

## **Making visible an invisible trade: Exploring the everyday experiences of doing social work and being a social worker.**

### **Abstract**

This article demonstrates that making art in conjunction with story-telling is a method which can elucidate the everyday working practices of social work practitioners. To date, the relationship between art and social workers has rarely been noted, in part because visual studies have not attended to lived experiences of social workers. In this paper, we draw on an empirical study undertaken in England which invited social workers to use art to tell their stories of being a social worker and doing social work. Their artefacts produced powerful visual and aural accounts of practice. They were displayed at the People's History Museum, in the first social work exhibition of this kind, making visible to members of the public the hidden, lesser known and understood aspects of practice. In this paper, we demonstrate how particular social work structures can rupture relationships between social workers and the families they work with. In doing so, we build on the sociology of art, work and interaction by showing how visual narratives can challenge, and sometimes alter, previously held assumptions and beliefs.

**Key words: professional identity; lived experiences; sensory; visual methods; art; exhibition.**

## **Introduction**

Thinking about the ordinary aspects of everyday working life in social work enables us to consider how working in a particular climate affects practitioners. In reality, these small details of production are rarely examined and, as a result, the unseen practices that often occur inside the social work organisation can be ignored or overlooked (Dennis et al., 2013). In England in recent years, a prescribed performance management model and increasing the amount of time social workers spend at their computers completing assessments has been criticised for overshadowing the relationship-based aspect of social work with (Rogowski, 2010; White et al., 2010). Although such issues are familiar news to those within social work, they are not so familiar to those outside of the community. Most likely because, as Andrew Pithouse (1987; 1998) has suggested, social work is ‘an inherently invisible trade’.

Pithouse (1987; 1998) argued that social work was not visible for three reasons. First, the majority of social work practice with service users is unobserved by colleagues or managers. Second, the outcomes of social work intervention are uncertain and ambiguous. And third, social work practitioners rely upon rarely stated motives and taken for granted assumptions to accomplish their daily work. However, our study made it clear that another reason social work practice remains invisible in the public domain is because social workers are often unable to talk about their experiences due to issues of confidentiality. In effect this produces a form of silencing which is most notable when a child known to Children’s Social Care dies and the expertise and effectiveness of social workers is questioned (Jones, 2014). The more media coverage social work receives, the more noticeable it is that the social workers involved in the tragedy are not able to comment on what did or did not take place. Their silence means that their voices are, as a result, missing from what can become a heated and contested public debate (Leigh, 2017).

Motivated by a concern that social workers are situated in an arena of increasing accountability, often frustrated with aspects of their everyday working life, a number of different authors have attempted to make the invisible aspects of social work practice visible. They have used different methods to do so such as: ethnomethodology (Morriss, 2016; Pithouse, 1998), ethnography (Jeyasingham, 2018; Leigh, 2017; Pithouse, 1998; White et al., 2010 and mobility (Jeyasingham, 2018). However, to our knowledge there has been little research carried out which has used art to explore social workers' lived experiences of their practice realities.

The aim of the study was to offer participants the opportunity to create artwork which could complement their story of what it felt like to 'do' social work and 'be' a social worker. Our main objective was to exhibit the final artefacts in a museum in order to provide members of the public with an opportunity to see the lived experiences of social workers. However, rather than just display the artwork, we exhibited it alongside written and aural extracts from their interviews, narratives we felt were important for visitors to read and listen to in order to better understand what social workers were trying to convey. Shaw (2011: 134) notes that 'the link to an interview is essential, because the meaning... will only make full sense with the participant's interpretation'. We felt this was important because our participants were not experienced artists; they were social workers who wanted to use art to explore their everyday working lives.

In the next section, we explore literature relating to the sociology of art, work and interaction, to articulate our rationale for using participatory art-methods as means of generating new understandings of social work practice. We then discuss the method, the workshop and the exhibition. We conclude with a discussion of the findings and reflect on the feedback we received from visitors to the exhibition.

## **Sociology of art, interactionism and work**

John Berger (1972) argued that seeing often comes before words. Seeing, therefore, establishes our place in the world. Although we use words to explain what we see, words can never undo the fact that what we see can help us to situate what we feel. It has become recognised that visual research can provide readers with a way of experiencing, expressing, sensing and seeing the world of social work (Leigh, 2014). Using visual methods to explore these activities is an ever-growing body of work which draws on creative, multi-sensory and multi-modal approaches to help understand a variety of different the crafts or themes from practice (Shaw and Holland, 2014). Yet, at the same time, it is important to note that ‘visual imagery is never innocent’ (Rose, 2007:17). It should always be viewed as a method that is constructed through various practices, technologies and knowledges. A critical approach is, therefore, required in visual research if researchers are to think about the effect a particular image can have in terms of defining agency and social practices.

Although the study of interactionism and working life is a well-established tradition within sociology, using art to engage with this quotidian is a relatively new concept (Clark and Morriss, 2017). In fact, in many ways it has been argued that using art to explore the significance of routines and relationships is difficult because ‘the essence of who we are’ is too close to the position we have in a particular context (Pink, 2012: 143). Concentrating on what the ordinary is requires research participants to become immersed in the seemingly unexceptional aspects of their working lives and, in turn, place their routine relationships as well as their interactions with others, things, contexts and environments under scrutiny. Only then, once they are able to identify the routine practices, are they able to make the hidden, the slight and the predictable visible (see Pink, 2012).

Using art to explore working activities and interactions can be challenging especially when different members of professional groups hold different ideologies, and the facts of a

case or the views of a department are perhaps interpreted in different ways (Dennis et al. 2013). Back (2015: 821) argued that employing a visual approach in such circumstances opens up imaginative and innovative opportunities for researchers to explore how lives are lived and made 'livable'. They not only give importance to the taken for granted aspects of working life but they also provide evidence of how people identify with their jobs and demonstrate that these perspectives are neither fixed nor permanent (Dennis et al., 2013).

### **Social work and arts-based methods**

Shaw (2011: 79) has helpfully identified the three types of art-based methods in social work as: advocacy (dissemination through the arts); direct activism (arts as methods of empowerment); and epistemology (arts allow for different ways of seeing). The majority of social work research using visual and arts-based methodologies has explored the lives of those who experience services (for a review see Clark and Morriss, 2017 and Shaw, 2011). Huss (2009) and Huss et al. (2014), for example, adopted an arts approach which elucidated the voices of Bedouin women and Bedouin children in Israel. Moxley et al. (2012) used drawing, photovoice, collage and quilting to explore the lives of homeless women in the USA. Russell and Diaz (2013) used photography with lesbian women to explore their experiences of identity, culture and oppression to effect change in social work. By encouraging these participants to make the art themselves, the service users were able to consider, explain and critique their social conditions.

More recently, Foster, Deafenbaugh and Miller (2018) used arts-based focus groups with adolescents where they worked in groups to draw metaphor maps exploring positive and negative community factors affecting their emotional health and stress. Collectively, all of the above studies have generated distinct and original data that has explored different aspects of the social work world. They demonstrate that there is an increasing engagement in social work with visual methods albeit with some limitations.

Thus, arts-based studies concerned with effecting change in social work practice have tended to focus on the experience of the service user in order to effect change in social workers' practice. Notable exceptions to this have been the use of photography to explore the impact of organisational space on social work identity and child protection practice (Leigh, 2014); drawings of Mental Health Act assessments (Matthews, 2014); and drawing as a way of working with stress to enhance resilience and coping (Huss, 2012). In the present study, we used an arts-based approach to explore social workers' lived experiences of 'doing' social work and 'being' a social worker.

## **Methodology**

The method we chose to undertake in this study builds on the work of Ulf Wuggenig (1990), who used the photo interview method in a participatory way as part of a larger sociological study of people's lifestyles. Wuggenig asked his participants to take photos of important objects and artefacts in their lives and then interviewed them immediately afterwards. Wuggenig called this approach the 'photo interview process' as it emphasised the active role of the participants in his research. We employed this technique in our study but instead of a 'photo interview process', we developed an 'artwork interview process'.

Ethical approval was granted by the three universities involved in this study. Participants were recruited via a process of self-referral after information about the study was circulated to a number of Local Authorities in the area. Social workers who wished to take part were asked to contact the lead author and were sent an information sheet with further details about what the arts workshop would entail. Initially 32 social workers expressed an interest in taking part but only 16 confirmed. On the day of the workshop only 8 social workers arrived. The group consisted of 7 women and 1 man and their social work experience ranged from 1 to 20 years. The workshop was led by our experienced visual artist, (Matt Morriss) and supported by social work researchers (Jadwiga Leigh and Lisa Morriss).

The participants were introduced to mono-printing, clay modelling and wire-work and were given time to experiment with the different materials. Following this, each participant chose the materials they wanted to use to produce their artwork. While they worked, we observed and took photographs.

Once the participants had completed their artwork they were interviewed by one of the researchers. The interview was unstructured but began with the same question: “Tell me about your artwork”. The interviews were audio recorded with the consent of the participant and later transcribed by the other two researchers. The analysis of the artwork took place over a series of stages. After making the artwork, the phase of decoding the visual information began. Participants took on an expert role in this phase as they described their artwork and entered into dialogue with the researcher. The artwork therefore influenced the interview by generating a discussion about the participant’s personal experiences and perspectives of social work.

As researchers we learned from participants as experts as they appraised their lives, experiences and communities. One of the valuable features of Wuggenig’s (1990) artwork interview process was the introduction of new topics as the participant examined the artwork with the researcher. We were aware that by looking at and talking about the artwork very carefully during this second phase, new details may appear that were not noticed or taken into account by the participant in the moment of making the artwork. The artwork interview process was useful on several levels as it enabled the social workers to integrate local knowledge about their experiences and practice into our research process. Rose (2007) has suggested that participants ‘audience’ their images for others and in this case, they begin a cognitive process of developing and expressing their ideas, feelings and concerns.

In terms of analysis, Rose (2007) suggests examination should involve three aspects of visual images: the production of images, the image itself and the audience; a distinction

that brings out several strategies for visual interpretation. In order to ensure that Wuggenig's (1990) artwork interview process was therefore a truly collaborative approach we integrated Rose's (2007) three-way analysis into the writing up stage and considered how and where the images were produced; what the images depicted from the perspective of the participant and the researcher and finally, who they were made for. In other words, the artwork was analysed according to the semantic content and the emotional meaning that was attached to the image.

In addition, to the artwork that was displayed at the museum for a period of three months, anonymous feedback questionnaires were made available on the information stand for visitors to complete and record their views. The content of the questionnaires were useful in helping us to consider the impact the exhibition had on members of the public. Elements of the themes that emerged from the feedback will be considered in the findings section of this paper.

### **Methodological considerations**

We recognise that in the writing up of this paper, our analysis of the artwork will be influenced by the current context within which social work is situated. This also applied to the participants who made the artwork as several factors may have influenced the visual narrative they created. In consideration of such methodological dilemmas, Fuente (2007) has advised sociologists of the arts to check their own assumptions and make explicit their position in relation to the study. This is a particularly important point in this context as two of the researchers involved in this study are registered social workers and were once practising social workers. We recognised, especially during the data collection and analysis stage, that our insider knowledge of the profession may have brought benefits but also limitations in that we both have our own lived experiences of social work. This knowledge may have, therefore, influenced the way in which we viewed the data. In order to overcome this potential bias, all three of us analysed the artwork separately and then met to discuss our findings.



## **The exhibition: Experiencing the social work world**

Our main objective, then, was to exhibit the final artefacts in a museum for a period of three months in order to provide members of the public with an opportunity to see the lived experiences of social workers. In addition, rather than relying solely on the visual (the artwork) and the written word (the accompanying narratives), we also introduced another sensory element, the aural. By employing actors to voice over the recordings of participants we embraced the sensory aspect of production by creating artefacts that encouraged spectators to use their eyes and ears to sense what social workers were trying to convey when visiting the exhibition. Mason and Davies (2009: 600) have contended that as our ‘senses are tangled with each other’ it is not always helpful to use specifically and/or literally ‘matched’ methods such as employing visual methods for the visual. But focusing on the senses is useful if we want others to understand lived experiences and identities (Pink, 2015).

Sensory studies are considered to be both cultural and corporeal as culture is explored through the senses and the senses, in turn, are able to explore the culture. Indeed, the field of sensory studies can be conceptualized as a visual culture, an auditory culture (or sound studies), a smell culture, a taste culture and a culture of touch (Howes, 2003). Applying the sensory turn to social work means exploring the invisible, the intangible, the unexpected, the unspoken and the felt or sensed elements of everyday experiences (Morriss, 2017). We recognised that it is difficult to overstate the significance of everyday working practices because it is the essence of social work. Using sensory methods was therefore felt to be significant if social workers were to effectively share their stories and make connections with those who wanted to experience the social work world.



Figure 1: The exhibition

The exhibition took place at the People’s History Museum from 08 April to 18 June 2017. While other researchers in social work have exhibited the artwork of their participants, their artwork had all been created by those who had experienced social work services (see for example, Capous Desyllas, 2014; Dakin et al., 2014; Moxley et al., 2012). Thus, this was the first social work exhibition, that we were aware of, to explore the experiences of social workers, making visible to members of the public the hidden, lesser known and understood aspects of practice.

For the social work researchers, (Jadwiga Leigh and Lisa Morriss), we entered new territory by becoming exhibition-creators. Fortunately, as an experienced visual artist, Matt Morriss had curated numerous art and design shows so he was able to guide us. Writing in relation to photovoice but equally pertinent here, Amanda O. Latz and Thalia M. Mulvihill (2017: 119) discuss how ‘exhibitions as a site of inquiry...remain surprisingly under-researched and under-theorized’. Exhibitions tend to be presented as a form of dissemination rather than an active part of the research process. For us, the exhibition was an integral part of the study; where social work was made visible. The exhibition was a multisensorial experience in which audiences were invited to engage in the social work world. We concur with Pink’s (2015: 172) notion of an “ethnographic place” where the visitors to the exhibition ‘become entangled corporeally, affectively and intellectually’.

By exhibiting the art work at a museum, the feedback we received from members of the public made it clear that they were able to understand what the ‘complex, occupational terrain’ of social work looked like from the perspective of the social worker (Pithouse, 1987: 4). Thus, the exhibition made social work practice visible to outsiders of the profession. But what we were not prepared for was how the making of the artwork also revealed aspects of social work practice that had not been previously visible to the participants who took part in the study. Although all the participants recognised that the current climate prevented them from spending time with families, an activity they valued, they realised that social work intervention did not always provide the best outcomes for the families involved.

### **Making the invisible visible: Lived experiences of social workers.**

The analysis showed that three themes played a significant role in how the participants expressed their lived experiences of social work: organisational culture, emotional impact and families. The artefacts did not represent these themes separately; rather they recounted how issues within the organisation affected both the social workers themselves *and* the families they worked alongside. In framing their artefacts in this way, participants were able to make connections with the wider context within which they were situated and in doing so, often spoke about the reactions that they had experienced from the media, the government and members of the public. Pierrot, for example, began by talking about the tasks she has to deal with, how these affect her and her practice before then discussing the wider context and offering an explanation for why she cannot reach her families (see Figure 2):



**Figure 2 Climbing over the paperwork**

**This is my everyday life, climbing through paperwork before I can provide support. I need to climb through all this paperwork before I can actually reach my families. When they go, there are more waiting. It's hard to see where they are. I lose perspective of what I'm doing. But it's nothing to do with them as people; it's just about where we are. It's a bigger thing. It's about experiencing cuts and the government not providing enough money. This problem is not just within one office, it's not even in one building, it's not even the council's problem. It's a problem that exists everywhere.**

**(Pierrot, child and family social worker, qualified 12 years).**

Pierrot used clay and wire in this context to reveal what takes up most of her time in her practice. Although all of the tasks that Pierrot carried out are normally conducted on a computer, the clay model she has created is of a person hidden behind piles of papers. These papers represent the number of reports that Pierrot needs to complete in relation to the families she is working with. Although Pierrot recognised that completing reports is an integral part of her job, she saw it as an issue because the more time she spent at her desk the less time she spent with the families she was working with. In addition, because the paperwork consumed her role, it led Pierrot to feel distracted and less focused on what she thought she should be doing. Thus, the paperwork acted as a barrier: it prevented Pierrot from

being with her allocated families. This is apparent in the way she has positioned herself, hidden behind the papers. Therefore, not only can she not see her families, but they cannot see her. They are invisible to each other.

In contrast to Pierrot, Demi used clay to reveal how she feels when she does have the opportunity to build relationships with the families she is working with (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3 Feeling Uplifted**

**There are times when I feel really uplifted and that's what the hands are for. The feeling I get when someone's connected with me, even if it's only for half an hour. Getting it from their perspective, position and understanding, it seems to work you know? It seems they feel like they're getting a fresh approach. Not being judged. Even though I maybe the fifth or sixth social worker in their lives.**

**(Demi, qualified two years, child and family social worker).**

Demi had only been qualified for two years at the time of the workshop but it is interesting to note how her artwork, in contrast to Pierrot, who had been qualified for 12 years, is focused on the contact she has with her families rather than the amount of paperwork she has to complete. Demi made her artwork to focus on what she enjoys and show how fortunate she feels when she is able to build relationships with families, even if she is their fifth or sixth social worker. Although Demi is aware that the profession in England is plagued with retention issues, she is also aware that the daily grind of the job can have a negative effect on

social workers as she recounted: “I got told once in a supervision with my manager that when I was reading books about the work I was doing and talking about it... that I’d learn more from reading Bella magazine or watching Jeremy Kyle”. However rather than feel dispirited by her manager’s disillusionment with theory and practice, Demi uses her artefact to reveal what she considers to be important in social work: building connections.

Five of our participants had strong responses to the formal organisational processes and systems that were in place in their organisation. The post-qualification experience amongst these participants ranged from 6 to 20 years. In some cases, they used their artwork to make connections between the formal processes and the wider context of social work practice. In this next piece of artwork, Frederica used two pieces of clay work to express how these factors affected her (see Figure 4).



**Figure 4 Heads will roll**

‘OFSTED’, ‘ICS’, ‘Timescales’, ‘Serious Case Reviews’, ‘Baby P’ because at least once a month someone accuses me of doing something with Baby P - either not protecting him or killing him or something. ‘Heartless’, ‘Blame’, ‘Kid-snatcher’, that’s something I get told a lot. And words with double meaning like ‘help’ and ‘care’- we put children into ‘care’ and we are supposed to ‘care’ for the people we work with. And similarly, with ‘help’, you know, ‘help’ as in sometimes I feel that I’m drowning under all of the paperwork; ‘help’ as in something we want to provide, but also ‘help’ is something people sometimes do ask us for.

(Frederica, qualified 12 years, child and family social worker).

These two pieces of artwork depart from the earlier pieces which make visible how much bureaucracy is involved in social work and what it feels like to connect with families. In this context, Frederica explores the concept of blame and how blurred the boundaries are between social worker and family. The artwork to the right of figure 4, shows a round pot which Frederica made to represent her world. On the inside of the pot, there is a social worker seated alone, her head bent over her knees surrounded by words which have been etched into the clay: OFSTED (Office for Standards in Education Children's Education, Services and Skills which carries out inspections of organisations offering children's services); ICS (Integrated Children's Computer System); Serious Case Review (conducted by local safeguarding boards when a child is seriously harmed or dies); Baby P (also known as Peter Connelly who died in 2007). These words appear to carry significant weight for Frederica as the walls of her world are caving in on her.

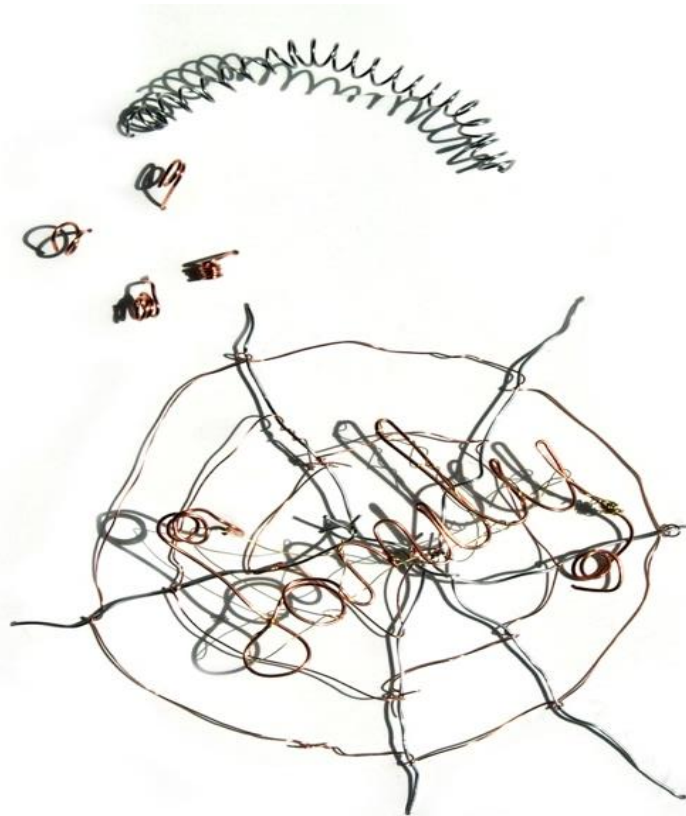
Although the concept of blame is implicit in this piece of artwork, it is explicit in the second piece of artwork (left of figure 4) where in front of a sea of heads are the words 'Heads will roll'. These heads represent the heads of social workers, symbolic of the phrase 'Heads must roll': a leitmotif of press reports following Lynn Featherstone comments during the Baby P inquiry (the Liberal Democrat Member of Parliament for the constituency of Hornsey and Wood Green which covered the Haringey area) (Warner, 2014). Speaking on Sky News at the time, Featherstone argued that Haringey social workers should be sacked over their perceived failures in the case. It was this catchy one- liner, 'heads will roll', that prompted David Cameron, the Leader of the Conservative Party at the time, to position the social workers in the case as culpable for following bureaucratic procedures and failing to act on common sense (see Warner, 2014).

Although Frederica talks about experiencing blame for Baby P's death, despite not being remotely involved in the case, her artwork highlights how she fears being blamed

herself one day. It is at this juncture that Frederica makes the connection that she and the families she works with are not so different as she reveals the “double meaning” behind the use of words such as ‘help’ and ‘care’. ‘Help’ is what Frederica realizes she needs from her organization so that the walls of her world can be strengthened and remain upright, yet it is the same word that families ask her for when their worlds are falling apart. Frederica also wants to provide ‘care’ for her families so that they can remain together but at the same time she is aware that she has the power to break up families when she removes children into ‘care’.

Frederica’s artwork is visceral, emotional and personal. It makes links between the micro and macro elements of practice and presents the social worker with a number of dilemmas. It also touches on the dark side of social work, the part that once identified can leave social workers feeling uncomfortable because it conflicts with their values and ethical principles (see Leigh, 2017). It is this dark side of social work that is further explored in the next piece of artwork (see Figure 5).





**Figure 5 The spider's web**

**This is the spider's web that our families are trapped in. This is their world. These four are people who are trying to help from outside the family- social workers, teachers, family support workers, drug workers, whoever. The wire to the side, the umbrella, is the government, encompassing everything the family and the professionals do.**

**(Polly, qualified 20 years, team manager).**

The contrast between how Demi (see Figure 3) and Polly see their involvement with families could not be more different. From Polly's perspective, once families become involved in social work intervention they feel trapped in a spider's web. It does not matter if they requested help, or were felt to be in need of it, either way they become caught up in a professional mesh, constrained and influenced by differing agendas. Although Polly does not focus on the use of words, in the same way as Frederica does (Figure 4), a similar message is conveyed: professionals may want to 'help' and 'care' but their presence can prove to be a

distraction and obscure their original purpose. In addition, the metaphorical use of 'the spider's web' suggests that once families are trapped, they may find it difficult to break free.

When asked about her reference to the role the government play, Polly found it difficult to explain:

I don't think the Government help as much as they could do and that's why I've made it very curly and messy... I don't know, the dynamics aren't always straight, it's not a straight word, it's not a straight thing, it's always tangled up within each other. (Polly)

Polly recognised in this instance that it is not easy to separate who does what, from the role they play in social work. Nor is it easy to distinguish the impact one agency has on a family from another. But what is interesting is that despite not being able to explain how this works in words, Polly does make the confusing and often uncomfortable aspects of routine and relationships easier to understand through her artwork.

## **Discussion**

This project provided participants with an opportunity of making visible the invisible activities involved in social work practice through an exhibition of their artwork. By using art alongside the written and spoken word, they have explored the issues that prevent them from, or connect them to, the 'doing' of social work. As a result, each participant has created a different artefact that may be from a specific or universal experience but which wholly relates to their understanding of the social work world.

Although none of the participants in this study worked for the same Local Authority, similar themes emerged and intersected their work. For example, they all recognised the impact wider cultural issues (resources, retention, blame, inspection) had on their practice and how this in turn affected their ability to practise effectively with families. The way in

which this was interpreted into art appeared to vary depending on their post qualified experience.

The newly qualified participants, such as Demi's uplifted hands (see Figure 3), produced artefacts that resonated messages of hope, containment and connection. The more experienced social workers chose to reflect on the meaning making practices of social work. They critiqued their practice by challenging their initial views that their involvement could help bring about positive change. Pithouse (1998) argued that the outcomes of social work intervention were uncertain and ambiguous. In this context, the social workers also realised that in reality their interactions had a different impact on the family in the long term.

In contrast to studies which focused on service users' perspectives to evoke empathy and understanding from social workers, by creating artwork of their own, social workers were able to gain an understanding of how their families may be feeling in a more personal way. The process of making art to explore the meaningful practices of social work materialised into a tool of self-reflection. By interrogating their roles, routines and relationships, these social workers used art to not only challenge their own perspectives but reveal aspects of their practice they had not properly considered previously.

Frederica's artwork and accompanying narrative, for example, identified how the words used in social work practice were contestable; they held different meanings depending on the situation. This recognition highlighted to Frederica that social workers are 'accountable for social action in interaction' in that the force of the language used by social workers could lead to a fragmented, shifting and temporary identity for all involved in that specific social interaction (Dennis et al., 2013: 170). As Frederica demonstrated, it depends on who she is with, in what situation and to what purpose that the words she uses shift in meaning and understanding. It is during this moment that she then questions her own positioning, supporting Pithouse's (1998) argument that social work practitioners rely upon

rarely stated motives and taken for granted assumptions in order to accomplish their daily work. However, in this instance, Frederica reveals that social work is not just about the ordinary triumphs of getting by, there is also a negative aspect involved in social work intervention and the damage it can have on the lives of the ordinary.

This style of expressive content is also visible in Polly's work (see figure 5) as she captures the atmosphere of working with families. Her artwork evokes 'sensory and visceral feelings' as the family are shown trapped in a spider's web (Rose, 2007: 74). This image cultivates a sociological sensibility which conjures feelings of discomfort and brings to the forefront issues of power, class and stigma (see Back, 2015). And in this instance, Polly has produced a visual narrative of social difference and demonstrated that there is a fine line between support and oppression. Her work reveals an aspect of social work that Pithouse (1998) argued is not often seen by colleagues or managers and in doing so reveals the element of practice that is not talked about with ease. Like many other professions, social workers have developed strategies to handle the uncomfortable and potential deviant aspects of practice, such as the removal of children from their parents (see Dennis et al. 2013). They attempt to, not simply account for but to change the meaning of, such uncomfortable elements by aligning their behaviour with that which is both recognisable and acceptable-help and care. The two terms that Frederica problematized earlier.

Yet there is another theme that runs throughout the artwork: the issue of silence. Although this theme was apparent in the visual narratives produced by the participants it was the visitor feedback that highlighted this aspect the most. In total, of the 453 visitors who completed questionnaires, 430 praised the artwork for revealing the hidden, invisible aspects of social work practice. One visitor wrote: "I am really moved. I have always vilified social workers and never seen it from their point of view. I am enlightened". There were others who commented on the exhibition being "powerful" and "overwhelming" but also "troubling".

The visitors felt that they were presented with visual accounts that depicted “dark and uncomfortable” aspects of social work practice of which they had not been previously aware.

Although the majority of the feedback was overwhelmingly positive, there were a few who commented on the “inappropriate nature” of this approach, those who felt it was unfitting for social workers to recount their experiences to the public. Here, the debates from art and sociology, concerned with the value of taking aspects of ordinary life seriously, are important (see Pink, 2012). As we argued at the beginning of this article, it is because social workers have been silenced that dominant and skewed narratives about their identity and practice have been produced. This exhibition may have exposed some aspects of practice that are uncomfortable and problematic, but these are precisely the areas of social work that do need to be discussed and considered. If members of the public are not made aware of the challenges social workers face in their everyday work then they can only rely on those sources which have little understanding of practice.

### **Conclusion: Art and the everyday in social work**

The issues raised in this paper matter in a number of ways as we have noted that the field of social work can benefit from two sociological traditions: 1) the sociology of work and interaction and 2) the sociology of visual and sensory methods. The first draws our attention to the ways in which a person’s occupation is tied to their sense of self (Dennis et al., 2013). By exploring their lived experiences of doing social work these social workers have demonstrated how certain aspects of organisational culture can have a ripple effect, rupturing relationships between social workers and their families. This is coupled by the recognition that language and intention also plays a significant role in the experiences of those whom social workers aim to support

The second enables us to appreciate how art can be used by social workers to make visible the invisible parts of their practice, for members of the public through an exhibition and also, themselves. Art can indeed be used by social workers to challenge and make visible the situations for those with whom they work. Yet in our study, social workers have used arts-based methods to explore their own perceptions of doing social work and being a social worker. The opportunity to exhibit this work has enabled them to share how this trade has not only affected them on an emotional and visceral level but also the families they work with. By extending on these two sociological traditions, this article makes a significant contribution by revealing how exhibiting artwork can challenge, and sometimes alter, previously held assumptions and beliefs for both public viewers of the artworks and the makers.

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