

## **Social workers' reflexive understandings of their 'everyday' communications with children.**

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### **Abstract**

Over the past two decades the use of ethnographic research methods, in combination with a range of discursive, conversational and multi-modal analytical approaches, have provided vivid accounts of the complex nature of social workers' everyday communications. This paper discusses the potential and the problems of combining a video stimulated recall (VSR) methodology with an explicit theoretical framework, in order to generate critical reflexive 'insider' accounts of social workers' direct encounters with children. The framework employed was based on an adaptation of Goffman's concepts of 'framing' and 'footing', which were integrated into an analytical process designed to theorise social workers' critiques regarding the nature of their communication with children. Three detailed case exemplars are used to demonstrate the potential of this methodology to explore the 'delicate' agency required by social workers in the practice of authentic communication in complex professional inquiries with children. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of the theoretical and practical issues associated with utilising reflexive methodologies in professional contexts.

**Key words: child care, social work, communication, professional agency**

### **Introduction**

In the UK over the past few years, researchers have paid increased attention to social workers' encounters with families and children<sup>1</sup>, and specifically what actually happens during the course of these encounters (Broadhurst and Mason, 2014; Ferguson, 2010, 2014; Author own/R 2017; Author own/W, 2017). The impetus behind the growing concerns regarding communicative encounters between social workers, families and children has largely arisen in the context of negative media attention following the

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the term children refers to children and young people

deaths of young children when they were known to social workers and other professionals. Although the deaths of these children occurred in complex contexts, where a multiplicity of factors coalesced with catastrophic consequences, the resulting media and political attention has often focused on the role of the social worker and the quantity and quality of their visits (Brandon et al., 2009; Jones, 2014; Laming, 2003, 2009). As a consequence the profession has been adversely affected by widespread negative reporting and specifically the inference that social workers' communicative practices, during the course of their encounters with children and families, are poor.

This paper represents an attempt to rectify the imbalance in these prevailing perspectives about social workers' practice. The focus of the *Talking and Listening to Children* (TLC) research project, which had three phases, was on social workers' communication with children in *ordinary, everyday practice*. Data from phase one has been reported elsewhere (Authors own, 2017). This paper discusses the development of the methodology used in phase two of the project which was an adapted form of video stimulated recall (VSR) (Authors own, 2011). Phase two was developed in recognition of the acknowledged limitations of using ethnographic approaches to studying complex expert cultures. The key methodological challenge that phase two was designed to address was how to develop social workers' critically reflexive 'insider' accounts of their communication with children.

### **Contextualising communicative practices in child care social work**

Over the past two decades research into social workers' communicative practices with children has expanded significantly (Lefevre, 2010; Luckock et al., 2006; McLeod, 2006; McLeod, 2006; Morgan, 2006; Authors own/R, 2014; Authors own/W, 2009, 2011). Research by members of the *Discourse and Narrative Approaches to Social Work and Counselling Network* (Hall and White, 2005; Hall et al., 2014) has begun to build a significant body of research based on the application of discourse and narrative research methodologies to the texts of everyday professional practice encounters, such as home visit conversations. As part of these developments, there has been a noticeable shift in focus from communicative practices in the context of exceptional and extraordinary circumstances (Brandon et al., 2009; Hawthorn and Wilson, 2009; Laming, 2003, 2009;

Monds et al., 2010; Munro, 2011) to communication in ordinary and everyday social work practice (Author own, 2017; Ferguson, 2010, 2014).

The use of ethnographic research methods, in combination with a range of discursive, conversational and multi-modal analytical approaches, have provided vivid accounts of the complex nature of social workers' everyday communications that are: non-verbal and deeply impacted by context, from geography to surrounding smells, sounds and sights (Ferguson, 2010, 2014); influenced by the personal touches associated with 'being' (Lefevre, 2015; Authors own 2016); and dynamic - taking place whilst 'on the go' (Ferguson, 2010; Authors own, 2017). This growing body of work has begun to provide empirical evidence of the complexity of the daily ordinary communicative encounters in which social workers engage. These approaches, that pay attention to the ordinary details of social workers' interactions with children, allow insight into what authentic (here defined as emotionally attuned and appropriate) child-centred communication might, or might not, look like. These approaches also highlight how social workers, families and children exhibit different forms of agency within encounters (Authors own, 2018) in pursuit of preferred outcomes and that achieving these outcomes in practice involves the use of highly developed skills and a diverse range of communicative methods (Author own forthcoming). The difficulty in understanding how complex expert cultures and organisational settings have the potential to either enable or constrain the forms of agency exhibited by social workers has also been highlighted.

The recent expansion in the focus of research into social workers' communication with children has been accompanied by a similar diversification in the methods used to gather research data. Video Stimulated Recall (VSR) is commonly understood as a method to support practitioners to reflect upon their practice and to 'recall' or articulate their underlying assumptions, biases and/or professional theories (Cherrington and Loveridge, 2014; Reitano and Sim, 2010). Whilst the use of video review for exploring professional practice is not entirely new (Van Nijnatten and Stevens, 2012; Antczak et al., 2017), and audio recording has been used to elicit participant accounts (Slembrouck and Hall, 2017), the use of video footage as part of a stimulated recall process in social work contexts is unique.

The significant development in the use of video stimulated recall methodologies undertaken in the TLC research project was the introduction of a formal theoretical framework into the VSR analysis process. Generally, within VSR, a broadly thematic or grounded approach is adopted to the analysis of participants' discussions about their practice. In the TLC project, conceptual ideas developed by Goffman (1959, 1974, 1983), were adapted into an explicit theoretical framework in order to shift participants' focus away from introspection on their understanding of a practice at a given time to a reflexive stance which encouraged critical awareness of the contextual factors that shaped their practice. With this conceptual framework in place, the VSR focussed on how social workers' communicative agency was constrained and determined by the institutional and professional expectations placed upon them.

### **Conceptualising communicative practices**

The conceptual framework integrated into the VSR process was based on Goffman's metaphorical notion of the 'performative self' (Goffman, 1959) and his associated concepts of 'professional inquiry', 'framing' and 'footings' (Goffman, 1974, 1983). From Goffman's theoretical perspective the 'meaning' of the observed interactions between social workers and the children would be produced via the performances of those engaged in the interactions. According to Goffman's theoretical perspective, such performances are possible, and communication is made meaningful, because of participants' 'commitment to the interactional ground rules', which he termed 'the interaction order' as explained below:

'The workings of the interaction order can be easily viewed as the consequences of systems of enabling conventions, in the sense of the ground rules of a game.' (Goffman, 1983, p.5)

Unlike Goffman, the focus of this study was not on identifying the existing fundamental 'interactional ground rules', but rather, the focus was on how social workers established the ground rules of their communication, more specifically how they framed their explorations, their 'professional inquiry', of potentially sensitive issues and situations

with children. The theoretical framework developed here diverged from Goffman's in two key ways. Firstly, Goffman treated the interactional order as distinct and separate from other layers of the social order, whilst our focus was on how the communication, or interaction, between a social worker and child was affected by social workers' agency and shaped by the institutional and professional demands made upon them. To this end, Rawls' (1987, 1989) development of Goffman's theory was adopted, because it extends beyond observed interactions to consider the role played by the 'institutional order', in shaping the nature of communications.

The 'institutional order' in this instance was defined as the external professional, organisational demands and expectations placed on social workers that constrained their interactions with children. Rawls (1981, p.144) postulated that an 'essential dialectic' existed between:

'commitment to the enabling conventions of interaction per se and commitment to the enabling conventions particular to an institutional context on any particular occasion.'

In this research the dialectic was constructed in terms of the tensions felt by social workers as they attempted to establish meaningful interaction with a child, whilst having to play the multiple roles required of them by the institutional order that framed their work.

Secondly, although Goffman was methodologically suspicious of participants' accounts, he viewed the 'cognitive relation of the participants' (Goffman, 1983, p.12) as a central issue in all face-to-face interactions. The research focussed on social workers' conscious and tacit understandings of how they established the ground rules of their communication and how they framed their exploration of potentially sensitive issues and situations. The methodology was premised on social workers being able to initially identify the more explicit aspects of these frames, and framing processes, and through engagement in the process, to reach a position where they could reflect upon the more tacit aspects of practice.

Goffman recognized that in certain 'forms of interaction', members are conscious of how they manipulate the frames they use. Indeed Goffman (1981) believed that if a specific communicative encounter formed part of an 'inquiry' then any study of it had to be set within the intentions, practices and aims associated with it:

What is being sustained then, is not a state of talk but a state of inquiry, and it is to this latter to which utterances must first be referred if one is to get at their organizational significance.' (Goffman, 1981, p.142)

The social worker-child interactions that were being videoed in the TLC project were, by definition, part of professional inquiries in which social workers consciously, and to varying degrees tacitly, framed and reframed their interactions with children. The VSR methodology focused on social workers' understanding of the nature of their agency by exploring the processes of footing, the movement between frames, and the type of alignments between their own understandings and those of the children.

### **Adopting an innovative methodology**

The TLC project was a large-scale qualitative study funded by the ESRC that took place between 2013 and 2016 across the four nations of the UK. The primary aim was to gain an enhanced and 'practice near' understanding of the dynamics of everyday communicative encounters between social workers and children. As indicated earlier, the project had three phases: phase one involved researchers undertaking ethnographic research accompanying social workers on their visits to families and children; and phase three involved developing research-informed materials for professional development.

Phase two, the focus of this paper, was developed in recognition of the acknowledged limitations of using ethnographic approaches to studying complex expert cultures, such as social work (Islam, 2015). Studying 'expert cultures' where practices are theoretically-imbued, both implicitly and explicitly, is difficult because direct observations and interviews with participants provide only partial insights. The key methodological challenge that phase two was designed to address was how to support practitioners'

articulate their understanding of their own practices in a manner that drew out not just what they felt was happening but also why it was happening and to make visible any hidden assumptions, thoughts, feelings and biases informing communicative practices. It was hoped that what would become 'visible' would include those tacit elements of their understanding arising from their acceptance of normative professional expectations *and* the socially constructed nature of many expert practices (Collins, 2007). To work successfully as a critical reflexive methodology, the VSR methodology not only needed to be capable of supporting practitioners articulate what was tacit but also needed to engage them in a critique of the nature of their professional agency.

### *The Video Stimulated Reflection Model*

Engaging practitioners in a reflexive critique of their own practice is challenging, especially if the practitioners have limited prior experience of so doing, if the researchers lack understanding of the culture in which practitioners operate and if the researchers are not familiar with the practices being reviewed. In this research project, the social workers that took part: a) were currently in practice; b) had engaged in a range of professional training and learning programmes; c) had engaged in training and learning programmes run by a member of the TLC research team who was an experienced social work educator and who also facilitated the phase two VSR process. Overall eight social workers, working with children aged from 9-16 years, took part in phase two.

The VSR process involved video and audio recordings of scheduled meetings between social workers and children. The video recordings were then reviewed by the individual social workers with the social work researcher/educator (highlighted above) who initiated a dialogue around how social workers' enacted, experienced and understood their engagement with children. This was known as the audio recorded VSR interview. The data for each social worker therefore comprised two sets of transcripts, one of the original videoed interaction and the second of the audio recorded VSR interview. Nearly 20 hours of video and recorded materials were generated and fully transcribed.

Having an experienced social work educator undertake the audio recorded VSR interviews allowed a dialogue to develop based on shared experiences of communicating

with children. The dialogues opened up into an exploration of 'felt' tensions, the various theoretical understandings social workers had of their communicative practices and the extent to which they felt configured and constrained by the cultures and systems they operated within. The 'open' nature of these dialogues aided the reconstruction of how the social workers had framed their communicative interactions with children and young people, by linking their specific observed practices with their reflections on the broader demands associated with the 'institutional order'.

#### *Analysing video stimulated reflection data*

The analysis was thematic and involved a number of cycles of induction, deduction and verification in order to build an integrated 'theory' of each social worker's framing and alignment processes. The first stage involved systematically interrogating the VSR interview transcripts to identify statements that linked the social workers' observations about specific interactions with the child to any mention of how these were affected by individual beliefs and values, professional norms, and organisational requirements and routines. The statements were placed in categories that reflected social workers' professional intentions for a given interaction. These ranged from maintaining or changing the pattern and nature of their communication to the overarching purposes behind their inquiries.

The next stage of the analysis involved a process of 'abduction' (Pierce, 1979) that attempted to reconstruct the specific 'frames' used by the social worker. The process was based on identifying themes that persisted within and between categories identified in the VSR transcript. In line with Goffman's (1981) theory, 'frames' were treated as being indented one within another. This first level of analysis, therefore, attempted to identify those frames that were used regularly and persistently across different interactions. Persistent themes were treated as potential overarching 'frames'. The sections of the transcript coded under a particular theme were 're-applied' to the transcripts of the original video recordings of their interaction. Re-application involved linking each section of VSR transcript to the particular part of the videoed original interaction it was describing. This resulted in a number of 'strips', essentially two columns of linked transcripts, on the left the VSR transcripts and on the right the transcript of the video



recording it discussed.

The next level of analysis established whether the strips in each theme formed part of the same overarching frame, or were an example of a more specific nested frame, or were a completely different frame altogether. Distinguishing between frames helped to identify the alignment processes used by social workers as it drew attention to the times when they switched between frames. Once an overarching frame had been identified the rest of the video recording was viewed again to identify whether it had been used in other sections of the interaction that had not been discussed during the VSR interview. If further uses of the frame were identified, these were then added into the case reports.

The completed analysis comprised a narrative case report that described the major frames and key alignment processes the social workers had engaged in. The case reports were sent to social workers so that they could verify them. Social workers were asked to consider the extent to which they recognised the frames, alignment processes and tensions they described. A mixture of email and follow up phone interviews were used to collect responses to the case reports. Engagement with the verification process was varied. Some social workers simply indicated their approval of the reports, whilst for others the process stimulated further reflection on both the tensions they faced, and the ethical decisions they had made. In such cases, the participating social workers tended to want to add further contextualisation around their use of certain frames, rather than elaborate upon their nature. The verification process helped social workers' become alert to how they chose to block, substitute or integrate 'institutional frames' at certain points within their interactions and increasingly aware of the constrained and 'delicate' nature of their agency. They were concerned that the frames discussed in the reports were not interpreted as their 'ideal', or even uncritically, 'preferred' approaches.

### **Frame alignment within a professional inquiry**

When undertaking the 'frame analysis' discussed above, the importance of Goffman's observation that frames are as much about what they hold in abeyance as what is legitimate within them, became increasingly clear. The main analytical theme across the eight VSR cases in the study was how different frame alignment mechanisms (Snow et al.,

1986; Snow et al., 2014) were used to ameliorate the constraints imposed by the institutional order. The social workers' discussions of how they used different frame alignment mechanisms were set along a theoretical continuum that reflected the degree to which they were integrated with, or excluded, more 'institutional' frames. In this section, three cases are discussed which span this theoretical continuum.

At one end of the continuum were those frames that 'blocked out', at least temporarily, the institutional frames that social workers were required to engage with in their professional inquiries. In the example below the use of one such frame is described in a case titled the 'Natural' because of the social worker's commitment, in the very early stages of her relationship with a child, to using frames derived from personal contexts – parent, sibling, relative, friend. In the middle of our theoretical continuum the impact of more institutional frames was ameliorated by 'substituting' (over extended periods) an alternative professional frame within which the social worker felt more able to develop the conventions and alignments required for authentic communication. In this case, the frame used was that of counselling and hence this case became known as the 'Therapist'. At the other end of the theoretical continuum were those frames that, in some way, normalised more institutional frames by 'integrating' them within various tools or games. The explicit rule-based nature of these frames required the adoption of very specific, routinized, and compartmentalized forms of interaction. Reflecting these processes, the case used to illustrate this end of the dimension was titled 'Self-assessment'.

### ***Example***

#### ***The 'Natural': Janet***

In her audio recorded VSR interview, Janet discussed the early stages of developing a relationship with Stephen, aged 10. They had been meeting approximately once a week, for the last six weeks, in order for Janet to assess Stephen's home circumstances. Stephen was on a child protection plan following reported incidents of domestic violence and school reports concerning his aggressive behaviour. Janet was an experienced social worker whose preferred frame was based on her communication with her *own children* and how *she was communicated with as a child*. Referred to here as 'the 'Natural' this terminology encompassed frames derived from other personal contexts – parent, sibling,

relative, or friend.

Janet used the image of 'the parent' in a very conscious manner to inform her approach:

*'I am aware that I treat the kids I work with as if they were my own' (VSR interview).*

In her encounters, Janet described how she tried to re-create forms of communication and alignment characterized by some of the naturalness and honesty of the interactions she perceived she had with her own children:

*So, I speak, I speak to him as if he were my son and I think that that does really help with kids and of course I'm not his parent and of course there is a line there, I know that. But I do think that because I speak to him and interact with him as if he were mine, I do think there is a sort of freedom there given to the child to respond back to that. (VSR interview)*

The adoption of this type of frame was not based on a naive belief that being 'natural' would overcome the artificiality of the situation, nor was it indiscriminately used with every child. Rather it was seen as a way of encouraging forms and types of interactions, such as reciprocity, that were perceived by Janet to be connected with the parent/child relationship and that could form, in her relationship with Stephen, a basis for more intimate and difficult discussions.

In keeping with the parent/child framing of her relationship with Stephen, Janet compared the naturalness, ordinariness and spontaneity of the perceived alignment she achieved with the 'unnaturalness' of the professional/child relationship. Janet exemplified this position when discussing her interactions with the child over an 'ordinary game'. She referred to how she eschewed the type of games created specifically to work with children preferring the 'real' games that she would play in her own family as a basis from which to explore more sensitive areas:

*Just in relation to the game, I do feel like what I'm watching is two people in tune with each other. He gets me and I get him. That's different to the difficult stuff that I'm trying to get him to talk about but just in relation to the game. And I like it, I enjoy it, I enjoy watching that because it's fun and it's funny and it's free you know there is no umm...there is no sort of pay-back there, there is no stress there. (VSR interview)*

Janet felt that the more 'natural' frame encouraged the development of trust, whereas more institutional frames aroused feelings of suspicion and mistrust:

*I do think that sometimes when you use these more sort of formal tools then you know kids are smart and they totally know the minute you know take out a case with writing on it and then this big mat and then all the wee bits, they totally know, instantly, that you're after something. I'm not comfortable with that. (VSR interview)*

For Janet, intimacy was a feature of these 'natural' frames in a way that would not be so evident in institutional frames. Janet used different types of humour, 'teasing', and touch that echoed her own experiences of positive interactions as a child and parent. Each act of intimacy was an attempt to temporarily re-align the nature of her interactions with Stephen so they appeared less like part of a professional inquiry and more like that which might take place between a parent and child:

*And I wouldn't necessarily do it with other children (lightly pinches child above the knee) but it's a thing, it's a joke that we do because mainly we're in the car and when we're having a carry on and I giggle, I grab, I do something to him that my dad used to do to me, it's a kind of grip above the knee and you just sort of crumble into giggles and he loves it. (VSR interview)*

However, from Janet's perspective, these forms of natural spaces, once established, provided her with the opportunity to align her own and the child's frame around

notions of reciprocity and caring, a basis from which she found it more professionally acceptable to change footing and explore more sensitive or difficult issues:

*Yeah and there's loads of, there's loads of wee bits where he's just...I don't know, where he's just open to the fact that I'm there in that he gives me wee, he gives me wee benefits of the time, 'no you go first, no I want you to go first'. He gives me, he's always giving me a wee something which isn't usual. And it's a, he's caring, he's caring, I'm not necessarily suggesting all about me but I think it shows that he's got that potential in him, that he gives all the time just wee things to let you know that he cares and that it matters to him. (VSR interview)*

For Janet being 'natural' was a means of blocking out more institutional frames, in order to align her communications with children and adopt an authentic child-focused approach. The next example highlights the use of a 'substitute' professional frame.

#### *The 'Therapist': Joe*

Joe's meeting was with Mark, aged 16, with whom he had been working with for a number of months. In his audio recorded VSR interview, Joe discussed how his approach to frame alignment included the use of an alternative professional frame, the 'therapist' frame, which he had developed in his work as a counsellor. Joe compared the sense of agency and freedom when operating in a more therapeutic frame with the constraints and professional obligations he felt he worked under as a social worker:

*Joe: Because it's different, therapy is different from social work in so many ways because I co-create an environment for explanation but with social work it's almost like, for me, about 70-30 me coming along and...*

*Researcher: Your agenda?*

*Joe: Yeah absolutely. I feel a bit of discomfort with that. (VSR interview)*

For Joe, the 'therapist' frame alluded to a more equal alignment between worker and service user than the 'ego drive' or form of agency that he believed framed the actions of social workers operating with a child protection agenda:

*It's bridging the two worlds of social work and therapy, again there's a greater ego drive in social work. Because if you think, I suppose, I think in terms of, I suppose, ego drive in the whole thing. Part of the social work task often is that ego drive as a social worker to push things forward for the purpose of protection of the children and I think sometimes, there's a couple of examples come to mind, sometimes the children, other needs get missed in view of the predominant need which is safety. And also, the adults get missed in the process as well. (VSR interview)*

Joe elaborated on the tensions that arose from the material limitations of time, his perceived lack of agency in putting into action any co-constructed plans, and the accountability demands of wider structures:

*What do we actually do, where do we go with the opinions and the ideas of children? .... We don't get the time to really sit down and allow that to emerge, it's all... I think because in great part, not fully, because of the fear that encompasses, the fear that is associated with accountability. We need to be seen to be getting it right for these people and if we don't, we'll be in front of a red top so there's a lot of fear. (VSR interview)*

Joe appeared to use an alternative professional frame because, although still constrained by the nature of being involved in an inquiry, it offered him the opportunity to engage in an alignment process that he felt lead to more authentic communication. For Joe the enabling conventions were those that placed an emphasis on 'co-creation' and constructed 'an environment for explanation' which was less about 'doing something' and more about 'being'. The final example, below, looks at how more institutional frames were integrated into the rule-based frame of a self assessment tool.

### *The 'Self-assessment': Yvonne*

The final example was based around Yvonne's meetings with Luke, aged 7, who she had been seeing weekly for six weeks. In these meetings she had established a highly routinised set of interactions based on a 'self-assessment' frame that focussed on Luke's changing perspective on a number of 'areas of concern'. The 'self-assessment' frame had a set of institutional frames integrated into it that reflected the social worker's role as an assessor of need and risk.

In her audio recorded VSR interview, Yvonne discussed the overall aim of her inquiry:

*It's been talking, exploring how he is feeling about things because they had to be removed from mum because of neglect but also, we found out that mum had been systematically beating him, him and his sister you know for no apparent reasons. So, they were removed from mum's care into dad's care. ... very easy to work with and when I first met them explaining my role and sort of saying to them my job is to make sure that you're ok and one of the ways that I'm able to make sure that you're ok is if you tell the adults around you what's worrying you, what's bothering and you know the things that are working well and the things that are good. (VSR interview)*

Within the meeting, the interactions framed by a 'self-assessment' perspective followed a highly routinised sequence in which Luke was asked to make a judgment, on a scale of 1-10, as to how he felt about a number of areas of pre-identified concerns. Yvonne and Luke returned to the same issues using the same tool over a number of meetings in order to map and monitor need and risk:

*I picked it up as one of the tools to use in practice and it's trying to get a sense of you know what's, you know, looking at the short-term issues that are there for a child, what's happening now, what's worrying you now. But then as you get that*

*information you are able to then say ok so how long has that been going on, you know. (VSR interview)*

By adopting the 'self-assessment' frame Yvonne was able to compartmentalize the overarching aim of the inquiry into a specific set of routinized interactions, aligned around conventions that were intended to support Luke being 'safe' and 'healthy'.

### **Alignment processes and moving frames**

The potential of using 'alignment processes' to analyse communication between social workers and children was based on the ability of these processes to highlight the tensions felt by the two parties in establishing authentic communication, whilst still meeting the requirements of professional and institutional agendas. The continuum, illustrated by the three cases, illustrated not only the different strategies employed but also the types of challenges social workers faced when they changed 'footing' and tried to use more institutionally constrained frames.

For Yvonne, these shifts in footings happened throughout her use of the 'self-assessment' frame. The formalized and repeated structure of her interaction helped to normalize the introduction of frames, legitimating the discussion of sensitive issues by conventions based around notions of safety and health. The potential need for a different 'footing' was initiated by asking Luke to just provide a score of between 1 to 10. For Luke, the structured self-assessment frame allowed him a degree of choice as to whether to report issues that might require a change of footing. The use of the self-assessment frame meant that changes in footing were both highly routinized and very explicit. The limitation of this approach was that changes in alignment were not particularly agile, in that the tool only legitimated a relatively prescribed set of topics and a somewhat limited set of interactions based around notions of relative improvement.

For Joe, shifts in 'footing' were a more reflexively and consciously considered aspect of his inquiry approach because, through them, he attempted to achieve more fundamental and enduring changes in the conventions that aligned his interactions with



Mark. For example, when Joe discussed trying to move Mark from agreeing to 'vague' commitment, '*Yeah it's a family theme, vagueness*', to more concrete plans, he attempted to do this by changing the nature of their roles in these interactions. One example included Joe acting as a minute taker who summarized agreed actions and drafted an action plan. These forms of interaction and the roles adopted were all part of the 'plan', the inquiry, and as such were a very specific enactment of Joe's professional agency.

Joe's use of alternative professional frames facilitated his attempts to realign his communications in line with the longer-term aims of his inquiry. In contrast, and recorded in her audio VSR interview, Janet focussed on the difficulties of reactively changing her 'natural' 'footing' to an institutional one, in order to follow up a concerning issue that arose during a specific interaction. In this case, in the midst of a game of Hangman, Stephen chose the phrase 'bad boy' for her to guess. The choice of phrase so concerned Janet that she decided to switch her existing 'footing', from one based on being players in an 'ordinary game', to one based on the use of a recognizable social work tool, the 'Magic Wand':

*I mean obviously I threw that [magic wand] in there because I was hoping that given what he'd just said about 'bad boy' that you know there might have been some nugget that he would have come up with that would have been helpful.*  
(VSR interview)

However, Stephen rejected the offer to participate in the Magic Wand frame and to realign their conversation in a way that would support Janet's inquiry. Janet later assessed this rejection as being based upon the introduction of tool that was incongruent with the type of conversation she had been having. The difficulty that Janet faced was that in the middle of her 'natural' frame, the footing she attempted to introduce was rejected by Stephen as he experienced it as an inauthentic, or an 'unnatural', switch. The result of this misplaced 'footing' was a misalignment with Stephen who no longer felt 'in tune' with Janet, and so was unwilling to explore his choice of the phrase 'bad boy'.

The difficulty in using the concept of alignment processes is that it can require quite fine-tuned, and therefore potentially time consuming, analyses of video interactions, unless the social worker operates with a very explicit and persistent framework. The analytical potential is that through helping social workers' become aware of how they chose to block, substitute or integrate 'institutional frames' at certain points within their interactions, they also become increasingly aware of the constrained and 'delicate' nature of their agency, and hence more able to critique both their practice and the contexts in which they operate. In aiding understanding of the complexity of the influences on social workers' practices, it is important not to overlook the possibility of the VSR methodology revealing less palatable versions of the application of 'frames' and 'footings'. This might, for example, involve 'frames' and 'footings' being used by social workers to manipulate their professional interactions with children, of particular concern given the pre-existing unequal power relations between social workers and children.

### **Developing social workers' understanding of their communicative practices**

The development of VSR methodology in the TLC research arose from the methodological and epistemological challenge of exploring practitioners' sense of their own agency within 'expert cultures'. Even the most embedded of ethnographers remains an 'outsider' within such cultures because of the difficulty in understanding the significance of the socially tacit and theoretically imbued practices they encounter. Methodologies, such as VSR that rely upon 'insider' accounts, need to support participants not only to articulate the tacit aspects of their practice, but also to engage in a critique of the dynamic between their professional agency and the contexts in which they work. The TLC VSR approach is an example of an innovative avenue into this complex research field.

As already acknowledged whilst video-based research is by no means new in professional domains, it has been reconfigured here as a form of video stimulated *reflexivity*. VSR, as a critical *reflexive* methodology, is based upon stimulating

professional dialogue within a research relationship characterised by the collaborative 'joint production' of knowledge (Finlay, 2002). A major challenge to the collaborative co-production of knowledge is a lack of awareness of the internal power dynamics between researcher and participant and, in particular, the failure to recognise and value the differences, and limitations, of the forms of theorizing each is engaged in. In this research the introduction of a formal theoretical framework to structure researcher-social worker dialogues was partially successful in creating such reflexive awareness.

The formal theory used in this research was helpful in that it focussed the dialogue around the 'delicate' nature of professional agency. Here 'delicate' is understood as the complex combination of the specific requirements of a professional inquiry, cultural constraints and norms, and broader organizational and professional expectations. The term 'delicate' highlighted how, at times, social workers acted by 'means-of-an environment' whilst at other times operated 'in-an-environment' (Biesta and Tedder, 2006:18). This gave the social workers, in particular, 'permission' to engage in a reflexive critique of the constrained nature of their agency, whilst also affording them the opportunity to understand how relatively small shifts in their own agency, and children's agency, could significantly improve their communicative encounters.

The limitations of bringing formal theoretical frameworks into a critical reflexive research methodology are that, at least initially, they are very much 'owned' by the researcher, which limits their self-application by the practitioner. There is, therefore, potential throughout the process for their use to undermine or silence, rather than to help articulate, the forms of theorising engaged in by practitioners. Beyond the theoretical challenges, there are other cultural and practical challenges involved in developing VSR as a reflexive methodology. In 'high accountability' cultures there is a significant risk that the use of video reviews, as part of performance management processes will, if taken up widely, generate various forms of resistance to the use of VSR methodologies for other purposes (Birkholm, et al., 2017). This does not have to be the case. The use of VSR in other professions has highlighted the potential of the approach to give practitioners greater control over the gradual de-privatisation of their

practice and their professional development (Authors own, 2009). Video reviews can play a key role in establishing a learning culture, rather than an accountability culture, within an organisation in which practitioners are willing to share and collaboratively reflect upon practice.

Together the methodological and theoretical contributions introduced in this paper highlight the importance of research endeavours, such as this, for the expansion of knowledge and consolidation of skills associated with social workers' communicative practices with children. The methodological approach adopted, with its sample size and innovative but not uncontentious analytic strategy, inevitably places limitations on the scale of the study's claims. Nonetheless its findings and their conceptualisation, have added to existing understandings of the challenges social workers face in their efforts to achieve greater authenticity in their communication with children, the undisputable ultimate aim of their professional practice.

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