On Caseworkers' writing in Child Welfare − when less is more

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This article describes the fragmentary and sometimes incoherent way caseworkers record cases in child welfare work. While recording practices are often criticised and the relevance of the case records, for both the child welfare services and their clients, may be questioned, the analysis in this article argues that caseworkers record for immediate and anticipated purposes of accounting for correct professional practice. Through brief and indicative writing styles, seemingly incomplete records are adequate to document the fulfilling of legal requirement and legitimate professional assessments and actions. Furthermore, the analysis suggests that purposeful vagueness allows for future re-interpretations of cases, giving leeway to act in unanticipated future situations. The article is based on a contextual analysis of 13 case records from two Norwegian child welfare frontline offices. The analysis is illustrated with examples from one of the cases, which include ethnographic material gathered during the one-year trajectory of casework.

Keywords: child welfare; casework; case recording; professional responsibility

Om skriving av saksdokumenter i barnevernet - når mindre er mer

Denne artikkelen beskriver hvordan saksbehandlere i barnevernet ofte skriver fragmentariske og til dels usammenhengende saksdokumenter. Måten saker dokumenteres på i barnevernet er ofte gjenstand for kritikk, og det kan stilles spørsmål ved relevansen av dagens dokumentasjonspraksiser, både for systemet og klientene. Artikkelen argumenterer derimot for at saksbehandlere skriver på den måten de gjør, for å dokumentere korrekt sakshåndtering, med henblikk på både nåtidige og forventede fortolkninger av saken. Det som framstår som ufullstendig dokumentering av saksforløp, kan likevel framstå som tilstrekkelig for å dokumentere at barnevernet har oppfylt sine juridiske forpliktelser, og at vurderingene som er gjort er profesjonelt legitime. Dette gjøres gjennom at dokumentene skrives i en form for 'profesjonell stenografi', med hyppig bruk av knappe språklige vendinger og antydninger eller indikatorer. Analysen peker også på at denne vagheten kan benyttes for å tillate framtidige alternative

fortolkninger av saken, og at sakspapirene på denne måten åpner for handling i lys av uforutsette hendelser. Artikkelen er basert på kontekstuell analyse av saksdokumenter i 13 barnevernssaker fra to barnevernskontorer i førstelinjetjenesten. Analysen er illustrert med eksempler fra en av sakene, som også inkluderer feltnotater fra følgeforskning over ett år.

Nøkkelord: barnevern; saksbehandling; saksdokumenter; profesjonelt ansvar

Introduction

During the dramatic course of investigating the possible neglect of twin babies, child welfare caseworkers recorded a surprisingly undramatic story in writing. To their office colleagues, they expressed great concern about the babies' development and the quality of the care the parents were giving them, yet the case records downplayed the drama in the family and the caseworkers' doubts and ambiguity of a case lacking evident conclusions. An in-depth reading of the case documentation revealed that what at first seemed a straightforward account of child welfare work lacked the expected arguments and details to constitute a coherent story. Bits and pieces of information conveyed the development of the family's situation and the trajectory of the casework, yet decisive links were missing from the narrative. Similar to the findings of White, Hall and Peckover (2009), it was 'difficult to discern what the case was "really about" (p. 1209)'. Vagli (2009), too, found that entries in child welfare case records were 'placed in no special order and gave an impression of something coincidental or unintentional and also of untidiness (p. 232)'. The patchworks of details and gaps in the reported rationales of the caseworkers left much unanswered. Yet, it is precisely this patchwork, with its gaps in rationale, that constitutes the materialized child welfare case.

Norwegian state auditors have criticized child welfare services for producing records lacking essential information about professional inference and assessment

procedures (The Norwegian board of health supervision [Helsetilsynet], 2017). In contrast, the UK's Munro Review emphasized how increasing demands for documentation could oversimplify the reality of what is happening to children and young people (Munro, 2012, p. 6). British studies of electronic recording systems have described how such systems have led to increasingly specific recording practices simplifying descriptions and assessment into a series of categories (Parton 2009; White et. al., p. 2009). Hennum (2011) observed similar simplifications in Norwegian case recording where even wordy and elaborate records could be reductionist in their normative descriptions of childhoods and care practices.

Selective and incoherent recording practices may partly be explained by organizational characteristics of the child welfare services (Parton 2009), but may also be intrinsic to case recording in general, 'because by definition they are selective for purposes of day-to-day management' (Hall, Slembrouck & Saragi 2006, p. 91). While research has pointed to the interrelationship between the overall contexts of child welfare work and recording practices (Askeland & Payne, 1999), few studies have looked closely at how organizational and procedural contexts impact on what and how caseworkers record. Exceptions from Finland are Räsänen's (2013) ethnomethodological study of emergency social workers, and Huuskonen and Vakkari's (2013) study of child protection social workers. Both studies found that normative and practical arrangements influence recording and that everyday work affects what is included and omitted from the records.

The aim of this article is to enquire into processes of case recording as they take place over time, providing insight into documentation practices within the ambiguous and uncertain contexts of child welfare work. Writing in child welfare work has multiple, often overlapping, purposes. It is both a working tool and a system of

institutionalized accountability. Bovens (2009) defines public accountability as ‘a social relationship in which an actor feels an obligation to explain and to justify his or her conduct to some significant other' (p. 184). Thus, recording practices will reflect expectations of accountable practice integral to the organization of the child welfare system, yet they will also reflect how the individual caseworker perceives his or her obligation to account for professional actions.

Intertextuality and indexicality

Intertextuality and indexicality have been useful in exploring what caseworkers record in their everyday work with children and families within institutional structures. While the concepts differ in theoretical origin, both refer to systems of communication and meaning allowing for linkages between everyday statements and established structures of accounting. Bazerman (2004b) describes case records as ‘parts of systems of human activity embedded within structured social activities and depend[ing] on previous texts that influence the social activity and organization' (p. 311).

Bazerman (2004a) defines intertextuality as ‘explicit and implicit relations that a text or utterance has to prior, contemporary and potential future texts’ (p. 86). A text may draw on other textual resources, explicitly or implicitly, directly or indirectly. Gubrium and Holstein (2009, p. 187) describe a diversity of accounts as potentially relevant for intertextual reference. These include cultural understandings, informal procedures or common-sense practices, just as much as legitimate professional theories or shared normative understandings. The writer builds on, and positions the text in relation to, these sources and ideas, to express authority or legitimacy (Bazerman 2004a, p. 84).

Particular utterances in a more narrow sense can also make use of implicit and/or explicit references. Garfinkel (1967) called expressions that rely heavily on

shared contextual understanding indexical. While intertextuality refers to how texts rely on and represent discursive structures, the indexicality of an expression indicates how the practical use of an utterance relates to an idea or an action within a specific context of understanding. In line with an ethnomethodological understanding of accounting as a way of creating sense in everyday practice (cf. Garfinkel 1967, p. 40), record writing entails linking practices and everyday actions to the situation where the writing takes place, and to the anticipated readers' understanding of this context. When writing a record entry, the caseworker will take a common scheme of interpretation and expression between herself and anticipated readers for granted.

Methodology

The research context

The article draws on a sub-project of a study of everyday practices of child welfare work, conducted over a period of two years, in two Norwegian child protection agencies. Agency caseworkers described constant time-pressure and demanding workloads, and expressed a general negative attitude towards the perceived increasing demands for recording and bureaucracy, taking focus off the 'real work'. Similar experiences are described in the international literature on child protection work (eg. Juby and Scannapieco, 2007; Huuskonen and Vakkari, 2013; Munro, 2012).

I interviewed caseworkers, conducted field observation on and off for the duration of the study, and read reams of case documents (see Skotte 2016). I entered the field as an inquisitive newcomer, a sociologist with little knowledge of child welfare work. This gave me a privileged opportunity to inquire into everyday work routine and taken-for-granted practices.

Data

The written material consists of 13 case records representing cases from both agencies, recorded in a two-fold recording system, with paper copies in case journals and case notes in an electronic recording system. The 13 case journals and case records contained from 32 to 176 documents and from 97 to 250 entries, respectively.

In one case, including twin babies, I followed the process through one year, gathering field notes of day-to-day casework deliberations and meetings. I also conducted interviews with three caseworkers who were involved in the case throughout the year, and with other involved parties. Further detail on the dataset is provided in Skotte (2016). The main excerpts illustrating the analysis in this article stems from this case. Five caseworkers who were not involved in the twins-case, recommended the other 12 case records constituting the data for this article . The cases had been in the system for different lengths of time, ranging from one to 13 years. These 12 cases were similar to the main case in terms of the high level of involvement of the caseworkers. Otherwise, they represent different reasons for referral and interventions. In four cases, the children were placed in out-of-home care, and in-house measures were taken in the remaining eight. Although the number of cases is small, the data reflects a variance in recording practices and situational contexts.

Analytic approach

I approached the material as textual data about contextualised social action (Miller 1997, p. 81; Prior 2003, p. 12-13). I did not search for the caseworkers' motives for writing the texts; instead, I wished to investigate the organisational logic as expressed through the caseworkers' recording practices (Silverman 1975, p. 280; Prior 2003, p. 67).

I started by analyzing the case with corresponding ethnographic material. I compared written case records, interview data and field notes. I took note of how and what the caseworkers documented and/or omitted from the records during the development of the case. I looked for intertextual links between the written texts and the textual and narrative resources available on different levels within the contexts of the casework (Prior 2003, p. 56-57; Bazerman 2004; Gubrium and Holstein 2009, p. 55). I used instances where the record seemed to lack correspondence between caseworkers' talk and what was written down as key incidents (Emerson 2004) in my further analysis.

While I could compare records with ethnographic data in the single case, I relied on general contextual resources in the analysis of the remaining 12 case records. I used my field knowledge of child protection work, developing a 'sense of the interpretive domain in which the text was produced' (Miller, 1997, p. 85). I had gained first-hand knowledge of typical concerns and issues of the caseworkers' everyday activities and dilemmas. In line with ethnographic methodology, I employed this as an active resource in my analysis.

I analysed the records of each case horizontally. Again, I focused the analysis on explicit and implicit linkages between the recorded texts and other textual and non-textual resources, paying particular attention to how cases developed. I then compared developments and incidents of the 13 case records that gave evidence of shifts, incoherence and contradiction, working towards an analytical understanding of recording in context.

Ethics

This study is part of a larger interdisciplinary research project on children's participation in professional practices (Ulvik and Gulbrandsen, 2015), which gave me access to the field. The study was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research

Data. The parents of the children in the 12 cases consented to research of the case records. In the case involving the twins, the parents and the caseworkers consented to let me follow the process over time. I have ensured anonymity by transcribing each document, and by removing or changing details that could identify the participants involved. I kept the transcripts locked away when not in use. No documents or original copies were removed from the agencies.

Analysis

Types of texts

As mentioned, Norwegian child welfare services record casework in two systems, the case journal and the case notes. The case journal includes formally required documentation, including standard forms for reported concerns, assessments, correspondence with external partners, formal administrative decisions, action plans, and other paperwork corresponding with the legal procedures of casework. These are archived in a paper folder in a filing cabinet, filed in order of the child's date of birth.

Case notes are written and kept in an electronic recording system. These are the caseworkers' documentation of their work with the case, and of communication with the clients and other partners. According to the Public Administration Act (1967), the caseworkers are obliged to document facts and activities that may bear on the case. How and what caseworkers record depends both on the individual caseworker's approach to writing as well as the status of the particular case. A case with a high level of risk will have more entries than a case the caseworkers perceive to be low-risk and manageable (O'Rourke 2010).

Case recording is a practice closely linked to accountability understood as responsible practice and transparency. Bovens' (2009) furthermore links accountable

practice to actors' feelings of obligation to justify their actions. In child welfare the caseworker acts as an individual, a representative of her or his profession, and a representative of the child welfare system. The records reflects the actor's accountability toward colleagues, clients, managers, auditors and the law. Moreover, the caseworker is accountable towards his or her profession, representing the ideals and mandate of the child welfare professional.

Recording practices respond to this multitude of binding relations of accountability, yet recording is also a reflection of everyday practical child welfare work. This twofold rationale for keeping records influences how statements are written and suggests a simplified typology of child welfare recordings, presented below.

Activating records constitute the formally organised response to the official system of accountability. These records justify and set activity in motion. They legitimate the child welfare service's interference in people's lives. Activating records are mandatory and have a standardized format. Management oversees the content prior to it being entered into the records, thus they represent the system's version of the case, the casework and the client's situation. Examples of such records are administrative decisions, activity plans and assessment reports. Systems of auditing are put in place to monitor these recordings followed-up by ticking boxes that account for correct procedure, including the keeping of deadlines. While primarily written to document the system's adherence to correct procedure and to justify professional response, the records are also used in day-to-day work situations. The following excerpt illustrates how an activating record dismissed a notice of concern from a family councillor service regarding a family of four children:

> Assessment: The main concern was that the mother and father of the youngest children lived in a conflictual relationship, affecting the children. The mother has moved out of

> the house with the children. We have no information indicating that the children are not receiving proper care.
>
> Conclusion: The notice of concern is dismissed, with no further follow-up from the child welfare services. (case 5)

The record activates non-interference, and is linked to other recorded documents of prior case handling, which justifies the dismissal.

Justifying records represent other parties' assessments and viewpoints, or child welfare workers' professional assessments. These records strengthen the justification of the child welfare service's activities and decisions as reflecting professional expertise. The case journal may contain copies of pre-existing reports, such as criminal records or case histories. Other documents may be written for the recorded child welfare case. Reports from schools, physicians and psychologists are examples of such records. Other expert voices are recorded indirectly through the caseworker's accounts of telephone conversations or meetings. In general, these expert inputs constitute the most 'objective and factual' documentations in a case and serve as the strongest evidence in order to justify decisions (Zimmerman, 1969, p. 338). The caseworkers' own assessments might carry similar weight when they are written as reports of factual events, such as reports of observations. The records justify interference, decisions and actions towards public auditors, yet they also intended to inform future colleagues of the facts influencing the process. The following excerpt illustrates how caseworkers' representation of information from 'experts' is used to argue for placing a five-year-old boy in foster care with his grandparents:

> The health clinic services has not been followed up since his two-year examination. At the time, they registered that his language development was delayed. Former kindergarten says the boy had trouble understanding social codes, and was often

> involved in conflicts. He often played ‘action games’. The boy was in kindergarten until the age of four. He has not been in kindergarten this last year, and has therefore spent a lot of time with his grandparents (case 4).

The author represents institutional voices to justify that the boy needs care and support, and indirectly claim that the grandparents may provide such care.

Emergent accounts are notes of individual caseworkers accounting for their everyday work, framing their accomplishments as both proper and professional. What is relevant to record in each case is largely left to the discretion of the caseworkers. Some will record conversations and observations to document the client’s perceptions of the situation, their reflections or lack of such, their healthy or unhealthy behaviour, qualities of relationships, or to establish a characterization of the client (Hall et al., 2006). These accounts record how, when, where, and how much they talk with the clients, and often reflect the caseworker’s relationship with children or parents. The notes contain observations of material conditions in varying detail as well as caseworkers’ responses. Notes record assessments and interpretations directly or indirectly through descriptions and accounts. According to caseworkers in one of the agencies, some use the case notes to ‘ease their conscience through writing’, elaborating at great length about their work. Others, pragmatically and sporadically, take note of telephone calls, and report briefly on contact with clients and partners. How the authors of the records anticipate their use will influence how the records are written (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009, p. 187). Case notes as a genre represent a form of self-reporting on the part of the caseworker, and it is taught by example, where colleagues read each other’s entries.

The caseworker in the excerpt below writes elaborate notes on her relationship with a nine year old boy and his mother. The notes report of her work in detail, and in so doing represents characteristics of the family. The following excerpt reports on a home visit:

> The boy sits on the sofa, eating a white bread ham and cheese sandwich. He is quiet. Caseworker (SL) sits next to the boy and starts stroking his hair. The boy takes hold of SL's jacket, and SL takes the boy's hand. The mother says we should help her move the boy to another school. She doesn't like the boy's teacher. SL says the child welfare services will not help her with this. The boy receives appropriate assistance from the school he attends (case 9).

Again, the record refers to earlier documents recorded in the case, as well as to professional indicators and implicit assumptions.

Gap filling records are records that are flexibly entered into the case files and journals, without belonging to any of the types above. These entries are neither filled in forms, reports or expert assessments nor do they fit into the broad category of self-reporting. They document details that are otherwise not included in the records. Discussions between colleagues can be an example. Detailed accounts of communication with involved parties, experts or family members represent another example. These kinds of records fulfil the need for documenting gaps in the narrative of a case trajectory. They often link either to the story as it has evolved or to anticipated future events. Naturally, all recording implies a selection of information relevant to each particular case. Much of what takes place in casework is not recorded. Thus, when caseworkers add notes and details that differ from the regular entries, this might seem haphazard. However, as I will illustrate with two examples below, such entries often carry more importance than their apparent incidental character might indicate.

Both documents I present below deviate somewhat from the regular entries in this particular case. They fill in the scant narrative documented through the regular case entries. The first example is a working note entered into the electronic file. While also filling a gap in recording, the second is a mixture of an emergent account and a

justifying record. It is a printed note, inserted in the paper folder, differing from the other records in the folder in its level of detail and pathos of the interlocutor.

Linking to organisational procedures

This first is an example of a sketchy record entry. I will show how the note may be meaningful and significant given the circumstances in which it was written. Field conversations with the caseworker, and field notes from the agency, written a few days after these events took place constitute the context for analysis.

The child welfare services were considering placing twin babies in care. William and Jenny and their mother were temporarily staying in a specialized child protection institution for support and observation. The mother had a history of mental illness, and the stay had been arranged to assess whether the parents were fit to care for the siblings. After three months of the stay, the staff concluded that the children had special needs, and that neither parent were able to meet these needs. They recommended out-of-home care for William and Jenny. The first written record after the child welfare services had been informed of the institution's conclusion was the following note. It reports on a case deliberation between the responsible caseworker and the office management:

> **13 January Deliberation regarding legal assistance**
> Caseworker deliberated whether the mother and father should receive legal assistance. The child welfare services have not decided to present the case for the county social welfare board, with reference to legal § 4-12. The case is serious and several solutions were discussed;
>
> - Can the family home increase their staff and ensure the safety and well-being of the children, and the mother continued mapping/supervision?
> - Would a voluntary placement be best for the children / do the parents want this?
> - An emergency might occur for the children

> The child welfare services will go through the concerns regarding the children's situation with the mother and the father Wed. 14 January; it has been decided by the management not to contact a lawyer.

This brief text covers a few days of working drama and ambiguity on the part of the caseworker. She had arranged for the mother and the babies to move out of the institution and into a new arrangement, a 'family home', where the mother would continue to receive a certain level of supervision and support to avoid putting the children at risk. The institution staff strongly disagreed with this suggested arrangement, expressing serious concern through several phone calls to the caseworker. They negotiated possible approaches with the caseworker, who had to balance the babies' interests with the staff's concerns and her possibilities for acting on these concerns within the economic and organisational limitations of child welfare services.

The county social welfare board, a court-like arrangement, approves decisions for out-of-home care presented by child welfare services. Based on the caseworker's earlier experiences with out-of-home care, she was aware that getting the board's approval for out-of-home care demanded rigorous documentation and evidentiary proof. The office management was not convinced that documentation and proof was sufficient in Jenny and William's case. The entry reflects, though very subtly, the caseworker's ambivalence.

Members of the child welfare organisation might understand the urgency of the note merely by finding an entry of a case deliberation in the records. Case deliberations are usually a part of a work process, and details of these meetings are seldom documented. In both agencies, case deliberations were typically held when caseworkers needed to involve the office manager in decision-making phases. The purpose was twofold. Deliberations constituted a forum for discussing professional dilemmas and

uncertainty, and for gaining support from the manager for proposed measures. Once a deliberation resulted in a decision and an approved plan of action, the caseworkers documented the result in corresponding forms, and there was little need to document the discussion itself. However, by recording this deliberation, the caseworker documented that the management was involved in the decision-making process. The decision was not hers alone.

The entry fills a gap in the regular documentation of the case. While most records report actions and events that have taken place or reproduce professional arguments, this document refers to considerations and deliberations. Contrary to ordinary recording practice, the entry indicates uncertainty.

Recording is used to document correct procedural steps. The heading and conclusion of the note suggest that the deliberation concerned the parents' right to legal assistance. However, this question and its conclusion are merely stated, and the rest of the note seems to have little reference to the topic. The note does not narrate the story of the deliberation, with arguments for or against involving a lawyer to represent the parents, nor does it reproduce the arguments for a proposed action. In both form and content, the note is similar to a checklist. It has an *informational* rather than a *narrative* purpose.

The law requires that other and less invasive options have been tried and failed before suggesting out-of-home care, correspondingly the note informs potential readers that 'several solutions' for the family have been looked into. Similarly, clients have the right to participate, and the note documents such participation. Thus, the note indicats correct procedure. In a situation of ambiguity and a possible future court case for out-of-home care, it was important for both the caseworker and the child welfare office to document legal compliance. According to Bovens (2009), public managers share the

understanding that ‘being held accountable means being in trouble' (p. 189). In light of anticipated scrutiny by lawyers and the courts, the content of this brief note contributes to protecting child welfare caseworkers and managers from such anticipated trouble.

The brevity of the note and the lack of detail gives its author and the participants in the deliberation the leeway of the usual ‘off the record’ deliberation. The content of the discussion cannot be inspected and a reader can only guess what was said during the meeting. The note does not reveal logical lines of argumentation, yet it indicates that a discussion has taken place, and that the necessary assessments were taken into account. Thus, in a potential scrutiny of the records, details perceived as unnecessary will not obstruct the presentation of a correctly handled case. The underlying assumptions and contextual conditions left out of the note and the obvious gaps in argumentation allow the reader to interpret the content of the note according to different future scenarios. If the twins’ situation were to change dramatically, the vagueness of the documentation of their child welfare case would allow for re-interpretation.

Shared but not explicit schemas of understanding

Although the management had decided against presenting a case of out-of-home care, this was still a possible future scenario, and, as the previous document warned ‘an emergency might occur'. The caseworker explained to me how she had to ‘build a case’, should she need to present a decision to place the children in out-of-home care. The institution staff’s observations and assessments constituted most of the case evidence. The institution had not yet submitted their formal concluding report, and written documentation was scant. This next entry illustrates how lack of formal documentation can be countered by documenting oral communication.

The following document is dated one day after the previous note. The entry documents what appears to be a verbatim account of the telephone conversation between the caseworker and Marie, an employee at the institution.

> Document 29
> 14 January
> **Summary of telephone conversation with Institution staff**
> **Supplementary information regarding notice of concern from institution, by Caseworker [CW]**
> CW had a conversation with Marie at the institution, where she gave supplementary information regarding the notice of concern. Marie said the circumstances that give basis for concern have escalated during the weekend. She informs that they as a rule do not achieve contact with the children, there is active avoidance, and it is developing downhill. The mother does not respond to supervision. Marie considers that a family centre will be a castle in the air. The institution does not consider it an emergency as of yet. It may become an emergency, depending on how the mother reacts when she learns that the institution has concluded that the children cannot live with the mother. Marie considers that the children need help very soon, the mother is not able to offer this help. The dominant pattern is that they actively avoid contact, also from the institution staff. The totality of the care is inadequate.
> The institution described an episode where the children could have been in danger: the mother lifts the babies from the floor, one on each arm, she holds her hands under each baby, like spatulas, their heads dangling. Marie described this as reckless treatment. Marie describes mother as abrupt, depending on who she is with. Marie describes a constant hustle and bustle.
> Marie experiences that the mother has poor understanding of the difficulties; there is a low level of reflection.
> The institution describes that the father gives the children less, but he is more stressed.
> Marie informs that the mother and the father have an undefined relationship.

This entry conveys the staff's professional assessment and documents and animates their observations of the family as communicated by Marie. Similar to many case

records, the entry tells a story. In contrast to the informational form of the note above, most case documents appear to have a narrative structure, telling stories of individual troubles and institutional responses. Just as the note from the deliberation drew on the knowledgeable reader's understanding of office practices and procedures, case narratives take for granted shared contexts of understanding between the author and the reader (Bazerman 2004b, p. 311). These shared contexts constitute schemas of understanding, understood as 'cognitive structures through which interpretations of the world are made' (D'Andrade, 1992, p. 52). Indicators or hints suggest the use of particular schemas, and things that are neither present nor perceived will be 'filled in' by the reader to make the pattern recognizable (ibid.). A few hints and indicators give enough information for colleagues and other knowledgeable readers to understand how the situation fits into structures of professional knowledge.

In child welfare, these schemas are often structured by theories of developmental psychology, and while records are full of professional indicators, a lack of theoretical language is a common trait. In this presumably essential account for the construction of argumentation towards a very serious measure, the language contains few technical or theoretical terms.

The text reads, 'She informs that they as a rule do not achieve contact with the children, there is active avoidance, and it is developing downhill'. Contact and avoidance refer to central aspects of attachment theory, and the classic scoring system for measuring infant-care giver attachment developed by Ainsworth and colleagues (1978). 'Proximity and contacting seeking' and 'Avoidance of proximity' are two of four scales used to measure interaction between mother and child through observation (ibid.). Though not directly referred to, attachment theory has a very strong position in the Norwegian child welfare services (NOU 2015:5; Hennum 2011). A caseworker

writing within this system will expect the knowledgeable reader to understand the gravity of the concern when attachment behavior is described as not developing as it should.

The text contains similar indicators in the description of observed risky behaviour. The second paragraph describes a specific situation where the mother holds the babies in a way that the text characterises as reckless treatment. The mother is described as abrupt, and in a constant ‘hustle and bustle’. This account may be understood within the context of the child welfare service's characterization of the mother as immature. Although none of the written records use this specific term, the caseworkers talk of immaturity in the mother as a serious cause of concern when they discuss the case. In her influential book *Sveket*, Kari Killén (2015 [1991]), a Norwegian authority on child abuse and neglect since the 1980s, describes causes and risk factors pertaining to immature parents. She outlines a type of ‘impulse driven parent’, characterised by restlessness and anxiety, who can have an abrupt, defiant and aggressive quality. Even the slightest frustration might provoke strong aggression. ‘[They lack] impulse control and ability to see correlation between action and its consequences […]' (p. 150).

The record entries contain what Bazerman calls implicit intertextual references, recognizable to child welfare workers and other professionals acquainted with established theoretical correlations and explanations. There existed a shared understanding among the professionals involved with this particular case that the mother showed personality traits linked with poor ability for care. While the entry about the telephone conversation between the caseworker and Marie gives the impression that this is a serious case, the reader needs to link the text to underlying professional texts,

such as Ainsworth and Killén, explicating indicators of poor parental care as a professional account.

The textbook schemas of interpretation are not the only frameworks of interpretation that the caseworkers link to in the recorded accounts. Child welfare accounts can also be structured around the logic of available measures. At the time of writing, the caseworker and the office management anticipated a possible out-of-home care case. The recorded text allows future readers to fit the causes and concerns into an argument supporting an out-of-home care decision. However, just as the caseworker writes in light of the current situation of the case, a future caseworker will read the case records in light of the status of the case at the time of reading. Since the written argumentation bases itself on indicators rather than on a complete narrative, and no individual entry, nor the full trajectory of recorded data, present a clear line of argumentation for out-of-home care, the future reader may construct the narrative as he or she finds useful.

However, while caseworkers may appreciate the freedom to interpret documents written by their colleagues in the past, they often seek help to decipher the case recordings. Caseworkers look for support of their interpretations from colleagues acquainted with the cases' back-stage talk.

Repair work

In his study of medical recording, Berg (1996, p.514) describes the continuous 'repair work' carried out by medical personnel to decipher written case records. By repair work, he refers to oral communication between staff to clarify points in written record entries. In the child welfare offices, this often consisted of finding a colleague with previous experience with the case, who could contextualize the written information. These oral accounts become important contexts for interpreting the written recordings.

The caseworker in charge of the case of the twins changed jobs and left the office six months into the case. Her successor expressed discontent with the quality of the case recording.

Since the former caseworker was no longer in the office, she talked at length with the institution staff, hearing their assessments of the parents.

Institution psychologist: He [the father] can get mad, but mostly just says unkind things. The mother, however, she is unable to control herself. Whether the child welfare services are present, or there are other people there, she doesn't know… There is no reflection. (fieldnote 34)The dramatic oral descriptions of the mother are relevant to the inferences that the child welfare workers make. They fill gaps in the schematic accounts. In this case, it strengthens the caseworker's perception of the mother's immature character. Without this repair work, the records remain at a functional level of vagueness, providing the caseworkers and the child welfare services with leeway to act.

Concluding discussion

In the foregoing, I have illustrated how caseworkers account for legitimate and justifiable professional activity through what to an outsider might appear as incoherent and partial practices of case recording. My analysis suggests that both immediate events and anticipated responses to casework influence the way written records of child welfare cases make use of recognizable legal and procedural terminology and theoretical schemas to communicate to knowledgeable audiences.

Earlier research mirrors in many respects my findings in demonstrating how caseworkers creatively use the available recording systems to document what they deem relevant at a given point in the case process (Huuskonen and Vakkari, 2013; Räsänen, 2013; White et al, 2009). While the electronic recording systems used by Norwegian agencies require ticking boxes and filling in forms, the caseworkers can work flexibly

around these requirements, both through what they choose to write as well as to enter 'unauthorized' records to fill gaps in the storyline. My findings suggest that it is not only the recording system, but also professional cultures and organisational requirements and restrictions framing what details and parts of assessments professionals choose to record.

It may seem as if caseworkers strategically choose to omit details and to record incomplete lines of argumentation. However, we must not forget that record writing is a compulsory task for the child welfare worker, and for many a task with low priority, compared to other pressing demands. It is a time consuming task in a practice pressed for time. Heath (1982) describes the brevity of the records as a question of economy of effort. 'Being more complete than necessary for practical purposes wastes both the time of the writer as of those who need to quickly find relevant information in the record (ibid.)'.

In a study on medical case recording, Berg (1996) argued that selectivity of the information entered into the records 'is a prerequisite for the functioning of the record.' (p. 520). What goes into the records is what the system perceives as professionally relevant. This professionally relevant information is written in such a way that colleagues may interpret the records as they find useful in the future, according to Berg (ibid.). Incomplete and brief records may be interpreted to fit with unanticipated events, the passage of time and alternate assessments. An indicated assessment, rather than an elaborate display of causes and effects, provides leeway to act according to new interpretations. Several researchers have suggested that case recording not only serves purposes of ensuring responsible and transparent practice, but also contributes to structuring the complex everyday work situation of social workers and other professional groups (Berg, 1996; Garfinkel, 1969; Hall et al., 2006; Heath, 1982). De

Montigny (1991) claimed that '[social workers] [use] documents and files to artfully manage the confusion [they] face in the everyday worlds of the clients' lives. […] In the documents the everyday world becomes a domain that is properly manageable and properly managed' (p. 187). One may wonder how seemingly incoherent and fragmented records actually contribute to a feeling of order. However, through the extensive use of intertextual references and indexical statements, authors may leave out details in accounts, expecting prospective readers to interpret these accounts within shared professional schemas of understanding. Caseworkers' abilities to reconstruct schematic contexts allow disorderly records to create professional order.

While the study aims at understanding how contextual conditions of child welfare casework influences the way cases are recorded, the study also opens a debate about recording practices. It illustrates how vagueness and implicit argumentation may fulfil institutional purposes of accountability just as much as detailed narratives and complete lines of argumentation. However, while these practices seem useful to caseworkers and agencies, they may threaten the public security of the children and families involved with the child welfare services. Moreover, records dependent on repair work for interpretation does not represent transparent documentation. It is difficult, if not impossible to contradict vaguely formulated arguments.

My findings suggest a need to look into recording routines and procedures of child welfare agencies. While it may be pertinent to question the possible negative effects of sketchy recording practices, the rationale behind these needs to be taken into account in future discussions. The manifold aspects that may explain caseworkers' implicitness in writing, suggests a necessity to develop writing as a relevant tool in child welfare work, addressing questions such as how to incorporate uncertainty in recording,

without compromising professionalism, and how writing may become better integrated in social work practice.

Further studies into actual processes of case recording are needed to explore how organizational, cultural and procedural aspects of child welfare work influence case recording. Although professional writing in social work is receiving increasing attention by researchers, the production and use of case records are pivotal to understanding the link between professional practice and systems of accountability, and how these influence each other.

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