedagogue or social worker in order to demonstrate a specific point. In Flanders, I was aware that the date of an interview extract or ethnography notes could also reveal the professional's identity as I visited two agencies at different times of the year. Although both were from the same organisation they had dissimilar experiences. Therefore rather than date interviews and ethnography notes, I have chosen to label all interview extracts as Day 1, Day 2 and so on.

Although the English and Flemish agencies have not been specifically identified in the text, and pseudonyms have been used to keep their details confidential, I have chosen to use photographs in this study. I thought that these images could easily be identified by those who know their work setting well but not by anyone from outside of the agency. On one occasion this proved me wrong when during a presentation I gave to lecturers in the UK one attendee recognised the Fenton department (England). I have therefore used an illustrative application to alter this image, making it recognisable as a building but at the same time, difficult to identify by the reader. Once again, I reiterate that these pictures were not taken without consent and do not include any images of the participants or their families. I have chosen to use them to show contrasts between the European environments with the aim of demonstrating how these settings might impact upon the identity of a professional.

The documents that were analysed varied depending on the location, or rather my role as insider or outsider, but included cases notes, assessments, reports, policies, presentations, procedures and emails. These have been downloaded, printed off and anonymised. They have then been stored securely in a locked cabinet in my home. All interviews have been transcribed verbatim and I have removed any inadvertent or indirect identifying details from the text. The audio recordings are stored on a USB stick which is stored in a bureau which is locked in a secure room in my home. All transcriptions are stored electronically on my computer, a different USB stick and protected with a password.

3.9.6 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to explain the principles behind the study and provide a reflexive account of the research process as well as explain my theoretical base in the writing of this thesis. By carrying out a comparative ethnography this research has involved exploring two distinct, unique settings in order to develop a contrast for the England agency, one in which I was located in as an intimate insider. By adopting a dual role in ethnography and taking up the position of an outsider in another setting, I was not only able to promote reflexivity for my role as an insider researcher but also able to effectively reshape my identity as a practitioner.

Ethnography is a method which accepts that emotional experience and intellectual autobiography is not only constructed and reconstructed through research (Coffey, 1999) but inevitably what draws you to the study in the first place (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). This project was inaugurated as I was motivated by a concern for how my professional colleagues might construct their identity within a culture entrenched in blame as a result of the experiences I had encountered

personally as a practitioner. Due to unexpected dilemmas that occurred along this journey, the research process has subsequently forced me to re-evaluate my motives and analyse aspects of my own character; features I had not previously considered or appreciated.

Furthermore the experiences that I have encountered reiterate the argument that the native anthropologist does have a far more advantageous position in understanding the emotive dimensions of behaviour which can be difficult to interpret for an outsider (Ohnuki -Tierney, 1984). In England, I have had access to certain types of information I was not privy to in Flanders. However, I have also come to realise that my trips to Flanders have not just involved gathering data as an outsider from a different organisation but have provided me with the opportunity to also reflect back on what I had experienced in the ethnography I was conducting 'at home'.

Despite having found the method of comparative ethnography a positive experience, I have still encountered certain professional and personal dilemmas: issues, I have come to realise, that will always ensue whichever location the ethnographic researcher finds him or herself in. For whether it be insider or outsider, subjective or objective, the stance of the researcher will undoubtedly prompt diverse information as both positions connect and become acquainted with contrasting methodological issues.

The data that has emerged has done so amidst all that I have discussed here. It has been analysed according to a variety of principles and with the support of computer software. The next chapter presents my reflections and analysis on the data and begins by constructing the macro level culture in child protection social work.

Chapter 4: Constructing culture in child protection social work

If we are to understand how professionals construct their identity, we need to first appreciate the impact certain external agencies have on the culture within which they work. Understanding where social workers are located is therefore imperative simply because they are embedded at the very heart of this culture. This chapter is, consequently, concerned with the way in which child protection agencies perceive how certain external agencies respond to child abuse.

Through the data presented in this section we shall see how these agencies interact with one another to develop a powerful macro culture which inevitably surrounds the child protection domain; a culture which not only affects the practice of social workers within the Fenton department and child protection workers within the VK agency but one which impacts upon the way they then perceive their own identity as professionals.

4.1. The role society plays

Sociologists define society as that which consists of people who share a common culture within a particular location. By interacting with each other in a particular way they then develop a cultural bond with one another be that from shared beliefs, values or attitudes (Walsh et al. 2000).

Society and culture are, therefore, intimately connected but at the same time uniquely different, for a culture is made up of various objects within society yet society is constructed from people who share a common culture. In this context, I refer to 'society' to represent people who live within the United Kingdom or in

Flanders and who are, therefore, whether they are aware of it or not, affected by its child protection system.



4.1.1 The do goody thing has faded (England)

I begin this section with extracts from interviews with different social workers who explained to me how they think they are perceived by the public:

J: Tell me how do people respond to you when you tell them you are a social worker?

SW 1: I find that if people say ‘what do you do?’ and I say I am a social worker, they look at you with a bit of contempt. It’s not like it used to be, the do goody thing that we were once known for has faded. Some people (laughs) have unrealistic expectations and the criticism you get from members of the public when something goes wrong, well it’s not good for morale.

(Interview, Day 13)

SW 2: Yeah, no one likes social workers do they? Although actually I was talking to two builders in the pub and they were like “wow, that’s amazing, we have a lot of respect for you” which I really didn’t expect from them (laughs).

(Interview, Day 19)

There is a general agreement within the Fenton department that the view the public has of social workers is far removed from the one it once it held. Practitioners often expect to be criticised for the profession they have chosen and when they are not, it comes as a surprise. Especially when, as social worker 2 demonstrates, admiration comes from those you least expect it to, those you think will believe all that they read in the papers.

So it is, therefore, considered normal to be disliked and to be criticised for the job we do. But being excoriated by those who do not understand what the job entails does still have an impact on how we feel, not only about ourselves but about the

profession we are members of. These “unrealistic expectations” that social worker 1 refers to, has developed from a belief within society, in more recent years, that ‘blame must be apportioned’ to the professional who, rather than the parent, has failed a child (Reder et al. 1993: 2).

In these extracts, it is also noteworthy to consider why both social workers resort to laughter. It is, I believe, a way in which they can mask the discomfort they feel when talking about issues that are troublesome or unorthodox. Although neither I nor my colleagues from the Fenton Department have ever been, up until this point, involved in a public child abuse inquiry, the reputation our profession holds with members of the public has, nonetheless, led to a stigma being affixed to each one of us. Goffman (1963) defined stigma as a process by which the negative reaction of others can spoil the identity of what was once considered normal. In his study of stigmatised neighbourhoods in urban Scotland, Clark (2003: 74) found that ‘the image’ outsiders have of residents can have ‘a more direct [and] material effect’ on the way they perceive themselves. And in this instance we can see from the data in this study that on a professional level, when stigma is attached to those doing the work, it can deplete the spirit of a group and affect the identity of those who wish to succeed and do a job well. On a personal level it can impact on the way people respond to you and the way you respond to them.

SW1: You and I, we’re just social pariahs. People are never the same with you once they know you are a social worker.

J: You think it can even affect the way people behave towards you?

SW1: Yeah, some people seem nervous and scared. They are very particular about how they treat their children in front of you. There are others who think you're a do gooder and that you can't be very warm or caring. Hasn't it happened to you?

J: Yeah, sometimes.

(Interview, Day 21)

It is interesting to see how the term 'do gooder' has changed in its meaning in this context from one who does good to one who is not "good". As society's opinions and attitudes have changed over the years towards social workers, an ambiguity in the meaning of the term has also emerged. Sausurre (1974) accounted for this change in meaning as *la langue*, a term used to represent language as a system and the elements of this system are defined only in their relationships with other elements within that system. Using Sausurre's understanding of language the term 'do gooder' still signifies someone who is well intentioned but when applied to the role of a child protection social worker it alters. It instead suggests that intervening into the private lives of families is seen by some as intimidating, and is only carried out by those who do not care.

I chose to include this extract as I remember reeling from the comment made by this social worker about us being 'social pariahs', ostracised by society simply because of the job that we do. It had never occurred to me before but by exploring this aspect further, I can now see how a particular kind of discourse emerges, one which 'influences how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others' (Hall, 2001: 72); one which, in this context, unites two social workers after it dawns on me that I too have experienced similar uncomfortable situations; times when friends have cut stories short mid sentence as they have realised that they are about to tell me, their friend but also a child protection social worker, that they have chastised their child.

It is a result of this shared experience, an understanding develops between us, two social workers from the same discipline, and leads us to construct, or in this instance build upon, our group identity and confirms that, in one way, 'social work identity is reproduced through talk' (White, 1997: 10). It also shows that which Freidson (1986) highlighted, that it is through the individual's attitude and commitment to their career that their professional identity merges with their own to become one identity.



4.1.2 We do have a lot of credibility within our society (Flanders)

I begin this section with an extract from an interview, which I will continue to revisit in more detail in later chapters, with a Flemish child protection professional (CPP) who with his team had worked with a family where the father had assaulted his six month old baby whilst the mother was out with friends- he had been drinking at the time and did not remember the incident until the next morning when the mother woke to find the baby with bruises to his face and his head. The family agreed to work with the VK agency and they had been involved intensely, at the time of this interview, for a period of six months. The team were at the stage when they were contemplating with the mother whether the father, after having himself decided that he should leave the home initially, could return to the home.

J: So if everything is ok and everyone is in agreement that the father can return home and then in a year or so time, the father gets drunk and a similar situation happens and the baby this time dies, what would happen to you as professionals?

CPP: Again they would check that we have done everything properly.

J: Who is they?

CPP: It can be the juridical authorities. Not necessarily but it can happen. But I am working now for 25 years and I don't remember many cases where the police were interested, or anyone else for that matter, were interested in whether we were good at what we do or not.

J: So would someone be found accountable within this team and have to face a Statutory Inquiry?

CPP: No! If something happens it will be the police who will be coming to us and ask us what has happened. And then it is possible we are prosecuted but that is more theoretical and it almost never happens. It doesn't mean we are not happy about it and that is why we discuss everything in the team to make sure we do things properly and it makes us more credible that way and that is why we are not easily prosecuted. Because we do have a lot of credibility within our society.

(Interview, Day 3)

The first question in this extract shows how I am trying to comprehend how the risk taken by these professionals may affect them at a later date if the child is injured once more by his father. This child protection professional (CPP) tries to reassure me that in the 25 years he has been working for the agency he cannot remember many times when this organisation, or their sister agencies across Flanders, have been investigated by the police for making a wrong decision. He even appears shocked at my suggestion that the agency could be subjected to a statutory inquiry, if the decisions they had made were later found, by others, to have been inappropriate. Although, as he explains, being held accountable for their decision making is not impossible, it rarely happens, a reason he believes derives from the strong, reliable reputation his agency has within the Flemish society.

In the following extract a child protection professional from Kind en Gezin (Child and Family agency) tells me about the two child deaths they have experienced in one of the Flemish regions. The first was, a baby, whom they believe had been suffocated with a pillow by one of his/ her parents.

J: And that baby that you are talking about, were you involved?

CPP: Yes we were. A few years ago there was also here in another region of Flanders there was another child who died. It was because of parents with drug issues. I think the child died from neglect. We knew about the situation but there was already help in the home. There were two services, us and another. But it still happened.

J: So in a case like that how did the public respond?

CPP: The public is dual in their opinion. Yes there is, how do you say it, a witch hunt. We have to react.

J: So it does happen here! We have this in England.

CPP: (Laughs) Yes but it is not the same; we have to explain our position, the process that was taken but we are still very respected by our society.

(Interview, Day 4)

It is important to mention that the professional in this extract was not personally involved in either of these incidents, which happened, incidentally, in two different regions to the ones I visited. However, rather interestingly she still uses the collective term of 'we' to refer to the organisation she is working for, the same organisation which was involved with these two cases. In doing so, she assumes responsibility for both of these incidents and does not attempt to separate either of them from the practice that takes place in her own micro culture located in a different Flemish region altogether.

She also confirms that which the Flemish CPP from the previous extract was saying, that when an incident occurs, if an explanation is required by the public, then one is provided. It is not then followed up with a Statutory Inquiry, as it would be in England, as finding a professional accountable is not the main priority for the members of Flemish society. Despite using the term 'witch hunt' in this context, it soon becomes apparent that the definition of this term appears to mean something different in Flemish to that which we would understand it to mean in England.

Sausurre (1974) argued that when certain spoken signs are thought of, these things become signals that can populate our mental life. In this extract, we can see how the term 'witch hunt' is a linguistic signifier which conjures up for me images of social workers in the midst of a moral panic episode once a child abuse tragedy hits the news. Yet in Flanders the witch does not refer to the social worker, it refers to any agency which can answer the pertinent questions society asks in order to try and understand the *process* that has been followed by professionals with the families in question. In doing so, child protection agencies come forward and do have the opportunity to explain the actions that they took at that time. As a result of entering into a debate, they are able to answer the questions posed by members of society and do not appear defensive or suspicious, as if they are trying to hide something but open and transparent. This way of communicating not only reassures their critics but also leaves this professional feeling that the good reputation of their agency remains unharmed.



4.1.3 Our client is society and not the service user (England)

Along with the changes in the way that social work is performed in England and the way that the profession is viewed is also the belief, amongst the Fenton department, that the client is no longer the child or the family but instead society, whose opinion we tend to consider and value the most.

There have been tragedies and the tragedies are all about the same when you look at them back to Maria Colwell and so on. People back then didn't seem quite so ready to have a downer on social workers and to blame for things that went wrong as they might do now. So I think there is always that question of what does society, ultimately your customer 'cos it isn't the service user anymore it is society that you are doing a policing

job on behalf of, what does society want? And I think their expectations of social work are different now than they used to be

(Interview with manager, Day 43).

I think the negatives outweigh the positives and that is what the public sees, that is what we have to work with, you know bear in mind when we carry out assessments. What is it that society expects from us?

(Interview with social worker, Day 19)

...after the Children Act, you know the time that insisted on having locally based centres where people could properly access services and we had a centre where people could properly drop in with a laundry room and stop and have a coffee so it wasn't just hauling them in when we were trying to take their kids off them, it was a lot of preventative work not like now. Now we are putting out fires trying to pre-empt which referral is the next tragedy, worrying about what society will say if the next child death is in one of them.

(Interview with manager, Day 53)

When carrying out their ethnographic studies in a child protection setting Dingwall et al. (1983), Pithouse (1987), Scourfield (1999), White (1997) and Ferguson (2011) all asserted that the social worker's client was primarily the child. Scourfield (1999: 66) did add that this definition also extended to that of the parent, simply because, most of the contact social workers had was with the adult caregiver. However, in this context we see a contrasting argument emerge from the data.

All three of these extracts have been selected to highlight a common theme from all interviews carried out, that there is *another* party present, albeit implicitly, in the practice of social work. The manager in the first extract is clear that he no longer believes that it is the child or the parent who is the client but society instead. With 28 years post qualification experience, he talks about the seemingly steady decline in society's attitude towards social workers and attributes this change as that which has shifted the emphasis on the former concept of social worker working to meet the needs of the child and family to that of which it is now: social worker meeting the expectations of society.

His comments are supported by the social worker, who discloses that when she is carrying out social work assessments with families she, does not just think of the family, but also considers the expectations society have of us. She is also of the opinion that the negative opinions held of social workers outweigh the positives. Although not discussed further in this context, I cannot help but wonder if these 'negatives' she describes go on to then affect the assessment of the family. For as White (1997) noticed, social workers are more likely to carry out assessments with a rule of scepticism than with the rule of the optimism noticed in the early 1980s by Dingwall et al. (1983).

In the third extract, we see this manager look back on social work practice with rose tinted spectacles as he remembers how things once were, how preventative work led to contact with the client, the parents and their children; unlike the practice he is part of today, one which he feels is located in a climate of insecurity, where we are always fearing the worst and 'fighting fires' on behalf of society. This comment supports the findings of Parton and Matthews (2001) who found that each year statutory child welfare agencies were overwhelmed by an increase in child protection referrals. As a result of these needing a formal investigation, they learned that the majority of staff were consumed with this rather than providing services to instigate preventative work instead.



4.1.4 Our clients are the parents and their children (Flanders).

I begin this section with a lengthy extract from an interview with a Flemish child protection professional (CPP) which I believe is necessary in this context to give clarity to the way in which the Flemish deal with certain issue. Here a CPP explains to me here how the agency encountered and dealt with a bad experience with the legal authorities.

CPP: I don't know if I told you about our relationship with legal authorities. It's a long story. The first case ever in Belgium that appeared in the Court D'Access (High Court in Belgium) started here. A little girl of six years old that was abused by her father and her grandfather...the child entered the hospital with vaginal seizure, bleeding so strong that she could have died from it. She was abused with the leg of a puppet in her vagina. And that caused the seizure. Well that case went to court but at that time there was a big struggle between legal authorities and our services, especially this service. Because at that moment, this centre was exemplary in whole of Europe for its non repressive attitude, its work without intervention of legal authorities. Well, lawyers and judges here were not happy with that situation because they said "This is our work, it is not the work of social workers" and we disagreed and we said "No, these are family problems and you have to treat the family's problems that is the best way you can do for the wellness of a child"..... It was a very strong position, it was an extreme position and we were exemplarily for that attitude in the whole of Europe. Well the father and the grandfather were not convicted. Because of the lack of evidence. Incredible. I have seen so many cases of child abuse, of sexual abuse, most of them without any medical evidence at all. This was a very clear case. No conviction. And in the speech of the Judge, we were condemned. They said that we didn't work properly with this case. We were pre judged and seen as only helping the mother and things like that. Crazy, really crazy. Ok. Ummm, after that first case, never an incest case appeared before that high court again as they realised it was a little bit overdone. That was just to explain to you that we were now in a fight with Judges. We didn't speak to each other, we didn't know each others work and we disagreed about handling cases of child abuse. Things evolved. I got a new boss....and in that period we tried to build out a better relationship with Judges because we were a little bit afraid about, what you say in England, that one day they can find out that we don't work properly and they can prosecute us.

(Interview, Day 12).

This interview extract is important for a number of reasons. It begins by contextualising the relationship the VK child protection agency once held (in the

1990s) with their legal authorities. As I have mentioned previously, the aim of VK is primarily to carry out work with families whose children have been abused. They state that they will work with anyone who acknowledges the abuse they have caused to their child and who is willing to accept the support provided by the agency. Those parents/ carers who are not willing to do either are referred to the Judge. In this instance, we see how this high profile case was the first to reach the High Court (Court D'Access in Flanders) because of recent changes to the law at that time and because neither the father nor the grandfather of this child were willing to accept the intervention of VK.

However, as a result of professional disagreements as to how the case should be handled by legal authorities, no conviction was granted and the VK agency was subsequently criticised for the handling of the case. This criticism did not lead to a police investigation or a serious case review, it simply led to two professional parties disagreeing on how a case should be handled, much to the detriment of the child. This lack of child centred focus does appear to strengthen the findings of Roose et al. (2009) whose study found that there was an imbalance in power between professionals and their clients and that this often resorted to a particular kind of social work discourse being used: one which strengthened their own theoretical argument and led to the empowerment of the parent but in turn, disempowered the child. In this extract, we can see how this may have happened, with the VK agency philosophy being that family problems must be “treated” before the child’s welfare can then be considered.

Despite feeling injured by this humiliating experience, this VK agency realised they had to do something if they were to change the situation and, this CPP admits, that part of their incentive for making those changes was so that they would *not* end

up in a similar position to the welfare agencies in England. They therefore overcame the dilemma through a meeting with a leading prosecutor, the details of which are explained in the following extract:

CPP: ...Some months later I went to a conference in the city on child abuse. At that conference I met a very important prosecutor.... she was a prosecutor of child abuse and we spoke for hours....and that became the beginning of an excellent relationship with the judicial authorities. We discussed a lot about our work and how to treat offenders and how to deal with victims. In fact we ended at the same point, we agreed that if possible, you have to treat the family by therapy but she also heard from me that we had our own way to make risk assessment and for us when it was not safe we would go to the police. And from that moment on she made it possible for us to discuss cases with each other, in confidence, she decided that in future we should discuss the best way of handling a case. And we build that out and she met me and had contact with all our colleagues and with the juvenile judges and so on and so on and still right now this whole network still exists where we speak very easily with each other. I don't call it a collaboration I call it a good understanding we know perfectly what they do and they know how we work and there is a good understanding about each other. That is very, very important. For them, the most important point is that they know that we take our responsibility very seriously and if it is not safe for them then we go to them and that is why they have confidence in how we treat our cases which means that we really can go for social work and work with our clients, the families, and not for control. In England you try to control everything. Control is impossible.

(Interview, Day 12).

There are a number of important points which emerge from this extract. The first, which struck me as the most different, is the personal and individual way in which this complex situation was dealt with by two entirely different professional agencies, each using different discourses to 'regulate' their 'knowledge of the world', with each fundamentally holding their own perspective on how child abuse should be handled (Burr, 2003: 67). This intimate way of seeking a resolution derived, I believe, mainly from the fact that at the time there was no specific law or policy or set of procedures to underpin, and then dictate, the way in which child protection professionals should work with cases of child abuse. Instead, an agreement was reached between these professions through the act of simply communicating effectively with one another.

The VK agency was able to defend their position, promote their ideology and advocate their approach by demonstrating their effectiveness through the use of research. They were able to persuade that their method was valuable and, furthermore, reassured the legal agencies that the police would be contacted if and when they were required. As a result, this informal agreement would remain in place for the next twenty years.

The second point of interest is the conference that both the prosecutor and the CPP attended on child abuse. In the UK, most social welfare conferences are designed to meet the needs of a specific professional agency be that social workers (JSWEC, SWAN, etc). Other professions, involved in child protection issues, tend to have their own. Therefore these conferences that are dedicated towards resolving social welfare issues do not tend to include those other professionals who may be working within the children protection arena. Yet this example demonstrates that although we in the UK often promote the notion of 'working together' with other agencies, the opportunity to actually share knowledge with one another in relation to issues of child abuse is actually limited.

The third striking point of interest is the comment this CPP makes about how they defended their 'social work' practice. Despite being at a conference where different professions convened, at no point during this disagreement did the VK agency concede and allow the police to work alongside them in cases of child abuse. The philosophy of the VK agency is about providing the *family* with therapy, not just the child but also the parents. And by doing this, this CPP is of the belief that the needs of the family are then placed first before those of the criminal justice system: A system that performs in partnership with social workers in cases of child abuse and is

consequently dominated by the need to control, an action which this CPP argues is not only impractical but also ineffective.



4.1.5 Parents don't treat us with respect (England)

In response to a question about how society has changed in its attitude towards social workers this social worker replied:

I think it's bad, well it's bad for us in the eyes of the parents, the families because they don't see you as someone they should treat with respect and they don't see you as someone who might have something valid to say. They see you as an incompetent idiot. You are not just walking in as a social worker, you are walking in as a social worker who has made mistakes. They say 'Why are you here when you didn't save the lives of these little babies? What gives you the right to interfere in my life when you've cocked up in the lives of others? I mean some of their points are valid especially when they ask 'How do I know you are not going to cock my life up?' Well, it is a fair question.

(Interview with a social worker, Day 14)

This social worker demonstrates the repercussions faced as a result of the negative discourse circulating in relation to social workers that has managed to manifest itself within the media. The stories he is presented with, when he enters the home of a new family, are those one-sided accounts that have subsequently affected the views and perceptions of what social workers can achieve for the family. Yet research carried out by Spratt and Callan (2004) and Ghaffar et al. (2012) into the experiences parents have had with social workers, both found that, despite initial apprehension, in the majority of cases successful relationships were formed. Nonetheless, fearing that someone else's nightmare could well become that of their own gives a clear indication that some families lack faith in the professional from the start, something that even this social worker takes on board and acknowledges is a position of doubt he can

understand and empathises with. But, even so, the fact that this social worker is associated with the tragedies he has not even been involved in, still strengthens the argument I asserted earlier that social workers in England are stigmatised from the moment they walk in the door and meet a new family for the first time.

J: How does it make you feel when parents respond to you angrily?

SW: The number of people who have held me personally responsible, in fact someone did say to me on a visit 'Well what about that kid that starved to death in Birmingham? What did you do about that?' 'Errr, well nothing, (then shouting) I don't work in Birmingham! That was not my fault!' and people say 'Yeah you killed Baby P'. (shouting again) 'No I didn't! And you know what? No social worker did!'

J: Does that kind of response make you angry as well?

SW: Yeah, maybe it does. It does piss me off.

(Interview, Day 19)

Having to deal with parents' anger and frustrations is an aspect of social work that most practitioners in England have always accepted is part of the job. But being blamed and held personally accountable for the tragedies other social services departments have been held responsible for is, for this social worker, an unnecessary part of the job, one which encourages her to become annoyed and defensive. Although I did not see how this social worker behaves with parents when they do respond to her in that way, I did notice how talking about the way they behave towards her made her vexed and agitated. These kinds of feelings are ones which lead practitioners to become defensive and cautious in their practice (see Ruch and Murray, 2011).

Unlike the Flemish CPP who used the collective term 'we' when discussing the child deaths that had occurred in the same agency but in another region, in this context, this social worker holds no desire to be associated with the so called 'mistakes' other social workers in other agencies have been criticised over. For being

labelled, not just as a professional who has failed, but a murderer who has caused the death of a child, is becoming a more regular feature in the UK practice of child protection social work. An issue that Munro (1996: 794) highlights is fuelled by the public's expectation that social workers should protect all children and if they don't, and a child dies, then that social worker has 'done something wrong'.

On the whole, from the interviews carried out within the Fenton department all social workers have experienced similar situations. But interestingly the general opinion is that these outbursts of excoriation and blame are more likely to be experienced following the news coverage of a new child abuse tragedy. Yet as time passes, and memories fade, and the media find something else to focus on, the blaming of social workers continues but becomes a less obvious problem.



4.1.6 I can trust them and they can trust me (Flanders).

J: How would you find out that she was not telling the truth?

CPP: By speaking to everybody. Mama, Papa, the therapist, the paediatrician and the child and family involved. And she knows that we keep these contacts. She knows this and if someone sees something that isn't correct we will know. But I don't want to point at the control factor because I don't believe in control.

J: You mean the control the services have?

CPP: Yes. I use it. I am not blind or naive but it is not my goal. For me my goal is to build out the relationship with these parents where I can trust them and more importantly, they can trust me. And first call for me is, if there is a problem that you cannot handle tell me about it so we can look at it together. Acting like that is a place of trust.

(Interview, Day 23)

From the first moment I met this CPP, I noticed how he talked about 'the client' as a singular unit: not the child or the parent as separate entities but as if they were both one. This CPP has given presentations at various European conferences over the years about this approach and has always stood by his argument that a professional cannot support the child without considering the needs of the parent. This information contradicts that found by Hetherington (1998) who argued that the Flemish were clear that their only client was the child. But the CPP is not alone in his approach, it is a philosophy that the VK agency as a whole believes in and supports. In this extract, this CPP explains to me that the way he meets the needs of the parent is through developing a relationship with them. Marneffe (1996), a Flemish academic and child protection professional who has worked for one of the VK agencies, has argued that the best interest of the child is also linked to the best interests of the parent (1996: 380). By focusing solely on the child, as we tend to do in the UK (see White, 1997), Marneffe proposes that it is inevitable in this approach that the parent will be excluded.

The CPP in this extract does recognise that there is still an element of control in the relationship between VK and the parent for in most instances the parents have agreed to work with the VK so as to avoid facing the Judge and possibly losing their child to the care system. Nonetheless, once this point is discussed and clarified at the initial meeting, the primary aim of this CPP is to then concentrate on understanding how the parents function. This can only happen if the parents feel comfortable, safe and trust the professional they work with; a professional who believes in them and whom they can believe in. Once a trusting relationship is developed then the idea is that both the professional and the parent can start working together to meet the needs of the child.

The next extract shows part of a conversation between another Flemish CPP, a parent and me:

J: How long have you been coming here?

Mother: I have been coming here and seeing (name of CPP) for 25 years.

CPP: We were involved because of sexual abuse. Three of her children were under the juvenile judge. It's a kind of complex story. Her husband was sexually abusing their children...she (mother) made a video hearing and he was put in jail. (To the mother) But tell her why you are still coming here.

Mother: (both CPP and mother laugh) No you tell her.

CPP: Well at that time I started a group of mothers and she was alone and it was very impressive that she had a huge story and I was a rather young social worker and I didn't dare to comment on things because I had a normal life, (turning to mother) yet you had survived life and I felt "Who am I really?" I had seen mothers struggling with their issues so I decided with (CPP names the Director of the centre) to build up a group to come together rather than them talk individually to someone who didn't know what they had been through and I thought we could learn from each other. Well it was amazing, the group ran for ten years and we met once a month and you know something, they never missed a session, not one. And she (pointing to the mother) was one of the leaders of the group (the mother laughs) and they all really helped each other. For me what was impressive was how there was this group of mothers who were the leaders. I was just a witness; they were the ones who decided how the group would run. They also organised a group for their children who had been sexually abused to meet. So the mothers were in one group and their children in another.

Mother: I was a lonely child and I couldn't socialise very well but in this group I became socially aware and wanted to help others, especially disabled people....coming here has always played an important part in my life. I feel relief after I have visited.

(Observation, Day 18)

I asked the first question because when I first met this parent it was fairly obvious that she was quite a lot older than the other parents who visited the centre. Her children have now grown up, and one of her children has a child of her own. However, when this VK agency first became involved it was after it had emerged that the children had been sexually abused by their father. This mother had had previous involvement with the child protection system so when she met this CPP she was

unsure of how the VK agency would respond to her or whether they would be able to support her effectively.

This CPP admits she had not long been qualified when they first met. She was aware that she had little understanding of how mothers may feel when their children had been sexually abused and what they had to do to overcome problems of their own to ensure the safety of their children. This CPP was particularly impressed by the strength of this particular mother and so, with her support and the agreement of the Director of the agency, they formed a support group for other mothers in similar positions. This CPP was then able to learn how other women in this position felt about what had happened to them and their children. Although she was part of their group, she did not approach the meeting as an insider, but an outsider, someone who was able to learn about what had happened to them by listening to their stories. She contextualised her lack of experience, 'who am I really?' by prioritising their positions as 'parents whose children have been sexually abused' above her professional status and theoretical learning and understanding.

Although this CPP arranged the group, she wanted the mothers to lead it. As a result it provided her with a unique insight, a kind of understanding that she would never have experienced had she have led the group herself and imparted her knowledge upon them. It also gave a distinct meaning to this mother, and others who were in a similar position to her, for she was not left to feel isolated because of what the father of her children had done to them. Instead she was able to meet others in a similar position to herself, mothers who might understand what she had been through. And so as not to detract from the needs of the mothers, another group for their children was established so that the children could develop a similar network to that of their parents.

The relationship between this mother and the CPP did not end after ten years, when this group, for some reason or other, ceased to continue. This mother, now in her 60s, still returns to the centre to meet with this CPP. Everyone at the centre knows her, she feels part of this VK agency, and she also feels it is part of her. The support that she received from them began when the CPPs learned her children were being sexually abused, but it did not end once the father was jailed, it has continued to support her for the next 25 years. The relationship that has developed between this CPP and this mother can be witnessed in parts of this interview. They hold a deep respect for one another. When they converse, they fill in for one other, like good friends do, friends who have shared a journey and have come to know the other's life story so well.

If our identity is constructed out of 'the discourses made culturally available to us' and which we draw from when building relationships with other people, then it is evident that this mother is the end product of the various discourses to emerge from this VK agency (Burr, 2003: 106). This extract presents a distinct contrast to the practice I, and the Fenton department, have experienced in England. A setting which lacks empathy and understanding for the parent and where 'the absence of critical scrutiny is amplified because the idea of child centred, early intervention carries such an overwhelming, a priori correctness', which make it difficult to disagree that the child's needs must always come first (Featherstone et al. 2013: 3).

Yet the mother in this extract, despite previous mistakes and prior involvement with the system has not had her reputation tainted; she has been able to turn her life around after she was given an opportunity to be a mother for a second time. In return this mother has taught this CPP what being the mother of an abused child is like. This two way encounter has formed a strong and lasting relationship; it is

an example of what 'partnership working', a term we like to promote in the UK, actually looks like. This extract also serves to show that although Roose et al. (2009) found the voices of service users were not well presented in Flemish reports, in this dialogue we learn that this mother was encouraged to use her voice to share her experience with others.

J: Do they have to sign anything that shows they agree to work with you?

CPP: No and I am happy that we don't do that at the moment but it will come in Belgium soon because when you have a family who is in crisis we know that some services start with that, 'sign here to show us you want to work with us that you know what that means and that there's a possibility to put a complaint in about our service' and the families have to read it and sign it. But I don't think it's a good idea when you are working with families in child protection. You can do this along the way but not 'Come in, sit down, read this, do you agree? Then sign it'. I don't work like that. But no they don't have to sign anything. But there is growing pressure from France that we work like that. And it's in fact to protect yourself so that you can prove to the family that you did that and that you can keep a file about them. That they know that you have a professional secret about them.

(Interview, Day 3).

In the Fenton department we rely heavily on working agreements. These pieces of paper are not legally binding, in fact when I am on duty, the police often moan to me that 'they are not worth the paper they are written on'. But despite their lack of explicit legal strength, implicitly they carry a lot of levy, for we tend to use them as a way of clarifying what it is we want parents to do and use it as a tool to start legal proceedings if the parents do not stick to the written agreement.

The VK agencies on the other hand actively refrain from using this approach. Although they recognise that there will be pressure to implement this formal procedure in the future, they see this form of practice as a mechanism to control families not work in partnership with them. They also believe that this way of

working only serves one purpose- to protect professionals and not the children whom they should be trying to safeguard.

4.1.7 Summary

This section has seen how the attitudes and opinions of society can affect the culture child protection professionals find themselves located within. I have asserted that, as a result of certain expectations social workers in England have become stigmatised by events that have occurred throughout the trajectory of their profession. This stigmatisation has altered the way that social work practice in England is performed and affected the discourse which social workers draw from. It has also had a significant impact on who is ultimately our client; although conspicuously we are seen as seeking to serve the child and the family, I contend that inconspicuously we are acting to appease society's expectations.

In Flanders however we see a different approach carried out towards families by professionals and as a result we can see how the media and society view their child protection professionals differently. By trying to build a relationship with parents based on trust and respect, not suspicion, CPPs then aim to meet the needs of the child. They hold a strong and reliable reputation within Flemish society and in cases where tragedies have occurred and they find they are criticised, it is not because society is aiming to find someone accountable so that they can be blamed for what has happened but because they want to understand the *process* that led up to the event occurring in the first place. Although the process of the statutory inquiries in the UK also aims to achieve this in order to learn from mistakes, the Flemish are aware that this doesn't actually happen, as a search for a scapegoat often ensues. At present, there is no specific law or policy or set of procedures in Flanders, therefore

child protection professionals simply work from a collective philosophy, derived from Kempe's (see Kempe et al. 1985) theory of child abuse. Their aim is to create a two way relationship with the parent for the sake of the child; one in which the professional can learn from the parent, one that doesn't focus just on the parent learning from the professional.

4.2. The role the media plays

Media refers to a form of communication that is transmitted by either the written or spoken word to a large audience. It includes the newspapers, television, advertising, movies, the internet, magazines and so on. The media is a significant force within western culture and a number of sociologists refer to contemporary life today as that of a mediated culture where the media reflects what it thinks the public is thinking and consequently creates a culture which they are a part of (Lister et al. 2008).

The messages that the media sends out does not only affect moods and attitudes but it also promotes a way of thinking, by constructing for the public what is important and what is not. In the absence of a certain party, such as a social worker, the media can take centre stage and create a moral panic³² which not only influences the way the public think but impacts on the way the Government and other agencies behave; altogether it can also have a huge impact on the identity of the professional (see Cohen, 1972). In the following section, we will see how child protection professionals, in England and Flanders, view the media and how they feel it affects their practice and their identity.

³² The term moral panic has been widely adopted both by the mass media and in everyday usage to refer to the exaggerated social reaction caused by the activities of particular groups and/or individuals. Such activities are invariably seen (at the time at least) as major social concerns and the media led reaction magnifies and widens the 'panic' surrounding them (Cohen, 1972).



4.2.1 Hindsight is a wonderful thing (England)

..it annoys me the way the media responds to the profession because to a large extent we do society's dirty work, and actually if you're not prepared to come and do this yourself, if you're not prepared to stand where I am standing then maybe you don't have a lot of room to criticise and say 'they should have done this and they should have done that'. Hindsight is a wonderful thing.

(Interview with social worker, Day 17)

In her ethnographic study into child abuse procedures and social work practice, Wise (1988) found that having the benefit of hindsight provided agencies who were examining the practice of those who were involved *after* the death of the child with an advantage. Social workers, on the other hand, were not afforded the luxury of this position as they had to deal with the uncertain facts of life whilst the child was still alive. This argument mirrors the point made by the social worker in this extract.

Here this social worker once again refers to society being the client, rather than the child, and positions herself in the role of cleaner, the one who cleans up the 'dirty work' on behalf of her client. Her work, however, goes unappreciated by those who are happy to make comments, influence opinions and criticise the work of another. When the media criticise social work practice and print what they think should have been done, from their position with more information than the social worker had at the time, it does nothing but hinder the profession as it encourages social workers to adopt a defensive position as we will see from the next extract.



4.2.2 Covering your arse (England)

J: How do you manage that risk?

SW: There is a gap between where the media think you should intervene and where the courts think you should intervene and I think operating in that gap is the most difficult bit because you know you are operating with a level of risk and a lot of that is about case recording, covering your arse and knowing that if you wait long enough this will end up in proceedings. It's not there yet but it will be but you need to know that if something happens in the meantime your arse is covered.

J: What do you mean by covering your arse?

SW1: (Laughs) You know what I mean! We all do it. Writing up every little thing we have done, not taking the responsibility for decisions we don't agree with, not being hung out to dry if the shit hits the fan.

(Interview, Day 17)

Munro (2011) observed this form of defensive practice and recommended that it ceased, a point that I completely agree with, but one that I argue cannot stop unless something in society changes. In this context, this social worker clarifies my argument by demonstrating that social workers always work within 'a gap', one that defines the parameters of their practice. This social worker is aware that leaving children with certain families is a decision she has to live with and is fully aware that she could be blamed for it if it was deemed to be a mistake at a later date. She is also mindful that it is the Judge, the one who actually authorises whether a child should be accommodated or not, who often feels differently for whatever reason but is in a fortunate position where his/her decision is never attacked or condemned.

Ayre (2001) argued that social workers lost confidence in the making of their own decisions as they became so wrapped up in following procedures and more concerned with protecting the system than protecting their own client. I agree with Ayre to a certain extent, but in this context, what we see here is that the social worker does not follow procedures to protect the system but to protect herself should she

one day find that she is the subject of unwanted media attention. This is not an isolated behaviour; it is a character defect that we are all guilty of, and as she reminds me, 'covering your arse' is not something we are ashamed of: it is an action we all recommend is carried out within the Fenton department, to each other and to all the new members, be that social worker or student.



4.2.3 From 'behind closed doors' (England)

The media, they don't talk to social workers, people don't know what we actually do. They could help us a bit more than they do at the moment and I think that hinders us greatly.

(Interview with social worker, Day 17).

We are not allowed to talk are we? That's the big one so it looks like it all goes on behind closed doors, cloak and dagger, like we have something to hide, whereas if it was more open and honest and we could speak our mind then I think we would be viewed differently.

(Interview with social worker, Day 3).

The issue of being the silent party, the unheard voice, yet the epicentre of a situation, is a topic which often arises in discussions within the Fenton department. In the past Wise (1988: 47) has also queried why those who were involved in a case, who she refers to as the 'insiders', were the silent voices in the process with the 'outsiders' being the only voices permitted to speak. In this context, both social workers believe that remaining silent for a confidential reason does little to help the profession and just leaves the media with an empty canvas. Both social workers consider this to be a weakness of our profession as it is because of this silence, this absence, from professionals directly involved in child abuse tragedies that the other side of the story

is never accounted for. But talking to the press should not be reserved until after a child abuse tragedy has occurred, communication could be established as part of everyday practice. Although the College of Social Work³³ has become a representative voice on behalf of the profession of social work in terms of media, these social workers want to be able to personally build a rapport with the media and invite them in to their world in an overt way. Reporters would then be able to see what is going on behind closed doors, and might, perhaps, think differently about our practice. This is the way, as we shall see shortly, child protection professionals in Flanders behave and respond to the media.



4.2.4 Our papers are not as extreme as your tabloids (Flanders)

J: So the media, would they ever hear about this?

CPP: Yes of course.

J: How would they respond?

CPP: Like in England but our papers are not as extreme as your tabloids.

(Interview, Day 3).

This extract is part of the same conversation I had with the Flemish CPP who was involved in the case with the six month old baby who was assaulted by his drunken father (see section 4.1.2). In this part I am curious as to how the media would respond if the father returned and the baby was assaulted once more but the next time was seriously injured or died. Despite thorough analysis of the data collected from

³³ In 2008, the government commissioned the Social Work Task Force to conduct a thorough review of social work in England. The government recognised the importance of these recommendations and, as a result, provided start-up funding to enable the development of The College of Social Work.

Flanders, there is little reference made by these child protection professionals in relation to the media. I have noticed that in some extracts, even when I instigate the discussion and encourage the thread of conversation to involve the media, there is little elaboration on the part of the professional on this topic. This lack of data indicates that there is a distinct difference, for in contrast to the UK, the role of the media plays a relatively small part in how the culture of the Flemish child protection system functions.

J: And that baby that you are talking about, were you involved?

CPP: Yes we were. A few years ago there was also here in another region of Flanders there was another child who died. It was because of parents with drug issues. I think the child died from neglect. We knew about the situation but there was already help at the home. There were two services, us and another. But it still happened.

J: So in a case like that how did the public respond? Was it in the papers?

CPP: Yes it was and there were a lot of reactions in the paper. They say mostly 'Kind en Gezin were there, they were involved so they must be harder, we have to do more'. But when they know that you use a reliable instrument to work with the family, when we tell them that we use this to recognise signals with the family you get a different response, they say 'No, it is not necessary'.

J: So you do have to deal with the media then?

CPP: Yes but we are still respected by them. It does not happen often and we are able to talk to the media about the case, we have a publication in the papers. We also have information in the papers about how we progress annually. We also have all this information on our website³⁴. But our main reason for doing this is so that families know that Kind en Gezin is there for everyone, it shows how we are involved with every family so there is no difference between anyone. There is no stigma to use it, it is like school, for everyone. We do have a media representative and she has to read everything in the papers and she has to react or give information to the newspapers. For example on the 25th of November it was the Day Against Violence for Women. So I wrote something on the website and she addressed it with the papers.

(Interview, Day 13).

This interview extract demonstrates that the CPPs in Flanders do still have to respond to media pressure when a child abuse tragedy makes the headlines. They also appear

³⁴ Reports are accessible in different languages- they include demographic information and perspective on changing cultural situations

to face the kind of situation which is often referred to in the UK social work discourse as 'you are damned if you do, damned if you don't', a dilemma first recognised by Dingwall et al. (1983) and which succinctly describes the quandary social workers often find themselves in when making decisions about how, or if, to intervene into the private lives of families where they face criticism for not doing enough or doing too much. Yet there is a difference between the UK and Flanders in the way this is handled.

Rather than this CPP feeling stigmatised by her professional status, she instead believes that she, her colleagues and her agency are still respected by the media. The agency she works for is not silenced by confidentiality, even though they are very aware of professional secrecy, instead they are proactive and talk to the media through their organisation's spokesperson and they are able to give their side of what happened, explain the position they took and the reasons why. As a result, the 'special discrepancy between virtual and actual social identity', that leads to stigma (Goffman, 1963:12), does not exist in this scenario. For these child protection professionals are able to record information about the work they have carried out with families on their website. Instead of 'being' stigmatised by the media their main aim is to *not* stigmatise families; they do this by making the information they hold accessible for everyone to see.

4.2.5 Summary

In this section we see how social workers in England once again refer to society as their client as they attempt to navigate the treacherous terrain between the needs of the court and the needs of society. By not being able to speak out when a story breaks, their absence is noticeable, but it is a gap which is easily filled by the media. With no

one present to defend the profession, or the professional, the media is able to take centre stage and create sensationalist stories that lead to episodes of moral panic. This form of reportage has, subsequently, had a negative impact on the social worker as they, in turn, start to adopt defensive behaviours, ones which are, are promoted as common cultural practice and used to protect themselves should they, one day, find they are in the limelight.

In contrast, the Flemish CPPs rarely talk about the media in their interviews and as a result the media appears to have little impact upon their practice. There are instances when these CPPs have had to respond to media coverage about child abuse tragedies but they are not demonised or stigmatised as the social workers in England are. Instead they are provided with the time and space to explain their position, to clarify the actions they have taken in a way that demonstrates that their voices are heard, are valued and are respected. They show how their practice can take place *without* being defensive as there is no need for these professionals to protect themselves from the media. Instead their main aim is to not isolate families who they hope will still be able to access their service and trust in the support they seek to provide.

Burr (2003: 109) often talks about there being an array of diverse circulating discourses, each presenting an alternative vision of what identity means for certain people. In this situation, we can see from the data how two dissimilar discourses have emerged around child protection settings in two different countries. These prevailing discourses produce entirely different professional identities for the child protection professionals working within each realm, 'a realm where people swim in a sea of language and other signs'.

The defensive behaviours I have referred to above in relation to the English professionals are, as we shall see, not primarily reserved for the social worker. In the next section we will see how the UK Government also finds it needs to defend itself when a child abuse tragedy hits the news and the media demand immediate action is taken.

4.3. The role the Government plays

In the UK the Government really plays three roles within social work: funding the local authority where the statutory social worker practises, creating legislation and policies to shape practice and finally, responding to the public when an issue with one of its agencies has been raised (see section 1.2). Normally this is done within the formal context of an inquiry but sometimes it can be done less formally by discussing future plans with the media. In this context, I begin by considering the latter and the impact our leading body can have on social work practice, and social workers within the Fenton department.



4.3.1 Mr Macho and his Kangaroo Courting (England)

I open this section with this extract which is from a conversation with a social worker who had just been telling me how he thought it was fair that senior managers in child protection were considered just as vulnerable as the frontline social worker, when it came to finding a scapegoat.

J: What you mean like Sharon Shoesmith?

SW: The way that was dealt with was just appalling in terms of kangaroo courting that was just bad. I mean if you are saying that somebody is incompetent and that she didn't do her job properly then that should be done in due process, you shouldn't just, well Ed Balls, Mr Macho, look at me protecting all the kiddies, oh look at me 'I will save the babies, I will get her out', that was just wrong.

(Interview, Day 23).

However, when I gave the name of the Director from Haringey Services who was infamously identified and blamed for the death of Baby Peter, this social worker recognises that no matter who it is, it is unjust the way the Government respond to media pressure in such a way. For the belief within the Fenton Department is that the Government should not just be responsible for protecting children as it does not just have a duty towards society. It is also accountable for its employees; in this context the social workers who are employed to do a job on behalf of the Government.

A kangaroo court is used here to describe a mock court in which the principles of law and justice are disregarded or perverted (Merriam- Webster Dictionary, 2012). This social worker uses the term here to describe the way Ed Balls (Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, 2007-2010) jumped the formal rules after he found himself under pressure from the public and the media. Ed Balls argued that he was placed in a position where he felt it was his duty to protect children. He dealt with the issue by calling for the dismissal of Haringey's Children's Services Director. However, Sharon Shoesmith only found out she had been sacked from her job when she turned on the television and heard about it on the news (Sky News, 2010).



4.3.2 We are 'insignificant'. (England)

...the difficulty is if you don't speak to workers and understand why they are doing a certain thing and what their perspective is on that certain thing then you are going to treat them as insignificant.

(Interview with social worker, Day 5)

This social worker is talking about the Government with particular reference to the way it responds to the Children's Social Care department. When a tragedy strikes and the media become involved the Government have a duty to respond and explain what has happened and why. But, unfortunately, in recent years it has been more focused on finding out who can be blamed for the situation rather than finding out what might be done differently next time (see Ayre, 2001; Edwards and Soetenhorts, 1994; Ferguson, 2011; Reder et al. 1993; Wise, 1988).

Stanford (2010) blames these actions on the Government's incentives to change a country's economical situation by focusing predominantly on welfare; therefore need has become replaced by professional failure as society operates in response to a growing fear of risk. This kind of behaviour has a direct impact on child protection practitioners; in this instance the social worker indirectly refers to herself as 'insignificant'. If social workers feel insignificant and devalued by their governing body, then this event is likely to have a cumulative effect and trigger other events. As I asserted earlier in this chapter, when professionals are blamed and devalorised for the job that they do, it not only 'saps morale' but it also leads to the promotion and execution of defensive practice. It also shows that when social workers find they are being stigmatised it alters their perception of who the client actually is.



4.3.3 The grassroots of the organisation (Flanders).

In Flanders however, up until recently, the impact the Government has had on the way in which Flemish CPPs work for the VK and Kind en Gezin agencies is relatively small as this lengthy extract explains:

J:What is the law that underpins your work here?

CPP: (Laughs) Good question. We have no, well for the moment, in Belgium it is very complex....so you have a federal level and in the Flanders region you have a Flemish Government as well. You have the law on the Federal level and you have decrees on the Regional level. And a decree in Flanders has the same value as a law in the Federal side so that is the highest instrument to regulate something but about the confidential centres (VK agencies) there is no law or decree to regulate them up until now. But you have a parliament and a chamber of representatives of the people and you have a Government appointed by those people and the Government, the ministers and the Prime Minister all in all, including the Federal we have 7 kinds of Governments. They can all make decisions with the Flemish Government and it is the Flemish Government who has decided that there are confidential centres and those decisions are updated over the past two or three decades. In the near future there will be a decree regulating everything about youth care. It will be called 'Integrated Youth Care'.

J: So that is the name of the legislation?

CPP: Yes it exists already but it was decree of ten years ago and there will be a new decree and in that there is a new part about the confidential centres. It will say two things it will give us our tasks, I think there are four; the fourth one is the new rule about assessing whether there is a social exigency in the need for care.

J: That's fascinating that you have operated so long without one, isn't it?

CPP: Yes. But I think that is the grassroots of the organisation I think.

J: Oh yes, I m not saying it is a bad thing at all. It's interesting that it is coming now as it will be interesting to see what happens afterwards.

(Interview, Day 21).

As we can see from this extract in the 25 years that VK has been operating they have done so without any specific law underpinning their practice and their duties. This doctoral study, therefore, was undertaken at a turning point, a pivotal point for Flemish child protection practice. For up until now, the VK agencies have simply

worked from their *own* philosophy of how to handle cases of child abuse and they have developed the way they work over the years they have practised. These times have not been without conflict, as we saw earlier on in this chapter, but whenever disagreements between other agencies have occurred, the Government has not felt the need to intervene or take over. The agency has been left to resolve such issues by itself which is interesting given what the next CPP has to tell me.

J: So there is something new in the pipeline that is coming your way?

CPP: Yes. But normally the Dekret would be ok at the end of 2010. They put it through Raat von Staaten which is the highest legal level in Belgium and how would you translate that? The highest court that takes care of the lower laws, the basic law, the constitution of Belgium that everything is alright. The new law then cannot contradict the constitutional law. So they passed the Dekret in 2010 but the Raat Von Staaten said 'No it's not right, you need to do all your homework again'.

J: Right ok. But that's good for you if you're not in agreement with it.

CPP: Well it's good but not so good. The Dekret was good because it has more protection for the people who work in the confidential centres. On the other hand they were a little too severe about some points. That people are in agreement with you and they have to sign to show they agree with you. So it's double. Another problem with Dekret is that we are part of Kind en Gezin, child and family, and the Dekret was for child and family as a whole and the Confidential Centre was just a part of it. And also that was a problem. Because we think we need a Dekret just for the confidential centres. And not for the all [everyone]. Because what we do is too specific. We are the only service that goes to families and says 'We want to talk with you and if we can't talk with you then maybe we go to the court or to the police'. No other social services does this.

(Interview, Day 21).

In this extract where I am, again, trying to understand the way the law works in Flanders, we learn that the VK agency is the only agency which has the power, in cases of child abuse, to refer parents to the police or the Judge if they do not engage with their service. This has been, despite their reluctance to refer to it as such, their lever of control with families. It is the same one we hold in England. The Children Act (1989) states that if a family does not engage with a statutory authority we have the potential to go to court to demand an assessment order which will then enable us to

assess the child and their family. However, the difference in this situation is that in Flanders there has been no law in place to define this, simply a verbal agreement. Parents apparently know that this can happen, Flemish child protection professionals know that this is an option they can use, and clearly the police and the Judge are also aware of this way of working.

Yet the reason a new law is now being devised and implemented, one which will include the work of the VK agency, is not because there have been any issues in relation to safeguarding but because of the relatively new discourse circulating within the European Union, one that relates to the consideration of data protection.

J: So where is this pressure coming from?

CPP: The Government

J: Right. So why is the Government feeling the need to do that?

CPP: I think that what has changed in our work was the privacy legislation and I think it comes from Europe and that they ask to social services that they take more care about these issues about privacy with people. It's ok when you work in a hospital and other services. But when you work in investigation about maltreatment it's not so easy to fulfill because in fact our client is a child and this child has no voice in what is happening. And you have to protect this child. You have to take care of this child. And you can't always go to these parents and ask about or talk with them about child protection or the safety of the child without bringing the child into danger. So sometimes you have to work with cases where you don't inform the family but you are in contact with other people, other professionals, who keep the secret, for example a doctor. But because of privacy you can't do that because you are working together about a family you don't know that you are doing this. It's a discussion between the confidential centre and the Government about what are rights are as a service to do this work or not.

J: Right

CPP: Because most of the time our workers are breaking the law. Because there is no legal framework that protects us.

J: So are you saying there is no legal act out there that underpins what you do?

CPP: No. Not one that is clear enough.

(Interview, Day 3).

In England, the Data Protection Act has been in place since 1998 - a difference of almost 15 years. I am not suggesting or inferring that this means the Flemish are behind with the way they function, rather the opposite. It has taken Flanders 15 years

to deliberate and discuss whether this kind of law is needed for the child protection service- an issue this CPP clearly does not agree with because he believes that the safety of the child will be jeopardised as a result.

In the Fenton department, there has been a recent mandate that has instructed professionals to watch films, take online tests, and read a number of data protection updates about the dangers of leaking private information to the wrong party. This is most probably due to the amount of times the department has been sued and has had to compensate injured parties for the mistakes made by social workers that have included for example, sending child protection files to the wrong family or misplacing information in public. It is unclear whether this recent interest in professional secrecy is also the main motive behind the Flemish Government's actions but what is of interest, and is, I believe, an important point, is that this new legislation has not been created because the Government believes the VK agency is inadequate or in need of guidance when it comes to child protection issues. For unlike the Children Act (1989) which was created following the Cleveland Inquiry, the Integrated Youth Care law aims to define and protect the work that the VK agency does for matters of professional secrecy. And another important point raised in this extract is that from what this CPP says, this new law is being devised *in consultation* with the VK agency.



4.3.4 We have built up some kind of expertise that is recognised by society.

This next lengthy but detailed extract provides some crucial yet also valuable information with regards to how the VK centre began:

CPP: Have you been told about the Battered Child Commission?

J: No

CPP: Well that was the beginning of this agency. That was in the University hospital and Henry Kempe, you know him?

J: Yes

CPP: His article said that it was better that the service was reinvented to create that new knowledge. So the University picked up on this and in Leuven, Professor Eggermont- that is our founding father- he picked up the idea and he formed the Battered Child Commission where you had doctors and nurses coming together to discuss children who had bruises and stuff like that that were not normal or non accidental. That was the very beginning and the same thing was occurring in Antwerp and in Brussels. From those initiatives people came together and were doing some policy practice working on people in the Government saying 'we need something on child abuse and neglect we need to make a centre' and that was the making of the confidential centre and so it came from bottom up and not from the clients but practitioners who found there was a need for this kind of centre and now thirty years later there is a big discussion, it has worked all the time, these centres have built up some kind of expertise which is recognised by our society. Those centres for thirty years have been left alone but have created a movement against violence against women and everybody developed respect for that. We also had the Dutroux affair which reinforced our centres and now we have a whole lot of issues with abuse in the church so again reinforcement for everything that is to do with child abuse and neglect and so we have been left alone and nowadays we see a new movement from Government and policy makers which are regulating more and more and more. They are not only regulating money flows but also regulating what needs to happen there.

(Interview, Day 21).

In 1962, Dr. Henry Kempe and his colleagues from the USA, identified and recognised child abuse in a defining paper entitled 'The Battered Child Syndrome'. In 1976 Professor Eggermont who was from Flanders, Belgium, and based at the University Hospital Gasthuisberg subsequently set up the Battered Child Commission so when this CPP refers to the organisation as originating from the grassroots, he does not mean the idea for VK came from the clients but from the medical professionals who worked at the hospital. The idea therefore originated from a medical model of child abuse and was, therefore, not created by the Government's idea of what a welfare system should look like but was instead supported by it financially.

Kind en gezin (child and family) recognised the importance of the VK agency and agreed to fund it via the budget it received from the Government which is why VK is so closely linked to Kind en gezin and not the Government. VK is not therefore a statutory agency although it has the same powers as a statutory social service department in the UK does. Up until recently, they have had the freedom to operate without Government regulation for many years. This has enabled them to fight for different causes and, as a result of making the public aware of these different societal issues, they have been able to develop and build upon an admirable reputation.

So when scandals have hit the press, such as the Dutroux affair or the sexual abuse within the catholic church, the public are not looking to blame the agency, as Hetherington et al. (1997) (see section 2.7) thought they might do following their experience of what happened post-Cleveland Inquiry in the UK, but are instead persuaded that there is a need for an agency such as VK.

4.3.5 Summary

Although the Government may be seen as a distant dictator for some of the social workers within the Fenton department, it is evident that the impact it has had is much more powerful than some have had the time to consider. In this section, we have seen how, when under pressure from the public and the media, the UK Government panics and responds hastily by taking on the role of 'Mr. Macho' and seeking to swiftly transfer unwanted attention onto an individual professional. Rather than protect their public sectors, the Government immediately assumes an error has been made by the child protection social work department and without pausing creates a political distance between 'them' and 'us'. The data shows that this 'charlatan professional activity' which is 'thought to be legitimate by some audiences

in our society' has a detrimental impact on the social worker, as it leaves them feeling devalued, insignificant and at risk (Goffman, 1959: 71). And it also serves to develop my assertion that social workers are stigmatised as professionals.

In Flanders however, we see the Government play an entirely different role. Although they recognised some 25 years ago that there was a need for a specialist agency such as VK, they did not interfere with its inauguration and instead left it to the medical profession to develop and advance the idea. The Government has felt no need to control the agency (up until now). This lack of regulation has provided professionals from VK with a creative licence to progress with their work in whichever way they want. As we have seen, from these extracts, this has had a positive impact on the way these professionals construct their identity as they talk of being revered, feeling like experts and being appreciated for the work that they do with families.

4.4 Discussion

This chapter has discussed the impact certain external agencies have had on the professionals who work within the domain of child protection work. It is evident that these agencies do not operate as separate entities and are not disconnected from front line practice. Despite their relative distance from the internal workings of child protection, their values and attitudes have managed to permeate the agencies and have, in turn, affected these professionals for they don't just *practise* social work, they *are* social work.

In England the collective behaviour of these external agencies has not only had a negative impact on the way social workers perceive themselves but it has also

distorted the way these practitioners construct their own professional identity. We have seen how social workers can create 'a collective identity' through 'routines' and 'linguistic practices' (White, 1997: 204) and how certain linguistic terms (such as 'do gooder') have altered their meaning when applied to the system of child protection social work (see Sausurre, 1974). I have asserted that social workers view themselves as social pariahs, for when they are not at work they do not fit neatly into society as some other professions do. Instead their professional and personal identities have become so intertwined, it is difficult to separate the two.

I have also contended, as a result, that there is a social stigma affixed to their identity, one which does indeed affect their practice. I have claimed that social workers no longer see their client, as previous researchers have depicted, as the child or the parent but, as society instead. Despite being labelled as professional failures, practitioners still continue to do their job in the face of adversity but do so by aiming to prioritise the needs of society within their practice. Although most social workers recognise that this is a futile task as the unrealistic demands of society are impractical to achieve, to overcome this issue and deal with the vulnerable position this then places them in, they promote and develop a defensive form of discourse, one which leads them to a defensive form of practice which involves 'covering your arse'. As we have seen, social workers are the unheard voices, silent and absent from the public arena; they are unable to challenge this flawed and corrupt system and so use it instead to protect themselves should they find that one day they are held accountable for the death of a child.

In Flanders however, as a result of the attitudes certain Flemish external agencies have, we are presented with an entirely different image of how child protection professionals in this context view themselves subjectively. Although their

system is not perfect and they do face criticism and are challenged when child abuse tragedies occur, they are not demonised for the actions they have taken but instead listened to and considered a requirement for tackling such thorny issues. These professionals feel revered by society, the media and their Government. The latter agency has demonstrated this, I believe, by allowing the VK agency to practise for so long without being regulated. Yet, rather interestingly, despite working without legislation, policy and procedures the agency's desire to meet the needs of their families does not appear to have diminished over the years. I have affirmed that they do still appear to be motivated by the work that they do and driven to do better for those they are there to support.

If, as Althusser (1971) suggests, ideology interpellates us into subjects then we can see from these extracts how the Flemish child protection professionals in this context have taken up these particular subject positions. The discourse that they draw from also invites parents and children to join in and accept or reject their preferred ideology. If they do accept it, then together they all become 'locked into the system of rights, speaking rights and obligations', statuses or positions that enable them to carry out the agency's philosophy (Burr, 2003:111).

Although all the agencies within this chapter are explored as separate entities, it is clear that they are all related and it is through their interaction with one another that depending on the context, the development of alternative reputations for child protection work has emerged. Although the media is often blamed as the main instigator in perpetuating blame onto social workers in the UK (see Reder et al. 1993; Ayre, 2010; Ferguson, 2011), I suggest that this is only because they are the most conspicuous with their criticism of the profession, for when a child abuse tragedy occurs all other agencies react just as vindictively but, as a result of alternative

motives, they do so in a more inconspicuous manner. The Flemish data has enabled us to see how the media can respond to child protection issues critically yet constructively and with less hostility. And the reason why they have been able to do so is because they are part of a society which draws from a social welfare discourse; one which promotes dialogue between agencies in order to increase the public's awareness of child abuse.

Chapter 5: The use of space and environment in child protection practice.

What strikes me is the fact that in our society, art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life. That art is something which is specialized or which is done by experts who are artists. But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life?

(Foucault in Rabinow, 1991: 350)

Although Foucault brought attention to the use of art in relation to people back in 1983, Pink (2007:28) 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'. By focusing on the material and sensory prompts, individuals are also more likely to talk about their self-identities and experiences.

By using photographs in this chapter, I relate these theories to this study and contextualise the everyday details of both settings, providing the reader with a visual dimension of what space and environment has embodied for me. I will discuss what my interpretations may then represent for the participants of this study and present a visible phenomena which will hopefully sharpen the senses of the reader (see Emmel and Clark, 2011) and provide a more detailed depiction of where this research actually took place. By comparing and contrasting these two child protection agencies, I aim to show how space and environment can impact on the identity of those who work in these settings as well as on those who visit them. If those who work in the setting are able to talk about the way they view their environment, then

as Kulick (1995) has argued it is more likely that the identities of other selves will emerge, for the self is only ever completed in relation to others. I will also argue that 'material conditions and social practices are inextricably bound up in discourse' (Burr, 2003: 118) for these images show how work environments can provide a backdrop which professionals can draw from when constructing their own identities.

5.1 Comparing and contrasting the child protection settings in Flanders and England.

In this picture (Figure 1) we see just a small part of one of the VK agencies I visited in Flanders. The agency actually only occupies the top floor of this building. The three floors below it belong to a school. As we can see this child protection site is not the most beautiful of locations. It is a grey and rather out dated establishment. The red bricked wall on the left side of this picture is the perimeter of a prison! Although being next to a



Figure 1: The Vertrouwencentrum Kindermishandling agency, Flanders.

prison was not, I was told, intentional, it is accepted that its positioning is still symbolic in that it encompasses what Flemish society believes in, the law and authority. The red brick wall to the right encloses a building site where flats are in the process of being erected. Yet despite the lack of architectural glamour, this snapshot is significant for a number of reasons. First of all, if we look closely at the top right hand corner, we can see a rather strange wooden object. This figure is known as

Golem. He is a significant symbol for this VK agency and I will, shortly, go into more detail about what he means and represents for parents, children and professionals (see discussion of figure 15 below).

Second of all, I feel this picture demonstrates rather well the reason why this VK agency chose these specific premises from all the possible settings in the town. The offices they occupy are situated on the top floor. Therefore parents and children who visit the agency have to come in through the same front doors as the children who attend the school. As a result, there is no clear distinction between those children who are visiting VK for issues of child abuse and those who are going to the school to be educated.

J: Why did you decide to base yourselves here?

CPP: When we were looking for somewhere, 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 people passing by don't know why they are coming here.

(Observations, Day 13).

The choice of this setting therefore was not coincidental; it was selected carefully and precisely because of its nature and its function, for there are not many establishments which would allow a child protection agency to blend in so well with its surroundings 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 has attempted to try and understand how children and their parents/carers may feel when visiting the VK. Furthermore by recognising that they may experience discomfort, they have tried to make what is undoubtedly a difficult experience for most families into an easier one. In contrast, the building where the Fenton



department is based, was chosen by senior managers of the department for very different reasons.



Figure 2. The Children's Social Care building, England.

Similar to that of the VK agency (figure 1) this establishment is also linked to education as it was once a former school. But the difference is that the school has since closed down and relocated; it is now solely occupied by the Fenton department. The building is made of red brick and is situated on only one level. It is surrounded by a very large car park. Although only part of it can be seen in this image it does actually extend around the side and the back of the building. One of the reasons this location was chosen for the Fenton department was because of its parking facilities. In England, a key part of social work practice involves visiting parents and children within their home. In Flanders however, visiting the homes of clients is carried out by the Kind en Gezin (child and family) agency and therefore, child protection professionals, rarely, if ever, visit their families at home.

At the front of the car park, 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 that is provided by the professionals within it. This is rather unfortunate for parents and children who visit the centre and who may not wish to be

identified by others as families known to children's services. This lack of contemplation, in relation to issues of 'social stigma' that have been so carefully pondered upon by the Flemish professionals, is not, I believe, as a result of maliciousness but from a form of pragmatic reasoning (see Goffman, 1963). By having a sign large enough for everyone to see, no client or other professional could miss it when trying to locate it for the first time.

Manager: This building was chosen by (Name). She wanted one building in which all social workers in (names 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.

(Observations, 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 in one setting. This would make it easier for teams to confer, share information and offer advice with one another. It may also have contributed to a form of collectivism for practitioners who would also benefit from being part of the same micro culture rather than being compelled to develop professionally as a team on a smaller scale due to being separated geographically.



Figure 3: The corridor, VK agency, Flanders.

When I first visited the VK agency and saw this part of the corridor (see

Figure 3), it surprised me that there would be such an austere clinical and unwelcoming hallway for visiting families at VK. Given the rhetoric which influences Flemish practice, I had thought that this area, the part where families are about to enter the offices of professionals, would have been better laid out. For the wooden boxes which resemble miniature coffins are spaced equally at different stages along the passageway appear macabre, the colour of the walls are grey and together with the cold, stone tiles on the floor they collectively present a bleak and depressing image of what may be in store for the visitor. But as soon as I started walking down this corridor, this initial view started to change.

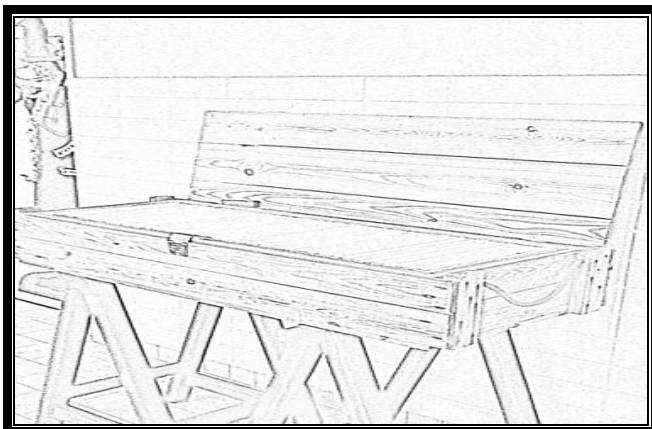
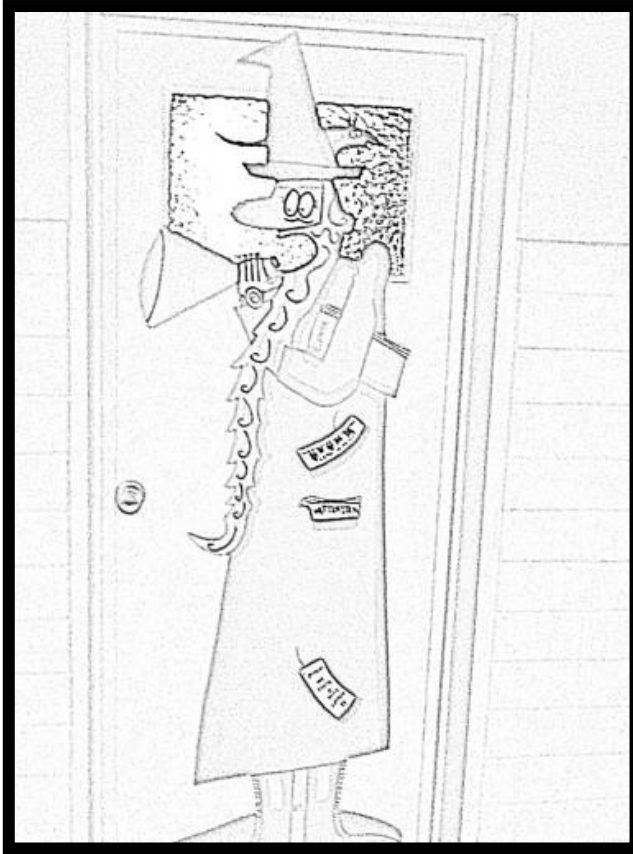


Figure 4: Wooden Box



I soon realised that these wooden boxes (figure 4) were symbolic and I noticed when I walked past the offices, that there was a different caricature (figure 5) affixed to each door which brought about a certain sense of radiance, humour and creativity.

Figure 5: Caricature, VK agency, Flanders.



This changed the landscape completely; a corridor which I had previously seen as austere and uninviting was now one which was welcoming and warm.

When this VK agency moved from using paper files to using the computer, they asked a local artist to compress all the case files they had into these specially made wooden boxes. When you look into the box you can see black, wiggly lines on the top of each file, these are the remnants of written words recorded by the professional about each of the families they have ever worked with. When families visit the VK agency for the first time and walk down this corridor, they are shown these boxes and reminded that they are not the first or the last family to have ever visited the confidential centre. The message being conveyed 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. This symbolic gesture has been prepared especially for visiting families to the VK agency by the professionals who

work there in order to make their visit more comfortable and less daunting or isolating.

As mentioned previously, each of the professionals working at VK agency have their own office. From this space they can do their work and meet with parents and/or children and other professionals. On each of their doors is a caricature which has been designed and painted specifically with their individual characteristics in mind. These exaggerated images add a little humour to what is a serious situation for most of the families who visit the centre. They also enable parents and children to see the professionals in a different light for they offer the visitor an impression, through a little gentle mockery, that the professional they are visiting is far from perfect. These caricatures acted perfectly as a kind of bookmark for those families who had to return to the centre, for once they knew which caricature they needed to look out for, it provided them with a landmark, or rather a meeting point, and they need never worry again about entering the wrong office.



Figure 6: The corridor, Fenton Department, England.



Here is one of the corridors in the Fenton department premises. All of the corridors look virtually the same as this one and surround a large office

(which is on the right hand side of this picture) which accommodates one of the area teams. The door on the left leads to the photocopying room. At the end of the corridor is another corridor that leads to some meeting rooms and at the end of that corridor is another office for social workers and support workers. I have walked up and down this passageway many times over the past four years and I have always enjoyed the way the light floods in from the skylights at the top of the building. I have also liked listening to the hubbub of practitioners talking to each other; a pleasant din that would stem from the office on the right. It was not until I returned from one of my trips to Flanders that I realised how little visual stimulation or symbolic representation there is of anything with particular meaning for families or for professionals. There are, admittedly, some pictures dotted around the corridors and these, I believe, came from IKEA. They are prints of flowers that have been used to add some colour the blank cream walls which dominate the interior of the building. But, in contrast to Flanders, there is nothing representative or creative for professionals or families to muse upon when visiting the building, nothing particularly ocular which might give meaning to the practitioners working there or make families feel more comfortable or welcome and rather less wary.



Figure 7: Social work office, Fenton Department, England.



There is an instant observable contrast between this office door for social work professionals and the previous one displayed above from Flanders (see figure 5) with a caricature affixed to it. This generic sign represents the two managers, six social workers and eight support workers who work behind this door (see figure 8). Not all of these social workers have their own desks, a few have to hot desk depending on the shifts they are working. We do not generally allow families to enter this office because of data protection issues. There are so many people working on different cases a family member could quite easily over hear the personal details of another case.



Figure 8: The social work office, Fenton department, England.



There is also the issue of privacy for the visiting child or parent. The room behind this door does not have any walls or partitions (apart from two glass offices in each corner where the managers are based). Therefore discrete conversations have to be held elsewhere in the building.

Social worker: The offices aren't the best designed. But you can overhear what others are talking about on the phone and see when they are getting stressed so we can offer them support when they need it, that's the way things are done here. But the manager can't hear that from their office so they don't always know what's going on.

(Observations, Day 62).

One benefit of having so many social workers together in one place is, as this social worker points out, that it can strengthen a group's identity. By being in one open space, everyone can hear what each other is talking about and how individuals are going about holding certain conversations. Althusser (1971) would argue that practitioners can listen to and then be interpellated by the circulating discourses within this office. This notion of positioning acknowledges the active way in which 'persons endeavour to locate themselves within particular discourses during social interactions'; in this situation, it can demonstrate just how a professional's identity can be constructed within this kind of micro culture (Burr, 2003:112).

The concept of positioning acknowledges both the power of culturally accessible discourses to frame our own experiences and restrain our behaviour whilst permitting a practitioner to connect with those discourses and use them in other professional circumstances (see Harre and Langenhove, 1999). However, within the Fenton department, this is not always a good thing. For when it comes to locating oneself in a certain position one must consider the hierarchy of the organisation and the structure of rights within the available discourses. These may, as we shall see in the next chapter, provide 'possibilities and limitations' for each practitioner as to what they may or may not do within each micro culture (Burr, 2003: 113).

In Flanders, on the other hand, all ten practitioners have their own offices. There is still opportunity, however, to develop a group identity as they meet each morning in this room to discuss new referrals. They also meet together at various points throughout the day, to conduct peer supervision sessions. It is here that they discuss their own cases and seek advice and support from their colleagues about how best to progress with some of the dilemmas they face.

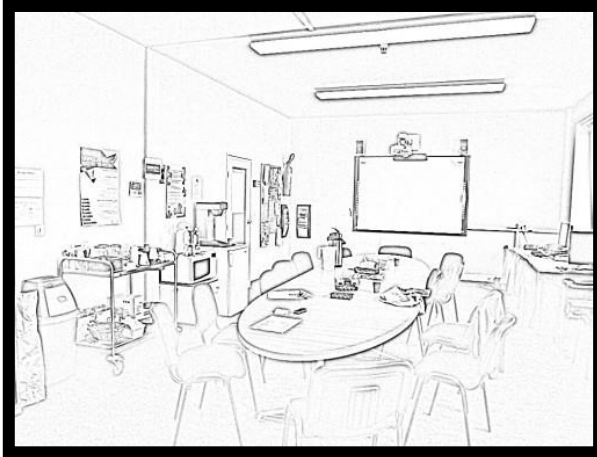


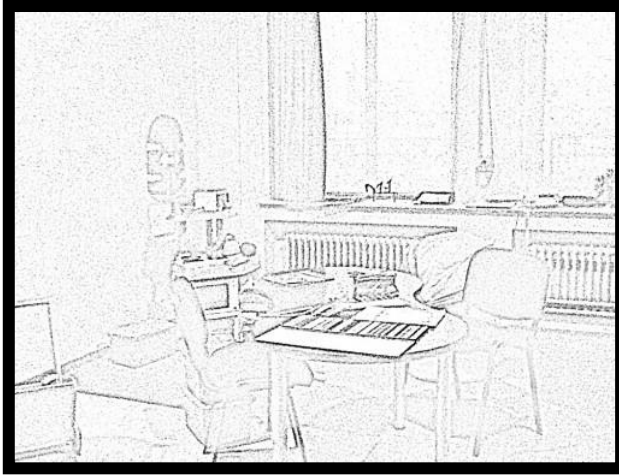
Figure 9: Staff meeting room, VK agency, Flanders.



When they do, they always start by drawing a genogram of the family so that those present can become instantly

familiar with the family's dynamics and structure. Each team group is made up of professionals from different professional backgrounds so there may be a social worker, pedagogue, psychiatrist, mental health nurse and psychologist present. The presenter begins by asking the group a question and together, drawing from the specialised knowledge and background of each professional, they offer their views and advice. On one of these occasions, we watched a video of a practitioner working with a child (filmed in the observation, therapy room, see figure 10) whose mother was in a domestic violent relationship. It was a deeply moving clip and it helped team members better understand the emotional turmoil the child was experiencing at that time.

Although there is one main philosophy for VK, the professional interactions that take place in this setting offer completely different subject positions for those participating. It also prevents practitioners from becoming firmly entrenched within just one professional discourse without them realising it. By drawing from various discourses they can recognise that there is the potential to view certain situations in alternative ways. As a result, practitioners are often provided with a variety of



strategies to choose from; strategies which can bring about change for families as well as resolve certain dilemmas that professionals might be facing.

Figure 10: Observation/ play therapy room, VK agency, Flanders. On the wall between the two windows is a camera which can film professionals interacting with children.



As practitioners in the Fenton department do not have their own office or space to meet with children and families (as they tend to visit families at home) on the occasions when parents or children do attend the office, they use meeting spaces such as the one shown in figure 11. These rooms are nicely decorated and there are plenty of toys available for children to play with as well as a few comfortable sofas. They are in a separate part of the building, the reception area. This area has been cordoned off for security reasons. Therefore, unless families have access to a fob they cannot enter the main offices where the social workers are based. There are also no hidden cameras to film professionals interacting with families in these rooms. In contrast to the Flemish approach, this part of social work, interacting with our families, is an element of practice which is rarely observed by our other colleagues or even our managers.



Figure 11: The play/ meeting room, Fenton department, England.



Using puppets during visits to children is a relatively new concept in social work practice, due to play therapy training courses, and is not one that all social workers in the Fenton department embrace. However, they have been known to be beneficial for communicating with children who are finding it difficult to express themselves. The idea of introducing puppets is to create a connection between practitioner and child in order for the child to use the puppets as a way of projecting their thoughts and feelings. This can help the professional learn about how the child may be feeling. As the social worker below explains, the puppets enable the practitioner to return to their own childhood then connect and communicate with the child on a level which they will understand. Although considered by some professionals as a valuable tool, it is a method that some view as bizarre, an identity trait that this social worker also agrees with as she refers to all child protection social workers as “a bit strange”.

Social worker:

Being child protection social workers makes us a little bit strange as we are the kind of people who believe hand puppets are real! We use them to talk to children. It's kind of an extension of being able to get on the child's level and carry that on in some ways I think but then I think other agencies think we are all a bit strange because of that and I think we are too.

(Observations, Day 63)



Figure 12: Hand puppets, England



Hand puppets are also common practice with the VK agency and in this next extract this child protection professional explains the different ways she uses her puppets in order to make connections with the family she is working with.

CPP: This is my favourite. I ask children and parents 'Which puppet would you choose?' Do you want to make a wish? Do you have a desire? And sometimes people feel a little bit uneasy and so I say 'What is your wish for your family?' and 'If this devil would speak to you or this baby or this Grandma what would they say?' Then if we can enlarge these heavy things that they feel and sometimes I can feel good things in parents and I begin to understand the traumas that they have of their own and we have a good place to start making changes within their own family....they got stuck somewhere and I need to understand where so we can move forward. I always look to make loops, a way of making a connection with the parent or the child.

(Observations, Day 13).



Figure 13: Hand puppets, Flanders.



However, as she points out in this instance, puppets are not just for the children but also for their parents. She later told me that parents do sometimes look at her strangely

when she asks them to choose a puppet but when they do choose one it does help them to open up and share difficult experiences. As a practitioner, this professional does not believe play therapy should be reserved for just the child but sees this as a way of building a relationship with the parent as well.

From all the different materials that the VK agency uses with their families, it was this box of unusual items that stood out for me the most. On first appearance it looks like an insignificant container, with little bits of rubbish inside. But the first time

I noticed it, I was instantly drawn to it and I couldn't stop wondering what the pieces of junk were for. When this CPP explained what the symbolic meaning and purpose of the box was, it instantly made sense to me and I realised that this little trinket was another, more personal way, of making a connection with a family, be that a parent or child, in order for them to be reassured that, once again, they were not alone. Sharing a secret, or moments from the past, is a difficult step for most families to take but is an action which is sensitively handled by the professionals from VK.



Figure 14: Box of unusual things, Flanders.



CPP: 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 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. They are instead asked to choose an item which will remind them of what it is they have just disclosed. This item also serves as a reminder that they are not alone and thus forges a link between the client and the professional. It begins to pave a new path for the client to follow; a path which can lead them to encounter an alternative discourse to the one they have been previously employed. It is through this other discourse that carers can 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 the VK 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 15: Golem, VK agency, Flanders.

(Picture removed due to copyright restrictions)

Returning to Golem. When the Director of the VK agency first came across Golem he knew that he had found a symbolic 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'. Like the frozen child, unable to talk about that which they have experienced, Golem appears unaffected and impassive too. However, just like the child Golem also has a heart which can be seen on this picture right underneath his chin. It is a hatch in his chest which when opened leads to his inner world.

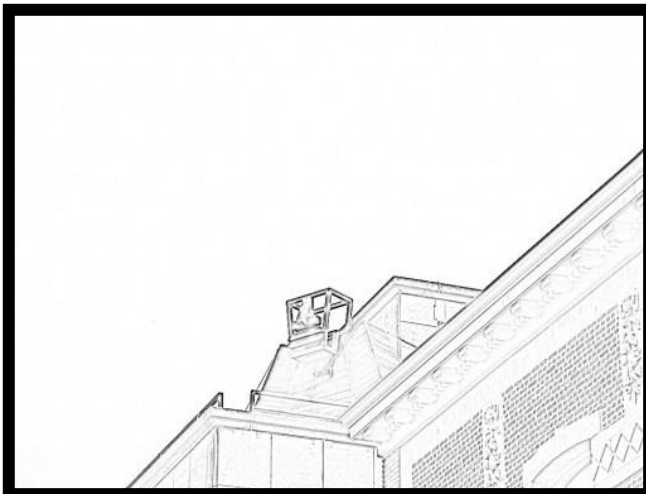


Figure 16: Golem, VK agency, Flanders.

Golem is now situated on top of the VK agency (see figure 16) and here he is able to make a connection with children on behalf of the professionals from the VK agency. Those who are 'frozen' by that which they have experienced are encouraged to go on to the flat roof and meet the gentle giant. There are steps which take them to the hatch which leads to his heart and here they can post whatever they like: drawings, notes or letters sealed in envelopes.

Whatever they do post, they have the comfort in knowing that only Golem knows their secret. They are told that 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, as the story children are told reveals, no one will ever find out about the journeys he makes because in the morning he is always back in his usual spot.

5.2 Summary

These photographs offer insights into some of the similarities and differences between the Flemish and English approaches towards child protection practice.

Foucault once said:

People know what they do; frequently they know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what what they do does.

(Foucault, quoted in Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1986: 187)

This chapter demonstrates how this theory can be applied to two different contexts. 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, '*...the what they do does*' by, carefully, considering aspects of space and environment with the parent and child in mind (Foucault in Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1986:187). 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, for they have used art as symbolic gestures, to develop ways of

communicating to parents and children that they are not alone, that professionals although far from perfect, are always there to support and help them understand what they have done and subsequently change. These artistic representations reach out to children who have been traumatised and they also symbolise the different ways in which they may be able to be freed from the pain they have experienced. And, consequently, by considering the family, a different sense of professional identity develops for the practitioner. Professionals place parents and children first; they recognise it is not about their own needs but that of their clients. They are aware of the power indifferences that exist between them and do all that they can to address and reduce these. By adopting these positions they draw from a discourse which evokes compassion for the abusers, and in turn provides them with certain positions to take up, which if accepted, can provide the family with the possibilities to make changes.

In England, on the other hand, the primary motivator for choosing the Fenton building was cost and efficiency. By ensuring that there is a large car park, it indicates that a lot of social workers' time is taken up by travel, not to mention being stuck in traffic. They certainly '*... know what they do....[and] why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what what they do does*' (Foucault in Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1986:187). For as the practitioners' focus is on visiting the family within their home, what is not felt to be of significance is the building in which they work. It is therefore understandable, that given most social workers spend a large proportion of their time away from the office, little consideration needs to be given to how the space and environment of the Fenton building is used. But it is nonetheless unfortunate that as a result of this lack of consideration, the way the premises are structured only serves to alienate families and encourage power and control indifferences between the

professional and their client and 'fortress social work' is thus intensified (see Richardson, 2011). For by framing parents and children as the objects of our assessments, we are not, unfortunately, encouraged to consider them as subjects of our own practice. If 'discourse disciplines subjects into certain ways of thinking', then we can see in this situation how our 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 client, like our Flemish colleagues have, it may help 'recover what we have lost' to a particular identity and encourage us to pay attention to how 'language and, thus social work practice, is measured by words' (Bellinger and Phillips, 2011: 101).

Although the use of space and environment in the Fenton department has neglected to consider the parent and child, it has aimed to strengthen the identity of the practitioners. And by having all child protection social workers in one place, what is evident is that a dominant, micro cultural, social work discourse has emerged. The open plan style of working supports and contributes to a specific kind of culture for practitioners, a way 'things are done' around here. It also shows where the origins of an organisational hierarchy begin. In contrast to the Flemish agency where all practitioners and the Director have their own space, in England having your own office is considered a sense of achievement and is only awarded once the social worker has been promoted to team manager level.

5.3 Discussion

By using photographs in this analysis chapter, I have attempted to contextualise both settings by providing the reader with a visual dimension of what space and environment has signified for me as the researcher 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 the participants in this study view them. And I am also fully aware that the way I view the Fenton department, a place in which I have worked for the past four years, has changed because of the visits I have made to Flanders and as a result of my own identity changing from that of practitioner to that of practitioner/ researcher. Yet I do agree with Emmel and Clark (2011) that images, such as these, still do record visible phenomena which can sharpen our senses. They also provide the reader, I hope, with a better understanding of where this research took place.

By identifying the differences between these two child protection agencies, we can see how space and environment does impact on the identity of those who work in these settings and those who visit them. It is evident from these photographs that '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 professionals to draw from when constructing their own identities. They also house the way services are provided and can, in turn, affect how these are received by the family, further impacting upon the relationships that are then built between the practitioner and their client. 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 surrounds us (Rose, 2007: 143).

Chapter 6: The impact of an incongruent micro culture on the identity of the professional.

In Chapter 4, I explored how the wider cultural context, in which child protection practitioners are embedded, impacts upon the way professionals construct their identity. In Chapter 5, I have analysed how the work environment can not only influence the way professionals view their identity but can also shape the way clients who visit them perceive their own. In this chapter and Chapter 7, I specifically focus on the way the culture of an organisation can affect the identity of the professional (see Appendix G for organisational hierarchy structure of the Fenton department). In this chapter micro culture will therefore refer to a UK statutory agency in the North West of England, better known as 'the Fenton department'. In the next, and final analysis chapter, micro culture will refer to the VK agency.

By drawing from the philosophical perspective of social constructionism my argument throughout this thesis has been that individuals are not entirely free agents when they are firmly situated within a social or cultural location. I have analysed the data by considering the identity of a professional as that which implies more than the personal and social history of a person. For in order to understand who child protection social workers are, we do need to be prepared to view them as 'embedded in historical context' (Strauss, 1977:164). I do not use historical context in this circumstance as a term which simply refers to recognising the 'history' of a person but rather as Abrams (1982:16) explained it, 'an attempt to understand the relationship of personal activity and experience on the one hand and social

organisation on the other,' an activity which is by no means finite but one which is continually constructed over a period of time.

6.1 There is something very disguised here

Manager: What do I think of this culture? When I first came here I thought it was lovely. People were really friendly. I thought people were quite kind, didn't seem to be too much bitching or back stabbing. I mean there is always a bit but nothing too bad. I thought the senior managers seem to be very approachable. Didn't seem to be a particular hierarchy of managers and people seemed to talk to each other as friends or rather equals. I didn't get a sense of the reality really. I think there is something very disguised here. 'Cos actually within a short period of time you realise that that is a veneer and there are managers here, um, things are not as they appear. People are superficially polite and friendly to each other but that is not underpinned by any level of confidence in each other. I think it is quite competitive here. I think people are quite nervous here.

(Extract from interview with Manager, day 126)

When trying to understand what was happening and what could be improved in software organisations, quality software manager Gerald M. Weinberg found that for a project to go well managers needed to respond appropriately to the 'difficult interpersonal situations' that were occurring in their teams. Similar to that of the findings of the Hawthorne Studies (1966),³⁵ Weinberg (1993) realised that in order for an organisation to progress, management should not be focusing on procedures but instead providing reasons for why things happened the way they did. For only by understanding the behaviours of an organisation can an agency then understand the dilemma and move forwards.

In this extract, the impression this manager had of the Fenton department was initially like that of a congruent organisation, an organisation which Weinberg (1993) has described as a place where people act sagaciously, are considerate of one another,

³⁵ The Hawthorne Studies was the most influential behavioural science study of a business enterprise after researchers realised that culture within teams played a major part in understanding the relationships between job satisfaction and dissatisfaction (see. Schwartzmann, 1983).

do not prescribe to a particular organisational hierarchy in order to get their job done and, as result, tend to enjoy what they are doing. However, after a while, once the honeymoon period had passed, we see how this participant soon grows to learn that this initial impression was actually just an illusion, a facade which covers over certain incongruent behaviours within the organisation.

Manager: I think I've always had a suspicion that if at all possible like most large organisations that this one would look at trying to get the blame established at as lower level as possible. I have no direct evidence to support that I just think that is what they tend to do, simply by the way they talk and think. Fairly obviously the higher up you are the keener you are for the buck to stop lower down the ladder than you.

J: But which tier?

Manager: I would see that tier within the second line management.

J: So they influence both those above and those below?

Manager: I would say it was just one or two of them that do it not necessarily all as a group. I also don't think they are at all cohesive as a group. I think they appear to be cohesive but they are not. I think they are very fragile but fragmented. I think there are one or two people, key people, who are influencing other people. I think those people are fooled by them but I think at this point they are tolerating it because of outcomes they are looking for.

J: Performance outcomes?

Manager: Yeah we are on the cusp of an unannounced inspection and they will come at any time and they are tolerating certain things because of that.

(Interview extract with manager, day 118)

Without revealing too much, this manager goes on to unravel the dynamics of a culture we are both located in. This description of how our culture functions, one which is previously referred to as 'very disguised', appears to be one that is similar to that which surrounds the culture of child protection practice, the wider context where statutory agencies are situated, which other authors have described as a 'blame culture' (see Ayre, 2011; Parton, 1996; Reder et al. 1993). Ferguson (2011:134) touched upon this briefly in his work when analysing the Laming Report

(2003:192). He found that the team which worked with Victoria Climbié had recounted to Laming how they had acted out 'distorted and abusive patterns with *one another*'. A similar culture is now apparent in the Fenton department from the data shown here.

From his own experience and observations of quality software management agencies, Weinberg (1993) found that blame cultures emerge from incongruent organisations. They produce certain positions for people in management to take up, statuses which have been described by Weinberg (1993: 59) as 'blame postures' where the most important decisions for management to make is who is important and who is insignificant. For in a congruent organisation, where congruence is integrity at the most fundamental level, every service and individual who works for an agency is valued. Yet as Weinberg (1993) has argued when there is little integrity, an agency struggles to build trust; without trust, individuals do not feel safe; and without safety, agencies have a hard time being congruent. Incongruence, therefore, reinforces incongruence and creates a powerful loop one in which actually, in this instance, reduces the chances of improving practice, meeting targets within timescales on the available budget. When stress affects people at the top they tend to lose their balance and fall into the 'blaming posture': an incongruent coping style characteristic which fails to take other people into account (Weinberg, 1993:221).

As I asserted in Chapter 4, this 'stress' that social workers feel evolves from being located within a flawed and corrupt system: a child protection system. In 1997, White discovered that a hierarchy of accounts emerged in child protection practice, one which social workers employed as a means of deciphering who 'blame and responsibility' could be ascribed to within the context of the family (1997: 262).

However, in this chapter, my argument is that there is evidence of blame shifting. This act which evades the notion of accountability rather than embracing it, is not only an act which is ascribed by a social worker to a parent but is one which also performed within the Fenton department between practitioners; professionals who are located within the same micro culture.

The manager in this extract recognises that the act of blame shifting, carried out by some of the team managers is a behaviour which is reinforced by feelings of low self esteem yet this manager also believes that these behaviours do not go unnoticed by those at the top of the hierarchy, the bystanders; they are simply tolerated because the Fenton department is awaiting the arrival of Ofsted, the official body for inspecting standards in both education and in children's services.

J: So you think that managers are worried about being blamed?

Manager: Managers are being held accountable for their workers' practice and senior managers are saying 'Well what are they doing? Why didn't they do that yesterday?' The emphasis is always on 'Why haven't they done that yet?' Rather than 'Wow, that was a good piece of work that has been done'.

(Interview extract, day 183)

In this next extract we hear, from a different manager, how the second tier management group are being scrutinised by senior management over front line social workers' practice. The pressure to get things right is being aimed at those directly responsible for the way child protection practitioners practise. Although this manager recognises that this kind of pressure does not take into account the hard work practitioners are undertaking, it is unclear at this stage of the interview whether this consideration has been relayed back to the senior managers. Instead, it is the strain of being accountable for the performance of others which mounts and subsequently

places pressure on team managers, pressure which manifests and materialises through different behaviours such as the following email.

Hi team

We have just got the figures for Jan, Feb. We are currently running at 69.9% for assessments on time which is the lowest it's ever been. I am aware it's been really busy however we are not completing as many as previously. We need to make a concerted effort to pull this figure up as this is not even the national average This will be scrutinised by elected members as part of the overall performance figures. On one hand this is an indication of how busy we are and the need to resource the front door on the other I am accountable to ensure we have high performance. I would welcome any suggestions as to how we can improve matters. We can agenda for team meeting.

(Email sent from manager to team, day 201)

This email is just one of many, which was sent right before the inauguration of a new assessment, a recommendation made by the Munro review which aimed to remove the prescribed timescales for initial assessments (10 days) and core assessments (30 days) by combining them into one: the single assessment (see Munro Report, 2012: 7). At the time this email was received, the Fenton department was in the process of getting ready for the implementation of this new single assessment which would allow managers to choose a time when the assessment should be completed. Yet despite the imminent change ahead, it is evident that reaching performance targets was still considered far more important at this stage.

The impression given here is that Ofsted inspectors, as well as 'elected members' (those at the top of the statutory agency, such as councillors), are still more interested in performance figures rather than the 'outcomes for children and young people' (Munro, 2012: 45). This way of thinking thus influences the way senior managers respond to their team managers by holding them 'accountable' for ensuring

their social workers meet the required targets. Weinberg (1993) explained that the reason a culture of blame usually starts at the top level of management is because those members are more inclined to see the other people in the organisation as the source of all problems. Employees are then subsequently seen to lack an appropriate work ethic, are criticised for having issues with authority and as a result resist change by not conforming. Weinberg suggests that this form of management can lead to certain destructive displays of behaviour culminating in: frequent downsizing, constantly readapting practice to avoid serious problems and the distribution of futile memos, all of which culminate in the humiliation of subordinates.

I have heard today that there is much disgruntlement from one of the teams in the Fenton department who have just been graced with a new manager. A star chart has been erected on one of the walls in the team office. Each social worker who completes a C&F assessment on time will be awarded a gold star. Those without gold stars have been told that they will face disciplinary procedures. This seems to be the final nail in the coffin for some social workers who have been complaining of feeling “patronised”, “demoralised” and “unsupported”.

(Fieldnotes, Day 208)

These notes were recorded *after* the implementation of the single assessment (known to the Fenton department as the Child & Family assessment) recommended by the Munro Review (2012) and which I explained above was meant to eliminate a performance culture by removing the pressure which timescales place on teams. Yet despite the fact that timescales have been relaxed and managers can now choose whether an assessment should take 10, 20 or 30 days to complete, unfortunately, the attitude of the management culture has not changed. In fact, I would argue that the situation has deteriorated since its implementation, especially in this case, where social workers are being threatened with disciplinary measures if they fail to meet

the required standards of the authority. It is important to note that this style of practice was not evident from all managers at the time of writing. Some do not approve of this particular approach. Yet, in recent years, I have been aware of similar approaches being implemented and enforced by different managers, all of which have a similar detrimental impact upon their team and can be construed as a form of bullying.

Weinberg (1993) has argued that when an organisation is in a state of incongruence, middle managers persistently receive mixed messages from their seniors as to how they can motivate their staff so that they can reach their targets. This is evident with the approach used by this manager: the star chart method, more commonly used by parents of three year olds, employed in this context as a means of promoting good behaviours and penalising unwanted ones. By trying to encourage staff to reach the required performance figures that this manager will undoubtedly be accountable for, this method is enforced in an attempt to try and motivate a team to perform well in order to keep the senior management happy. Yet little consideration has been given to the social workers who are left feeling condescended and devalued. This demeaning display of management has, therefore, the opposite effect of the one intended. For rather than improve performance figures it contributes instead to a stronger divide between front line staff and management.

6.2 The outcome of the Fenton department's last inspection

It is important to note that the Ofsted inspection played a large part within this study. When I started to collect data, we, in the Fenton department, were all awaiting the imminent arrival of the inspectors. Preparing for an inspection affects management

and social workers in the Fenton department in many different ways. Yet, when the inspection is over, rather than breathe a sigh of relief, managers and social workers instead wait to see what the results were and how these might subsequently affect the future of our agency; for as we have all learned over the years, a bad inspection can lead to serious repercussions for certain members of staff.

J: So how did we do in the last inspection?

Manager: We didn't do too badly - we got 17 goods, 2 outstanding and only 3 adequate but the adequates were in the safeguarding side. Some of the things they saw were about relatively straightforward, what you might think were straightforward things, they didn't like and I agree with them, they didn't like a lot of our child protection plans because they were not clear enough, they don't, for example, tend to have timescales on them. You can't imagine that someone would think that a plan without a timescale is a good thing especially not when you are working with parents. If you are saying to parents – you need to do this or else 'cos there is that underlying threat you have got to be able to say you need to do this by end of March or else.

(Interview with manager, day 280)

This interview took place shortly after the inspection and at this time no formal report had been issued to members of staff. However, there was a rumour that things had not gone too well but no one had heard anything officially and so everything went quiet for a few days afterwards. The report received from Ofsted doesn't seem too bad in this context. 17 'goods' indicate that the authority is doing fairly well in most areas. Two 'outstandings' demonstrates that in two areas the Fenton department is doing very well. However, what is of interest, is the focus this manager gives to the 'adequates'. Although there were 'only 3' adequates, the remaining part of this conversation (and most of the next) concentrates on what these were, with no attention given to what the 'goods' or the 'outstandings' were. By focusing on the negatives this manager does, in effect, override the good practice that is being carried out by social work professionals.

The concern is heightened, I believe, because all three ‘adequates’ relate to the practice carried out by child protection teams and as I demonstrated in a previous chapter, there is a lot of pressure from external sources to get this part of social services just right, having a few ‘adequates’ is simply not good enough. The next extract will provide more of an insight into the reasons why this may be so.

But before moving on, it is important to also reflect upon the comment made in relation to timescales and child protection plans. In Chapters 4 and 5, we have seen the Flemish talk about developing and pursuing understanding and compassion for parents who fail to safeguard their children. Yet, in this context, we hear this manager draw from a discourse which promotes a need for providing families with an ‘underlying threat’. Therefore, rather than attempting to comprehend the parents’ social circumstances and personal history, this manager instead advocates a form of discourse which bullies parents into changing in order to meet with the agency’s allocated time scale, “or else” they will have to suffer the consequences.

J: I know you have just related that to Flanders but what about relating it to this local authority how are you planning to implement Munro’s recommendations in this authority?

Manager: If you don’t mind I’ll change the question slightly because it is virtually the same question just a more immediate one – how are we going to respond to the things that the Inspectors have told us? I will carry on with that example about child protection plans – because it seemed to me that actually we were, we had got a process that could be seen as, I don’t want to be too critical of it, could be seen as almost positively unhelpful. By giving people boxes to fill in they see filling in the box as the purpose and they’ve done the ICS plan therefore all in the world must be right. Of course it is no good it doesn’t give the core group the direction of travel that it needs if it is not clear, it doesn’t give the parents the goals that they need if they are going to make the best of things for themselves. So it is consistent with both post Munro and the outcome of the inspection... what something like an inspection does is to teach you to stop being so blinkered in your thinking. There was something that cropped up in the inspection, I won’t go into the detail of what it is because it could, if you are not careful, identify one or two people, but it related to an area of what we do not so much practise but how we organise ourselves that really is a vestige of history of a decision taken some years ago. When the inspector talked to me about it she gave me the opportunity really to say this is all the fault of the previous Assistant Director so we are where we are. And of course that is no good from a manager because if you think something is daft the fact that somebody, however clever they

were, decided it in the past it is still daft. And I think what we've done is we've gone, "That's daft but hey ho somebody has decided it so we will go along with it".

(Interview with manager, day 280)

This extract begins after the participant had just made recommendations about how the system could work in Flanders if it were to implement procedures and timescales into its way of working, for, as we have seen, the Flemish way of practice is not restricted by this form of bureaucratisation, at present. Yet when I bring the conversation back to this authority and ask how this manager plans to implement the recommendations from the Munro report, the participant deflects the question by changing it and relating it back to Ofsted; an agency described to be 'virtually the same'.

Initially, I found this comment confusing. Ofsted and the Munro report are separate entities and far from being, what I consider, 'the same'. But then I started to realise that there is a form of logic behind this reasoning. For this manager recognises that the Munro report has affected the way that Ofsted perform and that as a result Ofsted will then affect the way that the Fenton department perform. This manager's priority is not, therefore, to implement Munro's recommendations but to implement *those* made by Ofsted. This kind of behaviour ultimately mirrors the performance identified by Munro in her final report which was categorised under the heading 'Unintended consequences':

Reforms have been implemented through top-down direction and regulation, which has contributed to problems and led to an over-standardised response to the varied needs of children. Managerial attention has been excessively focused on the process rather than the practice of work. In social work, targets and performance indicators have become drivers of practice to a degree that was never intended by those who introduced them. In turn, this has created an image of the

inspection process that perplexes those Ofsted inspectors who seek to take a wider and more qualitative assessment of practice. This top-down approach has also limited the system's ability to hear feedback from children, families or frontline workers about problems in practice (Munro, 2011: 131).

Munro emphasised that the reforms were never intended to create a 'blame posture', evident within the Fenton department, which finds senior management trying to decide who is responsible for not reaching targets (Weinberg, 1993: 221). The reforms were instead meant to provide a path for organisations to be guided by, and not, like the Fenton department, be dominated by.

Although this manager appears to not want to blame the conduct of certain predecessors, this manager is just as keen *not* to be associated with their style of management. This participant is very aware that if he/she were to be linked to previous decisions made, it may have considerable repercussions on his/ her reputation by elected members. Even though this manager does not want to go into detail, for fear of revealing identities, a reference is made to the 'one or two' people who previously endorsed this style of working, a style which this manager admits was also part of his/ her practice.

In an attempt not to take the sole blame for the mistakes that have occurred previously, this manager begins to use a collective form of speech when referring to how 'we' have done things that perhaps 'we' shouldn't have. In an earlier chapter, we saw how the Flemish CPP used a collective form of speech to *take* the blame for others. In this culture, however, one where managers are in the 'blaming posture', this method acts as a self protective device: one which is used to distract others from the inadequacy that the perpetrator of blame, 'the blamer', is feeling. It is a position which, I will go on to argue, further endorses the need for division between managers

and front line staff and confirms that the Fenton department has indeed fallen into incongruence.

6.3 The impact of the Ofsted inspection on the Fenton department.

It was shortly after this interview that some sudden changes were made to the management structure within the Fenton department:

The news today is that one of the managers has been pushed. (Name) left with no notice and no reason. (Name) called a meeting on Friday for all managers and then shared the news with them. Staff saw some managers leave the room crying, one was apparently “inconsolable”, as they tried to deal with this “great shock”. One manager told me it was because (Name) had “failed to address certain issues and covered up others”. The covering up of certain matters is thought to be partly because of the Inspection and partly because of the bullying that has been going on and the amount of complaints that have been made to (Name) about others but which have not been followed up effectively.

Today two new managers have moved into (Name) office and it is like (Name) has never existed. One manager told me that one of these new ones has spread the word that if anyone wants to share anything personal or professional, then [the] office door is always open. This manager also said that he/she had “no friends” in Children’s Services, he/she only had professional colleagues.

The office is buzzing with anxiety and anticipation as everyone is trying to guess what is going on and who will be going next.

Field notes, Day 211.

I will never know for certain, due to my position within the authority, if the departure of this manager derived as a result of the Ofsted inspection or because complaints of bullying, made by front line social workers about certain other managers, had been ignored by this participant. But I assume it was the former, for over the years the Fenton department has witnessed a number of managers leave suddenly and their departure always appears to follow, or come prior to, an Ofsted inspection.

In this instance the managers who acted as the replacements, moved into the office the day after this manager left which does indicate that a departure plan may have been underway for some time. This quick changeover of management did not

surprise some longer serving members of the Fenton department who had witnessed episodes such as these before in the past. But the sudden exit did still cause reverberations across the department due to the lack of explanations provided and the little notice given for those managers who remained. However, many front line workers who felt they had been formerly overlooked or ignored by the departing manager, were pleased with the news and began to hope that this would signal the start of a new style of management: one which would effect a positive change to address the previous behaviours which dominated our culture. Yet, at the same time, there were others who had seen this shift in hierarchy happen before, and who worried that, as time passed, the ideals of these successors would soon be corrupted and quickly forgotten.

6.4 I don't know if we work in a blame service or a protective service

The act of blaming is not just reserved for the performance indicators, for as Weinberg (1993) has argued, it is simply where it all starts in an incongruent organisation. Once blame becomes an everyday activity, and it drives the culture professionals belong to, it begins to affect everyone, especially when there is risk involved, as the second extract demonstrates:

J: Removing a tragedy out of the picture, when something goes wrong on a case you are working on, do you think you will be blamed?

SW: Oh yes definitely. I don't know if it's a blame service or a protective service. It's one that more like pushes the blame on to someone else. It happens regularly and yes it doesn't have to be a big tragedy. It can be over a decision you have made which actually hasn't caused any major difficulty but someone has questioned your decision and then I find that you can come straight back in a defensive role and in fact you end up looking to place the blame elsewhere. So yeah I do think that happens as well, day to day.

(Extract from interview with social worker, day 5).

I asked this question because since I started collecting data for this study, I had become aware that defensive practice was rife in the Fenton department. I had not considered however, before this interview, that I too may have tried 'to place the blame elsewhere'. Yet this social worker instantly reminded me of the occasions where I and my colleagues have also been critical of and questioned the practice of another colleague, or a manager as well as another professional from a different profession altogether. No longer do we appreciate the different 'styles of practice' that '[stem] from the workers' tacit understanding that all are capable practitioners' (Pithouse, 1998: 74). Instead, situated within an atmosphere of incongruence, we question and criticise certain decisions that have been made by colleagues. This defensive technique enables us to remove ourselves from blame, *if* it were to occur, one day in the future, for we do not want to be held accountable for the 'poor' decisions made by others.

Blame shifting is not an aspect of our practice that we often talk about so candidly with each other which is why I have chosen to include this extract in this context. Yet this social worker is aware of that what we do and questions the congruence of our organisation. Although she does not believe our motives are simply to blame one another, she does recognise she too takes part in this behaviour to protect herself from criticism. Unfortunately, this act is not just reserved for our profession; it is one which is shared between all the professions we work with in child protection.

J: So has it happened to you where the police want you to take the fall?

SW: Oh yeah and the hospital, the school, you name it, anyone. The other day the police wanted me to accommodate two children because they were worried the father was going to return to the house and kidnap them and then leave the country. And I said 'But that is why you have given him bail conditions to go elsewhere so that he doesn't return to the home' but they kept going on about not knowing him or having any evidence to suggest he wouldn't go near the house and I was saying 'We have

none to suggest he will go back either'. So then he said to me 'OK, so if you are willing to make this decision then on your head be it. I am taking no responsibility for it if he does kidnap them and there's an investigation. If you're happy for that then fine, it has your name all over it'. I said 'No, it's not my fault if he breaks his bail conditions, it will be yours'.

(Interview extract with social worker, day 74).

This extract shows how as professionals we are constantly subject to 'an interplay of different discourses, each with its own structure of rights, obligations and possibilities for action and each carrying identity and power implications' (Burr, 2003: 117). In this instance we see two professionals use their positions of power to try and negotiate an ideal outcome for the children and the father, one which will eliminate risk and protect them from blame. The policeman is worried that he may be blamed if this offender is released from custody and breaks his bail conditions. By shifting blame onto the social worker, the policeman seizes the power momentarily in a bid to protect himself should he face reproach in the future. But this is soon revoked by the social worker who shifts the blame back on to the policeman by suggesting to him that it will not be her 'fault' but his. What we, the readers, are left with is an image of two professionals 'trying to make sense out of a subway route without taking into account the network structure' (Bourdieu, 1987: 5). By focusing on who will be accountable for the final decision that is made, both neglect to recognise how their two differing professional contexts have merged together to become one: a culture entrenched in blame.

6.5 It's "just a nod and smile culture".

J: What I find interesting is just how this L.A. (local authority) has won an award for 'Investing in people' yet I have come to realise that there is no one here who lives in the borough and works for the authority who is in a position higher than an ATM (assistant team manager).

SW1: Yeah because those they have promoted up the ladder are those from outside with less experience and who nod and smile. Keep it shut (makes a zipping movement across the mouth) and defend the ideals of the organisation.

(Extract from interview, day 136)

SW2: ...at first I thought this (name of social worker) was an agency worker and then I find out apparently she has been put in post from being an agency social worker to a senior practitioner without being interviewed which a lot of people are not happy about and that does stink. When (name of a different social worker) was complaining to me about it she said "I can't believe they've done that, it was never advertised, she has just literally been offered a senior prac post on a plate", well I started laughing. I said "You know why they gave her that don't you?" and she said "No" and I said "Well it's 'cos she nods and smiles".

(Extract from interview, day 183)

J: You have plenty of experience, don't you fancy becoming a senior practitioner?

SW3: Yeah but no. My face don't fit now.

J: What do you mean?

SW3: It used to fit, I once got that tap on the shoulder but since then I have challenged the wrong people. If you don't just nod and smile, if you do challenge for a cause you believe in, well your name, well it becomes mud. There's no chance of promotion here for me now. I'd have to leave. But I'm not sure the grass is greener anywhere else.

(Extract from interview, day 54)

These participants relate the issue of not conforming to being located in a 'nod and smile' culture an appropriate label given to the way management expect front line staff to agree with certain ways of working. The days of being able to challenge our managers about anti oppressive practice and anti discriminatory rights, have long gone. This contemporary style of management performance, experienced within the Fenton department, penalises those who do not follow the organisational ideology. It also leads to a form of stigmatisation within the workplace setting.

In a Chapter 4 I argued that social workers in England are, as professionals, collectively stigmatised by society, yet from this theme it is apparent that this form of

labelling extends to those who work *within* child protection practice as well; those who have challenged an organisational hierarchy for whatever reason. Goffman (1963: 12) defined stigma as someone who is 'reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one'. The data shows that these participants have been reduced to an unworthy status by those in management. If they were to have turned to their group and obeyed the rules, like some have, they would have been considered 'loyal and authentic' but because they have turned the other way they are instead judged as 'craven' or as 'fool' (Goffman, 1963: 137). There is, therefore, little wonder that star charts are being implemented within certain teams when the dominant discourse which prevails in this establishment advocates that social workers should be seen and not heard.

6.6 The bullied, the bully and the bystander

SW1: I just described it as a toxic blame culture, 'cos if you don't conform then God help you because it is like this, they will make a concerted effort and a campaign will start against you and it's almost like, I mean that's what happened to me and various people. You know before all this happened to me I used to think I was concocting conspiracy theories. But when we put together the chronology of what happened, well, it was four pages long, four pages of what has happened to me and when I saw that I couldn't deny it then.

(Extract from interview, day 103)

Weinberg (1993) proposed that by directing the attention at another person- and blaming is often accompanied by a pointed finger-we create a self-protective device, used to distract others from the inadequacy that we feel. In this instance, when an organisation, such as the Fenton department, becomes riddled with the act of blame it becomes a covert mode of operation, for the act of blaming is not discussed openly but used as a weapon to make others feel vulnerable. It can also make way for

psychologically aggressive forms of behaviour such as bullying. An act which is evident has happened to the following social worker as well.

J: So does that make you feel paranoid?

SW2: Yes. And I feel that people are talking about me behind my back and they're probably doing what they have done to other colleagues and they are building up a collection of mistakes or errors so that if I do make a boo boo they can look back at everything. It might just be my imagination (laughs), my paranoia, but I have worked here for a very long time. I have seen how it works here.

J: So what do you think might happen?

SW2: Well it could continue and I feel it could get worse and of course then I could make mistakes because my confidence has been shattered and I am not prepared to put children at risk or be put in that position but what I am bothered about is the repercussions and whether I need to be watching over my shoulder.

(Extract from interview with social worker, day 164)

This extract relates to part of a discussion with a social worker who had made a complaint about a particular manager to senior management due to that manager leaking private information about this participant to a colleague. However, the complaint was not dealt with effectively. Primarily, I believe, because it was made against a manager and not a social worker. For dealing with complaints is not the Fenton department's forte, especially when managers find they have to resolve grievances in relation to their colleagues. Twemlow et al. (2004: 224) found in their study of teachers who bullied that the bullying teachers often forced loyalty in their colleagues, those who may have personally abhorred their actions, but dare not complain for fear their complaints would be seen as 'anti labor'. Whatever the reason may be for the Fenton department's poor response to the complaints that are made, it is evident that bullying is compatible with a blame culture.

For in this case, after having made a complaint, this social worker was left for five months without any information or news as to what might be happening next whilst, at the same time, being expected to continue working alongside the manager who had been the focus of the complaint. Yet, it soon became apparent that this manager was aware a complaint had been made against him/ her as this manager then started to raise a number of concerns about this social worker's practice. Therefore, what had initially started as a complaint about a manager's breach of confidentiality soon evolved into this social worker feeling she/he was being bullied.

This extract also highlights how incongruent organisations can produce certain discursive positions for particular members to take up. The notion of positioning (Davies and Harre, 1999) acknowledges the active style in which persons attempt to locate themselves within particular discourses in social interaction. The idea of there being a dyadic relationship between the bully and the victim in situations such as bullying, has been re-contextualised by Twemlow et al. (2004) who defied traditional definitions by suggesting that bullying actually takes place within a triadic paradigm, one which includes a third member, the bystander. In this extract we are presented with three positions in interaction: the bully, the bullied and the bystander.

The role of the bystander, in this case senior management who have failed to respond to the complaint, demonstrates just how the person in this role can either facilitate or ameliorate the process of victimization in a situation where 'bullying' occurs which Twemlow et al. (2004: 217) define as: 'the repeated exposure of an individual to negative interactions directly or indirectly inflicted by one or more dominant persons'. These destructive interactions can cause harm to the victim

through either direct physical or psychological means and/or indirectly through encouragement of the process or through the avoidance of the bystander. In this instance, we can see how this social worker was subjected to bullying episodes which questioned his/her practice, a practice which had, before the complaint was made, never presented as an issue. This reaction not only had a devastating effect on this participant's confidence but left him/her feeling paranoid about the repercussions that lay ahead.

Manager: But I think everyone will have a view of (Names four managers) and me, all across the organisation but I think that everyone else assumes that someone is being nasty or manipulative or whatever but I think what it is, is that everybody is a bit scared and everybody is feeling it. It's been interpreted differently because if you are the one who has just had the criticism you are going to feel picked on but the person who is picking is frightened because someone is picking on them. I haven't sorted that bit out properly yet though.

(Extract from interview, day 102)

However, in this extract (see Appendix F for more detail), we are presented with an explanation of why managers were behaving the way that they were and why the social workers above feel they were being targeted. For it is evident that *everyone* in this organisation is feeling anxious; this blame culture is embedded within a climate of fear and as this manager points out blame shifting is evident within all tiers. This alters the notion presented by Twemlow et al. (2004) that the bully, the bullied and the bystander are static positions which are simply taken up by certain individuals in certain situations. We can see, in this instance, that this triadic relationship does *not* remain with the same three people in this incongruent organisational hierarchy: instead it has the ability to adapt and modify itself depending on who it relates to.

6.7 “We have started covering for each other”

SW1: I am more savvy than (names a social worker). I hand write my case notes and then give them to admin to type up and the rest because the work load is ridiculous. If you don't do it that way you go under like (names a social worker) and face disciplinary.

(Extract from interview with social worker, day 163)

SW2: Each month we get our summons.

J: Our what?

SW2: Our summons (both laugh). You won't get it on out of hours but at the end of each month our team gets a list from (names a manager) summoning those who haven't completed their CP (child protection) visits within timescale to the office.

J: No way, that's like you're at school and going to the Headmaster to be told off.

SW2: It's worse than that. If you get called in more than once you're out.

J: What do you do?

SW2: We have started covering for each other so no one gets called.

J: Why don't you say something?

SW2: Did you see what happened to (names a social worker)? That's what he did and look what happened to him.

(Extract from interview with social worker, day 208)

In these extracts we can see how two social workers describe two separate coping mechanisms used to deal with the different kind of pressures faced within child protection practice. These two professionals attempt to balance the 'necessary response' required to get the job done (D'Cruz, 2004: 42). They also both demonstrate the implications this will have on their personal life and professional career if they fail. SW1 shares a way she deals with the ever increasing administration in order to avoid facing disciplinary. She has seen a colleague 'go under' and she is not prepared for the same thing to happen to her. She has subsequently devised a method which works and which helps her avoid this impending doom.

The second social worker provides us with an insight into what may happen if child protection visits³⁶ go out of timescale. Referred to as the 'summons' this practitioner and her team recognise that challenging this form of oppressive management practice is futile, it only threatens the future prospects of social workers. They have witnessed what has happened to others who have stood up and opposed this demoralising and threatening behaviour; they have been suspended. In order to evade disciplinary action, the team have joined forces collectively, and worked out a way in which they can meet targets without anyone facing ejection. This entails an 'emotional commitment' and 'the development of an appropriate system of morals' for the team, morals which make it possible to do what is right and appropriate whilst understanding what is wrong and inappropriate, all of which are derived from 'our occupation of subject positions within discourse' (Burr, 2003: 120).

However, this method has a threefold effect. Although it does ensure that child protection visits will be carried out on time and does create a stronger group identity for the team, it also sanctions and endorses the way management are supervising front line staff. For the way this manager is practising, however oppressive and ruthless I may consider it to be, by those higher up the hierarchy it will be evidenced as an ideal way of reaching goals. In an incongruent organisation, the way targets are achieved is not considered significant, it is just important that they *are* achieved.

6.8 "The grass ain't greener anywhere else".

I have always been a transient employee and have never managed to stay anywhere for longer than a couple of years. What still surprises me is that I have remained at

³⁶ These are visits to children subject to child protection plans. They must be seen at least once within 28 days by a social worker.

the Fenton department for the longest time to date in the whole of my professional career. Leaving and moving on to pastures new is an aspect of social work that I have always appreciated and used as an opportunity for change. As a result, I have always wondered why so many social workers choose to remain in this authority. There are, of course, those who do leave. There are also those who have been pushed. But then there are those who, despite being aware of all that goes on around them, still choose to remain. These three extracts provide an insight into the reasons why:

J: Do you think social workers are treated like this everywhere?

SW1: I can't comment because I have never worked at another local authority but from what I have heard, from when people come here from other places, the grass ain't greener anywhere else, there is no difference.

(Extract from interview with social worker, day 164)

SW2: See I know some authorities have got a block on...but one is advertising at the moment and is offering a lot of money but I know they are in a bad place so I think if I go there would it be any better? It would be quite good, wouldn't it? You know being paid all that money but then you think 'Well, no. I am familiar with the agencies here, the resources and if I went somewhere else well I wouldn't know'. It's better the devil you know really, isn't it? I don't think anywhere is a good place in child protection, I mean I love the job but I hate the chaos around it I think that sums it up really.

(Extract from interview with social worker, day 164)

J: Why didn't you go for the interview?

SW3: Well I started thinking, "What have I here?" Look I know I have no support from management and my face don't fit no more, but it's the people, you know the others like us, they have been there for me through so much, I couldn't leave that behind.

(Extract from interview with social worker, day 54).

There are, therefore, a number of reasons why practitioners do not leave an incongruent organisation. The first is the belief that it is not better anywhere else. Although none of these social workers have actually worked anywhere else to have evidence of this being the case, they have listened to the outsiders who have joined their authority and learned of the reasons why they left their previous post. Secondly, there is the comfort of being in a place where you do have a certain kind of knowledge

of how the culture works which is acquired from experience and from being an insider. They are fully aware of this organisation's incongruence, yet they know what to expect and they know what rules to follow. As SW2 emphasised, she loves her job, she just hates the chaos that goes on around it.

Thirdly, there is the notion of a resilient group identity emerging, one that contradicts the argument I made earlier that we all have a tendency to criticise each other's practice. For in this instance, when in the face of adversity, we see how these practitioners do join forces and unite. They are part of the same 'social shelter', they are resilient and protective of one another (Freidson, 1986). They may criticise each other's work to defend their own position but when they are collectively challenged by 'countervailing forces' they pull together (Freidson, 1986). They are aware that that the support they require from some of their managers is not always forthcoming but they have learned that, in order to survive in this hostile and incongruent environment, they need to, at times, come together to console and protect one another.

Yet there is also a fourth reason, one which none of the social workers here has mentioned but one which I believe exists implicitly in what they say: they are simply unable to leave due to feeling 'paranoid', 'scared', 'patronised', 'demoralised', 'unsupported' and overlooked by the hierarchy in their agency. The data in this chapter has shown that when a culture is firmly entrenched in the blame posture, destructive discourses are produced and furthermore, nurtured. These can then have a detrimental impact on the professional, leaving them with significant low self esteem. Foucault (1977) proposed that change is possible if marginalised and repressed discourses were opened up and made available. Unless, therefore, these practitioners are given the opportunity to draw from available congruent discourses,

the type of discourses which have long been displaced from the Fenton department, they will always find it difficult to leave the incongruent discourses behind.

6.9 Discussion

In Chapter 4 we saw how the culture of child protection in England is constructed within a hostile climate. I asserted that social workers were stigmatised as a result of being criticised by certain agencies, or 'countervailing forces', within society (Freidson, 1986: 208). In this chapter I have developed this assertion by explaining how particular organisational cultures of child protection, such as that of the Fenton department, can also fall into incongruence when the agency finds it is firmly entrenched within a context of blame. Once this happens, and a blame posture has been securely established, various forms of destructive discourse emerge, which further endorse and encourage particular ways of thinking and behaving for all the professionals who draw from it.

It is evident, from my analysis of the data, that social workers are thus discouraged from thinking creatively. Those who do not 'nod and smile', who instead challenge the dominant cultural discourse that prevails, are seen as those who do not want to conform. Their actions are perceived by some as attempting to usurp the power and prerogatives of management. Weinberg (1993) argued that there are different styles of organisational blaming which can vary from being harsh, vindictive, direct or indirect, yet whichever way they are conveyed they are always contagious. Although the blame starts at the top in the Fenton department, it is apparent that the act of blame shifting is not reserved for just this agency; it permeates the boundaries of our micro culture and, in turn, affects the practice of others. In an attempt to equalise the concentration of blame, *all* members involved in child protection work,

be that social worker, police, teachers or health professionals, practise the art of blame shifting when they find they are in situations of confrontation or conflict.

This defensive technique may be generated by those who hold the power at the top of the hierarchy but it has become a behaviour which has subsequently developed into a discourse which has spread and become endemic within, and outside, of the agency. Foucault argued that 'power and knowledge directly imply one another' (1977: 27). They are not simply two separate entities that can be separated and imposed from the top to the bottom, for 'power is everywhere' just as 'discourse is everywhere' too (Rose, 2007: 143). I have contended that within the Fenton department, the blame shifting discourse has been used by professionals as a means of distraction and protection. By placing the blame elsewhere only then can we distract the blamer and protect ourselves from reproach.

The days where 'displaying team loyalty' remained 'a crucial part of team leaders' identity talk' are now but a distant memory (White, 1997: 163). For I have implied that nowadays those who do not conform to 'the nod and smile' culture find they are subjected to episodes of bullying; those who do conform, move into the role of bystander and develop defensive techniques which will enable them to survive. In an incongruent culture, practitioners and managers are forced to take up different positions depending on the situation they encounter. As Burr (2003: 113) has explained 'the concept of positioning recognises both the power of culturally available discourses to frame our experience and constrain our behaviour'. These discourses can provide a person with the room to actively employ and engage with them depending on the social situation. From my analysis of the data, it is evident that there are just three positions present within the Fenton department for professionals to choose from: the bullied, the bully and the bystander. Davies and Harre (1999)

have argued that subject positions may be offered, accepted, claimed or resisted, but within the context of this study, whichever decision is made, it is this position which defines the way social workers then construct their professional identity.

It is as a result of this blame culture that certain defensive forms of practice become pervasive. Professionals soon learn that certain techniques are required if they are to survive in the face of adversity, subsequently they start to develop different tools which will allow them to manage the incongruence which surrounds them. These tools enable them to continue doing the job they 'love' whilst dealing with the 'chaos' that envelops it.

In addition, it is evident that, in situations of discord and tension, social closures are formed by social work practitioners to protect, console and defend one another against the pressures exerted by our management (see Leigh, 2013b). Although, Freidson (1986; 2001) only saw social closures as devices which would encourage growth, refinement and quality for its members, he did not pause to consider how internal structures might challenge professionals to develop individual or group coping strategies as a means of *self protection*. This defensive technique serves to contradict Freidson's belief that all professionals who are part of a social shelter should have their social, cultural and psychological needs protected. Instead they represent 'fragmented unities', members of a collective which do come together at times but are divided at others (Parker, 2000: 1). Although Pithouse (1998: 74) found that 'styles of practice did not lead to division or competition' among social workers, subject to both 'discourses of derision' (Hey, 1997: 39) and attacks from countervailing forces, present not only on the *inside* but on the *outside* of the discipline, it is evident that these child protection practitioners have had to develop their own unique defensive techniques in order to survive.

Chapter 7: The impact of a congruent micro culture on the identity of the professional.

In Chapter 6 I highlighted some of the implications for being a social worker which arise from practitioners being located within an incongruent culture, such as that of the Fenton department. I used the theory of subject positions and the notion of positioning from both macro, the 'constitutive force of the subject positions carried within particular discourses', and micro, 'the ability of the person to negotiate subject positions', forms of social constructionism (Burr, 2003: 126). In this chapter I am going to continue to use these two strands (both macro and micro) of constructionism to examine the culture of two VK agencies based in Flanders (see Appendix H for general organisational hierarchy structure of VK).

7.1 Just go, you can swim

J: I understand that there are bound to be issues but they seem to be the same old issues that we encounter. Like when (name of practitioner) felt the nurse was sharing the information so she could off load it and move on.

Manager: Yeah, but....I have the impression these young people want to know so they discuss, discuss and discuss and we have a culture in this team of discussing things that are worthwhile but I sometimes think that what we are missing is doing things, you know just get on with it and see where you come out and maybe you do something wrong but you are still doing something and it's not that they worry about being blamed but they are so uncertain sometimes and I say 'Just go, you can swim and you can see where you end up'.

(Extract from interview, day 21)

I begin this chapter with an excerpt from an interview with a manager from one of the VK agencies. The team had begun this day, as they do every Tuesday, discussing new referrals. A referral is only accepted by the VK when the identifying details are provided by the referrer. If they are not, the referrer can call just for advice. This is what had happened that morning and it felt similar to the experiences we have in the

Fenton department where a health professional might call for advice or as we refer to it 'to off load'.

Although this manager agreed with me, he goes onto explain that 'off loading' is also an idiosyncrasy of his own team; the team which is providing the public with the advice they seek. He attributes this behaviour to their youth or lack of experience and the uncertainty they feel about how best to progress with case, not because they have a fear, as we do in the Fenton department, of 'being blamed'. Yet what is apparent is that rather than feel anxious about the lack of experience his team has, this manager does not try to overcome this anxiety by making those decisions for them, instead he encourages them to be brave and use the knowledge they do have to take risks so that they can learn from their mistakes.

7.2 We have never had one fatal case...I can say that loudly and be proud of it.

This next section starts with an extract from an interview with a CPP who had been telling me about a high risk case the team were involved in. The one I have referred to and discussed in brief detail in Chapter 4 relating to the Baby X who had been assaulted by his father who had been drunk at the time.

J: Do you ever worry that if it got to that stage your team would disband as you all started pointing the finger at each other?

CPP: No not that much. But I think I told you about it the first time when you came that we have a project called Kind en Gezin and I see them very regularly and we discuss all babies at risk. In all that time we have never had one fatal case. Now we are at a point that I can say that loudly and be proud of it. It is remarkable. And that is because we work very carefully in these cases. What worries me much more is that we work too severely with these cases and we are too moralistic and we tell them what to do. At the moment we are a very young team and most of us don't have children and so don't realise how difficult it is to raise children and how difficult it is to build out a relationship and the offers it takes and what you can expect from change. I don't believe in big change I believe in a moral concern about safety. That is not quite the same.

(Extract from interview, day 23)

I had found the details of the case of Baby X quite difficult to come to terms with at first, not only because of the way the team had responded to the parents (in such an anti oppressive way, a complete contrast to the way I may have responded had I encountered this same case in England) but also because the photos of the injuries had been the worst I had ever seen on a baby. Furthermore, the team had just shared with me that they were in agreement with the mother that the father (the one who had assaulted the baby) could, after six months of living elsewhere, now return home. This piece of information did not sit comfortably with me at all.

What probably, upon reflection, concerned me the most was the risk the team were taking by allowing this to happen. In fact, 'allowing' is the wrong word to use within this context, because if this CPP were to read this, I am sure he would say that the word 'allowing' infers control and the VK agency refrains from controlling the decisions made by parents. And they are quite right. It was, after all, the mother who had decided she wanted the father to return. It was only after talking it through with the team did they also concur and agree with her that it was the right decision. Aside from this, the point I am trying to make is that by agreeing with her, they were in effect placing themselves at risk, professionally: for there were no guarantees that the father would not repeat the abuse, but next time, my fear was, it could be even worse.

In England when a public inquiry is set up to investigate the death of a child known to children's services, 'an atmosphere of blame and criticism' emerges as the media capitalise on the process through 'provocative and accusing headlines' (Reder, Duncan and Grey, 1993: 1). During the Climbié Inquiry (2003) the public witnessed the Haringey social closure disband and blame each other when confronted by countervailing forces within their own discipline. In a bid to protect their own positions and livelihoods, the public witnessed senior managers respond to media

pressure by promising to 'blame...the appropriate officer who did not do his or her job' (BBC, 2002).

Yet this fear that I sense is not a fear that is shared by this CPP. He instead worries that the team work too 'severely' with cases and are too 'moralistic'. These are not two words I would have selected to describe the team after I witnessed the way they handled the case of Baby X! Nonetheless, whichever way I or this CPP would describe the way they function as a team, one thing that does emerge from the way that they do practise is that in all the time this VK agency has practised, they have 'never had one fatal case' involving a baby.

Weinberg (1993) argued that steering organisations rely on congruent observers. If steering managers take up the part of doing the observing they will become actively aware of what is going on around them, how people are feeling and how to respond to those feelings to gain the best results for the agency. These first two extracts provide an insight as to how a congruent organisation may work. Although both participants see room for improvement, they also recognise the importance of providing support and instilling the values of the agency to improve the confidence of other team members in order to achieve a better outcome for their families.

7.3 I am in a very special position here...

J: What if the case came back after you had closed it, would your manager wonder why you had closed it so soon?

CPP1: I don't make the decision solely to close it. I go to the team and we make the decision together. Everyone is responsible. They could blame me if I didn't explain it properly or didn't mention certain risk factors and that is possible.

J: Has that ever happened?

CPP1: No. It happens that a case comes back after some time and we see that some things could have been done better. Of course.

J: But does anyone point the finger?

CPP1: (Long pause). It happened to me. It happened to me, because I have always worked here. I have many cases, old cases. They don't all come back but some do. It is easy then to point at me. These young colleagues don't have new cases. They don't realise their cases will come back if they stay long enough but first condition is they have to stay long enough. If they do, I won't blame them.

J: When the finger was pointed at you was it done verbally or did they write it on the case notes?

CPP1: No, no. Hmmm, that's a tricky thing that you ask me (laughs). I understand that you do this but I am in a very special position here. Very special. In many ways....I am the only one who is really, really, experienced. I know the whole evolution together with other colleagues I have built out the philosophy of the centre. There are so many things that these young colleagues cannot understand yet. And they have high expectations. And they want to profile themselves also. One of the ways to do that is in not respecting my experience. They know better. I think you have that in every team where there is such a difference in experience. But the things you are talking about, I am the only one who can have that problem. The others are not long enough here to have that problem.

(Extract from interview, day 20)

There are several important points to emerge from this extract. The first is the affirmation I made in Chapter 4 that the team do *not* make sole decisions on cases. When they decide on an action with a case, they do so as a team, and that team consists of all members in the district VK agency. In England, there is one lead practitioner on a case and this is the social worker. She may indeed work with other agencies (especially if the child is on a child protection plan) and relevant support staff in order to provide a package of support and care to the child(ren) but when it comes to making decisions as to how the case will progress, it is the social worker who is ultimately the one who is accountable and responsible for the welfare of the child(ren). These 'decisions' should be discussed between the social worker and the manager in supervision which is one of the reasons why supervision is so valued by practitioners (see Beddoe, 2010; Hair, 2012) but is also one of the reasons why

relationships between front line staff and management deteriorate rapidly; especially in instances where there is disagreement between the two parties as to which is the best way to progress. In Flanders, however, we see how this joint approach serves to protect professionals from reproach. For if a tragedy was ever to occur, it would be the *whole* agency that would be held accountable for the decisions that were made.

Although this CPP has had others within the team question the decisions that he, and others who have since departed, made on cases which have returned to the hands of the VK agency, he is aware that this is an inevitable part of his job and he is not prepared to blame anyone for this. Instead we learn how this CPP perceives his professional self. By using words such as ‘very special’ and ‘really, really, experienced’ he accepts that others will feel envious of him at times and will try and compete with his knowledge but he does not let this affect his view of the position he holds within the agency; rather, he appears disappointed with the others that they do, on occasion, choose not to ‘respect’ his experience. Yet unbeknownst to him, there are others who do respect his knowledge and experience and here is an extract from just one of them:

Student: I have also worked with CPP1. He is very pushy and makes you think a lot.

J: Does he?

Student: Yeah you learn a lot from him, he knows everything.

J: Can you see a difference in the way the professionals here practise? Because (CPP1) is a social worker, can you tell he is a social worker?

Student: No. He is just like, you can see he works a lot with parents but that doesn’t make him like a social worker or pedagogue and because he has got so much experience he really knows what he is doing. So no I wouldn’t say he was a social worker.

J: So have you enjoyed working with him?

Student: Yes, very much.

(Extract from interview, day 26)

The student in this extract had been on placement with this VK agency for a few months when this interview took place. Although she confirms and substantiates how CPP1 perceives his professional self within the agency, she also highlights another interesting point: How she does *not* see him as a social worker. This point is also affirmed by CPP1 as the next extract will demonstrate:

CPP1: Yes that also exists but the word social worker in England covers a lot more professions than here. I think. For instance, I am the only social worker here. The others are psychologists and similar things. I am the only social worker.

J: Yeah I know. And that's good. I like the way it's structured but I need to meet more social workers, more like you.

CPP1: No we haven't.

J: But you do, in the other agencies.

CPP1: Ah yes, but it is required. In a team that can be recognised you need at least one social worker, one psychologist, one medicine.

J: How do you feel being the only one?

CPP1: (CPP gets up and closes the door) It's terrible. I am the only social worker but I cannot split it up I am also the only field worker, I am also by far the eldest team member, the most experienced and that all gives a lot of trouble. The only social worker yes, that causes me trouble, but not because you think I need others like me around but because other professions focus too much on the child and not on the parent and if they need, if they want to help the child they have to support and think about the parent. It doesn't fit with psychologists, they don't think that way. But we social workers easily understand that and will focus our work with the parents.

J: Yeah I am not sure we think that much about the parent back home. I was thinking about you being on your own because you are part of a multi agency team. As a social worker, you are alone.

CPP1: Yes I am alone. I am not equal to the others. I have an experience of 25 years. Most of them here now will never have that experience. And that should give me a lot of authority which I don't have.

(Extract from interview, day 23)

This extract raises some important differences for me between the way identity is constructed by social workers in England and in Flanders. This conversation began at cross purposes. I recall, at this point of the interview, being focused on meeting 'more'

social workers in order to achieve a reasonable number of interviews to meet the validity criteria for this ethnography. It was only during this conversation that it started to occur to me that 'being' a lone social worker might affect the way this CPP constructed his own identity. In England, I work in a building which houses an army of social workers yet in this particular VK agency, there is just one. This CPP confirmed my belief that it has indeed affected the way he constructs his identity but not for the reason I had originally anticipated.

I had been concerned that without that 'group' identity, or what Freidson (1986: 208) has referred to as 'a social closure', this CPP would lack that sense of belonging that the rest of us (in the Fenton department) seem to feel. I soon learn, however, that this is not what this CPP desires. He instead yearns to be held in high esteem by his team members (who also incidentally do not distinguish him as a social worker either) for the years of child protection practice he has accomplished. However, despite his attempt to construct an organisational hierarchy which places him in a position of authority near the top, we see instead how the team draw from discourses within the agency which are constantly operating 'behind the scenes' in their interactions. Therefore, the prospect for this social worker in terms of identity negotiation and for having more influence must occur between this group of multi professionals who consequently position themselves 'within a variety of discourses in the shifting flow of social interaction' (Burr, 2003: 118).

It is evident that this CPP also makes assumptions about me and my role as a social worker. He assumes that 'social workers easily understand' that in order to help the child, 'we' must support and consider the parent. Yet this is not an experience I have always encountered and neither have others (see Ayre, 2001; de Montigny, 1995; D'Cruz, 2004; Hall et al. 2006; Scourfield, 1999; White, 1997). For in

England, although we need to communicate 'our' requirements of what needs to be done for the welfare of their child(ren) we often neglect to seriously consider the needs of the parent. As Scourfield (1999: 191) noted 'telling adult clients clearly where they are going wrong has become the dominant social work intervention....it is thought that anyone with the potential to look after their children will simply...do as they are told'. This CPP criticises psychologists for doing what we do in the Fenton department: 'focus too much on the child and not on the parent'.

CPP: I met him 26 years ago in the hospital and it was with him that we created this confidential centre.

J: You say "we" was that an equal relationship, one in which you contributed to equally.

CPP: When you have worked with someone as long as we have, you will understand that it is about accepting each other and drawing from each other's knowledge and backgrounds to move forwards in certain situations. (Director) often says 'Without you I was another person' and I feel the same about (Director). I would not be who I am today if we had not been through this experience together.

(Interview extract, day 33)

I wanted to include this final extract under the theme of being 'very special' in social work to show how two practitioners from different professional backgrounds have come together to create the foundations of another district VK agency to the previous CPP and develop its philosophy. As we have learned from a previous extract, all Directors from the VK agency should come from a medical background yet it is also a requirement that each agency has at least one social worker in order to function. In neither of the extracts in this section do we see a particular professional discourse lead the practice of the agency in contrast to others have noticed 'psycho-legalism' to dominate social work practice in the UK (see Dingwall et al. 1983; White, 1997). What

is evident, and is similar to the child protection culture in the UK, is that experience is considered as worthy and is valued (see White, 1997).

In this instance, we learn how two practitioners, a social worker and a psychiatrist, recognise how their identities have changed as a result of their interactions with one another. Burr (2003) argued that our subjective experiences are provided by the discourses within which we are embedded. Here we have two professionals who are drawing from one discourse, one which aims to enable change for its clients who abuse their children. By internalising the way this discourse represents human life, they have learned that they need to accept the mistakes of their clients if they are going to protect the children who have been abused. Along the way they have also developed a deep respect for one another, one which Weinberg (1993) would argue is dominant within agencies which do perform congruently.

7.4 If you are never able to trust people things cannot grow.

J: Control is run by fear and risk. You hear about risk all the time. I never hear the word trust being used.

CPP: But if you are never able to trust people things cannot grow. We want things to grow in a good way. Is it perfect? No not at all. But you first have to try and see if it can work and if it cannot work you take your responsibilities. Everybody can have a second chance. It's right to have a second chance. But it's not a right to harm children. And that's between these two points that we try to work it out. So this risk assessment is very, very important.

J: So what does it involve? (CPP shows me a graph)

CPP: Well to be honest it involves a discussion about it (risk). I can show you what we use. Here we have these categories. It is coming from a book of Kevin Browne. Professor of child abuse in Glasgow, I think. You don't know him?

J: No.

CPP: Oh yes, I know. I asked you that last time

(Extract from interview, 34)

This extract shows us one way in which the Flemish professionals manage risk. In England, as we have seen in Chapter 6, risk is an action or activity that can lead practitioners into dangerous territories, and encourage blame shifting to occur amongst professionals. In Flanders, rather than be disabled by the concept of risk, this VK agency has adapted a risk assessment tool, created by a British academic, Professor Kevin Browne (2009), which they use with within their work to measure the probability of maltreatment within their families.

There are, admittedly, concerns that arise from this, from using just 'one tool' to assess the levels of risk in child protection social work, yet this is the same team which earlier in this chapter claimed to 'never have had one fatal case' with a baby. The team came across this tool in their peer supervision groups and has been using it for the past few years when dealing with referrals to the agency and case work. In the Fenton department we do not, at the time of writing, use any assessment tools to measure risk, even though we are extremely concerned with the notion of it. There have been times when we have attended training courses and been asked to use tools to assess, for example, the level of neglect within the homes we visit (such as Bruce Thornton Risk Assessment Model, 1991) but for some unknown reason these approaches are only utilised for short periods of time before they fall by the wayside.

Yet in Flanders, rather than avoid risk and resort to blame shifting, as we saw the professionals do in Chapter 6, this team have embraced it and work with the principle that people do deserve a 'second chance'. Subsequently, they employ different words in their discourse such as 'trust', encouraging people to 'grow in a good way' whilst still recognising that it is 'not right' to harm children.

7.5 Organisational hierarchy

In this section I want to highlight how although both VK agencies are similar in relation to their philosophical perspective and how they respond towards parents, when it comes to the ways in which they construct the hierarchy within their organisation they do differ.

7.5.1 Case discussion: An interplay of different professional discourses.

Social Worker (SW) to me: Just so you know these are not fixed groups they rotate between the team members. So the purpose of these meetings is to gather together and discuss cases. The lead of the case will normally start with a question that will focus on what they want us to think about. So then we listen to what he would say and do and then we formulate our answer, or rather say what we would do in this situation.

(The Approved Mental Health Professional, AMHP, then goes to the board and draws a genogram).

AMHP: The genogram. My question is: Madam will not follow our guidance for the child so do we stop here or go to another service or do we go to the justice (court)?

(AMHP then goes on to give the context of the case. Concerns had been previously in relation to neglect and physical abuse from both the father and the mother- none of these were substantiated. They have since divorced and children are living separately with their mother and father. Mother is suffering from depression and regularly changes boyfriends. There are concerns of domestic violence between them and concerns surrounding neglect)

SW: So do we put pressure on the family or do we go to court?

Psychiatrist: I feel very concerned because mother lacks capacity on one hand and on the other there is problem with her attachment behaviour she is in many relations and in her relations there is a lack of self regulation. She travels from one man to another. So the question is how does the child deal with attachment and regulation? So we have a woman here who needs a partner, always looking for someone who will be on her side, she does not tolerate this for a long time and sometimes we, as partners are accepted as caregivers, and at that moment she forges with us and we are then seen as the partner because we are offering attachments and say things such as 'we want to help you, we want to offer you a secure attachment' and she is not able to come into a complementary relation with a partner and then she says 'I am going on my own' so it suggests she is a maltreated child herself. She never learned to compensate for her attachment problems.

Orto-pedagogue (OP): And even in your stories I do not hear something about her missing her other daughter.

AMHP: No

OP: So it's like children are separated as well. I know we are talking about the mother, but I also have some questions about the father. I think the father can have a compensating role so I think I should try to see both parents. To talk about the relationship between the

parents and the daughters. They had no contact with each other. What is the reason why they let it go? Why did they choose for one child and not the other one? And then we can offer help for both of them and not just the mother. I think she came for help and now we say 'You have to...' I think that is difficult but I think there is a big problem with both of them as they don't have enough skills.

SW: I think it is also important to look for a social network. Not only for raising the children but also for this mother and the father. It sounds like this is a mother with disability. I don't know what it is but is there anybody or service she can contact to help her? Not only from the perspective of being a mother who can raise her children but for her thinking that she is also in need of support as she is a victim of child abuse.

(Extract from field observations, day 28)

Prior to this lengthy extract, we saw how one VK agency employs a risk assessment tool to measure uncertainty. In this extract, we learn how another VK agency draws from different professional backgrounds to inform how a case should progress. From my observations, I noticed that a large proportion of VK professionals' time is spent discussing cases, sharing knowledge with one another by connecting theory to practice. In this particular case discussion, we see how a genogram provides a visual map of the family for the professionals in the meeting. On other occasions it may involve a video of the professional interacting with certain members of the family. Whichever approach is adopted, the professional always starts by asking the others a question.

In this meeting, there were four professionals; the Approved Mental Health Practitioner (AMHP), the Social Worker (SW), the Psychiatrist, and the Orthopedagogue (OP). Together they attempt to produce meaning for a particular situation or what Rose (1996: 129) would term as 'a genealogy of subjectification', which in this context can be translated as a way in which professionals account for the

diversity of languages of personhood³⁷ that have taken shape for this mother and her child. Rose (1996), who was inspired by the writings of Michel Foucault, devised five directions (Problematization; Technologies; Authorities; Teleologies; Strategies) for identity investigation which arise from Foucault's (1991) work relating to the genealogy of the arts of government. Government (used in this instance to represent the VK agency) refers to the more or less rationalised programmes and strategies for the 'conduct of conduct' or rather where political rationalities gather together to achieve certain desirable objectives for a person.

Applied to this context, we can see that by clarifying the issue faced (problematization) this AMHP reflects on the conduct of this parent and how it has become problematic: 'Madam will not follow our guidance for the child'. The VK professionals assemble and draw from practical rationalities to reach a conscious goal (technologies) by drawing from their own observations and experiential judgements. As professionals they are accorded the capacity to confer about the mother and her child (authorities) and they collectively draw from their own specialist authority to develop their knowledge in order to resolve the issue faced by the AMHP.

However, rather than attempting to install a particular model for the parent (the mother) to follow, such as 'the social model' which we use in the Fenton department, in order to change the way in which she leads her life for the welfare of her child, we see instead a 'unification of subjectification' take place (teleologies). Rose (1996: 130) described the 'unification of subjectification' as the union of different objectives or diverse styles of thinking. He also argued that this rarely

³⁷ Rose (1996) used 'genealogy' to replace personhood as he felt genealogy focused on changing practices and techniques of conduct for the person, means through which human beings have learnt to conduct themselves as particular sorts of person.

happens within certain cultural situations, environments where people are exposed to just one dominant form of discourse, such as the Fenton department. However, in this context, we have four different professionals drawing from four different professional discourses- mental health, social work, pedagogy, psychiatry- all working together in an attempt to produce meaning and understanding for themselves and the family, whilst also providing this AMHP with an alternative way of working with the family (strategies).

Although I have used Rose (1996) to explain the methods used by this VK agency when carrying out case discussion, the professionals within this agency did not refer to their practice as the 'genealogy of subjectification' but as 'meta analysis' instead which, when I probed further, was explained to me by one CPP as 'you know a little bit of helicopter vision by the whole team'. I observed 12 of these case discussions and throughout this time I was not aware of there being any particular dominant professional discourse. In this particular case, the AMHP did not have to end the session by selecting a preferred answer from the group of professionals in the meeting. Instead he, and others who present their question to the team, are expected to reflect upon and consider *all* the suggestions provided before making any further decisions.

7.5.2 That's the habit here

This next extract is from a conversation with a student from a different VK agency to that of the extract in 7.5.1 above. I have used this extract to demonstrate how cultures can differ between the same agencies. For as Parker (2000) has argued 'organisational cultures' can be 'both similar and unique in that every organisation responds to generalizable structural pressures in the wider society, economy, culture

and so on but each organisation mediates and reproduces these pressures in a local manner’.

J: So have you enjoyed working here?

Student: Yes, very much

J: And it’s interesting that you are separate when it comes to lunchtimes, who told you to sit there? (the student had been sitting in the reception area)

Student: My mentor...that’s the habit here. Students don’t eat with staff.

J: And have you experienced that elsewhere?

Student: No just the first time here. In the other settings where I have worked we were all just one team and talked together also about personal stuff.

J: And how did that make you feel?

Student: Now, it’s just weird. When I come back after lunch I go to my place and I can hear them talking in their place and you want to join in but also you respect the line that they draw.

J: Is the secretary allowed to eat with them?

Student: Yes.

J: Everyone here is allowed to eat with them apart from students?

Student: Yes

J: But I was allowed to eat with them yesterday

Student: Yes I saw that (laughs). I don’t know why.

(Interview, day 3)

This interview presented me with a dilemma as it appeared to contradict my argument that the Flemish child protection professionals feel differently about their professional identity because they are situated within congruent cultures. For in this context we hear from a student, who although is enjoying the placement with this VK agency, is not allowed to eat with the permanent members of staff, or their visitors. This kind of behaviour does not ‘fit’ well with that of a congruent culture. It instead appears to contribute to that of a strong organisational hierarchy, one more commonly associated with an incongruent culture.

Trying to understand what this meant was therefore difficult for me to decipher, for the 'epistemological assumptions of social constructionism' that I had made of how different cultures functioned no longer fitted together so well within my 'lego brick form of systemizing' (Parker, 2000: 92). For in this VK agency, the team members were responding differently to students than in the other two settings that have been observed in this doctoral study, that being the other VK agency and the Fenton department. In both of these settings, students are encouraged to feel part of the team and there is no question of them sitting separately at lunch time. Yet in this instance there was a clear division, one that was immediately removed when or if the student applied for a job with this VK agency and subsequently became an employee.

So does this mean that this VK agency is incongruent? Weinberg (1993: 220) would argue that it does not. For even in congruent cultures, team members are not always in 'the best position to observe' what others need to 'solve a crisis'. Even though this is not technically a crisis and this student had accepted that sitting separately at lunchtimes was just the way things worked in this agency, this form of separation did nonetheless make this placement experience feel 'weird', for both this student and for me. It also indicated that in this VK organisation, hierarchy, positioning and practice experience were considered integral to the way this team functioned.

7.6 We need to bring science into our work.

CPP: And that's why it's important to discuss this amongst the team. We are good at discussing things but we are very bad at evidence based work.

J: Aha

CPP: I think that (names another CPP) said, and I think this is needed a lot in the confidential centres in Flanders, we need to work more evidence based and to bring

science into our work. It's a big handicap at the moment. I worry about what the future will bring as.... I have the impression that we don't have enough expertise in our work.

(Extract from interview 13)

Although the CPPs in this agency consider research as an important part of their work and use it to inform their practice, what the CPP in this interview is advocating is that they start to carry out their own research in order to develop their professional expertise. It is evident that research is considered in this context to be only that which derives from quantitative methods as particular reference is given to terms such as 'science' and 'evidence based practice'. The reasons behind this are explained further in an interview with another CPP from a different VK agency:

J: Tell me, how long you have been working here?

CPP1: 15 years....I find that doing research with practitioners, like you are doing, is not a common thing to do here. There is quite a strict divide between the two and if you don't do that you get a lot of criticism.

J: When you do it you mean?

CPP1: Yes and when you do it.

J: Oh. Are you getting criticised?

CPP1: I think it's because on one side it is about being very neutral. Can you really be a researcher of your own work? Because of the blind spots in your mind and the pre occupation with stuff maybe it's not possible to be a good researcher. And the other thing is I think it is threatening also. When practitioners come and do the stuff that researchers do, is that ok or not? And also when you mix these positions, I am a social worker in a confidential centre and I am doing research in the centre of child abuse and neglect and there are going to be recommendations in that research that will affect policy but are you neutral in that? Can we trust those recommendations because somebody in the field is involved with it? These are some of the questions I will face. Up until now that doesn't occur, I have not had that experience. Policymakers like it very much and the Minister likes it and he has a lot of people around him and they like it very much the idea that somebody from practice is doing research, up until now good yeah? But most of the criticism goes on in the research field and I can handle that I think. I think qualitative research is very important but it is not mainstream here in Flanders.

(Extract from interview, day 41)

This social worker is doing what the other CPP, in the previous extract in this section, recommends their centre start to do and what a rising number of academics recommend should take place in social work settings (see Beddoe and Harington, 2012; Shaw and Lunt, 2011): carry out research alongside their practice to promote their expertise. Munro (2012: 85) concludes in her final report that the current employment conditions in the UK are 'not conducive to developing the level of expertise that is potentially available to help children and their families'. But rather than practitioners carry out research, Munro (2012: 92) recommends that research is used as evidence in social work practice 'to drive up the level of expertise in the profession'.

Munro has also argued that research from both methodologies is important in social work, yet it is evident, from this extract, that quantitative research is seen as the more valid and rigorous form of research in Flanders, as this CPP explains, due to a number of reasons relating to bias and being neutral. Although this CPP has used both methods and admits he does value qualitative research, he is aware that he will face conflict from others within the research field in the future. Not purely because of the methods chosen but because, he is, like me, an 'intimate insider' within his field (Taylor, 2011: 8). Therefore, the concept of there being a practitioner/ researcher doing research within the field of child protection is a notion which is considered as 'threatening' for other non-practitioner/ researchers in Flanders.

At the time of this interview, I have to admit that I was not aware, or really sure, of what this CPP was inferring simply because I had never had to deal with any controversy relating to my 'position' within this doctoral study. But, as mentioned earlier, in Chapter 3, since this dialogue took place, I have encountered criticism at an International Conference from a Flemish academic who struggled to see 'the point' of

this research, a study which is carried out by a practitioner/ researcher whose findings contradict those of his own, a non-practitioner/ researcher. This CPP provides a possible explanation as to why I received such a response, one which he too expects to encounter, despite having already found that his insider knowledge has impressed policymakers within the Government. It is important to add here that his conflict with status in the academic world does not present as an issue for those whom this CPP works with; they instead value his approach and feel they have learned a lot from his role, as the next extract demonstrates:

J: Do you feel it has benefited the centre having a practitioner/ researcher on the team?

CPP2: Oh yes. He analyses all our statistics for us which shows us the rate at which we are working and where we might need to spend less time or more time but he also gets us to think differently or creatively at times when we get lost.

J: Yeah I noticed that he practises a little differently.

CPP2: He doesn't tell us 'this is the best way' but rather 'this might be another way'. We have changed because of him.

(Extract from interview, day 34)

I have mentioned on a couple of occasions throughout this thesis that I observed professionals in Flanders use film to show others how they practised during case discussions. The first time I saw this was when the practitioner/ researcher (CPP1) showed the video he made. CPP2 was also present. The video showed CPP1 talking with a child who was sharing information about her mother and her new partner and how she felt their relationship was affecting her and her sister. It was an emotive film to observe and it moved all the professionals in the room, the same professionals who had previously commented and advised on the case in earlier 'meta analysis' sessions. They admitted it brought a sense of 'real-ness' to the family and reminded them of

how difficult it was to reflect on cases they were so deeply involved in. They saw this video as an act of bravery on the CPP1's part and were also persuaded that this method could be of benefit to their own clinical practice.

This video demonstrated how important visual methods can be for reflection, team work collaboration, developing professional expertise and more importantly, for the welfare of the family. White (2006: 27) has argued that 'reflexive practitioners need to be able to tell stories about themselves and others' if they are to 'create possibilities that things could be otherwise'. In this instance, this is precisely what CPP1 has done. He has filmed the story of his interaction with a child he is working with to seek feedback from the team and reflect on his own practice in order to make a positive change for her future.

7.7 The supervision and training of support workers.

J: Right my other question, you mentioned before that you do supervision. Who do you supervise?

CPP: The nurses who do the home visits.

J: The nurses from Kind en Gezin?

CPP: Yes that's right. That's our project for 12 years now. We also give them training.

J: Yeah?

CPP: Mostly about learning how to explain their worries to the parents. In a way that it is clear and helping. They are our eyes and ears.

(Extract from interview, day 27)

Another part of the Flemish social worker's role is to give supervision and provide training to the social nurses (support workers) who are carrying out the visits on behalf of Kind en Gezin and the VK agency. It is during these sessions that the nurses are taught how to use Kevin Browne's assessment tool to measure risk, work with particular models of parenting such as Belsky (2007; 2008) and Triple P (Sanders, 1993). They are also made aware that they are the 'eyes and ears' for the VK agency.

It is through these sessions that 'blind spots' have been realised as well as 'gaps' in communication between the social nurse and the family. To overcome some of these blind spots, social nurses now work with families in pairs so that two different views of complex situations are established. Also 'experts by experience' have been employed to teach nurses how to communicate with and understand the needs of certain immigrant families (mainly Turkish and Moroccan). Therefore, rather than rely upon interpreters to translate for linguistic purposes only, the social nurses are instead educated by former newcomers to Flanders to be open and to listen to the needs of the family instead of informing the families how things work in the Flemish culture.

This additional role of being a supervisor for the Flemish social workers is not just beneficial for the social nurses carrying out the visits but also enables the social worker to link theory to practice and develops their expertise, an experiential form of knowledge which is appreciated and valued by others within the organisation. This strengthens my argument that the VK agency is indeed a congruent agency for as Weinberg (1993) has argued, where congruence is integrity at the most fundamental level, every service and individual who works for the organisation is appreciated for what they do. And in the next extract we will also see how it is not just the VK agency which values its employees:

CPP: I will explain to you how it is in Belgium and I am very happy with it. Next month I become 55 which means that right now I have my normal holidays and then extra. I get holidays for my age. From 45 it's one day a month extra. From 50 its two days a month and from 55 it's three days.

J: A month?

CPP: Correct.

J: So that means you get an extra 36 days a year?

CPP: Correct.

J: Nice. That works out as an extra 7 weeks a year.

CPP: I have to use them every month. So I must take the three days every month.

J: What's the age of retirement here?

CPP: Now, it's 65.

J: You say "now", what do you mean by that?

CPP: When I am 60 I will have four days a month.

J: Wow, that's amazing. And when you say "now" are you expecting that to change, is it going to be higher?

CPP: Yes.

J: Ok. Now when you say the extra holidays from age 45, is that for all employees across Flanders?

CPP: No, it's for Flemish people working in care services. Hospitals, institutions, agencies such as Kind en Gezin.

(Interview, Day 4)

I conclude this chapter with this extract to demonstrate how social care and health professionals are rewarded by the Flemish Government for the work that they do; they are given more annual leave as they grow older. This method shows how care professionals are valued and appreciated for the time and dedication they have devoted to their jobs. There is little wonder that this CPP feels 'very happy' about it.

And yet it is another complete contrast to that which social workers are experiencing in the Fenton department at present. As a result of funding being reduced by central government, certain local governments have had to reduce the number of staff within social care departments. Over the past three years, this has resulted in a number of job losses and a major restructuring of the services that are currently being provided. Social workers, who already feel demoralised and devalued, are now being faced with additional pressure as a reduction in workforce only leads to an increase in case loads. They are also aware that the current political party in power, the Conservatives-Liberal Democrat coalition, plan to 'toughen up the inspection regime' in the hope to improve 'the quality of practice and the impact of help provided' (Conservatives, 2012). This, I believe, will not enhance practitioners' expertise, but instead strengthen the incongruence already evident in agencies such as the Fenton department. Increasing annual leave for the members of the UK caring

professions as they grow older would never be considered an option in the current situation as absenteeism and sickness rates in children and families are reported to be the highest in social care (Coffey et al. 2004).

7.8 Summary

In Chapter 6 I asserted that social workers in the England were stigmatised as a result of being criticised by certain agencies, or ‘countervailing forces’, within society (Freidson, 1986: 208). I developed this assertion by explaining how particular organisational cultures of child protection can also fall into incongruence when the agency finds it is firmly entrenched within a context of blame. I also argued that once this happens, and a blame posture has been securely established, various forms of destructive discourse emerge such as blame shifting, which further endorse and encourage particular ways of thinking and behaving for all the professionals who draw from it.

In this chapter, I have analysed data from two Flemish child protection agencies and come to the conclusion that although there is, at times, distinct differences between the two centres and that, even by their own admissions, they are far from ‘perfect’, as a result of their shared philosophy, which advocates that parents need as much support as their children, a different sense of professional identity has developed for the practitioners who are employed. The reason why it is different is simply because they all belong to an organisation which practises congruently.

Rather than shift blame and reject responsibility, we instead see how managers encourage practitioners to take risks and make mistakes. Practitioners also integrate research into the way they work. They do not just read research papers in

the hope that it may *inform* the way they practise, they use specific tools so that it may *shape* the way they perform and they carry out their own research so that it *will* enable them to think creatively. This, what some might consider as precarious, way of working has not led to poor performance but instead encouraged effective practice. The reason why they feel comfortable taking risks and trialling new ways of working is because they are not solely accountable for the decisions that they make; they make decisions on their cases as a team therefore individual responsibility is instantaneously replaced with group accountability. And as a result, a different child protection culture can emerge. For when one person knows they will not be held responsible if a tragedy should occur then the act of blame shifting, which is rife within incongruent agencies, comes to a natural end.

We have also learned how as a result of the agency working in a truly multi professional way, a variety of different theoretical discourses are offered as remedies during case discussions. Reflexivity is in turn, promoted between and amongst team members. This leads to the process of 'knowledge making' amongst practitioners and prevents practice from 'becoming routine and taken for granted' (Taylor, 2006). It also ensures that both children and parents are provided with a holistic package of support, as practitioners use their own experience and draw from their native, professional backgrounds to connect both bodies of knowledge to the issue at hand: the needs of the family.

Although I have argued that this inter disciplinary way of working is beneficial for the families in need of support and is required if an agency is to be congruent, it does also, without doubt, dilute the identity of the child protection social worker. Rose (1996: 130) argued that 'devices of "meaning production", vocabularies, norms and systems of judgement, *produce* experience; they are not produced by experience'

(emphasis in original). In this case, social workers in the VK agency only use their professional label of 'social worker' to emphasise which theory they will be drawing from when different occupational rationalities gather together to achieve certain desirable outcomes for their clients. They do not need the social work classification to connect with other practitioners, for the same reason as they do not need to be part of a social work collective. Therefore instead of assuming, as I have done, that social work identity is required for social workers to feel they 'belong', these accounts show that the meaning of professional identity for Flemish social workers is something entirely different: in this setting, identity is not definitive or predetermined but constructed in a context where different professional capacities and attributes are developed.

These professionals do not fear being attacked by the same countervailing forces that we, in the Fenton department, encounter because these participants *do* feel appreciated, they *do* feel special and they *do* also value one other. This positive sense of identity stems from an agency which lacks incongruence. This lack of internal pressure and stress encourages the agency to move in a different direction: one which establishes a posture of compassion, where accusation and condemnation are refrained from and where parents do get a second chance, not only for their sake but for the sake of their children.

Chapter 8: Summary and conclusion

8.1 Summary

You know at the end of the day, I miss the hands on social work practice. I know it sounds idealistic but I became a social worker so I could make a difference. I didn't have a good childhood myself you know and so I thought I would be able to make a change, work with kids who were where I once was. That role, well, it's for support workers now and that makes me feel really sad.

(Interview with social worker, England, day 43).

I think it is important to feel safe in a team and feel that the work you do is important. I have worked here for a while now and I wouldn't go anywhere else. I still enjoy coming to work as each day brings something new. We love that, we love that challenge. What can we do to help this family today? Yeah, I don't know what we would be without that.

(Interview with CPP, Flanders, day 24).

This doctoral study has involved the use of a comparative ethnography; a method employed to explore how certain cultural factors impact on the way child protection professionals, from two different agencies, construct their identity. I have drawn from the theoretical orientation of social constructionism throughout my work in order to consider how certain circulating discourses have affected their thoughts, feelings and meaning making practices.

This has been, for me, the most intriguing journey I have ever taken. I did not expect that it would have so many ups and downs or twists and turns as it did but as I reach the end I have come to realise that this is what qualitative research is all about: making sense of tales from the unexpected (Leigh, 2013a). Although I was aware that life as a front line social worker in England could be tough I was certainly not prepared for three social workers to be suspended and/or dismissed within such a short space of time soon after I started data collection. The impact of these actions did have a detrimental impact on the Fenton department and has definitely affected the findings of this study. However, this does not suggest that the data in this study should be dismissed as invalid, for although this kind of behaviour may seem extreme

to some, as we have seen from the literature, there is evidence of similar activity occurring in other organisations across the social work profession. I am also aware that the data I have collected from Flanders does suggest that the VK agency is an idyllic place to work in contrast to the statutory work that is carried out in the Fenton department. Although this may seem idealistic to some, I can only record that which I found, that which I will now go on to summarise.

I have used the quotes at the beginning of this chapter to conclude and succinctly distinguish the differences between the two agencies that have taken part in this study. By starting from the wider perspective of child protection (Chapter 4), I began by exploring how certain external agencies influence the way in which professionals practise. I have asserted that in England the client is no longer the client as the views of society have influenced the assessment and dominated the process. Although social workers are still committed to the values of their profession they also have to deal with the stigmatisation they have been afforded by others; this negative perception of who they are has not only affected their identity but has also affected the way that they think in practice. As Clark (2003: 438) has argued, stigmatisation is a problem for when it does occur it 'affects people's lives socially, economically and psychologically'.

In contrast, by using Flanders as a comparative element, I have seen a difference in the way professionals go about constructing their identity. For as a result of the different societal attitudes towards Flemish child protection professionals, these practitioners feel revered for what they do and as a consequence this impacts on the way they practise, and encourages them to do better for their clients, or rather, the families whom they are there to support.

By using photographs from both settings (Chapter 5), I have been able to demonstrate the similarities and differences between the two locations. I have argued that the environment within which professionals are situated does play a fundamental part in, not only the way the agency functions, but also the way in which professionals perceive their role and those of their families; for the 'ideas of place, place-image and how we imagine spaces to be, are central to the construction of [professional] identity' (Clark, 2003: 432). In England, it is evident that whilst 'the fortress [of] social work' has been established to strengthen the social work identity of practitioners it has also, nonetheless, encouraged distinct power differences between the professional and the client (see Richardson, 2011). By framing parents and children as the objects of assessments, social workers have not been encouraged to view them as subjects of their own practice. In contrast, in Flanders, parents and children have played an integral element in the way their agencies have been designed. Through their visual dialogue with the client they have aimed to recover what has been lost by making connections through symbolic gestures. As a result, we have seen how work environments do provide particular canvases from which professionals and families draw meaning; for 'material conditions and social practices are inextricably bound up in discourse' (Burr, 2003: 118).

By focusing on the daily activities of life inside of the agencies (Chapter 6 and 7) I have been able to see contrasting micro cultures emerge. From my observations, notes and interviews I have asserted that the cultures within these agencies vary depending on their levels of (in)congruence. I have argued that as a result of the Fenton department being firmly embedded within a blame culture in society, their organisational hierarchy has become affected and fallen into incongruence. Subsequently an act of blame shifting has emerged as a dominant cultural discourse,

one which sees all members within the organisation resorting to various defensive techniques as a means of distraction and protection. In order not to be blamed for making the 'wrong' decision, participants have learned to place the blame on another and in an incongruent agency, such as the Fenton department, this cyclical method has become an endemic form of practice. These actions do not lead to a strong group identity but rather to that of 'fragmented unities', as we see members of a collective come together at certain times but drift apart during others (Parker, 2000: 1); for when subject to countervailing forces which are present not only on the inside but on the outside of their discipline, these members of the Fenton department have had to develop their own techniques in order to survive.

In contrast, we have been presented with how congruent cultures (Chapter 7), like those from the VK agencies, can work to improve the experience of the child and their family whilst enabling professionals to feel valued and appreciated by their organisation. Although there is information to suggest that not all aspects of these agencies work perfectly, as a result of their shared philosophy, joint accountability and lack of blame shifting discourse, we instead see how these practitioners are encouraged to take risks for the sake of the child.

8.2 Limitations

A primary limitation in this study is the obvious differences between the data collected in England compared with that which was gathered in Flanders. In England data was collected over a six month period whereas in Flanders, it was only carried out over six non-consecutive weeks. Therefore, some of the cases that were seen during week 1 were not the same as those observed in subsequent weeks. This inconsistency most certainly interrupted the flow of data and any emerging themes.

However, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007: 37) warn the researcher that prolonged, uninterrupted periods of fieldwork do not always produce good quality data and instead recommend the researcher be selective and intersperse their data collection with 'periods of productive recording and reflection' to gain better quality data.

Another limitation is also an imbalance in data with relation to the documents that have been analysed. As mentioned previously, the gathering of formal documents only took place in England mainly due to not being provided with the necessary passwords to access the files in Flanders and not speaking Dutch thus not being able to read the reports that were shown to me when in Flanders. Although I did bear witness to some of the reports during case discussions, these were read to me and therefore translated to me by the professionals with whom I was sat next to. The difference in the time spent in each setting has also contributed to and impacted on the amount of data gathered as there is far more data from England than from Flanders. However, as Mason (2002) has argued it is the quality, and not the quantity, of the data that is used and analysed that is important. I have kept this in mind when selecting the extracts which now appear in this thesis.

There is also a clear lack of consideration of the parent and child in both England and Flanders, that is the two way interaction that has emerged between both client and professional and how this might serve to impact on the way the practitioner views their own identity. Although this was observed more readily in Flanders (as clients regularly *come to* the office whereas in England practitioners often *go to* the homes of clients) only one extract is referred to in this thesis. However, the comments of the Flemish parents did serve to replace the data I was unable to access so readily- the case reports. In England, on the other hand where I was able to access case notes about clients, I was able to gain additional information

from social workers as to how they feel the families they work with view them, but admittedly this is the view of the social worker and not the parent and/or the child.

Finally, it is imperative to consider the subjective nature of ethnography which has been criticised in the past by certain positivists for lacking scientific rigour (see Sheldon, 2001). To overcome these issues, qualitative researchers refer to the concept of reflexivity as a means of acknowledging the orientations of the researcher and accepting that these will be shaped by their socio-historical locations, values and interests. Locating myself and achieving reflexivity in the field within which I am firmly embedded is an activity which is hard to accomplish in ethnographic research. Methods texts devote considerable space to the problem of over familiarity stressing the importance of devising specific strategies in dealing with this issue (see Delamont, 1992; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Lofland and Lofland, 1995). These critics acknowledge that there are difficulties in achieving such a stance but argue that the naivety of the 'stranger- ethnographer' is one that provides an analytic cutting edge- allowing original questions to be posed, capturing the complexities of social life.

However, Coffey (1999: 22) argues that by ignoring the ethnographic presence and instead striving hard to eliminate the 'over-familiarity' one may render the familiar researcher mute, serving 'to deny the experiential in fieldwork'. She also points out that ethnography is more often carried out by members of that culture than by complete strangers, 'so who is a stranger or a member, an outsider or an insider, a knower or an ignoramus is all relative and much more blurred than conventional accounts might have us believe'.

In this study, I have made it clear that I too worked alongside my colleagues whilst conducting the research. The issues that have affected them, also affected me. I was as much part of the Fenton department as they were and to remove myself from

it felt epistemologically wrong. Therefore rather than deny my presence, in the text, I openly refer to it. I have introduced my own thoughts and reflections and have analysed my own words in the same way as that of my participants/colleagues.

As mentioned previously, to try and achieve reflexivity and make the data from England more obvious or visible, I used a comparative ethnographic stance by separating my time and travelling to Flanders. In this setting, despite being positioned as an 'outsider' initially it was not long before I found myself privy to 'insider' information. Ybema and Kamsteeg (2009) warn the ethnographer not to accept complete immersion within the field and recognise the importance of distancing. They recommend taking up a 'dual stance' which initiates 'an intimate familiarity' with the field which 'is simultaneous with the distance and detachment with it'. Some of the 'close the door moments' have been difficult to share within this thesis, most probably because being told them by a 'stranger' has felt more personal than being told them by friend or colleague with whom I work. Yet Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) argue that these conflicting loyalties and discomfiting experiences are a vital source in ethnographic work as they place the researcher at a reflexive distance. Therefore, in this thesis I have discussed the fear, confusion, surprise and frustration that I have experienced throughout this study, in order to make my position explicit and transparent for the reader to scrutinise.

Although using comparative ethnography as a method has had its benefits, it has also had its limitations. Langstrup and Winthereik (2008: 382) warn the researcher of creating a 'hierarchal relationship' between the two settings being observed. This study has most certainly acknowledged distinct contrasts between the English and the Flemish contexts with the former culture being identified as incongruent and the latter as congruent. However, in order to avoid bias I have also

aimed to highlight 'the discrepancies' found in Flanders and tried to explain these as critically as I possibly could. It is therefore important for the reader to recognise that, as with all research, the findings presented in this thesis are solely my interpretations of the data and to be mindful of a point I have raised earlier and refer to once more to conclude this section, 'texts do not tell "the truth", they [just] tell versions from which the reader will make sense' (Hicks, 2008: 91).

8.3 Conclusion

I do believe that much of that which I have explored in this thesis has already been considered by others in similar settings previously, but what, I hope, makes this thesis different is the comparative method I have employed to provide much needed up to date evidence. The findings presented here offer an insider view of what is actually going on 'behind closed doors' in some of the child protection agencies operating in the UK who are trying to provide a service and deal with the current climate: a climate which is enveloped in fear, with professionals working at the heart of it who are frightened of 'getting [it] wrong' (Ayre and Calder, 2010: 39; Lonne et al. 2008; Stafford et al. 2011). Although many readers will already be aware of the negative attitudes held by society towards child protection social work in the UK, and some may also suspect that this might then have a detrimental impact on those carrying out the work, little is actually known about the actual effect these views have on some of those working on the front line; those who are committed to the job that they do, who choose to remain in a hostile environment simply because they love what it is they do.

I have aimed to bridge this gap by explicating how social workers go about constructing their identity in their work by using a comparative element to also show

how differently this is then carried out in Flanders. My focus throughout this thesis has been on how both macro and micro cultures in child protection can affect the way social workers perceive who they are; this has, in turn, led to an explanation of why practitioners perform the way they do and why this can then impact on the identity of the families with whom they work. It is as a result of the interactions and exchanges that these professionals have, either actively or implicitly, been involved in that their identity has, and always will be, subject to change depending on the discourses that are made available to them. For 'we can only represent our experiences to ourselves and to others by using the concepts embedded in our language...our thoughts, our feelings...our behavior are all pre-packed by language' (Burr, 2003: 53).

Yet despite understanding how these professionals construct their identity within the professional context, we are still left with a dilemma: the reputation of social workers in the UK today, for as Clark (2003: 438) has argued, 'stigma sticks'. And if we are to improve the experiences of families subject to statutory intervention whilst keeping children safe from harm then the perception of social workers in the UK does need to change from one that is affixed with stigma to one that is credited with pride, as it is in Flanders. This is not an easy task to undertake and I do agree with Trowler and Goodman (2012: 161) that there is a 'national crisis within the profession'. This thesis has provided research which supports this comment by showing how the negative perception and stigmatisation of social workers is endemic in certain incongruent agencies. And I do believe this *is* an issue. Unless it is resolved, the Munro Review (2012) and the College of Social Work will have a difficult time convincing society, the Government and the media that social workers do deserve a more positive image and should be allowed to develop a revered reputation, one like they used to have in the early 1900s (see Ferguson, 2011).

Stafford et al. (2011: 63) have argued that 'in practice the lessons from comparative work are often difficult to draw from and difficult to apply' yet I do believe that there are many encouraging messages to have emerged from the data collected from Flanders, which if considered seriously, could present agencies in the UK with a number of opportunities to make simple yet progressive changes. One relatively straightforward alteration could be that which has been discussed in great detail in Chapter 5: the use of space and environment and symbolic images and gestures. If local authorities look for ways in which they can open up the channels of communication between practitioners and families, they may start not only to develop a different meaning of identity for professionals on the frontline but also encourage the start of a new discourse, one which evokes care and consideration for their clients. And as Lonne et al. (2008: 7) have argued, the time has now come for a 'renewed focus on child and family well-being rather than investigation and surveillance'.

By re-evaluating where and how the majority of 'child protection social work' takes place in the UK and comparing this with how it is carried out in Flanders, professionals could start to spend more 'quality' time with the families they are working with. For this to happen however, considerable thought would need to be applied to the current establishments which house child protection agencies in order to transform them from fortresses which encourage power indifferences and alienate clients (see Richardson, 2011) into spaces which welcome children and families and provide comfort, anonymity and safety for families to embrace or contemplate change.

Another, rather more complex challenge, is the complete eradication of incongruent cultures, cultures such as the one featured in this study. The Fenton

Department has demonstrated a need for this change and has highlighted well how child protection social work should *not* function. One method which is in operation in England, and has a number of similarities to the social welfare approach, is the Reclaiming Social Work Model in that they do accept professionals make mistakes, they do aim to privilege the voices of parents and carers, they try to create critical partnerships with other professions and they are learning how to take informed risks (Trowler and Goodman, 2012). This new system has shown one innovative way forward and does appear to provide some interesting contrasts to the incongruent culture described in Chapter 6. Although there has been an independent review of this model (see Cross et al. 2010), what is needed now is constructive research evidence which may encourage other local authorities to consider adopting and implementing this particular framework, or be inspired to set about creating their own.

Whatever the future holds, and whatever is decided, one thing I am certain of is this: it does not matter how many professional development courses social workers attend to 'challenge difficult parents' or 'recognise poor practice' in order to 'become a *better* social worker', if the organisation they work for is in a state of incongruence then trying to encourage better practice is simply futile. The main aim for future educators, elected council members and the Government is to recognise the damage blame shifting has caused and act to eliminate it, not only for the benefit of the professional but also for the sake of the child and their family. The only way this can be done is for senior members at the top of the local authority hierarchy to learn how to identify the blame posture they are in and alter it by making the necessary changes needed so that *all* members within their agency can begin to practise congruently.

And finally, it is important to note that whilst this study has focused on the construction and reconstruction of professional identities, it has also aimed to show that like the practitioners Ferguson (2011: 25) referred to in the UK from the 1870s and 80s, the professionals from England who took part in this ethnography were also 'no mere organisational dupes'. For, unlike their predecessors, they have learned that they have to follow 'the agency rules' in order to endure in a job they love. They have dealt with the chaos which surrounds it by 'finessing incivility' (see Thomas, 2013:11). That is, they have had to develop tactics and strategies in order to handle and manipulate the difficult situations they are faced with. Because, at the end of the day, 'none of us is truly taken in by the lies, damn lies and social work statistics' (Miller, 2008: 237). These social workers may not like the way they are treated and they may not be 'deeply respected' by others but they do still have a vision: to try and keep children safe from harm. 'I know this' because like White 'I [too] have been one of them' (1997: 326).

Appendix A:

Literature search

Databases searched:

Academic Search Premier
Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts
Care Knowledge
CINAHL
Sociological Abstracts
Social Care Online
Social Services Abstracts
Web of Knowledge
Wiley

Grey Literature

EthOS
General Social Care Council
Google Scholar
SCIE
Intute: Social Sciences
Social Perspectives Network
Social Policy and Social Work Policy Information Service
Social Services Research Group
Social Science Research Network
System for Information on Grey Literature in Europe Archive (SIGLE)

Journals

British Journal of Social Work
Journal of Social Work
Qualitative Social Work
European Journal of Social Work
Child and Family Social Work
Journal of Contemporary Ethnography
Ethnography the Journal

Citation Search of Key article

Author Search

If an author is identified as writing key articles then I will search for his or her other work in search engines

Appendix C

Interview consent and data processing statement

If you consent to being interviewed and to any data gathered being processed as outlined below, please print and sign your name, and date the form, in the spaces provided.

- This project - 'Exploring the identity of child protection professionals: A comparative ethnography' - is being conducted by Jadwiga Leigh from the University of Salford, School of Social Work, Psychology and Public Health, Fredrick Road Campus, Salford, M6 6PU. Email: j.t.leigh1@edu.salford.ac.uk. It is funded entirely by the Graduate Teaching Assistantship stipend from the University of Salford.

* Consent is entirely voluntary. You will not be coerced in any way to take part in this study. You also have the right to withdraw at any time without having to give a reason. If you do decide to withdraw you will have the choice as to whether I use or destroy the material that has already been collected from you. If you want me to destroy it, this is not a problem. I will shred all transcriptions and delete the audio recorded interviews.

- All data will be treated as personal under the 1998 Data Protection Act, and will be stored securely.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed by Jadwiga Leigh.
- Copies of interview tapes and transcripts will be offered to University of Salford.
- A copy of your interview transcript will be provided, free of charge, on request.
- Data collected may be processed manually and with the aid of computer software.
- Please indicate, by ticking ONE of the boxes below, whether you are willing to consent and whether I may quote your words directly, in reports and publications arising from this research.

I may be identified using my chosen false name in reports made available outside this study from the University of Salford and any other publications. My words may be quoted provided that they are anonymised.

I may not be identified in reports made available outside the research teams and the University of Salford, nor in any publications. My words may not be quoted.

Please print your name:.....

Signature:..... Date:.....

Appendix D

Letter informing participants of PhD study

Dear.....

In September I will be carrying out a research project for my PhD for a period of approximately six months.

It will be a comparative study that aims to explore the ways professionals construct their identity in child protection social work in the UK and in Belgium.

Data collection will involve participant observation. Other data collection will involve any follow up interviews with social workers- mainly aiming to learn about their own experiences and views of being a social worker in a statutory setting as well as documentation analysis (such as CP plans, assessments and case notes etc).

I have planned to attend a team meeting in September to talk through the project with everyone and then approach social workers individually to talk about the study, answer any queries and seek consent from participants. If anyone does not wish to take part, please do not worry I will not force or coerce you to! If those who do consent request to withdraw at a later date, their decision will be respected and the data collected pertaining to their views will not be used.

I will anonymise all identifying details of participants and the final thesis will only refer to the department as a 'Local Authority in England'.

I have attached a Participation Information Sheet if anyone is interested in learning a little more about what the study might entail. However, in the meantime, if you have any further queries please do not hesitate to contact me.

Many thanks

Appendix E.

Sub meeting 1st day.

I: Do any of your families speak French?

SW: No I don't speak French very good.

I: Don't you? I noticed in Leuven that there weren't any French signs anywhere.

SW: No no. There wouldn't be but you would have to know the history to understand that. There has been a quarrel between the French and the Flemish, well it's not going that well.

We enter the room. SW introduces me to the team. (Look at diagram to see who is in the room. There is coffee, tea on table).

SW: Just so you know these are not fixed groups they rotate between the team members. So the purpose of these meetings is to gather together and discuss cases. The lead of the case will normally start with a question that will focus on what they want us to think about. So then we listen to what he would say and do and then we formulate our answer. What we would do in this situation.

The MHP then goes to the board and draws a genogram.

MHP: The genogram. My question is: Madam will not follow our guidance for the child so do we stop here or go to another service or do we go to the justice?

Social worker: I will try and explain it because I don't he did that very well. So he offered some guidance, he tried to install some therapy that would help mother and children and what he is saying now is that she refused so he doesn't know what to do and has come to us to ask some advice.

Psy: And one of those possibilities is to go to court.

Social worker: Because we are not able to organise this. Our organisation is completely separate to court.

MHP: He then goes on to give the context of the case. There was a first question in 2005 when mother and father were together and that was a question of the grandparents, the parents of the father. They said to me that there was physically abuse and more especially physical neglect. From father and mother. So I had contact with these parents once and there was no concern for me then. The nurse from K&G was also not concerned about the neglect.

Psy: So you mean physical neglect or abuse?

MHP: Neglect. And my reason to stop it was because there was good connection between parents and children. Then for five years nothing and in 2010, the nurse contacted me to say that the parents have divorced and it is acrimonious (a fightful divorce). The parents have been separated a few months when she called. The nurse recommended the mother get in contact with our centre because of the false accusations of the grandmother towards her sister and her family. The sister and her were together. Then there is a situation in 2008 of acrimonious. When there is no contact between father and mother and father and the children. The children are divorced too. Then I see mother and she is offered care mother is fairly open to me and it is very difficult from this moment. Mother is depressed at that moment but there is good interaction between them both but mother is not good at all. She doesn't feel ok. It is also a mother with limited possibilities. But she agrees to start guidance with us at that moment. I contact K&G outreach team (with educators who come at home and train parents). But there is contact between me and K&G at home but in 2011 there is a new friend of mother and the parents of this new friend of mother contact us and tell us that there is physical abuse and emotional neglect. And I see mother and her new boyfriend together here and the boyfriend says to me that the parents of him do not agree with the relationship and that is the reason why they

contact the centre. He also said that he is also a victim of child abuse and he has been in different institutions. Then she said to me the mother that the K&G guidance has stopped but she said that they don't give her a good reason. So I contact them and they say that mother does not want to receive help at that moment. So there are several contacts over the next few months, mother separates from that friend and goes living to another place but I call her and she said that there is a new friend. This is the third one. It is quite difficult to get contact with her because she doesn't answer when I call her and when I have contact I talk about reinstalling home guidance but she says she does not need that. She says it is good with the girl and the father has stopped fighting and there is good contact with him and the girl. When she comes here I see a mother with no skills. She is vulnerable. I contacted the school but school don't see a problem and they have good contact with the child. I blocked on the situation but there is with me some worries. I still see some problems. I feel that there is something not very good there. The different boyfriends, then the move and it's not good for the child I think.

Social worker: So do we put pressure on it or do we go to court?

Psy: I feel very concerned because mother lacks capacity on one hand and on the other there is problem with her attachment behaviour she is in many relations and in her relations there is a lack of self regulation. She travels from one man to another. So the question is how does the child deal with attachment and regulation. So we have a woman here who needs a partner, always looking for someone who will be on her side, she does not tolerate this for a long time and sometimes we as partners are accepted as caregivers and at that moment she forges with us and we are then seen as the partner because we are offering attachments and say things such as 'we want to help you, we want to offer you a secure attachment and she is not able to come into a

complementary relation with a partner at those moments she can accept a short period and then she says 'I am going on my own' so it suggests she is a maltreated child herself. She never learned to compensate for her attachment problems.

OP: And even in your stories I do not hear something about her missing her other daughter.

MHP: No

OP: So it's like children are separated as well. I know we are talking about the mother, but I also have some questions about the father. I think the father can have a compensating role so I think I should try to see both parents. To talk about the relationship between the parents and the daughters. They had no contact with each other. What is the reason why they let it go? Why did they choose for one child and not the other one? And then we can offer help for both of them and not just the mother. I think she came for help and now we say 'You have to...' I think that is difficult but I think there is a big problem with both of them as they don't have enough skills.

Social worker: I think it is also important to look for a social network. Not only for raising the children but also for this mother and the father. It sounds like this is a mother with disability. I don't know what it is but is there anybody or service she can contact to help her? Not only from the perspective of being a mother who can raise her children but for her, but thinking that she is also in need of support as she is a victim of child abuse.

Psy: But how will she overcome her fundamental problem because if we put a network around her or something else we will always be confronted by her attachment problems. She only accepts the help that she can choose so I think that we

need some pressure as she has to know that she has to accept some form of help otherwise we do have to go to court.

OP: But we have no possibilities to go to court because we don't have...

Psy: No

OP: Aside from the children so if you want to do something for the children and we hope we can do something for the mother because for me the only pressure is to take the moat(?)

Social worker: I mean up until now all she has heard is that she is not a good enough mother.

Psy: Yes but she has to be able to do something about that. If we had grandparents or other people who were sitting around then perhaps we could remain in contact but this is the third report we have here and what is concerning is that in the first report it is only neglect in the second one it is neglect plus physical abuse but now the child is a few years older and that means with the child becoming older that if necessary when mother wants to enforce her opinion she adds physical abuse so it is becoming more serious and if we wait some years there will be more evidence so I think that we need to invite both parents and see if they are a different system or function the same together and perhaps the father has more healthy reflections to give but the other possibility we explain to mother that today we are talking to her as a free help in order to avoid other kinds of forced help but if necessary if it is not necessary to collaborate then we will have to talk with the court systems. At this moment there is no evidence to go to court as there is nothing observed but in a few years there will be.

Appendix F

Interview with manager

I: So tell me what are the strengths and what are the weaknesses in management?

M: I do believe and I know sounds a bit corny but I did a management qualification a few years ago and we did NVQ level 5 and I did that level 5 and it didn't teach me anything new but it did remind me about stuff I had forgotten about where I would like to be going. It wasn't rocket science and by covering bits of it in the social work course and it did pull it together nicely and the emphasis on your personality and management style. Interestingly enough they did ask me about that in the interview because there were two things they wanted to know: they wanted to know about my management style and how I saw myself as a manager and what I would be able to offer Xxxx and they wanted to know specifically with how I would handle performance and how I would tackle poor performance.

I: Were you surprised that they asked you that?

M: I wasn't surprised that I had those questions but I was surprised by how they came and there wording but I wasn't surprised when I went for a job in XXXX and I didn't want it by the end of the interview because one of the questions they asked was about that and said 'you will be working as a manager in a safeguarding team where you will be concerned about the performance of your staff, how will you effectively raise performance in your team and how will you quickly expedite it?' and as soon as they asked that question I thought this is not where I want to work because it was the tone of the question that told me everything I needed to know about that organisation. It isn't quite that bad here but it was a very chatty interview and all very soft and fluffy and these are the things they wanted to know underneath it all.

I: Because you came at quite a significant time really, were you aware that we were down to two and one of our colleagues had been suspended?

M: I don't know if they put quite like that. But yeah I was aware that there was an issue. I don't think they told me that someone had been suspended, I think they told me that they had a continuing absence.

I: Right

M: That needed to be managed. But I knew what they meant. Yes I knew what I was getting when I came here. But I do think that you see what you want to see and what I saw when I met you all I thought it's not actually that bad it's fine. And then you start talking to other people and everybody has a view on what happened and when and whatever and you were all quite friendly and chatty and so on but what I didn't realise was quite unhappy you all were. And I realise, well experience told me that there would be an impact from the loss of a colleague through suspension I was surprised to see the depth of the impact.

I: Really? Well that's really interesting.

M: Yes. And I think it's affected you all more than you realise. Some of you have greater insight than others. Some of you recognise the impact but some of you let's just say...perhaps you all internalise it differently and some of you just say 'I want to go' but nevertheless I think people are feeling very uncertain and it is not surprising that xxxx would but I think it's because it keeps happening. People are being moved around and things are happening here and I hope we can work through it but I do think it is quite damaging but I don't know because I have only been here a few weeks and I suppose you are asking me to reflect on what I saw initially and what I came to believe and what I believe now but all of that has happened in a very short space of time and that's difficult to unpick but I don't feel frightened here probably because I

am an interim and I am only supposed to be here 12 weeks and if it ends after that then so what. So I don't have anything to be overly worried about but I know that I don't want to change my management style to fit in with the defensive ways of Xxxx because I am going to be a manager somewhere else when I leave here and it might suit you but it might not suit your colleagues but that is not necessarily a reason to see why I should change what I have been developing for the last 15 years.

I: That takes quite a strength of character to not adapt to a culture, don't you think?

M: Well I am not saying I won't be affected by the culture because it can be insidious and so I might look back on myself and think 'Oh you wouldn't have done before you had gone to Xxxx' so I can't say what the result will be til I have gone But I don't feel inclined to do 'Oh god I have to do that then' but I have spent that period of time tip toeing around, I mean Xxxx doesn't want me to spend any money, no one will agree on what I can authorise and what I can't authorise but it has become very apparent that I just have to manage this and actually people aren't very interested in what I do they just want it to go away and not cost anymore money. But they don't want to say what my parameters are. It's interesting because if they are not clear about what I am supposed to do and what I am not, they can blame when I don't do it but they are not responsible when I do do it but fine I can play that game and I will make the decisions and I will explain that I have when I am asked to but in the absence of anything tangible I will continue to do so. I don't know how well that will go down but it has gone down reasonably alright when I have been other places but I do have to remember my place here and I need to keep reminding myself about that and I am very surprised what Xxxx has to take to Xxxx. I think 'You are team manager. Sort it out yourself'. But I think everyone will have a view of Xxxx and Xxxx and me and xxx and xxxxx, all across the organisation but I think that everyone else assumes that

someone is being nasty or manipulative or whatever but I think what it is everybody is a bit scared and everybody is feeling it. It's been interpreted differently because if you are the one who has just had the criticism you are going to feel picked on but the person who is picking is frightened is because someone is picking on them. I haven't sorted that bit out yet. It was a bit odd when I first came because people talked very positively about xxxx and about Xxxx and my very brief interactions with both of them but they have asked me to do a couple of things and then they have 'thanked' me for doing it so it has all been very pleasant and very personable so when you come in you feel that and you think 'oh that's quite nice' but there is an undercurrent and you don't know quite where that is coming from. I have my suspicions about where that is though.

I: So where is that then?

M: Well this is the difficult thing because you are now asking me questions but I am still aware that I am your manager.

I: Oh yeah. It isn't? (both laugh)

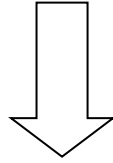
M: I think there are...well I would like to say exactly what I want to say but I don't think it's fair and then you will know what I have said and then you will know it and then you will know it aside from your PhD so I am not going to say it explicitly but I know and think that there are I think this organisation can change and I think that at a senior management level it is more facilitative than bullying or directive but I think there is a strong performance culture emerging. I know you think it is here now but I don't think it is here yet and I think it is going to get a lot worse and I think there needs to be a stronger framework to support it so it won't feel onerous in the way that they did in Xxxx. What I think that there are a small number of managers here that have a particular style and I think that is influencing the tone of the authority.

I: But which tier?

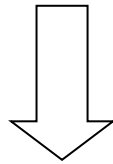
M: I would see that tier within the second line management.

Appendix G: Organisational Hierarchy of the Fenton Department (2011-2012)

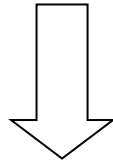
Assistant Director for Children's Social Care (social worker) x1



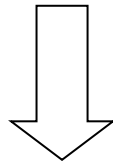
Service Unit Manager (social worker) x 2



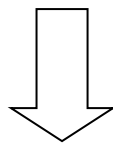
Team Manager (social worker) x 4



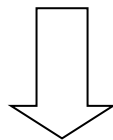
Assistant Team Manager x 8



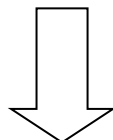
Senior Practitioner x 8



Social Workers x 36

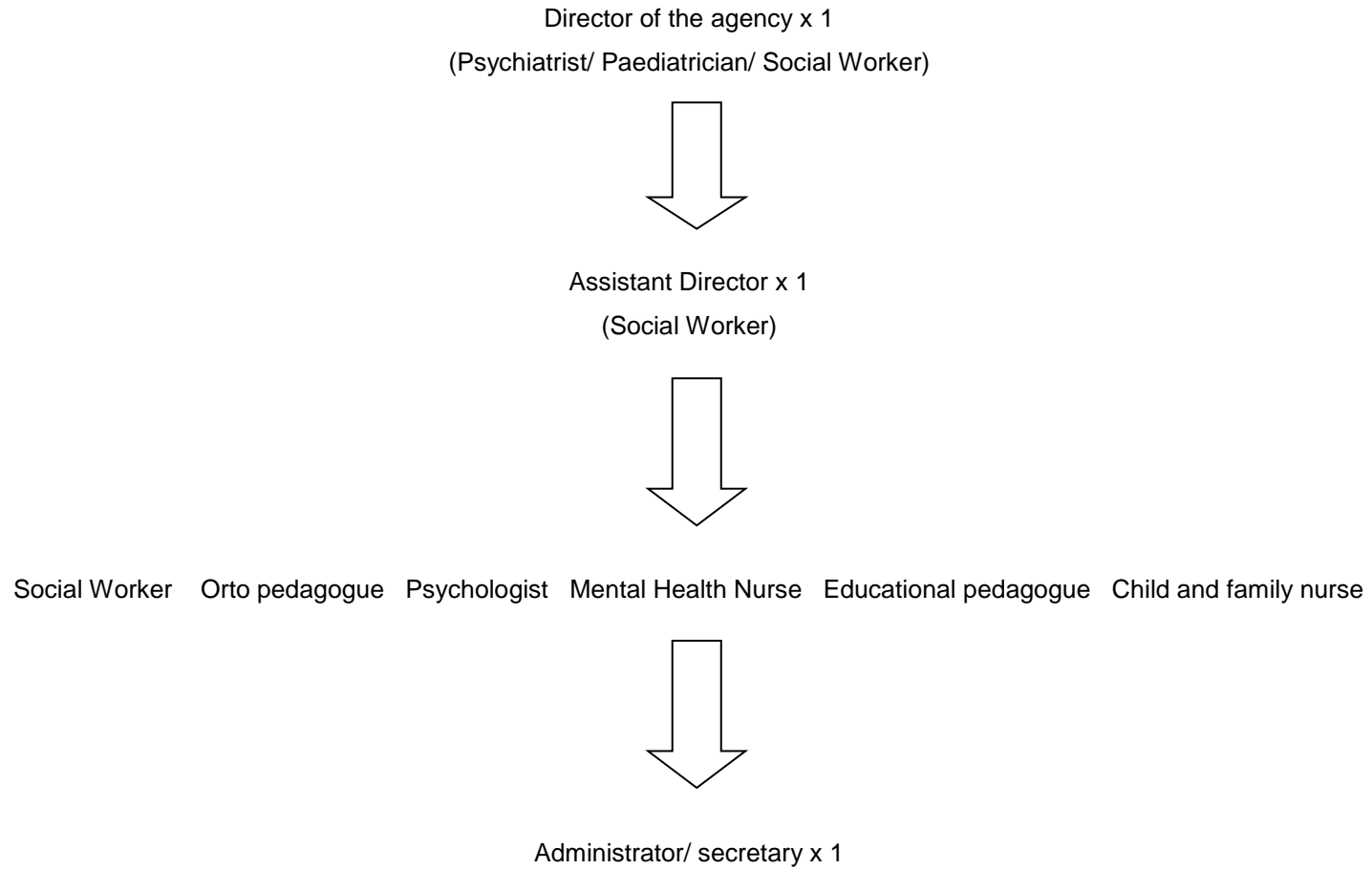


Support workers x 44



Business Administrators x 10

Appendix H: General Organisationl Heirarchy of VK agencies in Flanders (2011-2012)



APPENDIX I:

In Chapter 6, I focused on the way the culture of an organisation can affect the identity of the professional in the UK statutory agency I worked for and observed in the North West of England, better known as ‘the Fenton department’. By drawing from the philosophical perspective of social constructionism my argument throughout this chapter was that individuals are not entirely free agents when they are firmly situated within a social or cultural location. I argued that in order to understand who child protection social workers are we needed to be prepared to view them as ‘embedded in historical context’ (Strauss, 1977:164). I concluded by explaining how particular organisational cultures of child protection, such as that of the Fenton department, can also fall into incongruence when the agency finds it is firmly entrenched within a context of blame. I argued that once this happens, and a blame posture has been securely established, various forms of destructive discourse emerge; discursive regimes which further endorse and encourage particular ways of thinking and behaving for *all* the professionals who draw from it.

In that chapter I focused predominantly on how these discursive regimes affected the practitioners who were, at the time, working in the agency. Yet there was one person who also worked in this incongruent organisation whose personal reflections I did not include: my views of how this particular micro culture had affected my own professional practice. The purpose of this confessional appendix, therefore, is to explore the personal politics I encountered as a practising social worker within this same agency. Foucault (in Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983:216) once said that ‘maybe the target nowadays is not to discover who we are but to refuse what we are’. In this instance, therefore, rather than analyse how I constructed my professional identity in this particular agency, I want to spend some time considering

how I refused to accept what I had become as a result of being a member of the Fenton department.

The story of the PPO³⁸ queen and the production of a spoiled identity.

During the data collection part of this study, I carried out an interview with a manager, which was for me a particularly interesting dialogue, especially when we entered into a discussion about culture and identity. This manager was new to the agency and he was explaining to me that he did not want to change his management style to fit in with what he considered to be “the defensive ways” of the Fenton department. His reasons were that he had been shaping his management approach for 15 years before arriving at our agency and he would not allow a culture to affect his professional values (see Appendix F). Although, at the time, I did admire his ethical position in relation to an agency he had recognised had fallen into incongruence, I have to admit that I was not totally convinced that he would be able to deride the organisation’s values in favour of his own; I now acknowledge that this doubt may have developed as a result of an encounter I had experienced when I first joined the agency. An encounter which I will now go on to explore in more detail.

I had been with the Fenton department for just a few weeks when my colleague and I were passed a job that another social worker had received during the day but had been unable to attend to. The referral had come from a father, who had been assaulted by his son. The father had explained to my colleague that his son had ADHD and other emotional behavioural difficulties and that earlier on in the day his son had become upset and unable to express his emotions verbally and so frustrated

³⁸ PPO is an acronym for Police Protection Order and is used to remove a child and transfer them to a place of safety for a period of 72 hours by the police and social workers after working hours if it is thought that a child is at risk of imminent significant harm.

had instead intended to physically attack his sibling. His father, who had been present, intervened and had to restrain his son in order to protect his other child and it was during this restraint that the father had received several blows to his stomach and chest. The father was not calling our team because he wanted to make a complaint about his son, but rather because he wanted to notify us of the incident as his son was subject to a child protection plan (for emotional abuse due to previous domestic violence issues between father and now ex-wife, mother of the child) and because he thought his son may have incurred some bruising to his arms during the restraint. It is important to note that this referral had been made to the first social worker who took call at some time in the afternoon, however, it was 22:00 by the time myself and another colleague were able to carry out the visit.

In hindsight, I realise that it may have been wise to have discussed the plan of action between the two of us, my colleague and I, before arriving at our destination but for whatever reason this conversation did not take place and it was only after we had listened to the father telling us his story that I was about to realise we both had entirely different agendas. When we asked to see the child the father explained that he was in bed asleep. I reassured the father that this was not an issue and that after checking that he was sound asleep I would return the following morning to meet with the child, introduce myself and talk to him about the incident that had occurred. My colleague, however, interrupted me at this point and explained that this would not be the plan of action and that, despite the child being asleep, we needed the father to wake the child, bring him to see us and undress him so that we could check there was definitely no unexplained bruising to his body. Her reasoning was that the child was on a child protection plan and as a result we, as professionals, could not leave until the child had been examined due to organisational policy and procedures.

Featherstone et al. (2013:3) argue that in light of the debate surrounding cuts to state services (an aim from the Coalition Government agenda to reform welfare) there has been an 'absence of critical scrutiny' in child protection practice as the idea that 'early intervention carries such an overwhelming a priori correctness' appears to prevent practitioners from stopping and thinking, then realising that their approach is far from that of 'child centred'.

In this situation, the father followed my colleague's instructions and went to the bedroom to wake the child. I, on the other hand, was alarmed at the decision my colleague had made and, while the father was out of the room, made it clear I disagreed with it. However, my colleague informed me that that was the way "things were done around here" - a line I would hear a number of times during my stay with the Fenton department. The child was then woken and in a dazed and confused state was brought into the room where my colleague and I were, two complete strangers whom he had never met before, and undressed in front of us. My colleague checked his chest and arms and found that there was no bruising. She then checked the child's story and when he confirmed the account given by his father, she agreed that the child could be returned to bed.

This episode did not sit comfortably with me at all and during my next supervision with our team manager I shared this experience and asked his advice for how I should handle such a matter if it were to occur again in future. However rather than be reassured that this was not common practice, I was instead surprised to learn that my manager approved of this way of working and revealed that he too would have done the same as my colleague because that was just the way "things were done around here". When I explained that this was not the way I had practised at other local authorities and this approach was, I felt, oppressive and not considerate of the

child's best interests, I was informed that this model was adopted by our team so that practitioners could feel "safe" and rest assured that they had "covered their tracks" should, at a later date, the actions of the authority be brought into question.

I would have liked to now have been able to say that at this point I offered my resignation and hastily left the building with my professional values firmly intact, unfortunately however, this was not the case. Despite feeling in turmoil emotionally and professionally, as a mother I had my own family to support and the unsociable hours of the emergency duty team actually worked well in terms of my personal situation: being around in the day in order to bring up my own two small children. I was fully aware that the kind of position I was in were few and far between in the job market so the possibility of moving to a similar team in another authority would not have been easy. So instead I remained and made a promise to myself, much like the first manager who I referred to at the start of this story had made to me, that I would not be affected by this risk averse form of practice endemic in my micro culture and that I would challenge every oppressive situation I came across forthwith.

It therefore came as a surprise when one evening, some months after this incident, I was called to attend a meeting where the police and some members from another team were discussing a plan to remove a baby they held concerns about. They had been to court earlier on in the week to try and obtain an emergency protection order (EPO) but had been refused this request by the Judge. They had tried to engage with the family throughout the remainder of the week but relationships between the social worker and the family had broken down and the family were now refusing to allow the social worker to enter the home. When the meeting was called it was the end of the week and the social worker felt that she would not be able to rest over the weekend if the baby was not seen by professionals.

At the start of the meeting, I was not completely sure why I had been invited to attend. However, by the end of it I realised that my presence had been required, not because of any sage advice I may have been able to offer the allocated social worker or her team, but because I had developed a certain kind of reputation amongst other social work teams one which was succinctly described as 'the PPO queen' by a senior practitioner who was also in the room. Their aim had been, of course, to encourage me to go and remove the baby and "succeed" in an area where they had "failed". It emerged that my high rate of child removals over recent months had persuaded other social workers that I was a "safe" practitioner and "got my own way no matter what" despite encountering resistance from other authorities.

Burr (2003:105) has said that '[t]erms such as personality, attitude, skill and temperament, and so on present a particular vision of humankind'. In this instance, the term 'PPO queen' immediately enabled me to see that I had become a fully integrated member of the non-humankind culture I had initially rejected. The signs had been there all along, I had just refused to acknowledge that which I now was. In cases where I had doubted my own decision making I had opted for the decision which was safest to make as a professional and chosen to remove any child I visited who was in a 'risky' situation. Therefore rather than taking informed risks, I had preferred to not take any risks and instead moved the child to what I considered to be 'a safer place' for their own good. Despite being adamant that I would not be affected by the, at times, oppressive values of my agency, I had, with little resistance, allowed my moral identity to become contaminated by the values of the organisation: I had allowed my own professional values to become spoiled.

I have told this personal story to try and illustrate my own sense making process and to demonstrate just how difficult it can be for social workers such as

myself to resist dominant organisational discourse despite our best intentions. When discussing discourse and subjectivity, Burr (2003:105) has argued that individuals are often accustomed to thinking of themselves as having 'a certain kind of personality' and making choices, having beliefs and opinions that have originated in their own minds because of the conviction that 'we are their author'. Yet these terms are really 'only present in discourse' and they invite us as human beings to take up new statuses, statuses which are available to us depending on the culture we are situated in and which we draw from when in communication with other people. Trying to deny these positions is what Foucault (in Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983) was referring to when he argued that we should stop trying to discover *who* we are by instead refusing to accept *what* we are. It is this kind of challenge that other frontline practitioners, social workers who are where I once was, now have to face on a daily basis. They not only have to try and follow organisational policy and procedure in order to remain in a job where their decisions might be supported by their managers but they have to also recognise the power their culture can have on the discourse that they use if they are to empower the rights of parents and practice in a child centred way. The process of 'constructing and negotiating' their own professional identities will therefore always be presided over with conflict as they struggle to take up or resist the positions that are made available to them through their agency discourse (Burr, 2003:110).

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