

Presentation of work in progress at Applied Linguistics and Professional Practice Conference, Copenhagen, November 2016

# Combining ethnography and corpus to research writing practices in social work: challenges and opportunities in methodology, epistemology and application

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# Aims of presentation

1. To give an overview of the WiSP project
2. To outline our methodological approach
3. To illustrate/evaluate our methodology – particularly in relation to *ethnography* and *corpus*- by looking at a particular text type and practice= ‘case notes’
  - *What does an ethnographic orientation to case notes enable us to understand?*
  - *What does a corpus linguistic orientation to case notes enable us to understand?*
4. Reflecting on what it means to ‘combine’ ethnography and corpus
  - *Opportunities, challenges, tensions in methodology, epistemology and application*

# About WiSP

- 2-year, ESRC-funded research project (October 2015-October 2017)
- the first national research project on writing in professional social work practice

## Research Questions

- What are the institutional writing demands in contemporary social work?
- What are the writing practices and perspectives of professional social workers?
- What are the challenges faced and solutions found?
- How are writing demands and practices shaping the nature of professional social work?

Builds on writing/literacies research (e.g. Barton and Hamilton; Barton and Papen; Lillis) work based literacies research including social work (Brandt; Pare; Rai and Lillis)

# Why is this project important?

The production and use of written texts (often referred to as *paperwork*, *recording*, *inputting* or *documenting*) is a high stakes activity in professional social work.

Writing...

- plays a central role in all decisions about services for people
- is used to evaluate social workers' professional competence
- is often criticised – in public reviews and media reporting of high profile cases

Yet there is little systematic research on contemporary writing/recording demands, genres and practices

## Data collection aims

- 3 social work agencies
- 50 interviews social workers
- 10 weeks of researcher observation of writing in practice
- 1000 social worker days of writing activity logs from social workers
- A corpus of 1 million words of written texts - case notes, assessments, reports, emails....

## Data collected to date

- 3 agencies participating
- 39 social worker interviews
- 6 weeks of observations
- 427 days of writing activity logs in to date
- 2,300 texts anonymised (over 450,000 words)

## Data illustrated in this presentation- focus=case notes

- Two case notes in context
- Sub-corpus of case notes: case notes written by 20 social workers

# What does an ethnographic orientation to case notes enable us to understand?

Build a picture of the social work textual world through...

Observations

Interviews

Collection of texts written by social workers

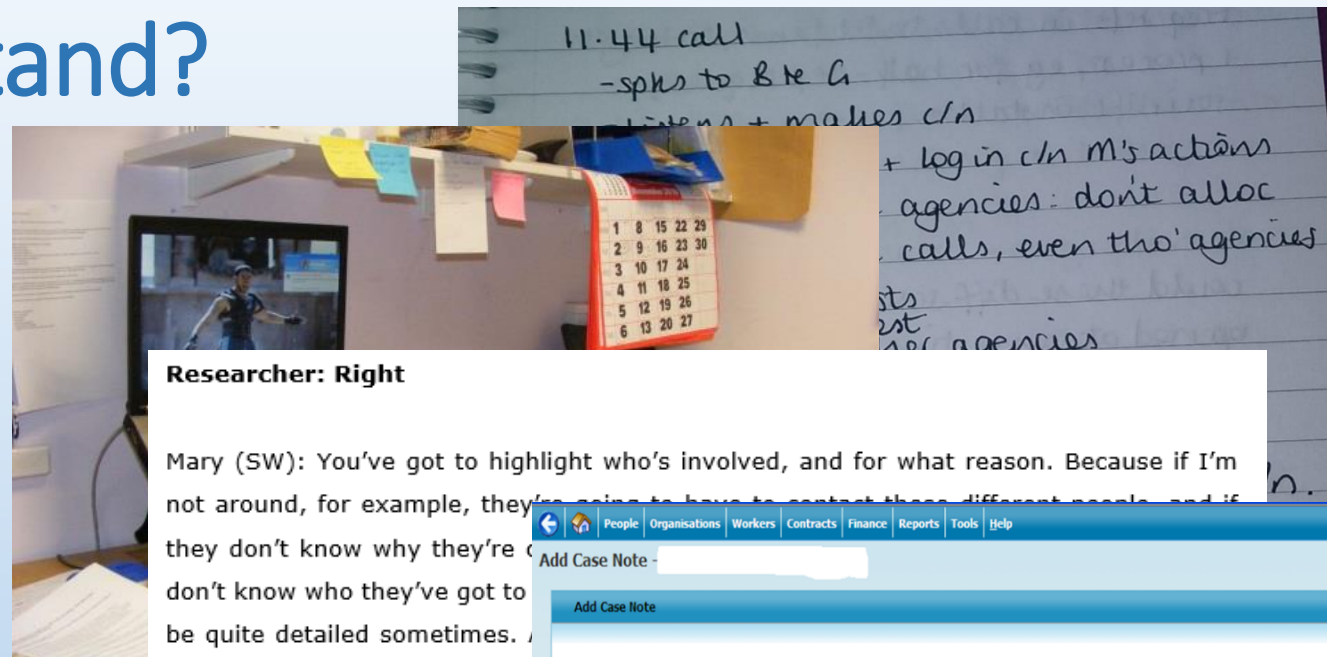
Documentary data e/.g. inspection reports, guidelines, policies

We learn about...

People's perspectives...

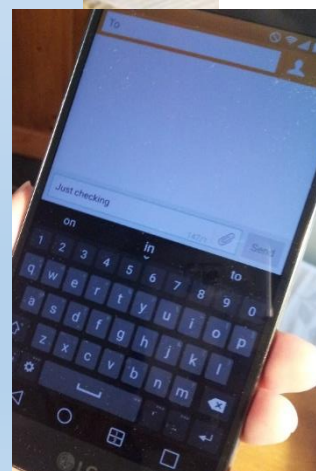
Amount of time spent on writing...

Types of writing...



## Researcher: Right

Mary (SW): You've got to highlight who's involved, and for what reason. Because if I'm not around, for example, they're going to have to contact these different people and if they don't know why they're calling, they don't know who they've got to be quite detailed sometimes.



important the situation  
son's mother's case. I  
that, or my manager b  
a conversation with t  
ation with them. Erm,  
to the manager, I've g  
family, and I've got to  
nsuming. But If I don't  
again, I'm always conce  
ial information, because

Specific focus today- case notes; what are they and where do they fit in the social work textual world

# Focusing on specific instances of case notes production

## **Example:**

The mother of a young man with long term mental health problems phones in distress to say that he has been assessed by Dept for Work and Pensions as not meeting any of the criteria for being awarded Personal Independence Payment.

## Focusing on specific instances of case notes production

**Example:** The mother of a young man with long term mental health problems phones in distressed on receiving a letter to say that he has been assessed by Dept for Work and Pensions as not meeting any of the criteria for being awarded Personal Independence Payment.

### Data sources

#### Interviews and discussions

- Interviews (transcribed) and notes of discussion with social worker (SW) and welfare rights worker (WRW)
- Emails from welfare rights worker

#### Observations

- Researcher week long observation including observation of phone call, case note writing and home visit to SU at time PIP was rejected

#### Texts

- Letter from DWP
- Appeal against decision by SW (written by WRW in name of SW)
- Decision letter rejecting appeal from DWP
- Appeal against rejection letter (written by WRW in name of SW)
- Case notes

#### Documentary data

- PIP descriptors produced by DWP and points- used by WRW welfare rights to draft text

### What the data sources enable us to understand....(some points)

- Social worker's (SW) perspective
- Where writing figures in social worker day
- How much writing/written texts takes place
- How much time is involved
- SW is orchestrating the resources
- The SW as literacy broker
- The need for literacy brokering
- The specific ways in which the SW works with SU/SU mother/another professional



# What does a corpus linguistic orientation to case notes enable us to understand?

## Descriptive statistics on case notes subcorpus

- 472 total texts (so far – texts from 20 social workers across two LAs)
- 65,500 words
- 136 words - average text length
- Range of 4 words to 1,228 words per case note (SD is 173)
  
- Mean average word length is 4.32 characters
- Mean average sentence length is 20.20 words

### ***What does this tell us?***

*On average these are short texts - But there is huge variation in length*

*[future work will compare the case notes subcorpus with a relevant reference corpus e.g. a corpus of electronic medical records]*

# Reflections -what does it mean to 'combine' ethnographic and corpus study methodologically?

- Model 1- 'do' ethnography, do 'corpus' and draw on findings from both to shed light on particular phenomenon – layering of approaches
- Model 2- use insights from ethnographic data to decide on corpus searches – e.g. the positioning of the SW through 'I' + type of verbs used – i.e. ethnographic 'corpus-based' research (Tognini-Bonelli, 2001)
- Model 3 - use insights from corpus data to decide on ethnographic research – e.g. high use of dates and times in the case notes caused us to return to look at these in the data. i.e. begin with 'corpus-driven' research
- Other models?

# Opportunities, challenges, tensions in methodology, epistemology and application

## Opportunities

- **Methodological**- Increases the range of data collected and the ways in which it is analysed
- **Applicational**-combining quantitative analysis with qualitative analysis likely to be of greater 'catalytic' validity (Lather)- have a greater impact on practice

## Challenges/tensions

- **Methodological**- tension around level of anonymization
- **Epistemological**-Different epistemologies adopted by team members towards the object of study/the unit of study and analysis (including the contingency of knowledge)
- **Practical**- Time-limited monies... weighing the value of investing time in building corpus against more contextualised data collection, e.g. observations
- **Meeting external funding requirements**

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**Thank you**

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