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Professional helping as negotiation in motion: social work as work on the move

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ABSTRACT

The delivery of welfare and professional helping, such as in medicine, nursing and social work is largely treated as though it is achieved through static and immobile practices. Research has been dominated by a focus on the sedentary as studies have stayed rooted in places like hospitals and offices, failing to follow practitioners when they go out to see their service users in their communities and homes. This paper explores the mobile character of professional helping through a focus on social work by examining what its practices look like through the lens of movement based social science. The paper draws on empirical data from my mobile and sensory ethnography of child protection work, where I went along with social workers and interviewed them in the car and observed them on home visits to families. It is argued that attention to movement gets to the heart of what these practices are, as shown in the multiple meanings of car journeys, and how keeping children safe relies on worker's capacities to move their bodies when in the home by walking, playing with and staying close to the child. Professional help goes on through what Jenson calls "negotiation in motion". Fundamentally, social work is work on the move.

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Dedication: for John Urry

1. Introduction

The classic image of professional helping is of the Freudian therapist sitting behind their client who is stretched out on the couch. While only occurring in a minority of professional relationships and even within psychotherapy only in the most orthodox of psychoanalytic approaches (these days most clients sit on chairs), the broader applicability of this iconic image is how it frames professional helping as a sedentary activity. It typifies how in social policy, practice and academic literature, welfare practices such as medicine, nursing and social work are largely treated as though they are static and immobile. Until recently research has been dominated by a focus on the sedentary as researchers have stayed rooted in places like hospitals and offices, failing to follow practitioners like doctors, community nurses and social workers when they leave their institutions and go out to see their service users in their

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communities and homes. Consequently, little is known about the mobile character of welfare services and what practitioners actually do and how practice is shaped by time spent on foot, in cars, travelling and moving when with service users. The emergence of the new mobilities paradigm (Sheller and Urry 2006) has enabled the ways that everyday practices are constituted through movement to be brought to the fore and paved the way for welfare practices to be explored through what Urry called a “movement-driven social science” concerned with “movement, potential movement and blocked movement” (Urry 2007, 43; Ferguson 2008, 2010).

In this paper I will explore the mobile character of welfare services through a focus on social work by examining what it looks like through the lens of movement based social science. As Hall and Smith (2013) argue, the focus on movement within a nascent mobile sociology of welfare practices does not mean a concern with something that is marginal and which might be of minor empirical and theoretical interest. Attention to movement gets to the heart of what these practices are, how and where they are performed, capturing what gets done and experienced through their mobilities and immobilities. Fundamentally, social work is work on the move. This does not mean that practitioners like social workers are constantly physically moving, performing corporeal mobilities. As will be shown, social workers spend significant amounts of time in the office sat at their computers completing bureaucratic tasks. Even when at a distance from service users, increasingly professionals interface with them through the virtual mobilities of the internet, aided by the use of smart phones and social media. In a “connected” world “remote working” is shifting the sense of workers needing to be deskbound. But while some significant work can be done when welfare practitioners are at a physical distance from their clients in the office or at a computer wherever it is positioned – such as information gathering, inter-professional discussion and assessment of need/risk, advocacy – helping and protecting people demand making human contact with them, that professionals and service users become “co-present” and are face to face (Urry 2000, 2007; Broadhurst and Mason 2014). The primary way this is achieved is through journeying from the office, usually by car and making home visits; in effect, by *moving*. Once in the home the movement does not stop. Social workers typically move around the home, to relate to ill and infirm adults who are bedridden, to see children on their own – very often in their bedrooms – or to inspect home conditions for signs of good enough child care.

In making this argument I will draw on empirical data from my ethnographic research into social work practices and child protection. The research uses mobile and sensory methods (Pink 2015; Ingold 2011) by participating in and observing social workers as they go about doing child protection work. It has drawn from mobilities scholarship that argues that while ethnographers have long moved when studying their subjects engaging in naturally occurring events, the mobilities involved are under-recognised and correcting this makes it crucial to foreground movement by pursuing a distinct approach of “mobilised ethnography” (Gottschalk and Salvaggio 2015). I spent time in social work offices observing organisational routines and talk, but my main aim was to observe the social worker’s practice, which I did by following them from the moment they left their desks and recording discussions with them as we *moved together*. I drew from the repertoire of mobile research methods (Buscher, Urry, and Whichger 2011) to capture everyday movements and practices, by using “walk-alongs”, where interviews are conducted while walking (Clark and Emmel 2010) and “ride alongs” in cars or other vehicles (Kusenbach 2003). Ross et al. (2009) used both these “go-along” methods to good effect in their research into the experiences of young people in care. Roy et al. (2015) used mobile

methods to get alongside vulnerable young men who used an arts and social care agency in the city of Manchester, going along with them, walking shoulder to shoulder, learning about their lived experiences of spaces, people, relationships, by thinking with them “*in movement*” (155). In my study I went along with the social workers on their journeys from the office to see service users, the majority of which were by car. During the journey the social worker was interviewed about their plan for the service user encounter, expectations and feelings. I accompanied the social worker into the family home and observed and audio-recorded their encounters with children, parents and others present (such as ubiquitous family friends). The worker was then interviewed immediately after on the walk along from the house back to the car and in the car on the journey back to the office, or to the next visit, about the encounter and their feelings about it (for a full account of the methodology, see Ferguson 2016a).

My aim here is not to report the findings in a systematic way – which I have done elsewhere (Ferguson 2016b, 2016c, 2016d) – but to use the data to illuminate the key theoretical and practice dimensions of social work as a form of work on the move. This work is “mobile” in the sense that it takes place in a whole range of different sites and settings (unlike, say, a GPs practice), which means that if social workers are to be effective they are compelled to move. Professional helping in practices like social work, it will be argued, goes on through what Jenson (2013) calls “negotiation in motion” (see also, Jenson, Sheller, and Wind 2015). This refers to practices of navigating and manoeuvring in spaces, where bicycles, cars, people, animals and so on “negotiate not only routes in an across space but also express dynamic flows of interaction in motion” (Jenson 2013, 138). The paper will show how this manoeuvring and navigating is enacted in social work through mobile interactions on streets, in cars, and in family homes.

The first part of the paper situates social work as a mobile practice, outlining the scale and nature of its movements. Attention is then focused on the car as a space for office work, direct practice with service users and for workers to process their emotional experience. The paper then moves on to consider the corporeal mobilities involved in getting into a home, and the movements social workers make to enable them to get close to children, to examine them, use comforting touch, ask them questions, and the day-to-day actions and blocked movements that place at risk professionals capacities to relate to children and keep them safe.

2. Situating and staging social work mobilities

At its most basic movement in the form of travel, usually by the car, is pivotal to social work because the home is the most common place where practitioners see their service users and they need a fast-moving vehicle to get them there. In two recent surveys of social workers from different parts of England I gathered data on the amounts of time they spend conducting a variety of tasks, including travelling. Participants were asked to estimate the time spent during the previous week carrying out: administrative tasks, direct work with service users; in supervision; attending meetings; and travelling. In the first survey of 132 social workers conducted in 2015, 14.5% of their time at work was spent travelling (this does not include the journey to and from work), and in the second survey of 187 practitioners carried out in 2016, they spent 12% of their working time travelling. By far the most time is spent on administrative tasks such as case recording and report writing, coming in at 39 and 45%, respectively, figures that do not include attending meetings, which social workers in both locations spent another 12% of their time doing. The proportion of their time spent in direct contact with service users was 21 and 27%, respectively.

These figures reveal the heavy administrative burden placed on social workers and how their work is subject to significant managerial control, audit and accountability. These practitioners work to standardised assessment frameworks (Broadhurst et al. 2010), covering questions about children's health, development, parental relationships, sources of family support, other involved professionals and so on. These findings are supported by my ethnographic research in how the administrative burden was found to have the effect of limiting the frequency with which some families were visited and the time available to spend relating to service users on some home visits (author's own). However, the ethnography found that what social workers do beyond the office is not simply shaped by managers, governmental imperatives, technical-rational rules and organisational dictates.

From the moment they left their desks and stepped out of the office and onto the street social workers were to a significant extent constructing their own practice in interaction with the environment, the family and their use of and experience of the car and the family home. As Pink, Morgan, and Dainty (2015, 450) have argued with respect to professional home visits, the homes of those being visited become part of workplaces, while also taking practitioners into forms of experience and knowledge that extend well beyond the reach of organisations. This applies not only to the home, but to other sites of practice, like the car.

Following Jenson (2013), social work and its relationship to movement can be understood in terms of "staging":

mobilities do not "just happen" or simply "take place". According to the *Staging Mobilities* framework we should think of mobilities as being carefully and meticulously designed and planned "from above", as one might say. However, they are equally importantly acted out, performed and lived "from below". Mobilities are staged and people performing mobilities are engaged in social interactions of staging mobilities. *Staging Mobilities* is therefore a process of creating lived mobility practices and the material preconditions to these. (Jenson 2013, 5)

The primary function of social work organisations is not movement in the sense that would be found in national and local government transport or urban design departments, for instance; it is basically to safeguard vulnerable people and promote their well-being and manage risk (Webb 2006). But controlling and directing workers' movements are central to how these are managed by governments at national and local levels. The imposition of such extensive bureaucratic tasks, insistence that workers comply with completing them and the creation of elaborate computer software and systems that permit managerial surveillance and checks for compliance and the sanctioning of staff if they fail to keep their records up to date is in effect a command to be seated by the screen, still, sedentary; to be *immobile*. At the same time however, the system creates an imperative to move in that social workers have to make "statutory visits" to families when children have been assessed as at risk and are on child protection plans (Department for Education 2013). When concerns for child welfare are high, they would probably be visiting the children and families anyway regardless of the statutory requirement, but what it does is institutionalise a demand and a "performance indicator" that children are seen within specified periods, and practitioners are assessed by managers on how well they meet these statutory timescales.

However, how bureaucracy is performed is not static but increasingly becoming mobilised through the use of tablet computers that can access the electronic records system and hot-desking workplaces which permit "agile" working, also permitting staff to spend some time working at home (Jeyasingham 2016). In turn, the significance of the car as a mobile office increases as workers use it as a base within which to input data into their tablets in between home visits.

Research shows that even within highly regulated bureaucratic regimes frontline workers – Lipsey’s (1980) street-level bureaucrats – attempt to find ways around managerial control by taking shortcuts and using discretion (Evans and Harris 2004). But in social work the possibilities for discretion and freedom from managerial constraints arise particularly from the fact that in order to achieve their ultimate purpose of promoting the welfare of vulnerable people, social workers have to go and see them, which means leaving the office and conducting their work on the move. As the survey data referred to above shows, social workers spend at least a third of their time travelling and in direct work with service users. While social workers typically lament having to devote so much more time to admin than face to face work, when travel time is included – some of which it will be shown below involves transporting and working with service users – the amount of out of office relational work that is done is still quite significant. Thus a “staging” process of social work is evident in how while managers have clear designs “from above” on how the work should be done, its implementation is performed and lived “from below” by social workers on journeys to and with service users and in the interactions between them. This “staging” means that social work is both static and mobile but that to be effective – indeed to happen at all – requires a range of nuanced negotiation in motion in terms of the dynamic flows of interaction while mobile that characterise professional helping and which will now be explored with respect to social work.

3. Journeys

While the car is central to the nature of the actual physical movement involved in social work, it has largely eluded analysis. Elsewhere I have shown how in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s the car was understood as a key site of practice and theorised as such, as academic and practitioner accounts of work with children gave great prominence to experiences in cars (Ferguson 2009). The car is no less important in child welfare work today than it ever was, and needs to be rehabilitated – or perhaps reconditioned – in understandings of what social work and welfare practices are, both as an object that is crucial to how the work gets done and as a subject for theorising the nature of some key aspects of contemporary (auto-) mobilities.

The car journey constitutes a transitional space between the office and the face-to-face encounter with the client. It is a crucial liminal space for practitioners in how it provides the opportunity to prepare for the visit by transitioning from the office to the service user’s home and life by thinking tactically about what they are going to do and managing their anxiety. Social work, like all home visiting, involves working with uncertainty, going into the unknown (Pink, Morgan, and Dainty 2015). The way the following social worker from the research articulated this experience was typical:

Well [in visiting] cases I don’t know, I’m anxious and I have little butterflies in my tummy, so hence the prepping in the car or talking to a colleague in the car about what we’re going to do and how we are going to do it. But of cases that I know inside out that are my own, emotionally it’s my responsibility to that child, that is my, I don’t have anything else, it doesn’t make me, I just want to get it right.

This illustrates the vital emotion work that goes on in professional’s cars, whether they are reflecting and “prepping” for the visit on their own or with a colleague. As Sheller (2004) shows, cars elicit a wide range of “automotive emotions”: the pleasures of speed and inhabiting a desired vehicle, “road rage” and so on. In mobile welfare practice, cars are key

containers for the emotional effects of the work on the practitioner as they travel from the service user's home back to the office or on to the next visit. Cars also provide enclosed confidential spaces for peer and managerial support and the emotional processing of what has just happened when a manager accompanies a worker on a troublesome home visit. Such supervision or debriefing and peer support involves the car being used as a transitory office not only for supervision, but the making of mobile phone calls, and writing up case notes.

It is not simply the car but the combination of the driver-car that matters (Dant 2004), or better still perhaps, the driver-car-service user assemblage. The most basic attributes come into play, such as individual's skills at navigation. Some social workers in my study were very adept at finding their way to homes, while for those who lacked a good sense of direction getting lost gave rise to feelings of inadequacy, frustration and stress. In the following example the social worker had got lost on the way to the family home and I asked her how common it was for her to get lost?

I'm absolutely hopeless actually. I'm famed for getting lost, phoning up saying I'm lost. But this area is a lot easier than the office that I worked previously, where the office was right on the edge of the patch, and it's all just mazes of places, whereas here you've got quite a lot of big main roads you can always orientate yourself off, so it's a lot easier.

In another example, the [soon to be lost] worker is driving along responding to my questions about the nature of the case we are on our way to visit, and reflecting on whether it should be classified at a lower level of risk called Children in Need, or the higher risk assessment of Child Protection, when the impact of getting lost hits her:

SW: It has been a Child in Need. There have been times when I've gone to [Team Manager], I'm really thinking maybe, should this be child protection? We've really wavered. There was a spell, I always get a bit lost now. I might have to put my TomTom on. I've got the worst sense of direction.

HF: Yeah, I know exactly how you feel.

SW: I really, really have, honestly.

HF: Believe me. I'm totally, I understand.

SW: I really think it affects me as a social worker, because it just makes my life extremely stressful. I've been to this house – how many times? And I can't quite, and because I put the TomTom on most of the time. I think this is it, [street name]. Yes! [street name], I've found it.

Not only is getting lost annoying but time is invariably in short supply and appointments have to be kept. This gives rise to a tension in the "staging" of social work in how the managerial demands of planned diary appointments are pitted against the unknowns of actually finding the house! Here, instead of being a safe container that assists workers to focus and manage their anxieties about going into the unknown, for poor navigators these journeys produce auto-emotions that threaten to destabilise them before they have even entered the home and become face-to-face with the potentially troublesome situations and service users they may be anxious about.

3.1. The car as a place of safety

The data shows how cars are vital containers for the emotional effects of the social work that goes on outside of them, as places of safety for practitioners to retreat to after challenging

face-to-face work has been done in a service user's home (Smith 2003). Cars in practices like social work are what I have called elsewhere "fluid containers" in how they are at once a secure base, a mooring that provides a sense of psychological stability to workers, and also something fluid in how what is achieved in them mostly occurs while on the move (Ferguson 2009).

A case that illustrates these processes involved a single parent mother – here called Pauline – and her five-year-old daughter Amy who the police referred to social work due to concern about possible drug use and child neglect. In the past, five of Pauline's children had been removed from her and taken into care, some at birth. Amy was returned to her mother after there was evidence that Pauline had changed her lifestyle. Pauline came to the door and immediately said that it didn't suit for the social worker "Hannah" to come in. Pauline then spent 14 min telling the social worker that she did not trust her, crying and shouting at Hannah and seeking assurances that she would not remove her daughter from her care. Having tried to remove herself several times from the situation the social worker eventually got away.

Strikingly, Hannah regarded this experience as quite typical of her work experience, saying: "I don't mind her directing insults at me, that doesn't bother me one little bit because I think that's fair enough". The social worker minimised the effect of the "insults", alluded to the emotional labour involved in absorbing the anger, fear and sadness of a distressed mother and went directly on to a home visit to another family that I observed, where she again experienced parental resistance, but did gain access to the home. I will return to this visit later in the paper.

Six days later I interviewed the social worker Hannah in the office on the same day she had been back to see Pauline (I did not accompany her on the home visit on this occasion because she took another social worker with her and three of us visiting would have been excessive). While Hannah admitted she was really nervous about going on the return visit, she again made little of the impact of Pauline's criticism and challenge she faced last week:

No, and you just turn the music up loud in the car and you forget about it, and then you focus on the next visit. But it's like if you have a lot [of difficult visits] together, then it would be draining. And that's what I was saying about, I think, like when I went, before I went on the visit today, I was sort of ranting to [colleague] about it, like, "Oh God, you should have seen her the other day what she was like with me, and now I've got to go." I think it's, I really draw on that, you know, being able to offload a little bit, just briefly, and her being like, "Oh yeah." Do you see what I mean?

This shows the importance of "offloading" feelings to colleagues in the office and similarly the role the car – and loud music – play for some workers in dealing with the deep emotional impact of the work. This evidence accords with that found by scholars of auto-mobility concerning the importance of sound in overcoming the loneliness of driving (Bull 2004; Walsh 2010). As Urry notes, a majority of car journeys in developed societies are now solitary, in which context, "Music and voices in the car fill the space and substitute for other forms of sociality and life" (Urry 2007, 129).

Alone in the car, which social workers mostly are when they do home visits, they seek consolation from the loud hum of music and make decisions about whether to process their thoughts and feelings from the last service user encounter and how to regroup and focus on the next visit. Hannah's narrative suggests she seeks to use the loud music to drown out her painful feelings, a decision heavily influenced by whether or not she is on her way to another home visit and if she is, then to acknowledge and deal with the rawness of her

feelings would militate against putting her in a state of mind and body where she feels strong and resilient enough to face the next family and practice effectively. Following Goffman, here the car acts as a kind of mobile “backstage” where the performer can “prepare” themselves for the next encounter and also recover from the last performance. This has similarities with how outreach workers use their van as a backstage in work with homeless people (Smith 2011). Were the social worker headed in a different direction and her destination was the office or home the contained noise of the music could be used to help her to acknowledge her emotions and self regulate by offloading at least some of them in the car. Some professionals have told me how on their way home at the end of the day they will use loud music as both an accompaniment to and a cover for screaming very loudly to express the frustration and other emotions they feel from having been “insulted” and shouted at and letting go of the many other feelings – sadness, grief, anger – they have absorbed during the day’s work.

This is not to say that professionals feel it is always preferable for them to be accompanied in the car. It depends on who the company is. Floersch’s (2002) ethnographic study of social workers who work with people with mental health problems shows the huge amounts of driving American workers have to do, travelling to get to see their service users and in transporting them to various appointments. The car was experienced as a source of freedom and security for workers, physically in separating them from dangerous clients on home visits and economically in terms of mileage allowances. However, the car was also seen as a place of danger and invasion of personal space by some workers because of how it places them and their client so close together in a small enclosed space. Clients whose personal hygiene was poor due to self-neglect caused workers discomfort because of their pungent smell and wanting to try to avoid touching their knee when changing gears. However the car was valued by Floresch’s caseworkers as a productive space, both in the opportunities for therapeutic dialogue with adults that went on in it and in practical ways such as when workers got service users to fill out forms while they drove them to appointments.

3.2. Car therapy: social work practice inside the vehicle

The car is itself a site of actual practice in which professionals and service users are co-present, such as when social workers take children and young people out for drives or those who are in care are taken on access visits to see their parents, to new placements, or to a café to talk. Some social workers in my study expressed the notion of the car as a “neutral space”, and how once in this liminal space, children drop their defences and become more relaxed and start talking.

I think it’s a, in a bizarre kind of way, despite the fact it being a social worker’s car, it’s almost like, I don’t know what the right word to use is but it’s a neutral environment, it’s not school, it’s not home, it’s not my home; it’s like in transit, it almost doesn’t count I guess, in children’s heads doesn’t really count because it’s in the car; it’s not labelled as a, I don’t think the social worker’s car is labelled as a particular, it’s just seen as transport I think by children. Maybe, maybe not, maybe.

It was typical of social workers to have insight into the sociological significance of the car journey as part of casework with children.

[I]f you’re going somewhere, they view it as literally, they view it as a car journey, they don’t see it as the social worker’s come to talk to me about these issues, they see it a bit sort of literally. The social worker’s taking me here and then you can have a very relaxed conversation. And also you’re not facing the child, you’re both looking at the front of the, I mean that’s, or if they’re in the back of the car, you’re not looking at them and I don’t know, it’s just a little bit more relaxed

and a little bit more natural and you can have discussions about, I don't know, what you can see or, or where you're going or and then you can, it's just more natural and they tend to tell you more. ... They often let their guard down I'd say, they let their guard down a bit more and they start talking, they start talking about other things that they believe are unrelated to your assessment or unrelated to what you're involved in the family with but actually it, it does help us to understand.

The ethnography did not stretch to observing or filming worker–child encounters in cars as researchers have done for ordinary journeys (Laurier et al. 2008). Intriguing questions surround how the car space is understood and used, as it could sometimes be just a car, sometimes a space to talk, sometimes to work, sometimes just to be together, sometimes alone, sometimes safe/liberating, sometimes dangerous/a trap, with obvious scope to switch roles and meanings.

Here, another social worker talks of how they take children out for drives as a casework strategy to find out things about them.

If they're a bit older, I try sometimes to take them out and take them places, because they're not making direct eye contact with you but it allows them to sort of jabber on about stuff, so you can find out a lot without actually saying a lot. They find it much more comfortable to talk, so it is quite a good way of finding out stuff.

In all these examples we see how the car itself is a crucial vehicle in opening up a discussion that led to significant disclosures, information the worker's experience suggested would probably not have come from working with these children elsewhere, such as in the home. Implicit in these workers' comments is the recognition that the car is a safe place to talk because the child cannot be overheard, unlike the problems that can happen when children are interviewed in their bedrooms or other parts of the home. As these social workers perceptively see, the car is an effective space for practice because of the forward motion, the seating arrangements and how bodies are not positioned face-to-face and the young person can gaze out of the window, observe passing objects and places, fiddle with the music player or on their own mobile phone, all the while talking about what is important to them. This resonates with how Clare Winnicott has conceptualised the car as a "third thing", which provides for "shared experiences" and helps to facilitate communication with children, playing a role as an object as "a focal point to relieve tension". The social worker/driver's gaze focused straight ahead, permits the service user to make or avoid eye contact, which helps to free them up to disclose intimate information. This dynamic of the viewer/viewed and the freedom to speak it enables is the essence of "car therapy". Space and time can be devoted to working not face-to-face but indirectly with service users, through the "shared experience" of a "neutral area" (Winnicott 1964, in Kanter 2004, 189). This finding is supported by Laurier et al.'s (2008) study of communication on ordinary car journeys, which concluded that intimate conversation was also made possible by the "pause-fullness" and slowness of conversation on journeys, in how cars have to stop and start. This "pause-fullness" within the moving car mirrors important aspects of typical therapeutic conversations in clinics and offices (Ferguson 2009).

The car was regarded as not only having value as a space for communication but as a means to reaching open spaces that could be availed of to do further work with children.

So even when we go out and do something, Peter's quite, he's that sort of [silent, male] stereotype, but driving in the car is quite a good place to chat to him. And again, I've just gone to the park and had a kick about and played on the swing and different things like that. I've tried

taking them, we have done things like gone bowling, or other things, but that ended in absolute disaster with Peter kicking my car and then he ran off and vanished into the night!

Here the car is an object of the young person's anger, perhaps a proxy for the social worker who had recently taken him into care. Kicking their car seems to be intended as a blow to the worker. Following Barker (2009), this shows just one of the ways in which cars are sites of conflicting power relations between professionals and children.

4. Corporeal movements in performing social work in the home

Movement does not stop once the worker has parked up near the family home, walked to the doorstep and gained access (or not) to the home. When social workers step into homes they invariably encounter the flow and flux of family life as adults and children interact, play, eat, cry, fight, the TV is on, their mobile phones ring or ping, the dog(s) bark, growl, demand attention, or other adults are present whose identities are often unknown to social workers. This is in stark contrast to the kind of control and order the practitioner is able to create in the social work office or consulting room. So a key task for the social worker is to try to bring all this movement under control so that they can create the kind of order that is needed if they are to meet their aims to interview parents, and to be able to become mobile themselves to see children on their own and in the company of their carers. This involves social work in several kinds of work that is performed by the mobile body. To illustrate this, let us return to the social worker Hannah, who we left above dealing with the emotional impact of having encountered a fearful, angry and distressed parent and on her way to see another family straight after. What happened on that next home visit was typical of the kinds of embodied work and negotiation in motion on home visits that was performed by social workers in the study.

The case involved a 10-year-old boy, here called Kevin, who the school were very concerned about due to emotional difficulties and behaviour problems they suspected were linked to possible neglect. The social worker's aim for the visit was to see the boy alone. She had been out to the house once before, a week previously, and Kevin's mother was hostile towards her. The worker tried to get Kevin to talk to her on his own but the child wouldn't consent to it. Grandmother let us into the home and led the social worker into the sitting room where the mother and the four children aged between 13 and 3 were, including Kevin. The children's father was standing inside the sitting room door and, oddly, while he remained there for half of the one-hour visit he never said anything and no one spoke to him, until the social worker involved him towards the end. The social worker immediately sat on the settee placing herself in the middle of the children. This nicely symbolised her getting straight into the heart of the family and she got all the children drawing, an engagement strategy with Kevin that clearly worked. The room was homely, but there was an atmosphere of tension due it seemed to the social worker's presence. The social worker engaged intermittently with the children and mother, including explaining how people often fear social workers and that she wouldn't be doing her job if she didn't do the assessment.

Some 10 minutes into the visit all the children began moving around the room and flowing in and out of adjacent rooms and after 45 min they were once again in the sitting room where the social worker was, except for Kevin. Realising that Kevin was next door in the dining room on his own the social worker asked mother:

SW: Is it okay if I go and try and speak to Kevin briefly?

Mother: Yes.

SW: Is that all right?

Mother: ((calling to Kevin)) Is that all right with you Kevin? Hello?

No reply came and the social worker got up from the settee and joined Kevin (I followed the social worker everywhere, as I always did, when the participants consented). On entering the dining room the social worker closed the door and immediately got down on to the floor beside Kevin. She engaged him about the activity (drawing) that he was involved in and wrote down some notes as the boy spoke – which he did fluently. She spent seven minutes alone with him, gave him a smiley-face sticker at the end, and initiated a high five with him. While the period of time spent with Kevin was quite short, given the parents' and the boy's initial resistance, afterwards the social worker was pleased that she got to see him alone at all and that he talked. This was not only due to the social worker's therapeutic skills, but just as importantly her agility, purposefulness and willingness to move. The worker was alert, saw the opportunity to move and the speed at which she moved by going next door prevented a situation where the boy could have come back into the sitting room, effectively blocking her movement and ability to see him on his own.

This shows the centrality of corporeal movement to social work, in how it relies on worker's capacities to get up from their seat and walk to where the child is. But it also illustrates how mobile social work in the home or when present with the child elsewhere is about more than walking. A walk will take the worker up close to the child, but other movements and negotiation in motion are necessary if direct contact is to be made: bending down, lifting up, jumping and twisting in play, using the hands and touching – to bring comfort, affirmation through high fives, and so on. In effect, not only must social workers be good at conducting drive-alongs and walk-alongs with children and families, they have to perfect the art of what might be called the “play-along”.

Being still for periods and sitting with the service user is essential to interviewing, as it enables good listening and observations of interactions and relationships in the family. Hannah's capacity to do that with these fearful parents was crucial to enabling them to work through their resistance. However, the research evidence suggests that there is also a requirement to be mobile which means that at some point during a visit the worker must move around the home and engage directly with the child and their home conditions. On 40 of the 71 home visits I observed in the study, social workers went upstairs and inspected the bedrooms. In most of the 31 visits where this did not happen when I was present, the workers had been upstairs on a visit prior to the research visit or did so on the next one. On 15 of these 71 visits children were seen on their own in the home and in 9 of these the place where they were seen alone for a period was in their bedroom. Kevin's experience was typical of how the other six were seen alone in downstairs rooms. The findings support Pink and Leder-Mackley's (2016, 172) argument that understanding the lived experience of the home and how people practise and create atmospheres in them requires attention to mobilities and a focus not merely on what people do *in* homes but on how they improvise by moving *through* the home. Effective social work and child protection involves the skilful management of mobility and immobility, transferring between being seated and being on one's feet; being on the floor and standing still, all by actively moving through the environment and engaging and negotiating in motion with children and adults.

However, professionals face a huge challenge in getting the body to make these kinds of corporeal movements and intimate contacts with children. Their struggle is to avoid the risks of immobilisation and blocked movement. A distinctive feature of social work encounters is how they go on in small, enclosed, intimate spaces. The use of mobile and sensory ethnography enabled the research to show that thinking, walking and getting the body to move are much more complex and difficult than is usually recognised (Ingold 2011). For instance, in many serious case reviews where children have not been protected despite the involvement of professionals, social workers have been criticised for not acting to protect children when with them in the home and elsewhere (Ferguson 2011). The rational assumption is that all practitioners have to do is make up their minds to move towards a child and then carry through on it. Social work always involves *potential* movement, and mobility does not always happen when it should and a key reason is the ways in which movement is blocked. The case above involving social worker Hannah where she was kept on the doorstep for 14 min and refused access to the home and the child is a vivid example. In the second case Kevin refused to see the social worker on her own on the previous visit and his mother was a constant source of resistance to the social worker moving anywhere in the home that provided insights into the family's inner life. The brooding presence of the father contributed to an affective atmosphere of menace that heightened the anxiety level for the social worker and created further uncertainty about her right to move within the home (Brennan 2004). At its most extreme, parents have stage-managed home visits to prevent workers from noticing that children who were right in front of them had broken limbs (London Borough of Brent 1985). This harm to children may have been detected had social workers got the children to walk, picked them up or engaged them in play-alongs.

In a minority of home visits in the research social workers were observed being overcome by the emotional intensity of the work and complex interactions with angry, resistant parents and family friends. Workers were also affected by organisational culture, time limits on their work and insufficient support to enable them to contain their feelings, think clearly and focus on the child (Ferguson 2016c). Here again tensions arise in the staging of social work as top-down bureaucratic pressures and insufficient support with the emotional demands of the work limit the time available to conduct such complex work and to be able to think clearly and critically while doing it. Many instances were also observed of practitioners acting creatively, including moving purposefully, to overcome barriers to engaging children and working in ways that helped parents (Ferguson 2016d). Thinking about practices in terms of mobility can help to develop a theory of practice based on the necessity for negotiation in motion and how ordinary mobility with children, even if it only amounts to taking a few steps or having a short play-along with them, is a way of getting to know their experience, be it of abuse or more broadly what it is like to live in this home and family.

5. Conclusion

Kesslerling (2006) suggests that "mobility" can be defined "as an actor's competence to realise specific projects and plans while being on the move" and as I have tried to show in this paper, the achievement of realising welfare projects such as protecting children and vulnerable adults, depends on social workers' and other professionals' capacities to be effective, not only while seated/stationary, but also while conducting their work on the move. While the movements of professionals are constrained in significant ways by bureaucratic demands

and organisational dictates, as I have tried to show, when the staging of social work practices are also considered “from below” in terms of the lived experiences of social workers and service users, a much more nuanced, uncertain, fluid and dynamic characterisation of practice emerges. Beyond the office walls, in several ways the car and mobilities assist service users and practitioners to meet their aims and in some key respects liberates them to disclose emotional truths. Home visiting too requires creativity, courage and a capacity to cope with highly unpredictable work. Where children are kept safe it involves professionals moving towards them to properly see, touch, hear and walk with them to ensure they are fully engaged with and the risks to them uncovered. In crucial respects professional helping must be understood as work on the move.

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