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# Accounting for an encounter involving a social worker and man with learning disabilities and crafting tools for ethical social work practice

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## ABSTRACT

This article critically reads a social encounter in which a social worker and a middle-aged man with learning disabilities are implicated. To do so, I draw upon ideas and approaches associated with anthropology and the sociology of everyday life to expose invisible, or invisibilised, dimensions of social interaction which may, otherwise, be obscured, backgrounded, and perhaps even concealed by virtue of their ‘thereness’. Through the prisms afforded by these disciplinary lenses, a seemingly ordinary, and unspectacular, social encounter may be regarded in the context of everyday life alongside learning disability, as registering/generating multiple forms of language, and as being inescapably saturated in multifaceted forms of power. Because these disciplinary tools may help map not only the particular social encounter to which this article is concerned but also social interactions more generally, they constitute useful resources, to be cultivated, or crafted, for ethical social work practice.

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## Introduction

People with profound learning disabilities, or impairments, not only have been, and continue to be, routinely excluded from society (see, e.g. Cockain, 2022; Kitchin, 1998) but also theoretical, methodological, and empirical discussions and studies (see, e.g. Mietola et al., 2017, p. 264), as well as social work education and research (Ward et al., 2016, p. 920). In contrast to persons with either mild or moderate learning disabilities who are perceived to be more accessible (Doody, 2018, p. 1), persons with profound intellectual impairments may, as Mary Kellett and Melanie Nind explain, ‘be left outside research efforts because *they are perceived as too difficult to include*’ (2001, p. 51, emphasis added). Perpetuating this exclusion are, as Paula Jacobs *et al* explain, ethical concerns regarding ‘power imbalances, consent and vulnerability’ (2021, p. 330) and the complexity of involving individuals with profound communication difficulties (Nind, 2008, cited in Jacobs et al., 2021, p. 330); tendencies for people with ‘severe’ learning disability to be excluded, often in institutional settings, from ‘normal’ society; and the hesitancy of ethics committees to grant approval for people with ‘severe’ learning disability to be included in

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research (Doody, 2018, p. 2). Meanwhile, scholarship, influenced by Marxist, social constructionist, and poststructuralist perspectives and orientations has produced potent insights into the entangled material, structural, systemic, cultural, and discursive mechanisms which exclude and oppress disabled people, albeit while eclipsing individual experiences and properties, like the impact of ‘insurmountable impairment effects’ (Mietola et al., 2017, p. 263) and their role in people’s disablement.

Although learning disability has tended to be regarded through a partial prism, or looking glass, as research focuses on a narrow portion of the learning-disabled population, there has been a political drive to redress this omission—or exclusion—and to cultivate inclusive practice. As researchers explore possibilities for ‘ethically sustainable research practice’ (Mietola et al., 2017, p. 264) and strive to cultivate creative and imaginative ways to facilitate, and support, inclusion (Doody, 2018, p. 4) so educators attempt to conceptualize and realize inclusive practice in social work education (Ward et al., 2016, p. 922). Despite such commitment to inclusive, and participatory, research, researchers struggle to reconcile inclusive intentions with the practice of doing research albeit while remaining committed to finding ways to meaningfully include people with learning disabilities (Kellett & Nind, 2001, p. 51).

This article strives to contribute to such efforts and conversations by bringing into presence the everyday materiality of life alongside learning disability before and after the narrow ‘stage’ (Goffman, 1959, pp. 128–129) upon which social workers and service users typically encounter one another. It is hoped this article might not only sensitize practitioners and students to the multiple forms of language (e.g. words, space, silence, etc.) and power which saturate an ostensibly ordinary encounter between a middle-aged man with profound learning disabilities, and people whose lives are enmeshed with his through kinship but also introduce resources, and tools, with which to chart them. Because these maps not only help navigate the particular social encounter which occupies the center of this article but also social interactions more generally, they constitute useful resources, to be cultivated, or crafted, for ethical social work practice.

## Methodology matters

This article has emerged through participant observation, a ‘qualitative method of social investigation whereby the researcher participates in the everyday life of a setting’, while recording ‘experiences and observations’ (Coffey, 2011, p. 214). Participant observation is a defining feature of ethnography, the latter of which encompasses a ‘cocktail’ of approaches (e.g. interviews, documentary analysis, life histories, etc.) which ‘share the assumption that personal engagement with the subject is the key to understanding a particular . . . social setting’ (Hobbs, 2011, p. 101).

That ‘Paul’, a pseudonym, who is central to this article, neither has not nor cannot give consent to participate in the ‘project’ to which this article refers may likely cause ethical alarm in readers since in most research involving human subjects, informed consent of participants is a fundamental component. I did, however, gain ethical approval from the Human Subjects Ethics Sub-Committee of the university department where I worked, for a larger project in which ‘Paul’ was implicated but unnamed. Although by the time of writing up this article, I had become affiliated to my current institution, a renewed application was not required since approval had already been

given by a recognized ethics committee. In my application, I stated that in situations when informed consent was ‘not possible’, I would defer to parents, guardians, and caregivers for consent.

Although I have, over many years, explicitly and implicitly gained consent to implicate Paul in research, the nature of this consent is complicated because we are enmeshed through kinship, a ‘mutuality of being’ which, as Marshall Sahlins explains, means ‘persons . . . participate intrinsically in each other’s existence; they are members of one another’ (2013, p. ix). Such entanglement between Paul’s life, and story, and my own may even make this article methodologically resemble definitions of autoethnography, a form of enquiry which uses personal experience to describe and illuminate sociocultural and discursive practices and experiences (Muncey, 2010, p. 29ff).

Because of the ethical complexity of research consent, the reflective practice this article seeks to stimulate in others (e.g. readers, students, practitioners) must be applied to myself, and my position (or positionality) and the methods and methodology which underpin this article. Despite a lack of consent, The Mental Capacity Act (2005), section 31, presents guidelines which help ethical decision-making, stating, for example, that there ‘must be reasonable grounds for believing that research of comparable effectiveness cannot be carried out if the project has to be confined to, or relate only to, persons who have capacity to consent to taking part in it’ and, meanwhile, that the research has ‘the potential to benefit . . . [Paul] without imposing on . . . [Paul] a burden that is disproportionate to the potential benefit to . . . [him] and, crucially, that ‘anything done to, or in relation to, . . . [Paul] will not’ either ‘interfere with . . . freedom of action or privacy in a significant way, or . . . be unduly invasive or restrictive’ (Department of Health, 2005).

Critical reflection, and reflexivity, provokes further thorny questions like: Who is this work for? What right do I have to undertake it? What right do I have to write, or inscribe, Paul?

Although, like Kellett and Nind, I do not doubt that I benefit from the research, in intent, if not outcome, ‘this is in addition to people with learning disabilities . . . and *not at their expense*’ (Kellett & Nind, 2001, p. 52, emphasis added). I am, moreover, convinced that tendencies for people like Paul to be excluded—in life as in research—may make it unethical *not to include him* in articles like this, especially since they may provide insights into experiences which may help shape caring and care-full future relations (Tuffrey-Wijne et al., 2008). Consequently, it may be necessary, as some feminist researchers have argued, to represent the stories of ‘others’ who may be unable to do it themselves (e.g. Mietola et al., 2017, p. 271). Admittedly, my intent to ‘shape’ caring relations may not be explicit in this article although by situating Paul in the ‘normal’ patterns and rhythms of everyday life, I strive to disclose potential for community-based support and normalization, albeit in contexts marked by power and power relations. I hope such intentions may justify this article, as both the process and product of ethnography (Cockain, 2018b), especially since these aspirations cohere with Paul Atkinson’s claim that the ethical commitment of the ethnographer is key to ethical practice and that ethics should be evaluated in relation to the project’s commitment to promote ‘interests of social justice’ (2015, p. 183).

## Social worker! Social worker!

Paul was, as he has been for some days (and nights) now, almost incessantly on the go. For most of the previous night, he was in, out, up, down, in a seemingly never-ending Sisyphean loop on a quest for something which might resemble what Jacques Lacan calls an ‘objet petit a’ (Žižek, 2006, p. 69). This is not really an object, in a standard, taken-for-granted, sense. It can neither be seen nor touched. It may not even be perceived although it can become incarnated in specific objects. The ‘objects’, which are not really objects, vacillate—washing liquid, paint, coffee, pens, potatoes—becoming temporary hosts, or custodians, of Paul’s insistent, seemingly amorphous, desires. With every entrance and exit, Paul slams the door, as if attempting, while failing, to impose closure and perhaps even fabricate those ‘hard lines’ which demonstrate the human ‘yearning for rigidity’ (Douglas, 1966, p. 163).

After this day’s iteration of habitual protracted quotidian machinations which I describe more fully elsewhere (Cockain, 2021), Paul and I are on our way. We take a small rucksack filled with provisions: chocolate chip cookies, two apples, a pear, a flask of coffee, and two plastic cups. In three and a half hours the social worker will come.

Paul is several meters behind on a road carefully chosen for its relative lack of footfall and cars. Paul produces sounds which appear to form a constant stream.

‘Wee-wee toilet’.

‘Dad car. Pick up’.

‘Ramsey tip’.

‘Ronan, car, gray’.

Those words which I do know coexist with many others I do not know. Other sounds seem to thwart any effort I might make to translate them into words and meaning. Many do not even appear to be words at all, as perhaps may seem the case for Paul, all of which raises the frightening notion that Paul and I are cut adrift from each other, together alone.

‘Zander, plane’, Paul says, seeming to communicate more unambiguous meanings to the effect of ‘go away’.

‘Phone call. Phone Dad’.

The sun is visible now, having punctured the dark, heavy, cloud, the remnants of which still hang over the hills behind us. ‘Phone call, Dad’, Paul repeats. ‘Back, please’, commands Paul, before segueing into ‘wee-wee, tree’, although words are not accompanied by action.

In three hours, the social worker will come.

How far should we go? What would be the best time to arrive back? My ‘inner conversation’ is moving back-and-forth, vacillating between potential sequences of events, fast-forward, and reverse, hoping to reach a decision capable of producing the best—or least negative—outcome. Should we arrive exactly on time, so Paul has insufficient time to get locked into something potentially problematic, and thus be wound up tight, like a whirligig, when they ring the doorbell? Perhaps, we should return in medias res when the course of events is already in the process of unfolding? Or maybe we should

get home more briskly than I had intended, thereby allowing sufficient time for me to make Paul lunch before they come.

As we walk, temporarily alongside each other, I impress upon Paul the labels we ascribe to the world around us. ‘Gorse’, says Paul when called upon to do so. ‘Daffodil’, says Paul later, as well as ‘sheep’, ‘pig’, ‘horse’, and when he does, it feels as if we dwell in the same landscape, together, although I am aware of how, perhaps, I coerce Paul to enter a linguistically circumscribed role *I* inhabit.

Falling behind, momentarily, Paul is weeing on a rockface, urine flowing down his tracksuit trouser leg onto his shoes and, unfortunately, from my perspective, two people pass as Paul is in mid-flow.

In two and a half hours, the social worker will come.

We sit on a bench, the sea behind and elevated headland stretching round in front. I pour coffee, a task which is complicated by Paul’s vigilant, surveying, and possibly Panoptic gaze. Due, perhaps, to what is labeled ‘compulsive behavior’, Paul is determined to finish the flask, four chocolate chip cookies, and fruit.

Paul has one eye on his cup, one eye on mine which is propped between my legs, while remaining alert to the flask itself, and the volume of liquid therein. Paul is trying, with success, to make it impossible for me to pull the wool over his eyes, figuratively speaking, and preserve some coffee for a later moment. I decide to lose this specific encounter, yet as a side-effect instigate a smokescreen enabling me to put several cookies aside, should they be needed as bargaining chips.

As we bend our way back home, Boris Johnson’s voice emanates from a radio in a garden where men are working. It is time, Johnson expounds, to ‘squeeze Russia from the global economy, piece by piece’, as he announces a wide-ranging sanctions package. ‘Putin will stand condemned in the eyes of the world and of history: he will never be able to cleanse the blood of Ukraine from his hands’, Johnson explains. In 90 minutes, the social worker will come.

‘Zander, plane, airport, Canterbury’, Paul remarks with increasing frequency, joining words to form clauses. These words seem to unambiguously denote ‘get lost’, or ‘go away’, although they might be intent upon communicating converse meanings in the way that ‘I hate you’ may, sometimes, indicate the very opposite of hate.

Paul is now weeing on the gate of an autism center. That Paul was excluded from there, for one reason or another, makes me read, or impose, resistant, or transgressive, qualities upon his practice. In eighty minutes, the social worker will come.

We are home. In forty-five minutes, the social worker will come. Paul has seen a pizza. This ‘trigger’ seems to become enmeshed with other ‘stressors’ to produce anxiety in Paul which extends to those beyond him, in ways which blur taken-for-granted notions like the ontological separateness of persons.

‘I am panicking’, says Paul’s father, sentiments echoing my own.

Paul’s hands are full of pears, which he speedily eats.

In eighteen minutes, the social worker will come.

Paul is being helped to change, from an outfit which made him resemble Max Wall to something more ‘normal’ and brush his hair.

The social worker enters, together with someone representing a care provider. She is holding a small brochure.

They cross the threshold, moving to the front room where we have arranged the meeting to manifest. It is one minute since the social worker came, although now she is 'Jennifer', as the care provider is Mary (both pseudonyms), from Journeys (fictitious name), a charity which, the brochure explains, provides respite to carers. Mary, and Journeys, have been referred by Jennifer, and we explore how this might work.

'What would work best in terms of time, Mr. Cockain?'

'What about the age of the carer, do you have a preference?'

'What kinds of activity do you have in mind? Would you want care for Paul, inside or outside the house?'

'How many hours?'

'I'm away next week, on holiday'.

The brochure leaves Mary's hands, somehow finding its way to Paul who seems intent upon subverting its apparent purpose, making it a canvas for his craft.

We sit around a coffee table, Jennifer, and Mary on one sofa, Paul's father on another, and Paul and I on the carpet. Paul is drawing planes, propellers, balls, and so on. It is eleven minutes since Jennifer and Mary came.

Neither the farcical qualities I feared nor the chaos, and commotion, which might provide those present with sufficient cause to nip any potential care in the bud materialize. Things are frenetic, nonetheless. 'Draw paint, Zander, cap off', although now he wants Jennifer's pens. Moments later, everyone has surrendered their pens to Paul, in ways that again awake my anthropological propensity to read and romanticize resistance.

Costings for care are etched onto the brochure.

'£18.50 p/h = £4 mileage'.

The meeting continues to explore potential support and support workers, and Jennifer explains she will share her assessment. We also talk of risk. Talk turns to Paul's travel, his tendency to grab things and people, and I notice his hand, reddened because of decades of biting himself. Arrangements are made to follow up, after Mary returns from vacation. Things are, seemingly, moving forward. Paul has, however, uttered 'go' several times, and Jennifer and Mary take this literally, despite being encouraged not to read Paul's words thus. They soon go. Perhaps, they would have departed soon anyway. As they disappear down the front path, it is twenty minutes since the social worker came.

Several minutes later, as Paul and I depart the house, we walk by the social worker and the care provider, as they stand beside one of their cars, in a manner which suggests debriefing. Paul bounds past, with an apparent obliviousness which seems to contrast markedly with the awkwardness I not only feel myself but also 'read' in them.

### **Critically reading the social encounter**

Things become everyday by *becoming* invisible, in ways which induce neglect. It is, nevertheless, possible to 'strip the everyday of its inconspicuousness' by 'making strange' and inducing 'estrangement' (Highmore, 2002, p. 21). To imbue strangeness into the social encounter explored in the paragraphs above, I draw upon ideas, and approaches, associated with sociology and the sociology of everyday life; linguistic anthropology; deconstruction, a process which involves 'demystifying a text . . . to reveal its internal

hierarchies and ... presuppositions [as well as] ... what is excluded, and what is concealed' (Rosenau, 1992, p. 120); and poststructuralism which, as Barbara Fawcett explains, tends to 'concentrate on the operation of language, the production of meaning, and the ways in which knowledge and power combine to create accepted or taken-for-granted forms of knowledge and social practices' (2008, p. 666), albeit while attending to how power may be negotiated, resisted and perhaps even subverted.

### ***Sociologies of the everyday or rehabilitating everyday life***

Through 'pursuing an everyday activity with the kind of attention brought to bear on it by sociology the activity is removed from the flow of daily life, transforming it (de-everyday-ing it) in the process' (Highmore, 2002, p. 24). This may not only 'disturb the comfortable certitudes of life', by virtue of asking questions which may 'render the evident a puzzle and may defamiliarize the familiar', but also permit new possibilities so that everyday ways of life, and the social conditions in which they take place, may 'emerge [merely] as one of the possible ways, not *the* only way, of getting on in our lives and organizing relations between us' (Bauman & May, 1990/2001, p. 10, original emphasis).

Such orientations may provide ways of orienting to the edges of the previously described social encounter. These include the 'before' and 'after', temporalities which are populated by voluminous, seemingly inconsequential routines and repeated day-to-day practices which coalesce to produce slow, sometimes halting, rhythms: the everyday.

Rehabilitating these ostensibly mundane and insignificant details (e.g. sitting on a bench drinking coffee, urinating against a gate, debating whether to have lunch and if so what to have, etc.) which might seem superfluous discloses the contours of a particular life alongside learning disability and autism. These quotidian rhythms and repetitions—whether normal or otherwise—constitute the taken-for-granted. These are the things which are 'just there', to the extent that they, like the air we breathe, seem 'natural', by virtue of not being made subject to critical reflection and scrutiny. When these everyday practices are scrutinized, the apparently trivial, and unspectacular, unfolds, like a peacock's feathers. This exposes intricate layers and folds which constitute a self-evident lifeworld which registers/generates stocks of knowledge arising from 'the sedimentation of all ... previous experiences' (Schutz, 1970, p. 73), with the hyphenated term indexing how these, as well as other elements in this article, are both constituted by (registering) and yet nevertheless constituting (generating), an enmeshment which echoes the 'duality of structure', by which Anthony Giddens means 'the essential recursiveness of social life' whereby 'structure is *both medium and outcome of the reproduction of practices*' (1979, p. 5, emphasis added).

Seemingly automatic or semi-automatic practice occurs upon an expansive, largely inaccessible 'backstage' which lurks 'behind' a 'frontstage' (Goffman, 1959, pp. 128–129) upon which service users and social workers meet. Constituting this backstage are presences and absences, or places orientated to and avoided respectively. The habits which guide this practice are either intentionally cultivated or built up imperceptibly over time, in ways that 'acquire a life of their own, shaping ... [persons] as much as we shape them' (Felski, 1999, p. 26).



Such practice is not a product of unfettered agency but, instead, registers ideological, or discursive, conditions albeit while generating (or re-producing) them, the recursiveness I communicate by the slashed term register/generate. Underpinning, and informing, and yet nevertheless being generated *through* everyday practice are an entangled enmeshment of ideologies, or discourses. These include ableism, disablism, and the ways they come together in dis/ableism although especially shaping, or producing, an order of (and *to*) things, are constructions of normalcy/abnormalcy as hierarchically related yet ontologically separate objects. Dress, as Mary Jo Deegan explains, is part of the hidden labor involved in achieving the appearance of normalcy (2010) and maintaining the public ‘front’ (Goffman, 1959, p. 122) which Paul is helped to produce. Here, and elsewhere, Paul is made to ‘pass’ (Cockain, 2018a) through processes of governmentality (Cockain, 2021, p. 634). These become entwined with violence (Cockain, 2021, p. 633) and the burden of emotional labour which characterizes the disability concealment and disclosure I describe elsewhere (Cockain, 2022).

Choreographing, or simulating, normalcy not only takes time but also results in flawed simulations which come undone, in ways which—like the curtain separating frontstage and backstage in a theater opening—reveals its fictiveness. Routine practices like washing and dressing take ‘longer than is “normal” or acceptable’ (Hansen & Philo, 2007, p. 498, emphasis added), in ways which lend frightening poignancy to the claim that time is ‘the primary criteria of exclusion and discrimination’ (Paterson & Hughes, 1999, p. 605). The stop-start, backward-forward, upside-down qualities of these practices demonstrate disrupted temporalities. Meanwhile, Paul’s bodily fluids (e.g. saliva, urine, etc.) come out, often erupting, at what may seem inopportune, inappropriate, and abnormal, moments, with a frequency which registers the inherent fragility, and temporariness, of the normal façade, or front, he is encouraged to occupy and inhabit. The ‘signs’ these practices (e.g. dribbling, urinating) give and give off register and generate the stigma of leaky bodies while also concurrently registering/generating deviation and deviance from the normative body as clean and proper (Paterson & Hughes, 1999): the fabricated mythical product of civilizing processes (Elias, 2000).

### **Multiple variables and modalities in human interaction**

Even though the brevity of the social encounter in the living room contrasts markedly with the length of those events which combine to constitute a backstage, it is still populated by multiple variables and modalities, as well as ‘hidden’ languages. These signs, and sign systems (e.g. words, gestures, the sounds accompanying language, silences, clothing, space, and the ways people occupy it, etc.), were, admittedly, not fully perceived in situ although they may become visible through various disciplinary lenses. These include proxemics, the study of how persons perceive, use, and occupy space (e.g. Hall, 1966); kinesics; and linguistic anthropology which not only attends to words but also paralanguage and silences.

Even ordinarily, the capacity to enter space, or the lack thereof, vividly indexes power and status although this distinction, and its implications, are especially relevant to the social encounter which people implicated in this article are enmeshed. An assessment is inescapably an intrusion. Social workers, like ethnographers, are ‘moving into people’s daily lives, talking to them, watching them, asking them questions,

thinking about what they are saying, writing about what they are saying, analyzing what they are doing, and sometimes being critical about all these things' (O'Reilly, 2005, p. 59). This ordinary 'visit' causes persons 'not to be [and feel] at home in one's home' (Adorno, 1951/2005, p. 39) while the taken-for-granted capacity of Jennifer and Mary to enter this place contrasts markedly with multifarious barriers which prevent Paul from entering all but very few places, both ostensibly public and apparently, and evidently, private. Such asymmetric qualities of social worker and service user, or client, enmeshment is, perhaps encapsulated by some readings of the term intervention. As Chris Beckett explains, intervention not only has uncomfortable military connotations (2010, p. 45) but also 'conveys a notion of intrusion into people's lives and by its very nature indicates where the dominant power relations are situated' (Dalrymple & Burke, 2006, p. 159).

Admittedly, Beckett acknowledges that while it is apt to use the term intervention to refer to some forms of social work (e.g. when a social worker *insists* on getting involved when child abuse is believed to have occurred), in other situations which, perhaps, resemble that to which this article refers (e.g. when a social worker arranges, at the behest of an elderly man, for him to receive assistance in an aspect of everyday life), the term may fit less well (2010, p. 45). Notwithstanding this, Beckett emphasizes how the term intervention highlights how 'actions (even when they are welcomed) are *always* an intrusion into people's personal lives' (2010, p. 45, emphasis added). This troubling dimension of social worker-service user enmeshment as well as how persons may perform to internalized notions about how they *should* appear and the tensions which manifest in and between front and backstage are indexed by a heading in this article (Social Worker! Social Worker!) which provocatively indexes a 1984 cartoon from *The Far Side*, by Gary Larson entitled 'Anthropologists! Anthropologists!' in ways which highlight potential problematic parallels between social worker-service user and researcher-researched relationships.

Kinesics, meanwhile, studies body movements, facial expressions, and gestures (or what are called kinemes) and engages in frame-by-frame analyses of interactions, sometimes even filming them (e.g. Birdwhistell, 1952). In so doing, a different narrative, or story, unfolds than that which emerges through attending only to words. Through a kinetic lens, we may 'read' affect displays, namely gestures which convey emotion, for example, my frown and adaptors which facilitate the release of bodily tension (e.g. Ekman & Friesen, 1969), like the nervous foot shuffling Jennifer seems to practice, especially when Paul's father seems to return the conversation to the middle of things when to my ear, and those of others present (judging by their bodily expression), the encounter had already run—and perhaps even exceeded—its course. Meanwhile, bodily hexis, or gait and styles of deportment, as Pierre Bourdieu observes, as well as 'the body', more generally, 'is the site of incorporated history' (Thompson, 1991, p. 13; see also Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 437; 466–468), with submissive posture sometimes indexing subordinate positionality.

Attention to paralanguage, or the sounds which occur 'alongside . . . language' (Trager, 1958, cited in Ottenheimer & Pine, 2019, p. 79), and 'how' something is said rather than 'what' is said and 'silent languages' (Hall & Hall, 1971)—as well as silence itself—further unfolds layers constituting this truncated social encounter marked by a relative paucity of words, highlighting the multimodal qualities which characterize what is ostensibly 'just

there'. Gazes, and glances, meanwhile, constitute a 'crisscrossing complex' (Casey, 2007, p. 59) of potential other narratives which supplement those emerging through other disciplinary prisms (e.g. proxemics, kinesics, etc.).

### ***Languages of assessment and ostensibly peripheral yet supplementary discourse***

These 'hidden' languages coexist with, albeit while being eclipsed by, the formal language of the assessment which emerges as a product, or record, of this fleeting encounter while the length of the assessment and its forensic precision contrast with the brevity and undecidability of the social encounter. The assessment immediately discloses Paul's 'learning disability' and his 'autistic spectrum condition' as labels which position, and frame, him within a 'primary presenting client group'. The text also divulges instances in which Paul was detained by the police under section 132 of the Mental Health Act 1998, in ways which indicate how the past may come back to 'haunt' participants, as Goffman observes is the case for ex-patients (1961, p. 159, 164, 374–375).

Individual words within the assessment exist within a wider chain of discourse which positions Paul. The assessment refers, for example, to words constructed within previous assessments, like the label 'echolalic', a term frequently applied to children and adults with autism which, to my reading, erases, or writes over the complexity of language he produces although, admittedly, it may not be intelligible to persons proficient in only 'normal' modes of communication (Cockain, 2018a). For the most part, however, the assessment is seemingly well meaning and, in ways which index contemporary definitions of 'good practice', the social worker's discourse is supplemented with discourse written by persons like Paul's father, so that Paul's construction is a product of multiple voices.

Nevertheless, it is salient that by foregrounding Paul's incapacity to speak, and thus, label himself, the assessment contributes to making conditions which provide justifications for him to be written on from the outside by more discursively powerful others whose agency markedly contrasts with Paul's deficit, or lack:

Due to . . . communication style, it is not possible to gain his views . . . As . . . would not have the capacity to consent to this assessment, I am proceeding under best interest pathway (discourse in Paul's assessment).

The text is also saturated in references to risk. These not only appear in the text itself, appearing 15 times, but also repeatedly in the room itself, not only being voiced by Jennifer and Mary on several occasions but also Paul's father in ways which index the seemingly enigmatic notions that people may speak discourse *as if it were their own* and that discourse *speaks persons*. In one category, for example, Paul's risk banding is '4', indexing 'critical', as opposed to 'no', 'low', 'moderate', or 'substantial' needs which would be indexed by 0–3 respectively. This combines with other criteria to produce a hierarchy of risk with Paul's 'value' condensed: Paul is made calculable and subject to the 'power of the single number' (Rose, 1999, p. 214). Risk is so pervasive in and surrounding the social encounter that it is compelling to regard it as a master signifier, or what Jacques Lacan has called a point de capiton, namely a 'point of convergence that enables everything . . . in . . . [a] discourse to be situated retroactively and prospectively' (1981/1993, pp. 267–268). A point de capiton is, as Slavoj Žižek explains 'a nodal point,

[in] a kind of knot of meanings, . . . not . . . simply the richest word, the word in which is condensed all the richness of meaning in the field it quilts . . . [Instead, it is] the word which unifies a given field, constitutes its identity: it is . . . the word to which things themselves refer to recognize themselves' (1989, pp. 95–96). This unit of language (i.e. 'risk'), the ways it repeats itself, and the organizational practices and cultures it registers/indexes, 'suture' the field of discursivity, and the ways it registers/generates practice, knotting meaning together. This prevents a 'shapeless mass of stuffing from moving too freely about' (Bowie, 1991, p. 74), in ways which make a potentially endless movement of signification cease, producing the necessary illusion of a fixed and unambiguous meaning.

It is not only these words themselves (e.g. 'Risk Banding', 'Paul has no capacity to understand the risk', 'Paul does not have the ability to anticipate risks', 'Risk Band Score', etc.), and the systems, processes, practices, structures, policies, discourses and ideologies they register/generate, all of which may be regarded as 'absent presences' which 'haunt' the surface of the assessment text but also the words, practices and ways of being and becoming they silence—or erase—by virtue of *being there*. These may include, for example, alternate arrangements, like conditions of possibility which permit more expansive presentations and readings of self and the capacity to 'see' people, and the relations between them, as fluid rather than ordered, or governed, by hierarchically related, and hermetically sealed, categories. Such alternate arrangements may, for example, accentuate, and prioritize, well-being and compassion over safeguarding and risk, permitting positive risk-taking as opposed to risk aversion.

While the notion that risk may be regarded as the unequivocal point de capiton is compelling, it is, perhaps, even more convincing to suggest the knot binding this seemingly disparate field of discursivity and practice together is 'hidden' in an ostensibly peripheral 'thing'. Knotting, or suturing, not only discourse but also spatialized relations in the room is discourse on the brochure which sits, seemingly silently, on the coffee table between one sofa on which Mary and Jennifer and another on which Paul's father sits, with Paul and I on the narrower end of the rectangular table.

'£18.50 p/h = £4 mileage'.

The brochure and especially this chain of discourse (i.e. '£18.50 p/h = £4 mileage') is constitutive. It registers and generates discourses, or ideologies, and structures, systems and practices and conditions of possibility, in ways the slashed term register/generate indexes. This ostensibly peripheral discourse (i.e. '£18.50 p/h = £4 mileage'), scribbled upon a text which is seemingly positioned on the edge of the social encounter registers and generates models of practice and care as a monetized service rather than either a relation or way of being and becoming. Such discourse commodifies care as something which is bought, sold, and which not only produces, or accumulates, a value for itself within markets but also the persons who practice care, echoing the ways disabled people may more generally be 'expected to operate as consumers of care and support services in local care "markets"' (Power et al., 2022, p. 222).

These words index how market forces, and the marketized identities they produce, are central to the way social work and social care are delivered and received: 'the "marketization" or "commodification" of care' (Koubel, 2013, p. 27). These words (i.e. '£18.50 p/h = £4 mileage') index commodification, a process whereby things (e.g. human labor) are

converted into commodities to be bought and sold on the market. Such words (i.e. '£18.50 p/h = £4 mileage') indelibly register/generate not only the discourses, practices, systems, and structures 'behind' these words but also limited subject positions.

This discourse is constitutive: people talk social reality into being (Heritage, 1984, p. 290) through manifold forms of discourse. Meanwhile, subjects 'emerge because of the prior existence of discursive positions which individuals then occupy and position themselves within' (Barker, 2004, p. 194): 'the products of discursive practices are *the very persons who engage in them*' (Davies & Harre, 1990, p. 46, emphasis added). People, as Michael Guilfoyle explains, '*make sense of who they are by locating themselves within culturally circulating discourses and narratives*' (2016, p. 123, emphasis added). 'Once having taken up a particular position ... a person inevitably sees the world from the vantage point of that position' (Davies & Harre, 1990, p. 46). Subjects are, thereby, inescapably constituted by and through 'materials lying about in society' (White, 2004 p. 103).

The subjects produced through such discourse are positioned within a hierarchical binary, or dualism. 'Service users', 'service providers', and 'paid carers', as well as other constructions (e.g. social workers, people with learning disabilities, etc.) are cast in a series of restrictive, rigid, potentially oppressive dualisms. This discourse, and the practice it registers/generates, limits potential for shared identification, and eclipses how landscapes, imaginaries, and practices of care may be less oppressive, and more caring and care-full relations. Such discourse also masks how people may overlap with each other and the world, in ways which register/generate the taken-for-granted, yet nevertheless socially constructed, notion that humans are ontologically separate, or independent rather than interdependent. This may further obscure, and perhaps even eclipse, how people with and without learning disabilities build their lives relationally which, itself, may be masked by the ways neoliberal agendas inflect personalization discourse, practice, and policy (Power et al., 2022, p. 222). The reductive, debilitating, binary of carer/cared for, and the conditions this generates/registers, which is comparable to a colonizer/colonized dualism, is antithetical to notions and practices of care as mutually rewarding, constitutive and as potentially generating 'positive consequences for those who are involved' (Brechin, 1998, p. 177) and masks how caregiving may be envisioned 'as an existential quality of *what it means to be a human being*' (Kleinman, 2010, p. 27, original emphasis).

### **Orienting to power**

The hitherto anthropological and sociological concepts and approaches, deployed as tools, or lenses, with and through which to regard the layers and folds which constitute a particular social encounter, are not exhaustive. They may be supplemented by a myriad of alternate lenses in ways which may expose further facets to what might otherwise constitute 'seen-but-unnoticed life' (Gouldner, 1975, p. 422). These include the ethnography of communication and the eight interrelated elements which together comprise the speaking acronym (e.g. Ottenheimer & Pine, 2019, pp. 170–187) and Erving Goffman's interaction order (1983). Dell Hymes developed the speaking acronym to permit inclusive ways of thinking about the use of language in real situations, encouraging attention is paid to setting, participants, ends, act sequences, keys, instrumentalities,

norms, and genres (1974). Goffman, meanwhile, in addition to providing potent conceptual tools with which to elucidate upon the multifaceted qualities of social interaction (e.g. 1959), addresses the relationship between social interaction and structure, arguing that the ‘interaction order’ be regarded as ‘a substantive domain in its own right’ (1983, p. 2). In addition to these, and those elements they make visible, manifold forms of power are central to this encounter, the qualities of which may be elucidated upon through a poststructuralist lens, or prism.

Poststructuralism registers how power saturates social encounters, in ways which are not reducible to a David-versus-Goliath model with oppressed and oppressor occupying distinct, and hierarchically related positions within practice and discourse. While discourse contributes to the production of specific conditions of possibility (structural, systemic, discursive) which limit possibilities for human agency and action, people are not wholly determined by them. This is because there is ‘a possibility of notional choice . . . because there are many and contradictory discursive practices that each person could engage in’ (Davies & Harre, 1990, p. 46) and the notion of subject positioning ‘allows us a conception of agency that acknowledges both the constructive force of discourse at a societal level as well as the capacity of the person to take up positions for their own purposes’ (Burr, 2015, p. 212).

Put differently, power is not monopolized so that one dominant person, or actor, may exert ‘power over’ another, through forms of instrumental power, to compel, cajole, and coerce less powerful others. Instead, power is co-produced in the spaces between people and circulates through persons present. This becomes especially apparent when regarding the encounter, and power, in ways which demonstrate more affinity with social work’s purposes and methods. For example, John Pierson and Martin Thomas write of relational power or associational power which is ‘expressed as the “power to” rather than “power over” when people come together to talk and to act. This . . . power provides the capacity to accomplish things . . . from people getting together, discussing, deliberating and reaching agreement on what should be done and how to do it’ (2010, pp. 408–409). Seen accordingly, it becomes possible to orientate to efforts, or tactics, demonstrated, or presented, by Jennifer to develop, cultivate, and nourish relational power and to produce practice grounded in, and informed by, social work values.

Nevertheless, the social encounter demonstrates evidence of asymmetric power relations. This is because persons like social workers, like other professionals, are ‘endorsed with institutional authority’, to make judgments and impose labels on people’, in ways that mark out boundaries between what is and is not ‘deemed acceptable (or normal)’ (Swain et al., 2003, p. 12). Such disciplinary power positions people in ways which produce subjects and subjectivities.

Significantly, power is dispersed and flows between and *through* people, as is even evident in the ways the encounter is chosen to be staged in the ‘front’ rather than the ‘back’ room, and (stage) managed through collaboration as a team, in ways which hide the ‘dirty work’ which characterizes the everyday before and after the interaction (e.g. Goffman, 1959, p. 44). As power is neither authored nor realized by one dominant person so there is negotiation, resistance and, crucially, complicity as persons partake in their own co-production as subjects in ways which evoke Foucault’s visions of a ‘carceral network’ (1977, p. 298). However, it is not only those ‘judges of normality’ to whom Foucault refers who wield ‘normalizing power’, namely ‘the doctor-judge . . . [and] the “social worker”-judge’ and upon whom ‘the universal reign of the normative is based

(1977, p. 304). Instead, all those present are implicated in a vast ‘carceral network [which] reaches all the disciplinary mechanisms that function throughout society’ (Foucault, 199, p. 298). The ‘unmarked’ (Titchkosky, 2003, p. 148) yet, nevertheless, oppressive practices and discourses of normalcy these combine to accomplish manifest in many of the daily practices, routines and social encounters taking place within social fields (e.g. a living room, a form, a brochure, a road, etc.) in and beyond those documented in this article.

## Theory matters

This article has hitherto deployed theories, concepts, and approaches associated with anthropology and sociology to dispel the taken-for-granted thereness in and around a social encounter. These, together with many other theories and concepts, constitute tools which may be cultivated for ethical practice. Although, like theories more generally, these do not provide ready-made answers, they provide guidelines about questions to ask as well as how they may be answered. Theories and concepts, moreover, provide ways of mapping, and orienting toward, social encounters.

Accordingly, the theories and approaches not only within, but also beyond, this article may be regarded as lenses which together constitute a kaleidoscope which teachers, students, and practitioners may critically and reflectively deploy in ways which yield different horizons and vistas, all of which produce ways of attending to, and making sense of, social worlds. The world of practice must not be forced to ‘fit’ theories in ways which demonstrate ideological hegemony. To do so would be analogous to the stepsisters’ efforts to force Cinderella’s slipper onto *their* feet in ways which are violent not only to theory but also practice—the slipper and their feet respectively. A kaleidoscope is a ‘child’s toy . . . When you turn the tube and look down the lens of the kaleidoscope the shapes and colors . . . change. As the tube is turned, different lenses come into play and the combinations of colour and shape shift from one pattern to another. In a similar way, we can see social theory as a sort of kaleidoscope—by shifting theoretical perspective the world under investigation also changes shape’ (O’Brien, 1993, pp. 10–11).

Despite the potential perils of theory, when deployed mindfully, it may, direct attention to specific dimensions (e.g. in the context of this article, proxemics, kinesics, the ethnography of communication, etc.), as well as suggesting connections between the various elements, or things, which constitute reality, or everyday life.

‘The purpose of theory is to clarify the world in which we live, how it works, [and] why things happen as they do . . . It energizes action’, as Andrea Dworkin explains (1993, p. 127). The views these anthropological and sociological gazes afford on social worlds and the ways they permit ideation of the linkages between social structures and discourses, on one hand, and microlevel interaction, on the other hand, are so informative that they should be positioned more centrally within university curricula and practice, not simply as a stand-alone module in, for example, introduction to sociology. This would not only enable ideas associated with anthropology and sociology to etch themselves more deeply, and embed themselves within, social workers’ imaginations and practice, in ways that recognize their potential resonance, their shared histories (e.g. Shaw, 2021), and their possible future synergies, or enmeshment. Such liaisons would be forged by and in a spirit of togetherness (not othering), as Ingold puts it elsewhere (2018b, p. 66), and recognise the enmeshment of

disciplines that may have become separate over time but which, nevertheless, may be comparable to siblings.

## Concluding thoughts

This article has critically explored a social encounter involving a social worker and middle-aged man with learning disabilities. This has been read, first, to bring into presence-specific dimensions of a particular encounter situated, and positioned, in time, space, and discourse. The short, perhaps even perfunctory, yet nevertheless potent, languages of the assessment contrast markedly with the multiple languages in and around the social encounter. This asymmetry may highlight the need to not only tolerate but also, and especially, to embrace complexity and holism in encounters and assessments so that theories relating to ‘the whole person’ and the ‘person-in-environment’ (e.g. Kondrat, 2002) may begin to be realized through application or practice even if this be accomplished through the application of tools and techniques which allow social workers to engage with spaces and people beyond the then-and-now (e.g. engagement, ecomaps, genograms, etc.).

This article has also sought to argue more, generally, that theories from anthropology and sociology constitute potent tools, or lenses, with and through which to access the many layers of meaning constituting social reality, and the ‘things’ therein, which may be so hidden behind a veil of familiarity and ‘thereness’ as to appear opaque. These tools, and lenses, must be cultivated and crafted for ethical practice, albeit without either being worshipped to the extent that they stand over practitioners, thereby acting as impediments to thinking which are divorced from practice. Crucially, theory and what we call ‘data’ exist in symbiotic, mutually constituting, and informing, ways: ‘Theory without data is empty; data without theory says nothing’, and ‘theory only becomes worthwhile when it is used to explain something’ (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008, p. 403, p. 141).

The arrangement of this article attempts to demonstrate such recursive liaisons, or enmeshment, between practice, or ‘data’, and theory. The first part presents ‘data’ which is presented there ‘to think with and to think about’ while the second and third parts exploit a range of ‘theoretical perspectives’ and ‘disciplinary frameworks’ which are brought into conversation, or dialogue, with ‘data’ (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 153). As Paul is central to this article so service users, or clients, should be central to good practice and their world must be engaged with in as complete a way as possible by social workers who, like ethnographers, must write—or render—this so that it constitutes a ‘faithful’ record of ‘life as it is lived and experienced’ (Ingold, 2017, p. 21) marked by ‘descriptive fidelity’ (Ingold, 2017, p. 23, 24)

These two elements neither do nor should exist independently of reflection, and reflexivity. That reflection and reflexivity do not occupy a discrete section in this article is apt since as it is intended these permeate the entirety of this article so they should not only be infused in practice but also embedded in social work values which may further and productively be anchored in sensibilities cultivated through anthropology and sociology to produce anthropologically and sociologically informed social work. Anthropology, as Tim Ingold explains, is ‘a generous, open-ended, comparative, and yet critical inquiry into the conditions and possibilities of human life in the one world we



all inhabit' (2017, p. 22) while sociology attends to how people's lives are enmeshed in social forms.

The combination of these elements—engagement with the layers which make reality and people, and a commitment to produce an account which attends to this complexity and richness; theoretical mindedness; and reflection and reflexivity, terms which though different are sometimes used synonymously; all of which are grounded in, and driven by, values from social work and anthropology—is productive. Making social reality and practices, like the social encounter this article has dwelled alongside, 'accountable' (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 240) discloses how social order in an ongoing accomplishment: an order which *becomes* through social interaction. More generally, sensitivity to the particularity of persons and events combines in practitioners with the more 'speculative' qualities of theory, both of which are informed by social work values like commitments to social justice and anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice, may contribute to 'bringing' events from everyday life 'into presence so that we can address them, and answer to them *directly*' (Ingold, 2017, p. 25, original emphasis).

This rehabilitation is necessary because they might otherwise be either invisible or invisibilised and thus unnoticed, constituting merely 'a background of seen but unnoticed features' (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 41). Engaging with these is especially important when people like Paul are written upon from the outside by potent labels and names which make objects out of things. This article has, thereby, sought deliberately and purposefully to bring into presence people, things, and events which might otherwise be either invisible or invisibilised. As Ingold explains, we 'don't care for others by treating them as objects of investigation, by assigning them to categories and contexts or by explaining them away. We care by bringing them into presence, so that they can converse with us, and we can learn from them' (2018a, p. 131). Also conducive to ethical practice is not only taking others seriously (Ingold, 2018a, pp. 1–25), but also critically reflecting upon ourselves, wherever we may be (or see ourselves) positioned in this encounter (e.g. as social worker, service user, person with impairment, carer, parent, sibling, student, teacher, etc.) and not to accept things as they are but instead to question, or de/re/construct seemingly established and entrenched categories of thought. A corollary of this is that the taken-for-granted everyday order of objects begin to shed their self-evident qualities, giving way to worlds, people and things which are alive, and engaged in processes of becoming.

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