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How to cite:

Lillis, Theresa (2017). Imagined, prescribed and actual text trajectories: the 'problem' with case notes in contemporary social work. *Text and Talk*, 37(4) pp. 485–508.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

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Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1515/text-2017-0013>

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Imagined, prescribed and actual text trajectories: the “problem” with case notes in contemporary social work

DOI 10.1515/text-2017-0013

Abstract: Drawing on a text-oriented action research ethnography of the writing practices of UK-based social workers, this paper focuses on a key but problematic aspect of everyday, professional textual practice – the production of “case notes.” Using data drawn from interviews, workshops, texts and observation, the paper locates case notes within social work everyday practice and explores the entextualization of three distinct case notes. The heuristic of *imagined*, *prescribed* and *actual* trajectories is used to track specific instances of entextualization and to illustrate why the production of case notes is a particularly complex activity. A key argument is that in the institutional imaginary, and reflected in the institutionally prescribed trajectory, case notes are construed as a comprehensive record of all actions, events and interactions, prior to and providing warrants for all other documentation. However, they are in actual practice produced as parts of clusters of a range of different text types which, together, provide accounts of, and for, actions and decisions. This finding explains why case notes are often viewed as incomplete and raises fundamental questions about how they should be evaluated. The complexity of case notes as an everyday professional practice is underscored in relation to professional voice, addressivity and textual temporality.

Keywords: bureaucracy, technologies of writing, professional writing, recording, adult services, social work case notes

1 Introduction: the “problem” with case notes in social work

The production and use of written texts is a high stakes activity in professional social work, playing a central role in all decisions about services for people and at the same time used to evaluate social workers’ professional competence. “Case notes” (also referred to as “case recording” or “case notes recording”)

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have long since been emphasized as central to the vast range of official “paper-work” in which social workers engage:

Good case recording is an important part of the accountability of staff working in social services departments (SSDs) to those who use the services. It helps to focus the work of social services departments’ staff and supports effective partnerships with service users and carers. It ensures there is a documented account of their involvement with individual service users, families and carers. It assists continuity when workers are unavailable or change and provides an essential tool for managers to monitor work. It becomes a major source of evidence for investigations and enquiries. Over the last 25 years, inadequate case records have often been cited as a major factor in cases with tragic outcomes. (Goldsmith 1999: 1)¹

While this widely cited extract from an official inspection report illustrates a transparency orientation to writing (see Lillis 2013: 152–153), with case notes construed as offering a straightforwardly *documented account*, the extract also indicates the complex nature and role of case notes within social service provision. They are expected (i) to provide a comprehensive account – *a documented account of their involvement with individual users, families and carers*; (ii) to serve a monitoring function – *essential tool for managers to monitor work*; (iii) to function retrospectively as evidence and warrants – *a major source of evidence for investigations and enquiries*. Given the importance of “good” case recording, the consequences of “inadequate case records” are also emphasized: poor case notes are construed as having a causal effect in the provision of inappropriate or inadequate services – *inadequate case records have often been cited as a major factor in cases with tragic outcomes*.

The complexity of case notes is signaled in the range of aims they are expected to meet; however, the complexity (or possibility?) of producing texts which meet all stated expectations are rarely discussed. Indeed, where major concerns are reported in public reviews, the longstanding call for *comprehensiveness* in recording is reiterated:

Recording systems for child and family social work should meet the critical need to maintain a systematic family narrative, which describes *all the events associated* with the interaction between a social worker, other professionals and the child and their family. (Department of Education 2011: 11; my emphasis)

¹ This extract and versions of it are widely used with or without acknowledgment of the original source. It is repeated in other official documentation, as well as being reproduced across local authorities’ guidance documents – see e.g. http://wakefieldchildcare.proceduresonline.com/pdfs/rec_with_care.pdf (accessed 15 March 2015) – and training materials, e.g. http://www.sqa.org.uk/files_ccc/PreventionAndManagementOfFallsAndFractures-TrainingProgramme.pdf (accessed 1 May 2015), http://wandsworthchildcare.proceduresonline.com/chapters/p_case_rec_pol.html (accessed 3 January 2016).

The desire for comprehensiveness in written records is not unusual in contemporary institutional practices and indeed is central to the bureaucratic ideal, whereby the institutionally legitimized written record is accorded a privileged status, such that, as Kafka states, “what is not in the records is not in the world” (Kafka 2009: 345). However, there is considerable work still to be done to empirically track the making of the written record in many domains of institutionally governed social life, including the domain which is the focus of this paper, social work.

The aim of this article is to explore the making of case notes within the context of everyday social work practice, paying particular attention to the notion of comprehensiveness. The paper begins by outlining existing work on writing in social work and relevant work in other work-based domains, followed by a brief overview of the research study on which this paper is based. The main body of the article consists of two sections. The first section provides an overview description of the texts, technologies and practices which constitute everyday social work writing in order to locate case notes within the social work textual world. The second section provides a detailed analysis of the entextualization of three case notes by three social workers. The paper concludes by underlining the complexity of case notes with specific emphasis on professional voice, addressivity and textual temporality.

2 Existing research on writing in social work practice

Little empirical research has been carried out on contemporary social work writing. Most existing work has focused on the writing of social work students (e.g. Horton and Diaz 2011; Rai 2004; Rai 2006), with some work on graduate social workers’ writing on work placements (Paré 2002; Le Maistre and Paré 2004; Paré and Le Maistre 2006). Key findings from work placement writing, echoed in more recent small studies (e.g. Leon and Pepe 2010; Lillis and Rai 2012; Rai and Lillis 2012), point to the limited opportunities for “newcomers” to learn, or critically evaluate, the required writing genres (e.g. Paré and Le Maistre 2006) and to the limited attention paid to such genres in social work education (e.g. Lillis and Rai 2012; Rai and Lillis 2012). Other researchers such as Hall et al. (2010) and White et al. (2010), exploring the organizational systems governing social work practice in Children’s Services, have raised questions about the ways in which predesigned ICT (information and communications technology) systems orient social workers towards description and away from narrative, making it difficult for even the most

informed readers to grasp a holistic understanding of any single person's case. In a study focusing primarily on spoken interaction, Hall et al. (2006) include an analysis of one case using written documents, illustrating the relevance of their analytic framework to written record-keeping, an issue I return to below. The research reported in this paper aims to extend the empirical base of social work writing.

2.1 Focusing on entextualization in professional domains

While there has been limited research to date on social work writing, a body of work on literacy practices in other professional and work-based domains has emerged from two overlapping traditions: ethnographically oriented research, such as New Literacy Studies (NLS) (e.g. Barton and Papen 2010), and anthropologies of writing (e.g. Fraenkel 2001) including, for example, work on farming (Jones 2000; Mbodj-Pouye 2010), medical and health care (Papen 2010) and academic writing for publication (Lillis and Curry 2010); genre studies from a New Rhetoric tradition which have foregrounded the ways texts enact professional and work-based practice (e.g. Bazerman and Paradis 1991; Carol and Hanganu-Bresch 2011; Brandt 2009), as well as tracking text production across “grassroots” and professional domains (e.g. Trimbur 2013). Across these traditions there has been a growing interest in adopting a semiotic approach to the study of texts, in order to take account of the multimodal nature of “texts” and translation across modes (e.g. Prior and Hengst 2010; Trimbur 2013; Bezemer and Kress this issue). While it is the verbal written mode that is the focus of this paper, the impact of the range of technologies used in producing records – particularly the way the institutional trajectory is predesigned into the ICT system – is also foregrounded.

Of particular interest in the aforementioned is work which focuses on entextualization practices rather than finished texts, tracking how texts come into being and exploring how they constitute action across institutions. Brandt and Clinton (2002) usefully emphasized the mobility of literacy, picking up on Latour's (1987) notion “stable-mobile,” while indicating that such an emphasis does not (necessarily) entail an autonomous approach to literacy. Their work connects with “detachability” in Silverstein and Urban's definition of entextualization as the “process of rendering a given instance of discourse as text, detachable from its local context” (Silverstein and Urban 1996: 21). Producing a written record is the key way in which institutions detach discourse from its local (immediate) context and attribute it a privileged status. Blommaert's (2005) detailed analysis of asylum applications powerfully illustrates how applicants' spoken narratives are (re)entextualized in

various versions of written records and illustrates the consequences of such detachability.

In seeking to explore the entextualization of case notes, and the specific ways in which these texts are rendered “detachable” from their contexts of production, I use a heuristic of *imagined*, *prescribed* and *actual* trajectories. By *imagined* I am signaling the particular ways in which case notes – and their chronological and evidentiary positioning within the social work textual world – have come to be imagined by the institution, as evident in policies, practices and participants’ perspectives (drawing on Castoriadis 1987). By *prescribed* I am signaling that specific routes are designed into institutional documentation systems and practices by regulatory regimes (Blommaert 2005). By *actual* I am emphasizing the ethnographic intent to get at specific instances of entextualization, echoing Smith’s (2005: 223) use of “actual” to emphasize the active rather than inert nature of texts in modern institutions and bureaucracies. This three-dimensional heuristic helps make visible the ways in which text trajectories “simultaneously instantiate institutional processes and produce participant positionings and [professional] identities” (Maybin this issue; my insertion).

3 The study on which the paper is based

This paper is based on a study exploring the writing practices of social workers in Adult Services in one local authority in the north of England, carried out in response to a request to advise on improving the “quality” of case recording, with key concerns being comprehensiveness and the lack of “professional view.” In interviews and workshops it emerged that while there was complete agreement that case notes needed to be comprehensive, there was considerable debate about whether case notes regularly achieved this – case notes often being considered as providing “too much” or “too little” information. Similarly, there was strong agreement about the importance of “professional view” but strong disagreement about whether and how this should figure in case notes. Thus while both *comprehensiveness* and (the idea of the) *professional* seem to be stable “significations” within the social work “imaginary” (Castoriadis 1987: 359), they were also signaled by social workers as difficult to enact. Both dimensions became a focus of analytic attention during the text-oriented ethnography that took place over a period of one year which involved: collecting and analyzing case notes and other “documents” (defined below); researchers observing workshops exploring social worker perspectives; interviewing individual social workers about their experiences of producing case notes; researchers observing social work practice to understand where and how case notes writing fits within the social work day. The text-oriented ethnography was

set within an action research cycle where the “problem” was interrogated through empirical study and in discussion with social workers and managers.² The main focus of this paper is research question 1: What are case notes and where do these fit within the textual world of everyday social work practice? See Table 1.

Table 1: Overview of the study.

Key empirical research questions	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. What are case notes and where do these fit within the textual world of everyday social work practice?2. What specific problems with case notes are identified by social workers and managers?3. What are the challenges social workers face in writing case notes as required by the institution?
Participants	32 social workers (workshops to discuss case notes) 25 social workers (workshops to explore professional voice in case notes) 9 social workers = interviews 6 social workers = observed 6 days
Core data collected	interviews (18); field notes from observations (6 days); case notes and related documents (800); workshop observation notes; institutional documentation; national policy documents.

Ethical procedures were followed including local agency governance procedures and the university ethics committee. Central to such procedures was the anonymization of all texts before they were removed from the site.

4 Contextualizing case notes within the social work textual world

Observations and interview accounts of social work practice showed that a considerable amount and range of writing was involved across the working day. In interviews and workshops, social workers reported spending between 50 % and 80 % of their day on writing of some type and on each of the six days observed, writing took place during every hour of the working day. Writing across the day involved a range of types and modes: handwritten notes e.g. while making phone calls; writing on-screen into a range of “documents” and case notes; filling in forms by hand and drafting documents when visiting

2 The research was carried out by Theresa Lillis and Lucy Rai and included follow-up workshops and internal reporting to the authority over a period of two years.

service users. Some of this writing was relatively brief, lasting a minute or two, and some took place over a period of days or even weeks and often involved re-reading online a substantial number of related texts.

Technologies for writing varied: hard copy texts were strongly in evidence as part of everyday practice such as post-it notes, memos and individual notebooks (Figure 1). However, the digital documentation system was the official repository of all texts and the institutional anchor for all actions. This meant that while a range of technologies for writing were used, only those that were digital/digitized (including scanned in) were institutionally visible and legitimized.



Figure 1: A social work desk in a “paperless” office.

While working at desks, in shared offices, much of the social workers’ time was spent using the digital documentation system which is pre-populated with text types – referred to as “documents” – with each text type in turn pre-populated by specific templates. Figure 2 shows part of the drop-down menu for documents in the system. The digital documentation system both reflects and instantiates the institutional imaginary of how texts can and should serve the assessment of need and provision of services, providing a prescribed trajectory through the system whereby the production of texts constitutes and leads to specific actions.

Three points are important to note about the ways in which case notes are designed into the digital system: (i) they are not nested within the main “document menu” but are accorded their own specific digital space; (ii) they are multi-genre rather than uni-genre in nature, with case notes categorized



Figure 2: Screenshots of the drop-down menus on the ICT documentation system.

into 53 types including a category called “other” (Figure 3); and (iii) in the process of being detached from their contexts of production, case notes are also detached textually from other documents. The main part of the paper focuses on specific instances of entextualization in order to illuminate the significance of such detachment.

The figure consists of two screenshots of a software interface for adding case notes. The top screenshot shows a menu with options like "Aftercare Personal Advisor Case Note", "Assistant Director's Comment", "Information Exchange (S47)", "Police Check Summary", "CRB Check Direct Payment PA / Suitable Person", "Case Record Housekeeping", "Case Summary/Discussion", "Closing Summary", "Co-funding", "Court Hearing", "Deprivation of Liberty (MCA)", "Equipment Maintenance", "Equipment Order Placed", "Family Intervention Project Case Note", "Family Intervention Project Supervision Case Note", "File Audit Completed", "Finance", "Foster Carer Profile", "HOPs and LD and Day Services", "Home Visit", "Hospital Admission (Adult Out of Hours)", "Hospital Discharge Team Involvement", "Hospital Social Work Review", and "JRO Concern Log". The bottom screenshot shows a more extensive menu with options like "JRO Concern Log", "LACES Case Note", "Learning Disability Unit Manager/Deputy Unit Manager Case Note", "Legal Information", "Letter/Email/Fax/Memo Received", "Letter/Email/Fax/Memo Sent", "Manager's Decisions", "Mental Health Act Assessment", "Missing or Runaway Child Notification", "Missing or Runaway Child Return Visit and Interview", "Notification of Death", "Office Visit", "Other", "Other (Adult Out of Hours)", "PCT Continuing Care Review", "Personal Caller", "Police Information Exchange (S47)", "Record of Meeting", "Record of Supervision Discussion", "Remained at Home With Domiciliary Care (Adult Out of Hours)", "Remained at Home Without Domiciliary Care (Adult Out of Hours)", "Report Written", "Respite Care (Adult Out of Hours)", "Safeguarding Issues", "Signposting", "Supporting Families Case Note", "Telephone Contact", "Transfer Summary", "Visit - Other Allocated Worker", and "Visit - Social Worker". Both screens have a title field, date, time, and note text area.

Top Screenshot:

Title (max. 100 letters) *

Type of Note *

Date *

Time *

(Enter as 24 hour clock e.g. 15:30)

Note *

[Add Alert Recipients for this Note](#)

Bottom Screenshot:

Title (max. 100 letters) *

Type of Note *

Date *

Time *

(Enter as 24 hour clock e.g. 15:30)

Note *

[Add Alert Recipients for this Note](#)

Save and Continue Save and Close Finish Cancel

Local intranet 110%

Figure 3: Screenshots of drop-down menu for “case notes.”

5 Case notes in everyday professional practice

5.1 Case Notes 1 – case notes as accurate records: “you don’t want to miss anything”

The day the social worker, Paula,³ was observed, she spent the majority of her day centered on one service user, an elderly man who had recently been discharged from hospital and whose carer, his wife, was unable to assist with his mobility needs. Paula undertook a visit (not observed by the researcher) and spent much of the rest of the day writing on screen the case note and four related documents: a panel request, a care plan, a purchase order and a review summary. *The office environment was noisy, busy, cramped with lots of informal chat, talking on the phone and even some singing* (Researcher field notes). In terms of the action that this cluster of texts instantiates, the case note and related documents can be viewed as successful in that the service user’s situation is described, needs are stated and entextualized in several relevant documents which push the requests along the system leading to services (ultimately) being provided.

However, there are several potential issues of note within the context of the agency’s concern about the “quality” of case notes, if considered through the institutional imaginary of case notes providing a comprehensive account. Consider the case note alongside two other documents written during the same period of time.

- (1) Case note (extract, 3 lines from 7-line case note entry)⁴
Mike’s son and Mike are managing very well and Mike is happy to be at home. The lunch time and tea time calls are not really required during the week as Mike’s son is managing to transfer Mike to the toilet and change his pad.
- (2) Panel request (extract, 6 lines from 40-line form)
Mike returned home on xx/xx/xxxx with double up calls in the morning and evening to assist with personal care and to get out of and into bed. These are still required as his son is not able to manage Mike on the rotunda and Mike’s

³ All names used are pseudonyms.

⁴ Texts have been anonymized. The people for whom social services are being provided = pseudonym (following formality of address used in original documentation, e.g. first name or Mr. X); family members = e.g. son; other professionals – OT = occupational therapist, HCM = health care manager. Other identifying information such as dates and places have been removed and replaced with XXX. Deletions from original texts are indicated by —.

mobility is decreased at these times of day. However during the day Mike's son has found that he is able to manage to assist Mike to the commode and change pads. Mike's son also manages all meal preparation.

(3) Care plan (extract, 6 lines from 8-page form)

Mike owns his own home and has previously been quite independent managing all of his personal care and meal preparation until recently—Mike is aware that he is no longer able to manage to do as much for himself as he could previously but is adamant that he does not wish to go into long term residential care—It was considered that he should move to live with his son in XXX, however an environmental scan by Social services and the OT revealed that there would be insufficient room for carers and equipment to assist Mike into and out of bed—

If we consider the documents alongside the case note it is clear that there is some repetition of information (e.g. the son managing to change pads) but there is also additional information: in the panel request ([2]), additional information is included about the nature of the man's mobility (the need for help to get in and out of bed) and how it varies at different points in the day (*morning and evening, these times of the day*) and mention is made of the fact that the son can prepare meals; in the care plan ([3]) there is additionally an explicit statement of the man's wish not to go into residential care. Together they provide a more detailed account than the case note alone of the man, his needs and the extent and ways in which his son can help.

The social worker's description of how she approaches the writing of case notes signals that she is thinking beyond a specific case note towards what else – including other writing – will need to be done:

As I'm writing the case note I'm thinking about the future aren't I? I'm thinking about future outcomes, I'm thinking about what might or might not be wrong, thinking about family. You've got all that going on in your head haven't you? The dynamics of that case. — Sometimes, because in your head you're already one step ahead, aren't you? So while you're getting that information you're thinking "right well the next thing we need to do is this, this and this so I need more information to enable me to do that".⁵

Her description of how she orients to the writing of a specific case note – and the fact that in this example the case note and the four related documents

⁵ Interview extracts are presented using standard orthographic conventions. Deletions are marked by —.

were written within the same time period – suggests a different temporality (see Smith 2005: 116) than that imagined by the institution: as she writes across the four documents she is conceptualizing the whole case and required actions. In terms of institutional chronologies, the present to future temporality framing Paula's actions can be viewed as working well: imagining what texts need to be completed and completing these will lead to services being provided. Problems may arise when the institutional chronology shifts an orientation to texts which involves present to past, whereby case notes alone, or primarily, are used retrospectively to evidence a full account of and for actions and to warrant these retrospectively. The case note in this instance might be found "inadequate" as in actuality, the account and the warrants for action (e.g. the man's mobility is decreased) are dispersed across a number of texts.

The case note might also be considered inadequate from the perspective of the agency's concern about lack of professional view. The case note text has clearly been produced by the social worker but there is little on-record professional evaluation of the situation, with authorial voice implied, through categorical evaluative statements such as *are managing very well* ([1]) rather than foregrounded (e.g. through the use of the first person). Furthermore, the use of hedging could be construed as backgrounding the social worker's professional voice, *the lunch time calls are not really needed* with some ambivalence implied in the "not really". Overall there is a lack of clarity about whose perspective is being represented, for while there are traces of different encounters – the meetings with the service user and family member – these voices are not marked through direct quotes or reported speech, which serves overall to background not just these others' voices, but also the social worker's.

What constitutes "professional voice" textually and where it should figure in case notes was a hotly debated issue in the workshops. As in Paula's comments below, accuracy was often contrasted with being "subjective":

—the things that I want to see are accurate, accuracy and factual things, nothing that's subjective—. If someone were to look at one of my cases I would like to think that there is everything in that, not to say you can't make mistakes—. You don't want to miss anything —what you don't want to do is miss things —.

Paula's comment that it is possible to record "everything" is counterpoised by the anxiety about missing things – *you don't want to miss anything*. There is an imagined possible completeness of the written case note, a one-to-one record of events, peoples, actions and interactions. In practical (or actual) terms,

however, as Paula's practice signals, this is not straightforward; most obviously accounts get distributed across a number of texts.

5.2 Case Notes 2 – case notes and addressivity: “I’m not only interested in ticking boxes”

erved involved him spending most of the eight-hour day working at his desk in a shared office, where there was – as in the case above – considerable background noise. Throughout the day there had been several phone calls about the needs of an elderly man being discharged from hospital. From phone calls it was clear that the son and daughter had concerns, as well as different views, about the care needs of their father. At 2.30 pm John answered a call from the son, details of which are summarized in Table 2.

The social worker was visibly upset, by the angry tone of the son and by the reference to “Baby P,” a high-profile case of the death of a child widely reported in the media alongside attacks on social workers and which here clearly serves as a “shadow conversation” (Irvine 1996), a powerful point of reference for both parties in the conversation.⁶

The interaction led to two case notes being logged, one under the category of *case summary discussion* and one under *email*, and to the writing of two other documents: a letter to welfare rights seeking advice on whether the man is entitled to financial support for some help at home; and a templated form to record assessment of need. All four texts were written within a 24-hour period – towards the end of day of the phone call and at the beginning of the following day. Examples (4), (5) and (6) are the two case notes (full and extracts) and one of the related documents (extracts).

As in Case Notes 1, the account of the events and interactions, as I discuss further below, is dispersed across texts: the case notes focus on the account of the man's son's dissatisfaction and the other documents (see for example [6]) include statements reporting an assessment of the man's, Mr. Y's, needs and Mr. Y's perspective on his needs. The case notes do not function sequentially as prior to other documents but they are produced as part of a cluster of texts. Once again, this raises the issue of how case notes can and should be evaluated – and the problem of evaluating them in relation to the criterion of comprehensiveness and in isolation from other texts written contiguously.

⁶ This case was widely reported in all media in the United Kingdom. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-11626806>(accessed 23 April 2017).

Table 2: Mapping specific moment of case note entextualization.

Time	Researcher notes of interaction	Researcher notes of writing activity
2.30 call begins	Son phones	SW talking and typing notes into ICT system
	SW explains that father been assessed as having no personal care needs and that son needs to raise specific concerns with the ward.	Stops typing at key board
	Son clearly angry-voice getting louder	
	<i>SW: I'm not only interested in ticking boxes</i>	Writing by hand on notepad visibly upset
	<i>SW: If you have a complaint, I urge you to put in a complaint</i>	
	<i>SW: I'm making a judgement based on my professional experience, expertise</i>	
	Son: I know you're doing what you've been told to do [shouting]	
	<i>SW: I'm not an automaton. I'm trying to build a partnership with you</i>	
	Son: You're working from the same manual as the baby P social workers- [shouting]	
	<i>SW: I'm going to put the phone down- I don't think there's any need for these comments. I'm putting the phone down</i>	
2.44 call ends	SW puts the phone down	
	SW says aloud, addressing himself/ me.	
	<i>I need to log this down writing by hand.</i>	
	<i>That's why I'll need to get a log down.</i>	
	<i>I did advise him to put in a complaint didn't I?</i>	
	<i>I did advise him to put in a complaint</i>	
	<i>I advised him to put in a complaint</i>	
	Reads his notes carefully	Writing by hand on note pad at same time as talking aloud
	Asks if it's okay to mention that I had overheard gist of conversation	
	Writes case note on screen	Spends 20 minutes typing case note on screen into ICT system

- (4) Case notes – Case summary/Discussion (extract, 9 lines from 31 lines)

Long telephone call with Mr Y's son on his mobile.

I outlined the assessment criteria to him and discussed section 47 NHS Community Care Act 1990 in outlining the feedback from the ward sister that Mr Y is currently self caring with regards to personal care and may not qualify for home care support.

He suggested this judgement was scandalous and that I had been well trained in 'washing my hands' 'ticking boxes'

—

I advised him to put in a complaint if he was not happy with any decision made and I was wanting to support the situation

—

- (5) Case notes – e-mail (extract 28 from 38 lines)

Morning

I wanted to make you aware of a potentially difficult situation in relation to Mr Y on Hospital Ward X

Section 2 received and Mr Y ready for discharge. I understand from the logs and discussion with HCM1 that the information is supporting the fact that Mr Y's health needs have improved since admission to the point where the OT has assessed Mr Y as independent with washing and dressing, mobilizing and going to the toilet.

I contacted Mr Y's son last night suggesting that the information received is suggesting his father's needs may not satisfy 'on the appearance of need' A Section 47 assessment CCA 1990 and consequently assessment criteria.

My understanding with regards to section 47 (1) (a) requires an assessment to be carried out by the local authority whether or not the individual requests it. That is, the obligation to make an assessment for community care services does not depend on a request, but on the appearance of need. Second, the degree of need required before the duty to assess is triggered is only 'apparent' or 'possible' need; it does not have to be 'urgent or pressing or actual need'.

Third, the duty to assess arises even if there is little prospect of the individual actually qualifying for the services, either because of resource limitations on the part of the local authority or because of the financial circumstances of the service user (*R v Bristol City Council ex parte Penfold* [1998] 1 CCLR315). Similarly, the duty to assess arises even when services are discretionary. My conversation with the

Son was overheard by colleagues and he became angry likening my professionalism to that of the workers in the Baby P case. He was in intonation and content of speech, angry for much of the telephone conversation and efforts I made to have an open discussion to discuss discharge plans have broken down. I understand he is of the view that his fathers needs being assessed in a medical setting may not reflect how they are within a community setting and I tried to explain that I was reliant on the judgments of presenting needs.

–Thanks

- (6) Social care assessment of need (extract, 10 lines from 19-page form)
1. I have explained that as the ward is stating he is washing and dressing and using the toilet independently that residential care would not be likely to be funded ... [repeats information in case notes]
 2. Informed by Nurse on ward that he has been assessed by OT as independent he is independently mobile with the aid of a stick.
 3. He has stated his wish and intention to move into his son's house upon discharge stating that his care will be provided for by his son.
 4. He stated he is washing and dressing and going to the toilet himself though stated he may need help fastening shoe laces

The production of two case notes ([4], [5]) relating to the same event illustrates well their multi-genre nature, which as outlined above, is prescribed into the ICT system and stands in contrast to the notion of single-genre implied in the widely used institutional label “case note.” While they both include some information about Mr. Y's situation and focus centrally on an account of the spoken interaction in Table 2, the two case notes were produced with different purposes which, while not explicitly stated in the case notes, are signaled in their textual temporality, addressivity and voice. The first case note is a narrative and description in the past tense, with no marked addressee, providing an account *of* the telephone call. The second case note, the e-mail, is addressed explicitly to a manager and while it looks backward to record the event, it also looks forward (“a potentially difficult situation”) to offer an account *for* the social worker's actions (see Hall et al. 2006 for this dual frame of accounting in spoken discourse), emphasizing his attempt to sustain interaction in difficult circumstances (*efforts I made, I tried to explain*) as well as offering witnesses to warrant the claims about the son being *verbally abusive* through *my conversation was overheard*.

In terms of professional voice, authorial visibility of the social worker is evident through the use of the first person, mainly through reference to actions (*outlined, advised, contacted*) but also through reference to the social worker's knowledge and

expertise (*understand, understanding*). This understanding or expertise is also signaled through the inclusion of legal knowledge, through reference to legal statutes (CCAct), briefly in the first case note ([4]) and in more detail in the second ([5]) where the social worker, John, foregrounds his legal knowledge and evidence of acting on it. Traces of other voices in addition to legal statutes are explicitly marked in both texts – direct quotations are used to refer to what the man’s son said, reported speech to the man’s wishes and mention of information derived from other professionals (nurse, OT – occupational therapist). In contrast to Paula’s case notes, some trace voices – including the professional voice of the social worker – are marked. However, it is also important to note that this latter is most strongly visible as a defensive voice, accounting for actions and reactions in case of complaint, with the social worker’s sense of his professionalism being under attack as signaled explicitly in the text (*likening my professionalism to that of the workers in the Baby P case*).

In considering the criterion of comprehensiveness, it is important to note that a missing element was identified by the manager – the right of the “service user” to be re-assessed which is not logged in either of the case notes. If we return to the event which led to the case notes, it is possible to see why not: visibly upset by the response of the son, exacerbated by the son’s mention of “Baby P,” John’s attention is focused on recording the son’s dissatisfaction and informing him of his right to complain, which is evident in the repetition *I did advise him to put in a complaint*.

This specific instance illustrates that there are a number of differently imagined trajectories for the case notes by key participants – the social worker and the manager – with at least three orders of temporality. The first is the social worker’s imperative to capture the immediate-past event; the second is the social worker’s need to account for actions and reactions in case of a future-imminent complaint; the third is the manager’s need to consider the longer institutional timeframe where a case note might be used to assess the extent to which an agency fulfilled statutory responsibilities. This specific instance illustrates the difficulties surrounding the production of multi-genre case notes that can align with differently imagined trajectories and, once again, the difficulty of meeting the criterion of “comprehensiveness.”

5.3 Case Notes 3 – the text is not the practice: “would you like help with your paperwork?”

On the day she was being observed, Sara, the social worker, made two home visits, one in the morning taking an hour and a half and one in the afternoon

taking approximately two hours. The rest of her eight-hour day was spent at her desk, using the ICT system, taking and making phone calls and discussing specific issues of concern with colleagues in the same office. In order to prepare for the afternoon visit to assess the needs of an elderly man, she reads the case notes from a previous visit and writes a brief case note recording the arrangement to visit ([7]).

(7) Case note – Other (full version)

T/C to Mr X to arrange a visit for Wed at 2.30pm to review Attendance Allowance forms etc.

She printed out from the system the Attendance Allowance form and, based on her reading of case notes from a previous visit, began to complete sections by hand to take with her to the visit. On returning to the office after the visit, Sara completed the Attendance Allowance form and wrote a case note about the visit on the ICT system ([8]).

(8) Case note – Other (full version)

Mr X visited at request of keyworker. Finances discussed with Mr X and Attendance allowance started. Mr X would like help with other paperwork due to his recent stroke he is struggling to handle appointments etc. I will arrange to visit to assist him with this. Mr X would also benefit from the social car scheme as he is currently unable to drive and relies on visiting carers to complete tasks i.e. shopping. Before his stroke he drove and would take Mrs X out as needed. The Social care scheme would benefit both Mr and Mrs X until he has further input with regards to his current difficulties preventing him from driving.

In addition to the case notes, as stated above, Sara completed the Attendance Allowance form, an extract of which is in (9). As can be seen it is written in the first person.

(9) Extract from Attendance allowance (extract, 5 lines from 22-page form)
about why you are making this claim

I have difficulty gripping clothing due to my right sided weakness. Pulling up of socks, trousers and fastening buttons I find difficult. I have a bath hoist fitted however I find this difficult to use due to poor balance when sitting—Since my stroke I have problems with my communication called dyspasia. I am unable at times to pronounce or find the correct word—

As with Case Notes 1 and 2, the account of the event, actions and interactions is dispersed across several texts: a log of an appointment made and the purpose ([7]); a summary of the visit and actions ([8]); a description in the first person of the service user of the difficulties he faces in managing his everyday care ([9]). What none of the reporting in the case notes or the related documents reflects is the careful interactional work involved, as indicated in the researcher's field notes of the home visit:

An elderly man sits in a cluttered living room with an untidy pile of papers – letters, bills, envelopes scattered by his side. He struggles to articulate his words, is visibly upset and frustrated, angry, almost on the verge of tears. His wife is in a wheelchair in the middle of the room, finishing her dinner, slowly managing her fork with her right hand – she is left handed but her left arm is immobile after a stroke. A large TV screen shows a popular children's film. Most of the room is lined with shelving with videos three-deep. A black cat meows as it brushes past the wheelchair.

Sara sits on the floor between the man, Clive, and woman, Mary, and, showing the forms, explains that she's begun to complete a form that will enable them to get some support at home. She asks Clive if he would like to read it or whether she should read it to him. He says he'll read it so she hands him the form. She asks the same question of his wife, who seems clearly unhappy with Sara's presence in her house and responds gruffly. "Clive'll read it for me". But as Clive is clearly struggling to hold the paper still to read, the Sara suggests she could read it for her and Mary nods reluctantly.

Sara explains, showing the forms, 'This is something I wrote earlier'. "She means written, Clive", says Mary. Sara ignores the critical tone and patiently reads through the form, writing as Mary responds. When Sara, reading from the form, asks if she has a partner, Mary replies angrily "No I haven't got a partner. I don't dance". Sara continues reading the form aloud to Mary and writes as Mary responds. Mary tells Sara to stop shouting "I'm sorry" she smiles, "It's just a habit".

Sara asks if Clive would like her to help him with his paperwork, pointing to the pile of papers and letters around his chair. He struggles to say that he would like this but that he doesn't want to be any trouble. When Sara says cheerfully that this will be no trouble, his face lightens and he smiles, struggling hard to articulate what he wants to say "I. Should. Have. Met. You. Years. Ago". They all laugh. It's a breather in a very intense atmosphere. (Researcher field notes)

From analysis of the actual trajectory of this text – from blank form downloaded from an ICT system to home visit, to final completion back at the social worker's desk – the social worker's literacy brokering role is clear, as is the significance of the materiality of the literacy artifacts. Sara arrives with the hard copy texts to hold and pass around; she sits on the floor between the two people while she talks through the content of the forms, holding these out and pointing to specific sections. This instance illustrates how the text functions as a "stable-mobile" (Latour 1987), serving to carry institutional discourse from one domain to another, organizing a "definite sequence

of action” (Smith 2005: 120). The social worker enacts the prescribed institutional trajectory of the text, both by literally taking it to the home and by working through the requirements of the form.

There is no discussion about the form itself, about the requirement to complete the form or the fact that some sections must be written in the first person by Clive and Mary and that this is clearly not possible. This apparently small textual requirement – to write in the first person – illustrates a clear contrast between the institutional prescribed trajectory and the actual entextualization of this text. The only explicit dissatisfaction expressed is the mention of *partner*, a discourse that Mary finds distressful (as compared with “husband/wife”). Although they are all familiar enough with bureaucratic processes to know that they are doing what they need to do in order to secure some support, it still invokes tension and anxiety.

This specific instance illustrates what it means to “perform” (Bauman and Briggs 1990) as a social worker in the context of a specific literacy event. The social worker manages to steer them all in completing the prescribed task as well as in engaging with the immediate (unprescribed) situation – to ask if Clive would like help with his paperwork with which he is obviously struggling. It is noticeable that it is only when the social worker steps out of institutional, prescribed “textual time” (Smith 2005: 91) to engage in direct interaction, mediated by the specific material realities – the people, the room, the pile of papers – that the tension is released, an experience of direct human encounter.

Sara herself was unconvinced that it was essential to complete such lengthy forms in order to respond effectively to people’s needs:

Some people fall asleep while you’re working through it, some people to tell you to go, that they’ve had enough. It’s demeaning for elderly people to have to answer in such detail just to get help to go to the bathroom.

The brokering and interaction around the text is not recorded in the case notes – or other documents – so potentially it becomes invisible in terms of work and time. Furthermore, the professional voice that often seems to be missing in case notes is strongly evident in the encounter but is not recorded. It is an embodied voice not (easily) capturable in written records and seems not to be part of what the institutional imaginary requires.

6 Conclusion

Case notes are core to social work practice and are often found to be faulty or inadequate, in inspection and national evaluation reports. That written records

focusing on vulnerable people should be robust and accurate is not in dispute. However, there needs to be greater recognition – within social work agencies, inspectorates and the media – of the complexity of producing such records. Using the heuristic of imagined, prescribed and actual trajectories provides a way of making visible the nature of such complexity. Using ethnography to focus on actual trajectories highlights the specific ways in which case notes are imagined as part of the social work textual world and prescribed into practice, most obviously through the ICT system but also through practitioners' assumptions about what a written text can achieve. The paper serves to illustrate why an apparently mundane task is so troublesome, both in terms of production and evaluation.

A key aspect of the complexity of case notes emphasized in this paper is that of temporality: writing across a number of institutional texts often occurs contiguously within the same time-space so that while in the institutional imaginary, case notes are construed as a comprehensive record of all actions, events and interactions, prior to and providing warrants for all other documentation, they are in actual practice produced as parts of clusters of texts which together provide accounts of and for actions. This finding explains why case notes are often viewed as incomplete and raises fundamental questions about how they should be evaluated. Methodologically, the paper therefore serves to problematize the boundaries drawn around “texts” as a unit of analysis, signaling the importance of focusing on clusters of texts or “genre suites” (Carol and Hanganu-Bresch. 2011). A further aspect of temporality is that of *near* and *far* institutional time shaped by specific imagined addressivities: near time is clearly a priority for social workers, seeking to produce records that secure services and provide accounts of and for immediate actions; far time is a more central concern of managers who may be called on retrospectively to account for all actions taken and which together constitute the basis on which an agency is evaluated.

With regard to professional voice, the paper offers some indication of why explicit statements of professional view may often be missing in case notes. In wanting to enact the institutional imaginary of transparency, accuracy and comprehensiveness, social workers may position their own subjectivity as irrelevant, or possibly as threatening the achievement of accuracy and comprehensiveness, as signaled in Case Notes 1. However, such subjectivity is required by the imaginary where there is a risk to the institution, as indicated in Case Notes 2, where professional voice emerged as strongly visible when a social worker felt he had to carefully justify that he had behaved appropriately. Case Notes 3 illustrates what it is that the institutional imaginary seems not to require, an account of what it means to “perform” (Bauman and Briggs 1990) as a social worker and which is not – and

cannot easily be – logged in the record, contrary to the bureaucratic ideal. This instance reminds us that when exploring institutional entextualization practices it is important to seek to identify not only what such practices make visible, but also what is made invisible.

Acknowledgments: My thanks to all the social workers who shared their perspectives and practice, to Peter Bunting for comments on an earlier draft, to the ESRC for providing grant funding for a subsequent project (ES/M008703/1) which enabled time to write this paper.

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Bionote

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