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Professional written voice ‘in flux’: the case of social work

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Abstract

Contemporary professional social work can be characterised by increased ‘textualisation’ (after Iedema and Scheeres 2003) with written texts mediating most action. At the same time, writing, as a key dimension to social workers’ practice and labour, is often institutionally unacknowledged, becoming visible primarily when identified as a ‘problem’. This paper draws on a three year nationally funded UK-based research project to offer a situated account of contemporary professional social work writing, challenging dominant institutional orientations to writing in professional practice. The paper outlines the specific ways in which social work practices, including writing, can be characterised as being ‘in flux’. Drawing on ethnographic data and adopting a Bakhtinian (1981,1986) oriented approach to ‘voice’, the paper explores the entextualisation of three specific social work texts, focusing in particular on ‘critical moments’ (after Candlin 1987, Candlin 1997). These critical moments offer insights into key problematics of social work writing, in particular the tensions around professional voice and discourse. The paper concludes by arguing for an articulation of professional social work writing which takes account of the dialogic nature of language and the discoursal challenges experienced in everyday practice.

Keywords: expert discourse, transparency, agency, recording
1. Introduction

1.1 Research on professional social work writing

Writing has become the focus of increased attention in studies of professional discourse (for overviews, see Barton and Papen 2010; Bazerman and Paradis 1991; Borzeix and Fraenkel 2001; Gunnarsson 2009) and includes research on a wide range of professional domains, including health and medical care (e.g., Berkenkotter and Hanganu-Bresch 2011; Bezemer and Kress 2017; Candlin and Candlin 2003; Papen, 2010), law and policing (e.g., Freedman et al. 1994; Rock 2017), and engineering (e.g., Durst 2019; Haas & Witte 2001). However, the nature, function and practice of writing in certain professional domains remain noticeably under-researched, such as the focus of this paper, professional social work. Existing research primarily centres on student writing in social work (e.g. Rai 2004; Wehbi 2009), with some work focusing on the interface between academic and professional writing (e.g. Paré and Le Maistre 2006; Lillis and Rai 2012; Rai and Lillis, 2012). Only a small number of studies have centred on professional social work writing which include empirical analysis of written texts and practices: one case of written records in in a study focusing primarily on spoken discourse (Hall et al. 2006); a diary, text and interview-based study with five social workers (Lillis and Rai 2012); an ethnographically framed study on case recording in adult services (Lillis 2017); a study focusing on written records of supervision meetings between social workers and managers (Wilkins et al. 2018). A further small number of works have centred on dimensions clearly linked to the production of the written record, such as IT and organizational systems (e.g. White et al. 2010). The study of professional social work writing remains therefore an under-researched area within professional discourse studies as a field.

This paper draws on data from a UK-nationally funded research project Writing in Professional Social Work Practice in a Changing Communicative Landscape (WiSP)
This paper focuses on three specific moments when meanings are extextualised as written texts, drawing on the larger WiSP study to contextualise these instances and to consider what they illuminate about the nature of professional social work writing.

1.2 Social work writing ‘in flux’

The metaphor of ‘flux’ to characterize the nature of contemporary workplaces is well documented in organizational studies (e.g. the highly cited work of Morgan 1986) and aligns with research in discourse studies which documents significant changes in discoursal and semiotic practices in the workplace (e.g. Gee et al. 1996; Iedema and Scheeres 2003). Flux – understood here as a metaphor signalling a cluster of interrelated notions including change, instability, fluidity– frames the discussion in this paper at three interconnected levels. The first relates to the profession of social work itself where ‘flux’ is viewed as a characterizing feature: ‘it is rather clichéd to say social work is in flux’ (Heslop and Meredith 2019: viii). With a complex ideological history (see for example, Watts and Hodgson 2019), social work as a profession occupies a contested social position and is often the target of harsh criticism in the media (see Balkow and Lillis 2019). The contested – and often socially low – positioning of social workers as a profession necessarily has implications for their discoursal practices, as is explored in Section 6.

The second level of ‘flux’ relates to significant semiotic changes which can in broad terms be referred to as the ‘textualisation of the workplace’ (e.g., Iedema and Scheeres 2003; Karlsson and Nikolaidou 2016), a key dimension to which is the increasing emphasis on writing and written documents, often mediated by ICT (information and communications technology)
systems. The textualization of professional social work practice is a key finding from the WiSP study, providing empirical support for claims made by social worker associations and unions (e.g. UNISON/Community Care 2014). A baseline characterization from WiSP points to the large number and range of text types constituting contemporary social work practice and the significant amount of time spent on writing: 341 institutionally labelled text types were identified in the corpus of 4,608 texts, ranging from two-word emails to a 14,000-word Child Permanence Report. Writing takes place throughout every hour of the day, usually interrupted by other activities. Time spent on writing ranges from 50% of the working week (based on social worker logging of time) and between 68% and 95% of the working week (based on researcher observation) (Lillis et al. 2020). Contemporary social work writing is de facto a ‘writing-intensive’ profession (Lillis et al. 2017, after Brandt 2005), which is at odds with social workers’ perspective of a profession that they consider should be based primarily on sustained interaction with people (Lillis et al. 2020).

The third level of flux centers on the perspective of language and discourse adopted in this paper. The use of language to make meaning – which in the case of social work involves representing and evaluating complex situations and life histories – is, in a fundamental, Bakhtinian sense, always, ‘in flux’: the dialogical nature of language means that any instance of use involves (implicitly and explicitly) addressing others (both real and imagined), with any instance of language use therefore contingent on such addressivity (Bakhtin 1986: 95); the heteroglossic nature of language means that each instance of language carries the voices and histories of previous use, influencing both the meanings it is possible to make and how these are understood (Bakhtin 1981: 294). This dialogical orientation towards language, and,

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1 These figures exclude the significant amount of handwriting in everyday practice that is a specific focus in the project.
in particular, the focus of this paper, written entextualisation, stands in contrast to dominant institutional orientations, which construe writing as a relatively straightforward practice for encoding ‘reality’, abstracted from its specific sociohistorical contexts of production and uptake (Lillis 2013, Lillis forthcoming; Turner 2018).

In this paper, the first two levels of flux (the contested professional status of social work and the shift towards contemporary social work practice as writing-intensive) are treated as important contextual aspects for understanding the third level of flux, which is the empirical focus of this paper: the challenges and tensions involved in the written entextualisation of meaning, with particular attention to professional discourse and voice.

1.3 Aims and structure of the paper

The paper aims to make visible the realities of everyday professional social work writing in terms of the material conditions as well as the discoursal and rhetorical complexity of the writing that social workers are required to undertake.

This paper begins by outlining the specific ways in which the problematics around social work writing are typically institutionally framed, followed by an outline of the Bakhtinian informed approach for exploring professionals’ writing practice, using the notion of ‘voice’. Next a brief overview is provided of the larger study on which this paper is based. The main part of the paper centres on three specific instances of writing, focusing in particular on ‘critical moments’ (after Candlin 1987) and ‘rich points’ (Agar 1994, Agar 2006), that is moments where a text, or aspects of a text, are troublesome in some way and become an explicit focus of the professionals’ and researcher’s attention. Focusing on explicitly articulated moments of tension helps to avoid making *a priori* assumptions about what is
involved in social workers’ writing and provides insights into the fundamental problematics of writing that might not otherwise come to light. The paper concludes by calling for a more careful and nuanced attention to professional social work writing.

2 Writing and professional discourse in social work

Whilst research on professional writing has substantially grown in the past thirty years (Section 1), writing occupies an ambiguous position in many professional domains. As Opel and Hart-Davidson (2019) state, based on their study in a medical setting, “writing can be so pervasive in one’s professional life and even central to one’s professional identity while also being nearly invisible” (p. 352). This ambiguous positioning of professional writing in the contemporary workplace (central yet unacknowledged/invisible) is strongly evident in the case of social work. As indicated above, findings from WiSP indicate that social work has in recent years become a ‘writing intensive’ profession yet there is little institutional acknowledgement that this is the case: writing hardly figures in training and education (for discussion, see Lillis and Rai 2012; Rai and Lillis 2012; Paré 2002; Paré and Le Maistre 2006) or in the professional standards regulating the profession.

To this ambiguous positioning (central yet unacknowledged), a third dimension needs to be added which is that writing only tends to become institutionally visible when it is negatively evaluated, with phrases such as ‘poor recording’ (e.g. Department for Children, Schools and Families/Department of Health 2009; Department of Education 2011; Health and Care Professions Council 2018), ‘poor records management’ (e.g. Care Quality Commission,

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2 The recently approved standards in England for social work pay little attention to writing, see https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/standards/professional-standards/
2017: 35, 41) and ‘poorly written’ (Oftsed 2018) permeating inspection reports. Criticisms of social work writing (often under the label of ‘recording’ and more broadly ‘communication’) are frequently central to public enquiries, usually known as ‘serious case reviews’ which hit headline news when a case of extreme abuse or death occurs (Balkow and Lillis 2019).

At the same time, and often only implicitly linked to writing, critical comments are often made about the language used. The ‘language’ of social workers, which tends to be discussed separate from specific modes of communication, is often criticized, for ‘jargon’ (Community Care 2018a; Oftsed 2019), ‘euphemistic language’ and ‘sanitised’ language (SCIE 2016). Exactly what is meant by each of these terms is often unclear with ‘jargon’, for example, seemingly covering a wide range of textual features, from acronyms (e.g. ‘LAC’ for ‘Looked After Children’) to what we might refer to as theoretically-loaded terms, e.g. ‘attachment’.

The proposed solution is usually framed in guidance to use ‘clear’ or ‘everyday’ language. To briefly give one highly publicised example, Shemmings, an academic expert in attachment theory discussing a particular judge’s ruling (Community Care 2018b), argued that social workers should avoid using the term ‘attachment’, calling on social workers to report rather ‘what you see’. He suggested that in this specific case the word ‘attachment’ should be replaced with ‘relationship’. What this brief summary of this particular example serves to illustrate (the statement by the judge, Shemmings article and the responses made, see Community Care 2018b) is the dominant transparency orientation which pervades orientations to written discourse but is often at odds with situated practice (the extent to which ‘relationship’, for example, is experienced as a neutral descriptive term is explored in Section 6).

3 ‘Say what you see’ was stated in a Tweet by Sue White and later discussed in White et al. 2020. The debate about the use of ‘attachment’ is necessarily complex- here I am simply highlighting the limitations of transparency orientation to professional discourse.
Writing and its core semiotic resource, language, therefore occupy a contested position within social work professional practice. Writing is central whilst invisible, and often viewed in deficit terms; language tends to be viewed as a transparent resource and at the same time constituted by specific discourses (e.g. as in the case of ‘attachment’), social workers’ rights to which are often challenged.

3 Exploring social work writing: professional voice

The premise of this paper is that the institutionally dominant orientation to written discourse is inadequate as an articulation of the complexities involved in social work writing. One way of making visible such complexities is through the notion of ‘voice’.

3.1 Voice as experience and agency

Voice is an important notion in the social sciences, often used in studies which foreground the perspectives and experiences of people as agents of their lives, rather than, for example studies which foreground macro-level patterns or institutional structures (see for example, Freeman et al. 2007; Holland et al. 2019). Voice is also used metaphorically to signal the importance of paying attention to people’s everyday accounts (the emic) and the political/intellectual legitimacy of doing so, particularly with regard to people in socially marginalised positions (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, chapter 5). Voice foregrounds what people say, which can be described as voice as experience, as well as who they feel they are enabled/constrained to be, which can be described as voice as agency. It has been noted that
little research attention has been paid to the voices of social workers\(^4\), as compared with prominent voices about social work e.g. the media, inspectors, judges (see Gordon 2018). This paper aims to make visible some aspects of professional social workers’ voice, with regard to their experiences and perspectives.

### 3.2 Voice as discourse

The notion of voice, as used in socially situated studies of discourse and literacy studies, usefully connects with orientations to voice as experience and agency. Here the *how* of voice, that is the semiotic stuff of voicing, notably, language, is emphasised through the notion of discourse. Within what are often referred to as ‘sociocultural’ orientations to voice informed by the work of Bakhtin (e.g. Maybin 2012), language is construed as a complex heteroglossic resource for meaning and identity making, bound up with histories of use and therefore always challenging to take control over (Bakhtin 1981: 294).

In this dialogical orientation to language, addressivity – the phenomenon of meaning making as always involving responding to and addressing an/other – is core to any acts of meaning making.

An essential constitutive marker of the utterance is its quality of being addressed to someone, its addressivity. ---Both the composition and, particularly the style, of the utterance depend on those to whom the utterance is addressed, how the speaker (or

\(^4\) But see for example study carried out by BASW and the NI Social Care Council ‘At the core of this study is the intention to listen to the voices of social workers’ [https://www.basw.co.uk/system/files/resources/Voices%20of%20Social%20Work%20Through%20The%20Troubles%20%281%29.pdf](https://www.basw.co.uk/system/files/resources/Voices%20of%20Social%20Work%20Through%20The%20Troubles%20%281%29.pdf).
writer) senses and imagines his [sic] addressee, and the force of their effect on the utterance. (Bakhtin, 1986: 95)

Social workers make meaning in written documents in order to secure care and services for vulnerable children and adults. However, how they entextualise meanings is fundamentally shaped by: the immediate contexts of production; theirs (and others) specific histories of language use; their sense of agency as professional social workers and the discourses that may enact such agency; and, importantly, their imagining of how both real (e.g. a particular manager reading a report, a particular service user) and imagined addresses (e.g. more abstract entities, such as the ‘courts’) may engage with such texts.

4 The study on which this paper is based

This article is based on the WiSP research project, a 3-year U.K.-based study involving five local authorities in the U.K. The research centres on the three main domains of social work – children’s care, adults’ care (generic), and adults’ mental health care– and seeks to characterize the nature of contemporary social work writing, by documenting institutional writing requirements, tracking everyday social worker texts and practices, and exploring social worker perspectives.

Epistemologically, the study is ethnographic, adopting a social practice orientation to writing that involves paying attention to specific material contexts, texts, technologies and interactions around writing (Lillis 2013: 158–159). Methodologically, the study combines tools from ethnography, qualitative discourse analysis and corpus linguistics to explore the nature and significance of writing in professional practice and the ways in
which writing is situated within social workers’ everyday working lives. Core data sets include 81 transcribed interviews with 71 social workers, detailed researcher field notes based on 10 weeks of observations, 483 days of social worker writing activity logs, and 4,608 texts that also constitute a 1-million-word corpus. In addition, a range of different kinds of contact was maintained over the project period between researchers and social workers, some of which built on existing “long conversations,” (Lillis 2008, Maybin 1994) relating to specific areas of professional and personal interest and concern (see Lillis et al. 2020).

Ethics and governance procedures were followed in compliance with the formal requirements of the university and all agencies involved. All personal data was removed from written texts before leaving agencies to be shared with the research team.

5. Critical moments in everyday professional writing

The main part of this paper focuses on three instances of entextualisation. Entextualization can be defined, in broad terms, as “the encoding of some aspect of human experience and the cultural marking of this representation as a text – spoken, written, multimodal” (Maybin 2017: 416; after Barber 2007 and Baumann and Briggs 1990). Together they illustrate situations and the associated textual work that social workers routinely engage in. The first and the second are examples of writing in children’s services, the third in adult mental health. In each instance, data is drawn from researcher observation, text analysis and interviews with participants (the type of data is indicated after each extract).

In line with ethnographic research orientations more generally, value is placed on exploring particular instances because of their potential to capture and illuminate key aspects of the
social practice being explored (see Mitchell 1984). The instances discussed below have been identified as “critical moments” (after Candlin 1987, Candlin 1997) that is moments where written entextualisation becomes an explicit focus of the social worker’s attention because of a specific concern, tension or difficulty (aspects of the text in instances 1 and 2, and a specific text in instance 3). “Critical moments” often constitute research ‘rich points’ (Agar 2006: 2) in that they draw the ethnographic researcher’s attention to moments which are difficult to account for but which may yield important insights into the larger phenomenon: they often signal a difference between what the researcher may ‘already’ know and what the researcher still needs to learn to understand and explain what is happening (Agar 2006). The analytical categories used are not \textit{a priori}, that is, a predefined set of categories applied to all data, but rather specific categories which are brought to bear in order to make visible what is happening in each instance. Thus one category, lexical items, is a focus of attention in all three instances. But other specific categories are foregrounded in the analysis of the different instances: for example, evaluative metacomments in 6.2, and interdiscursivity and rhetorical moves in 6.3.

6. Critical moments in the production of written discourse

6.1 Writing a child and family assessment: truth and representation

6.1.1 The context of production

Paul\(^5\) has been a social worker in Children’s Services for 7 years. His work base is a large open plan office which operates a hotdesking system where social workers sit at any available desk, often storing their belongings, including laptops, in a locker overnight. Paul has been

\(^5\) Names and specific details in data extracts have been changed in order to protect anonymity.
working with a 12 year old boy, Ahmed, over a period of some weeks to assess his current situation and needs.

This moment centres on a discussion of over an hour (in short bursts in between the manager’s other ongoing activity) that takes place between Paul and his manager Jim, in the busy office. Paul had been working for several days on the assessment text which now has an imminent deadline, in between other activities (including making visits to see children, attending meetings, writing reports and emails and talking on the phone). He approaches Jim’s desk to ask him to read his draft assessment. Jim, the manager is in the middle of an ongoing discussion with another manager about an urgent situation regarding the safety of a 6 year old girl. At this point there is a break in their discussion as the other manager checks information on the ICT system so Jim is able to talk with Paul.

6.1.2 The text being worked on

The text being worked on by the social worker, Paul, is a child and family assessment document\(^6\). This is a text which aims to provide current and historical information about a child and her/his family in order to consider whether any specific support is needed and whether the child meets the criteria for ongoing services as a ‘Child in Need’.\(^7\) The child is Ahmed, a boy from a Middle Eastern country who is also seeking asylum in the UK. He is currently separated from his parents and extended family network and is in foster care.


\(^{7}\)A child in need is defined under the UK Children Act 1989 as a “child who is unlikely to achieve or maintain a reasonable level of health or development, or whose health and development is likely to be significantly or further impaired, without the provision of services; or a child who is disabled”.
The text is a templated document the first section of which requires the names of the social worker and all other professionals involved. Key headings under which the social worker, Paul, must respond include: ‘Significant life events’, ‘Assessment of specific needs and risks’ (e.g. health, education), ‘Parenting capacity,’ and ‘Family goal plans’.

6.1.3 Critical moments

Jim quickly and silently reads through Paul’s draft online, nodding. Then, reading the account of the boy’s journey to the UK, under the section ‘Significant life events’, says:

Jim: Don’t you think you need to say how crazy this all is? --- I’d like to put that we don’t think it’s a true account

Paul: Knowing and thinking are two different things. [1 Field notes]

They debate the extent to which the account of the boy’s early complex family life, involving accounts of being forced to leave his country, being pursued by gangs to transport drugs, hiding in a lorry to travel to the UK is ‘plausible’ or ‘true’. Paul points to where in the text he has indicated that his account is based on what the boy has said:

Paul: That’s why I’ve put claims [2 Field notes]

as in the following written extracts

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8 Broad conventions were followed in transcribing the interviews and notes of talk, using standard punctuation and brackets for inaudible talk and extended pauses. Three dashes indicate a section of the original talk has been cut.
Ahmed claims that a gang were threatening to hurt him and his family if he did not transport drugs. [3 Text]

is separated from his family after he claims that the gang found him. [4 Text]

They look at the text on screen, with Jim, the manager, re-reading. Jim does not think that claims adequately signals that the account is one offered by the boy, rather than an account that Paul can verify. Jim argues that they need to explicitly indicate that they cannot warrant the account:

Jim: We can put that ‘we can’t verify his story’.
Paul: But I really do not want to say that.
Jim: I want it to come across that we have some scepticism. It makes it look like you’ve swallowed the lot. You need some analysis. Can I put in, ‘as a 12 year old boy I’m wondering how much of this account he is able to remember and articulate’.
[5 Field notes]

Paul accepts that they are not in a position to verify the account but states

I wouldn’t want to say anything that would affect his asylum application.
[6 Field notes]

They continue by discussing the challenges of producing an ‘accurate’ account when they know they are basing their written representation of the boy’s life on limited encounters with
the boy and via spoken interaction with an interpreter. In terms of influencing an application for asylum, Jim the manager argues that it is better to show caution, saying that “if the Home Office identify one lie in a document, they tend to view the whole account as a lie”. After some further discussion which has to end because Jim has to return to the urgent situation of the 6 year old girl, Paul revises his text to include the following:

During this assessment an interpreter was needed so that Ahmed could relay his account of coming to the UK. We have no way of verifying Ahmed's account and as a 12 year old boy wonder how much of his account he can accurately remember and is able to fully articulate at his age. [7 Text]

Paul agrees to this version but is deeply troubled by including any wording in the text that might suggest that he, as the social worker, does not trust the boy’s account, and lend his professional legitimacy to a decision to reject Ahmed’s asylum status:

Writing about significant life events is really challenging when you are working through translation, when the child is clearly traumatised and when there’s no other written evidence to support an account. [8 Interview]

6.2 Writing a parental assessment: representation, accuracy and expert discourse

6.2.1 The context of production

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9 They were working in a situation where no further resources were available for translation/interpreting services until the next financial year.
Melanie has been a social worker in Children’s Services for 8 years. She works long days, routinely hotdesking across at least three offices, as well as regularly working outside of working hours at home. She has been working with one specific family grouping for more than 12 months, involving some 193 distinct texts (not including emails and handwritten notes) most of which were written by Melanie, but also reports from other professionals such as teachers, doctors and psychiatrists. An immediate priority is the completion of written texts assessing the two adults’ capacity to look after the children. Like much social work writing, these texts were written over several weeks, in between Melanie’s other work such as making home visits to a number of families, attending school-based meetings, observing ‘contact sessions’ between parents and children, attending meetings with co-workers.

This moment of writing centres on a morning of 4 hours where the social worker, Melanie, is drafting the texts with Joan, a family support worker, who has had considerable contact with the adults and the children. They had specifically arranged to meet in one of the offices where they could work alone in a small room. They sit with hard copy notebooks and Melanie with her laptop open on the draft documents. At the start of their discussion, each PA is more than 30 pages in length. The documents are due in by the end of the week.

6.2.2 The texts being worked on

A parental assessment (PA) is a document which aims to assess a parent’s capacity to look after his/her child/ren and is used in family courts to consider how a child’s needs can best be met. The social worker, Melanie, is working on a written assessment of two adults, from whom their three children had been separated because of concerns about drug and alcoholic misuse and violence. The two adults – the mother and the father of one of the children – are
separately seeking custody of two of the children, with one of the adults additionally seeking custody of the third. Given that the assessments centre on the care of one family grouping of children, with the same completion deadline, both texts are being worked on at the same time.

The document is templated with key headings under which the social worker must respond including: ‘The parent(s) background and their life experiences, including their childhood, education and employment’; ‘History of relationships, past and present adult relationships’; and ‘Physical and mental health, any learning needs, any history of misusing drugs or alcohol, any history of offending’.

6.2.3 Critical moments

There are a number of critical moments in producing the PAs. A key challenge throughout Melanie and Sue’s discussion is agreeing factual information and how this can be represented textually. They repeatedly check with each other, with Melanie often reading from her draft, “Let me know if this bit is right” and Joan reading her notebook, “That’s right isn’t it?”. One example of what might be considered the documenting of a relatively straightforward procedural issue, was the question of the adults’ views on whether their (observed) contact time with the children should be together or separate. Melanie and Jane checked and discussed notes and finally agreed that neither of the adults had a consistent view. This lack of consistency was finally encapsulated in the statement:

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10 To see example of form an authority not participating in the research to protect anonymity https://southwark.proceduresonline.com/pdfs/nt_assess.pdf
Over the following two months Mr Brown and Ms Smith changed their position regarding wishing for the contact sessions with the children and parenting assessment sessions to be separate or together.[9 Text]

Another challenge of more fundamental importance is clarifying whether in fact the adults see themselves as continuing to be in a relationship or not. Joan says:

How can I say that on same day that he said they were separated he bought her a pair of boots. (Joan) [10 Field notes]

The final textual account of this was as follows:

Both Mr Brown and Ms Smith are clear with the Local Authority that their view is to remain separated as they can identify the difficulties within their relationship however it is of concern that the couple have a history of ending and resuming their relationship and the status of their relationship throughout the assessment has been unclear. For example, the couple report that they were separated and had a dispute around Christmas however Ms Smith informed professionals that Mr Brown had bought her a pair of boots. [11 Text]

As extracts 10 and 11 indicate, language work is involved in shifting from spoken to a written discourse of a more formal register, through lexis and impersonal constructions (e.g. a history of ending and resuming their relationship, it is of concern). Throughout there is explicit discussion about wording and (implicitly) how to move from understandings articulated in oral discourse to written. For example, Melanie asks
How can I say ‘she goes from one to another very quickly’? [12 Field notes]

which in the final version of the text becomes

She appears unable to remain single for lengthy periods of time, entering from one relationship to another within close succession. [13 Text]

Another example is when Melanie asks

What word can I say that ‘she’s always cheated in her relationships’? [14 Field notes]

which in the text becomes

has entered into several different relationships which all show a pattern of domestic violence, instability and infidelity. [15 Text]

A specific challenge Melanie and Jane discuss throughout is how to represent the network of people each adult has been involved with sexually and/or emotionally, with each other and others (together or separately), and the extent to which violence and or drug and alcohol use have been part of routine behaviours. In attempting to produce an accurate written account of their networks (in the case of the man involving at least 14 other adults, and in the case of the woman, 28) Melanie and Joan struggle to impose a meaningful textual structure. After
discussing the details of the adults’ networks, there is a long silence. Finally, Melanie thinks a chronological textual structure is the best way forward, although difficult:

I’ll try to do it in chronological order but it’s very hard. I’m hoping they will see that.

[16 Field notes]

with ‘they’ here left vague but understood as ‘the court’ hearing the case.

In representing the adults’ lives, a particularly troublesome word throughout Melanie and Joan’s’ discussion and drafting is relationship. Relationship is part of the institutionally given-discourse, used in templated section headings and subheadings and therefore is a key ‘categorisation’ (Sarangi and Candlin 2003) that the social worker is expected to use, in her analysis and textual account. In some instances, whilst struggling to accurately document the adults’ involvement with others, Melanie and Joan seem comfortable with using the word as part of their discourse (see also Extract 11):

I don’t know how I’m going to summarise her relationships. When in one relationship, she sleeps with others, some relationships are all about domestic violence. (Melanie)[17 Field notes]

as well as using relationship as a way of recontextualising adults’ vernacular accounts. For example, Jane, talking of the man, reading her handwritten notes, says:
He says alcohol doesn’t make him violent, it makes him “horny”---He doesn’t really get that, that it’s all about their relationship, the violence in their relationship.[18 Field notes]

In the final reports, relationship/s is used substantially: 85 times in the woman’s PA, and 52 times in the man’s PA to refer primarily to people they interacted with sexually, some of whom they also lived with. However, in other instances of drafting the PAs, Melanie and Jane worry about the word relationship, viewing it as being inadequate as a descriptive term to capture the adults’ experiences and practices.

How can you say ‘she slept with them both’? ‘Sexual relationship? But it wasn’t a relationship. (Melanie) [19 Field notes]

They also debate which descriptors they can use to qualify and categorise the nature of the ‘relationship’:

how can I say their relationship is dysfunctional? Will the court have me on the stand challenging me on that? (Melanie: my emphasis) [20 Field notes]

The social worker is questioning her right to use the specific term dysfunctional, signalling that the court has specific views about which expert discourse she can legitimately use. In the final version, relationship is qualified through adjectives such as significant, positive and abusive and also used as a complex noun in domestic violence relationship, domestic abusive relationships. Melanie also opts for the word disputes (both as a noun and a verb) to signal disagreements/problems with the behaviour between the adults, for example, referring to
Disputes in the relationship [21 Text]

Verbal disputes between [22 Text]

X fully disputes this allegation [23 Text]

The lexeme dispute is used as a way of characterising behaviours between the adults at specific moments which – set alongside descriptions of the violence between them and the repeated breaks-ups – contributes to forming a warrant for an evaluative metacomment in the written text, as exemplified in the extract below:

There have been continued verbal disputes between Mr Brown and Ms Smith via the telephone, within Ms Smith's home---. There therefore continues to be an unstable and volatile relationship between the couple. [24 Text My emphasis]

Descriptions of specific events and behaviours constitute the warrants for evaluative metacommments on which the recommendations made in the PAs will be assessed (by the court). But a key challenge throughout is deciding how much description is necessary. Commenting on one of the PAs:

We’re already at 68 pages [25 Field notes]

At the end of their 4-hour discussion and drafting, Melanie and Jane were exhausted, feeling
drained, extremely drained [26 Interview].

6.3 Writing an appeal: from cautious to categorical interdiscursive claims

6.3.1 The context of production

Joseph has been a mental health social worker for 8 years and has been working with Matt for several years. Matt is a man in his twenties who has mental health problems. Joseph had helped Matt and his mother apply for a Personal Independence Payment (PIP), a welfare benefit introduced in 2012 as part of the UK Welfare Reform Act, intended to provide financial help to people with a long-term health condition or a disability with the extra costs of basic living. Joseph had talked with Matt both before and after Matt had had an interview with a PIP assessor, in which Matt was asked a series of pre-scripted questions against PIP criteria. Matt had reported that he felt this assessment interview had gone well, as noted by Joseph in his case notes:

Matt spoke about his life and needs with the Disability Assessor. He said that he felt anxious but was able to control this in order to put across his views. [27 Text ]

However, Matt subsequently received a letter from the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) saying he had been assessed as having no specific needs (scoring zero points) for financial help with daily living. Joseph was informed of the decision in a distressed phone call by Matt’s mother Jane and on the following day visited Matt and Jane, stating that in his view the DWP decision was incorrect and that he would draft an appeal.
6.3.2 The text being worked on

The text being worked on is an appeal, referred to as a ‘Request for mandatory reconsideration’, against a decision made by the DWP to not award any financial support to Matt who had been assessed as not meeting PIP criteria.

A ‘Request for mandatory reconsideration’ is a formal stage in the process, involving the claimant writing to the DWP specifying the grounds on which the ‘request’ is being made. The text can take the form of a letter but the DWP also provide a templated form on their website with section headings including: ‘About you’; ‘About the original decision’; ‘Why you disagree with the decision’; and ‘Further Information’. Writing a text requesting a ‘mandatory reconsideration’ of a DWP decision is clearly a challenging task, a point indicated by the substantial advice, support and examples provided by organisations such as Citizens Advice Bureau (2021).  

6.3.3 Critical moments

The critical moments in this instance are sparked by the failure to secure funding for Matt, and Joseph’s decision to draft a ‘Request for mandatory reconsideration’. Joseph does have some experience of writing appeals. But given the amount of time needed to dedicate to the task and the one month deadline, he decides to asks a welfare rights worker, Sue, who is based in the same building, for help in drafting the Request because “she has more knowledge and experience of it than me”.

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11 The latest UK government statistics show that more than half of PIP decisions are changed after mandatory reconsideration or an appeal to a tribunal.
Joseph generally enjoys much of the writing he is required to do, particularly mental health assessments because it’s an opportunity to focus in detail on one person and “it’s a formal way of writing that I quite like”. However, writing the ‘Request for mandatory reconsideration’ requires specific knowledge not only of the PIP assessment criteria but also contextual knowledge about the process (e.g. current legislation and assessment practices) and the written discoursal and rhetorical moves essential for challenging the decision. The production of the text over a week involves several long discussions between Joseph and Sue about Matt’s situation, brief discussions in between other work, and Sue reading case notes and written assessments of Matt’s mental health and support needs.

The welfare rights worker, Sue, is experienced in writing appeals in general and keeps up to date with the legislation as well as the rhetorical practices essential for successfully challenging a decision. She is very happy to help with the ‘Request’ because the mental health social workers “have got loads of pressures in other areas and it’s not something you really expect a social worker to do” but states she would have preferred to be involved from the outset because “you’re trying to undo something that you’re not even sure how it got tangled up in the first place”.

In drafting the text, Sue uses her specific expert knowledge to make several key rhetorical moves. The first relates to the assessment criteria and descriptors.

They’re very specific descriptors--- it’s a very restrictive way of working so it’s difficult for people. If you just sort of go along, you know, and say this person’s got
whatever, this is where they struggle, well they’re going to fail because you’re not being very specific. [28 Interview]

Being ‘specific’ involves challenging all the decisions made against each criterion. Sue’s first decision, therefore, is to write a letter rather than use the templated form as she knows that a letter will be acceptable to the DWP and will enable her to include far more specific detail to make a stronger case. ‘Being specific’ also involves using a categorical modality when describing Matt’s needs, which stands in contrast to Joseph’s more routine cautious and nuanced textual practices. Talking of his writing, Joseph says:

We write a lot of descriptive detail, to try and give a fair and detailed picture of a person and their situation. But we can’t be categorical. I tend to use words like may, could, appear. [29 Interview]

and an analysis of his case notes illustrates the modality used, for example the use of hedging in relation to proposed support:

I suggested that support may go some way towards alleviating some of X's difficulties. [30 Text]

OCD symptoms, then these may need to be addressed first [31 Text]

and in relation to evaluation of people’s behaviour and insights

some of his presentation may be a choice [32 Text]
X feels that this *may* have more impact on his thinking than 'abstract' ideas and possibilities [33 Text]

In contrast, the welfare rights worker, Sue, uses categorical modality in describing Matt’s needs throughout her letter:

He *neglects* his personal care, diet, medication and becomes socially isolated. Matt *struggles* to initiate any action independently of his family and services. [34 Text]

*M lacks* the skills to prepare cooked meals [35 Text]

*M requires* specialist help [36 Text]

Matt’s medication *needs to be* monitored [37 Text]

A second rhetorical decision made by Sue, drawing on her expert insider knowledge, is to explicitly address the reader – officially entitled the ‘decision maker’ in PIP cases – as someone who may not understand mental health issues and how these affect everyday living. She states:

these [decision makers] aren’t mental health experts---I remember once going to a training course with decision makers, and they thought that ‘borderline personality disorder’ meant it was ‘borderline’. No. And these are people who are making decisions. So I’m very aware of it. It really jolted me that day. [38 Interview]
A significant rhetorical move in crafting the letter is therefore to both to inform the reader about Matt’s specific mental health diagnosis and at the same time claim authorial-professional expertise. She does this in her opening summary by leaning on the expertise of another more socially prestigious expert, a psychiatrist:

Matt is under supervision of Dr X for a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder, previously known as Asperger syndrome---The main symptoms for Matt are around high levels of anxiety, usually in relation to change, isolation or stress. [39 Text]

And follows this by explicitly linking the diagnostic description with the focus of the PIP assessment, everyday living and mobility.

This anxiety manifests from many areas of his day to day activities.---He neglects his personal care, diet, medication and becomes socially isolated. Matt struggles to initiate any action independently of his family and services (Followed by 17 lines of further examples). [40 Text]

The third key rhetorical move by Sue is to explicitly echo the PIP assessment discourse. Thus in the opening paragraph she is not only categorical in making claims (e.g. he neglects, Matt struggles) but makes both intertextual and interdiscursive references (Fairclough 1992) to the discourse of PIP assessment descriptors. Examples of intertextual references (using the same wording) are needs and neglects. Interdiscursive references include sentences such as he struggles to initiate any action independently which echoes phrases in the descriptors such as independently unaided, needs prompting, needs supervision.
Throughout the letter the decision maker is explicitly addressed and, after providing detailed description of Matt’s needs, is asked to reconsider the decision to award 0 points for each category

We ask the decision maker to---[41 Text]

Sue directly challenges the decision maker’s decision with regard to one criterion, ‘Communication’ and she demands, rather than requests, a change in decision:

Matt meets the following criterion (more than 50% of the time) under the PIP descriptor and the decision maker needs to acknowledge this in relation to autism. [42 Text]

7 Discussion

The three critical moments constitute empirical accounts of professional social workers’ writing. They provide insights into some of the (often invisible) challenges social workers are grappling with, illustrating the complexity of everyday professional writing. They evidence how two key contextual dimensions to flux in the workplace – the shift towards contemporary social work as a writing-intensive practice and the contested professional status of social work – are enacted at the level of text production. The material consequences of the shift towards a writing-intensive practice are evident from all three instances: a considerable amount of text work is required; it takes place in and across noisy offices and is often squeezed in alongside other (often unrelated) activity (in 6.1 and 6.3). Quiet spaces with writing-focused time are sometimes sought out and secured for particularly long and complex
documents (as in 6.2), but are insufficient for the completion of the complex drafting required.

The contested professional status of social work is most evident discoursally in 6.2, where the social worker questions her right to use certain terms, i.e. *dysfunctional*, but also at the level of rhetorical claims, in instance 6.1, where the social worker (working with a manager) struggles with his authority to make claims in his representation of a young person’s situation.

All the texts require an explicit statement of social worker professional voice in order for the document to be legitimized: all require a social worker’s name and signature. However, in each instance the social worker is actively involved in the entextualization of voice in different ways. In 6.1 and 6.2, the social worker is the principal orchestrator of the text, whereas in 6.3, whilst the social workers’ knowledge and previous texts are crucial to the production of the text, it is another professional who actually writes the text. In all three instances, ‘literacy brokering’ – the participation of often unseen others in the production of texts (Lillis and Curry 2010: 22) – is evident, with differing relationships of power and expertise. In 6.1, an institutional literacy broker, a manager, is directly involved in the mediation of the text, whilst previously and – in relation to the production of the oral account on which the written text is based – an interpreter had acted as a broker. In 6.2 a family support worker acts as a key literacy broker: she has less institutional status than a social worker but her expertise, constituted by her knowledge of the adults, is highly valued by the social worker and contributes to the production of the text. In 6.3, a welfare rights worker plays a major role in brokering the text, bringing to bear expertise and discoursal knowledge from a different professional domain.
The three instances evidence the dialogic nature of meaning making with specific regard to addressivity. The most immediate addressees surrounding text production are the brokers discussed above: it is through interaction with such addressees that the texts emerge. The actual and imagined addressees of the texts are multiple. In 6.1, the immediate addressee is the local authority to whom an account is being made of the child’s needs and support required but there at least two other addressees: the Home Office, who may draw on this text as warrants for or against granting asylum status; and a potential future addressee, Ahmed, who as an adult may wish to read the social worker’s account of his life. In 6.2, the main addressee is the ‘court’ (rather than a particular judge, for example) with power to grant or deny parental custody; however the adults who are the subjects of the PAs are also addressees, both of earlier versions (as they were asked to confirm factual details) and as potential future readers of the final version. Whilst there were multiple addressees in 6.1 and 6.2, there was also clearly a dominant addressee which shaped discoursal and rhetorical decisions. In 6.1, the apparently ‘secondary’ addressee of the Home Office dominated discoursal choice and representation (about the veracity of Ahmed’s account) whilst the more distant (but as important), future addressee, Ahmed, did not seem to figure in discoursal decision making. In 6.2, the dominant addressee was ‘the court’ (emphasis was on providing factual details that could warrant the social worker’s recommendation) but in a fundamental sense, a key, but troublesome addressee, seemed also to be the social worker herself (how can I say? will the court challenge me?), indexing a question about who she is allowed to be discoursally as a professional social worker. Example 6.3, in contrast to 6.1 and 6.2 is unusual in findings from the WiSP study in having one specific addressee, a decision maker with institutional power to allocate funds, with one specific purpose: to overturn the decision made.
The heteroglossic nature of language is evident in the struggles around entextualisation in each instance. All three instances illustrate the challenges in moving from spoken to a formal written register (for example, in 6.2, *she goes from one to another* becomes *she appears unable to remain single*) with the social worker’s spoken discourse used to mediate the spoken discourse of other people, before then recontextualising aspects of both as the written text. Such recontextualization is further complicated where the social worker has to produce a written account in a language which is different from the child’s first (spoken) language and also additionally mediated by an interpreter (as in 6.1). Grappling with language and its histories of use to take control – ‘to submit [it]to one’s own intentions’ (Bakhtin 1981: 294) – is of course a challenge all (professional) writers face. However, the three instances signal specific challenges faced by social workers with regard to authorial agency, where there seems to be both concerns about which discourses they are legitimised (or not) to use (i.e. *dysfunctional*) as well as some dissatisfaction with words that they are legitimised to use and which are prescribed in institutional discourse (i.e. *relationship*). These particular struggles index what seems to be a challenge to a transparency orientation to language (‘say what you see’, see Section 2) as well as what seems to be a lack of a legitimised ‘expert’ social work discourse that enables professional ‘recognition’ (Bourdieu 2000). Given that expert discourses are considered to be constitutive of the status and identity of professionals in general (e.g. Gunnarsson 2009), the contested status of such a discourse in social work may account for the substantial use of ‘description’ by social workers, a practice often criticised (Lillis et al 2017).

8 Concluding remarks

There are a cluster of problems repeatedly mentioned with regard to writing in professional social work which need to be explored. This paper is intended as a contribution towards
making issues of writing and written discourse a serious focus of attention which go beyond transactional orientations to texts and transparency orientations to the written record. The paper has sought to make visible the realities of everyday professional social work writing, in terms of the material conditions of production as well as the discoursal and rhetorical complexity of the writing that social workers are required to undertake. It is hoped that the focus on critical moments in the production of texts will foster both academic and professional debate about the nature, functions and consequences of professional social work writing.

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