‘I’m Gonna Ask You about Yourself, so I Can Put It on Paper’: Analysing Street-Level Bureaucracy through Form-Related Talk in Social Work

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Abstract

Standardised formats in social work have often been seen as neo-liberal and linked to New Public Management. Analysing naturally occurring data from social work interactions (conversations) in a homeless shelter, we argue that examining street-level bureaucracy from a discursive perspective enables us to discover new aspects of form-related interaction. By investigating several approaches to form-talk, we see how standardisation, routinisation, time and documentation function in concert to accomplish social work. We argue that, while some talk strictly adheres to questionnaires, allowing little space for client voice, other types of form-related talk do not adhere directly to form questions, providing more space for client voice. Importantly, the former interactions are discursively narrow spaces for client participation but provide transparency of the accountable event in play, while the latter discussions are more participatory client spaces that reduce transparency of the accountable event. As a result, we are both critical of the use of forms in the casework context and cautiously optimistic in terms of implications for social work.

Keywords: Street-level bureaucracy, discourse analysis, conversation analysis, social work, institutional interaction, neo-liberalism

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Introduction

Documentation is vital to social work practice. While there is certainly a need to record client information, scholars have questioned the secondary purpose of documentation in a managerial movement that requires written records to expedite efficient practice and ensure client and worker accountability. Street-level bureaucrats create and implement policy in their everyday practice, mediating between ground-level clientele and an administrative body (Lipsky, 1980/2010). Street-level work is fraught with dilemmas stemming from a management approach located within a neo-liberal framework, emphasising efficiency and accountability (Abramovitz and Zelnick, 2015). Through the lens of neo-liberalism, efficient work is accomplished, in part, by creating and adhering to standards and developing routines, like documentation, that streamline work.

Using discourse analysis (an approach that examines language use and choice in context) and conversation analysis (an approach that examines turn-by-turn social interaction), we explore dilemmas of case managers in an urban men’s homeless shelter, particularly focusing on those dilemmas relating to efficiency and accountability, which are realised through an examination of caseworker–client talk of or relating to forms/documentation in the shelter. By investigating several approaches to form-talk, we see how standardisation, routinisation, time and documentation function in concert to accomplish social work. We argue that some talk strictly adheres to questionnaires, allowing little space for client voice. In contrast, other types of form-related talk, that do not adhere directly to form questions, provide more space for client voice. The former interactions are discursively narrow spaces for client participation but provide transparency of the accountable event in play, while the latter discussions are participatory client spaces that reduce transparency of the accountable event in play. As a result, we are both critical of the use of forms in the casework context and cautiously optimistic.

Managing social care

The impact of New Public Management (NPM) in social work is increasingly researched, by scholars who question its impact on policy implementation, human services practice and client experience. Neo-liberalism is largely defined as an ideology that manifests itself in many ways, including privatisation, decentralisation and integrating business ideologies and market rationalities in non-businesses (Harvey, 2005; Peck and Tickell, 2007). NPM is an organisational model for implementing that ideology. Diefenbach (2009) defines ‘NPM is a set of assumptions and value statements about how public sector organizations should be designed, organized, managed and how, in a quasi-business manner, they
should function’ (p. 893). This NPM approach of implementing managerial principles is synonymously called ‘new managerialism’, particularly among institutions that do not take an explicitly NPM approach but are nevertheless integrating business and market principles into daily institutional practice. Abramovitz and Zelnick (2015) suggest that new managerialism is the second of three stages of privatisation, ‘import[ing] market philosophy and business principles into non-profit organisations’ (Abramovitz and Zelnick, 2015, p. 121). Within an era of increasing austerity measures, a business model in a non-profit or public services institution promises efficiency, equal treatment, outcomes and data-based practices and transparency (through data gathering). These positive characteristics are potentially overshadowed, some argue, by a loss of relationship depth, routinised practices that diminish client voice and promote practitioner stress (Abramovitz and Zelnick, 2015). Likewise, Soss, Fording and Schram (2011) suggest that NPM and new managerialism have been ‘deployed as neoliberal responses’ to the ‘challenges of [organisational] coherence and accountability’ (p. 207), meaning the desire for collective results and accountability have been answered with the implementation of further neo-liberal principles that put, for example, previously existing paperwork practices to business purposes. They argue that the ‘features of the new public management lie in tension with one another and tend to work at cross-purposes’ (Soss et al., 2011, pp. 231–2). On one hand, managerial discourse is an ““emancipatory” one, stressing choice, control, and independence’ and, on the other hand, clients are obligated by contract to responsibly complete tasks, which appear to undermine the former qualities (Scourfield, 2007, p. 116).

Lipsky (1980/2010) and his inheritors examine street-level bureaucrats, front line workers who mediate between the administrative body and the client, and implement policy according to their interpretation and individual discretion. The policy implementation of street-level bureaucrats is examined vis-à-vis the dilemmas they face given large caseloads and increasing oversight and accountability. While some have criticised the reliance on Lipsky in social work, arguing that, to understand policy implementation, one must extend beyond Lipsky’s street-level bureaucrat (Evans, 2011; Scourfield, 2015), Brodkin (2011) situates street-level bureaucrats within new managerial institutional space, highlighting how new forms of process regulation and managerial structures adjust the behaviour of the street-level worker through incentive structures, sanctions and regulations. This paper examines street-level bureaucratic practice as it exists within a NPM institutional space, acknowledging the influence of neo-liberal principles that dramatically shape talk between caseworkers and clients.

We focus specifically on routinisation (the ritualised use of routines) as it is evidenced through documentation used in caseworker–client meetings. Lipsky (1980/2010) suggests that SLBs ‘develop routines to
deal with the complexity of work tasks’ often ‘because of the scarcity of resources relative to the demands made upon them’ (p. 83). The use of documentation through paper and computerised forms is not new; however, its aims and uses multiply under NPM. Documentation is used in the name of efficiency (for the institution and for the worker) and accountability (for both the practitioner and the client, both of whom are held to standards). Hjörne et al. (2010) identify responsiveness versus standardisation as a dilemma central to the position of the street-level workers in Europe. Social workers are asked to simultaneously be responsive to individual client needs and claims while also paradoxically treating all clients equally (Hjörne et al., 2010). One worker, according to Abramovitz and Zelnick, stated:

... my agency has taken the focus off people and placed it on outcomes and paperwork. I remember when it was possible to sit with my clients and develop a relationship without having to type in the middle of an interview (Abramovitz and Zelnick, 2015, p. 10).

This approach contributes to a depersonalised and objectified social work practice (Parton, 2009). Some find that workers resist depersonalisation, finding ways to guarantee a narrative relationship-oriented social work approach, notwithstanding (De Witte et al., 2015).

The USA is not unique in its integration of NPM-initiated standardised formats (Høybye-Mortensen, 2015). Using discourse analysis, White, Hall and Peckover (2009) examine a NPM computerised documentation system in UK social work. Though they critique the form’s inability to accommodate narrative, they argue that social workers found ways around the form’s narrowness, though the dual use of the form for referral and for assessment/accountability purposes was problematic, as Brodkin (2008) found in her research. Likewise, in Denmark, NPM standardised formats have been implemented with unemployed hard-to-place adults and caused much debate in practice as well as research (Caswell et al., 2010). Given the proliferation of neo-liberalism and NPM across the globe and the increasing reliance on computerised forms of documentation, this study contributes to a growing literature on documentation in the era of NPM and neo-liberalism.

Our paper examines the use of documentation during caseworker–client talk in an urban American homeless shelter. While we find this to be evidence of managerialism and ergo neo-liberal principles, we identify positive and negative consequences of the presence of documentation, routines and standardisation. We argue that form-driven interactions provide limited space for client narrative and extended participation but they are transparent to the client. Many interactions have space for extended talk, but the aims are opaque. Our conversation analysis of pauses in particular illustrates the participatory presence of paperwork in practice. To this end, we pose the following broad research question: to what extent is documentation present in these interactions,
and to what end? We consider this question in light of how documentation functions vis-à-vis efficiency and accountability.

Research context

The data for this study were collected by the principal investigator (PI) in 2006–07 in a north-east American metropolis. In 2002, the city on which this study is based was facing a boom in homelessness. In 2003, 38,310 homeless individuals lived on the streets and in city shelters (DHS, 2004). Responding to these increasing numbers, the city initiated a plan that in part intended to reduce the total city shelter population by two-thirds in five years (DHS, 2002, 2004). Approaches to city homelessness in the mid-2000s in part focused on standardised measures of assessment and increased responsibility and accountability, for both caseworker and client.

Social workers at this shelter oversaw case managerial staff. Social workers saw clients only when caseworkers were unable to solve an issue independently. This study observed case managers who, in addition to facilitating client’s movement from shelter to housing and coordinating relevant services to achieve that end, also do forms of social work. Many case managers had a B.A. in social work, sociology or human services, and some were working towards a master’s in social work. Case managers were held accountable for placing clients in suitable independent housing within nine months of entry to the shelter. They coordinated with the Human Resource Administration and Social Security, which provided clients with financial assistance, and various housing organisations in the city.

When clients were admitted to shelter, meetings generally followed a certain order. The intake assessment meeting was first, documenting the reasons for the client’s homelessness, previous housing, relatives, etc. The psycho-social assessment was generally conducted in the second meeting, recording the psychological and social history of the client. Each of these meetings involved primarily case manager-initiated questions (based on paper forms or computerised documentation) that required client answers. The housing application was the last question–answer sequence, documentation-focused meeting. Other check-in meetings might occur between the psycho-social and the housing application meeting. The housing application meeting documented the client’s preferences for housing, along with information about what the client could afford. These meetings generally followed a strict routine that involved introducing the topic and documentation, a series of questions requiring answers and a closing sequence that either ended the meeting or transitioned to filling out a secondary set of documents: the Independent Living Plan (ILP). A meeting, therefore, may involve a caseworker conducting the intake assessment of a client and then providing the client
with an ILP that, particularly at this stage, required client to complete a series of tasks required of all new and returning clients (e.g. receive a tuberculosis test and a psycho-social assessment). However, those meetings could also be separate.

Caseworkers used paper or computerised forms, maintaining records of intake assessments, psycho-social assessments, housing applications and monthly service plans, called Independent Living Plans (ILPs). ILPs were used in coordination with a client responsibility policy that lent legal support to enforcing the service plan if a client refused to participate with the minimal actions necessary to move from shelter. The policy initiative required clients to ‘actively participate in the development and implementation of’ their service plans (DHS, 2002, p. 23). Caseworker–client interactions on a bi-monthly basis were the nexus of practice (Scollon and Scollon, 2004) within which service plans and other tasks were discussed.

The flexible meetings referred to in this paper are check-in meetings that occurred after the initial intake assessment and psycho-social assessment. Though short-term clients had these flexible meetings, long-term staying clients (clients who stayed, or who could potentially stay, in shelter for nine months or longer), required more than the three or four document-based meetings to place them in appropriate, long-term, independent housing. Clients who were categorised as long-term stayers often experienced difficulty in completing required tasks, prohibiting them from moving forward. These informal discussions, while providing space for extended client talk, often terminated with developing an ILP: responsibilities that the client and caseworker were obligated to complete. By signing the ILP, the client was consenting to a contractual relationship between he and his case manager.

**Methodology**

Data are drawn from an institutional review board (IRB)-approved, nine-month institutional interactional ethnography of an urban homeless shelter in the USA, including fifty-four audio-recorded interactions between six front line, female caseworkers and eighteen homeless, male clients. The PI took field notes. Most clients were ‘hard-to-place’, having often concurrent personal issues or designations that made securing permanent housing challenging. Client–caseworker meetings were recorded from beginning of shelter stay through housing placement. Meetings lasted between five and seventy-five minutes. Audio-recorded meetings were transcribed (see Appendix), totalling over 1,000 pages of data. All participants gave informed consent in the language of their choice prior to the first recorded meeting and were able to withdraw from the study at any time for any reason. All names were given pseudonyms and other personal data (names of centres, shelters, social security numbers, etc.)
were rendered unrecognisable. The IRB protocol signed by all participants stipulates that research and analyses have no bearing whatsoever on the employment, probation or promotion of case managers or the placement or sanctioning of clients.

Our analytic approach stems from social constructionism and ethnomethodology, the former suggesting that meanings are socially constructed in the moment, the latter arguing that reality is structured and regulated by rules that are observable in the satisfaction and the breach. Discourse and conversation analyses are qualitative approaches that focus on moments in talk that may be considered beyond notice. While discourse analysis, more broadly, examines language choices in context, conversation analysis analyses the interactional turns of each participant, examining how the relationship between those turns, taking into account how each new turn orients to (or rejects) what came before.

Discourse analysis of bureaucracy has often been done using critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2000), taking a leftist position prior to data collection, potentially skewing results. Other research on discretion and NPM in social work involves narratives and practitioner reflections (Scourfield, 2015; Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2003). In contrast, our work analyses naturally occurring social work talk. Combining the observation of naturally occurring data, discourse and conversation analysis, we examine ‘what caseworkers do versus what they say or may think they do’ (Brodkin, 2011, p. 261).

The discourse practices that are the focus of this analysis have evolved organically from preliminary analyses of the data. The discourse practices that best illuminate documentation are as follows: preference structure, pauses and word choice. Preference structure analyses the turns interlocutors take at talk, what kinds of turns they are (questions, answers, requests, etc.) and whether those turns are normative, expected types of turns, based on extensive prior literature (Sacks, 1992). When turns go against expectation, they are called dispreferred responses. Pauses in talk often signal a delay by a conversational participant and may also signal a dispreferred response. The use of terminology around documentation is analysed through cohesion and coherence (Halliday and Hasan, 1976), which allows us to examine the clustering, or collocation of words and ideas, but also how concepts/words extend from one transcript to another. The discourse approach we take examines the interactional, jointly accomplished routinisation enacted by the participants. As such, the client is complicit and a participant in constructing the routines by, for example, answering questions posed by the case-worker. That said, given that the case manager, vis-à-vis documentation questions provided and her position of relative power, controls the introduction of question topics and therefore establishes the routine, our focus in this paper is on the presence of documentation in the interaction. Ergo, we focus more on the caseworker, as she implements this documentation as a street-level bureaucrat.
This paper does not intend to make generalisations regarding policy implementation or delivery across country, city or shelter systems. Rather, we seek to make a theoretical and methodological contribution by demonstrating how forms, paperwork and routines function in everyday, seemingly mundane institutional talk. We hope to illustrate both positive and negative outcomes of these managerial practices across the cases described in the study.

Highly structured talk

Meetings that centred on intake assessments, psycho-social assessments and housing applications were more highly structured than meetings around ILPs. This first excerpt comes from the beginning of an intake assessment interaction and is representative of most intake assessments that were observed. The case manager (CM) explains the intake assessment to the client, Julio (C) in this first interaction between the dyad:

Excerpt 1: Intake assessment

1. CM: (laughs) Okay, so today I’m meeting with you- close the door for me?
   2. C: XXXX
   3. CM: today I’m meeting with you to do your long intake basically it’s a set of questions I’m gonna ask you, about yourself, so I can put it on paper, umm, (.) then, (.) we’ll get into your independent living plan which I’ve already constructed so we don’t- I don’t waste too much of your time I’m already (.) ahead of the game I’m a little prepared for you today, umm so we’ll go over this, (.) I’ll ask you the questions you answer as honestly as possible I’ll write it down, (.) as quick as possible and we’ll try to get through this as quick as possible, okay? (.) you have medicaid?
   4. C: /C14 yeah /C14
   5. CM: re you single, divorced, married,
   6. C: Single
   7. (2.4) ((CW writing))
   8. CM: thank you ((to another caseworker))
   9. C: ‘yeah’
   10. CM: re you single, divorced, married,
   11. C: Single
   12. (2.4) ((CW writing))
   13. CM: thank you ((to another caseworker))
   14. (9)
   15. CM: umm, you’re not a veteran are you? Have you ever been in the army, navy,
   16. (.)
18. CM: do you have your PA- you don’t know your PA case number, do you?

This first excerpt exemplifies two trends in the data: (i) an interaction organised by documentation and (ii) the collocation between documentation and efficiency. ‘Okay’, a change of state marker, signals the beginning of the meeting. In lines 3–8, the CM defines the ‘long intake’ assessment: she will be questioner and he answerer. Lines 8–18 begin the series of questions. Question–answer sequences controlled by the practitioner are a common asymmetry in institutional interaction, though, in this case, the sequences are almost entirely dictated by forms.

Describing intake, CM says ‘it’s a set of questions I’m gonna ask you, about yourself, so I can put it on paper’. Drew and Heritage (1992) suggest that institutional talk departs markedly from everyday conversation; the CM’s statement exemplifies recipient design (Schegloff, 1972)—an awareness of the institutional context and recipient of your speech in that context. Personal pronoun emphasis on ‘you’ highlights client’s role and ‘so’ communicates the intended result of this questioning procedure: ‘putting it on paper.’ The documentation is the end result, stressing the importance of documentation executed efficiently and quickly. Abramovitz and Zelnick (2015) argue that efficiency and speeding-up are two common outcomes of new managerialism vis-à-vis neo-liberalism, here referenced through ‘not wasting time’ (line 5) and ‘as quick as possible’ (twice, lines 7 and 8). Pre-construction of the client’s living plan is equated with CM preparedness, allowing more efficient work. When clients enter shelter, the first several requirements are the same (e.g. tuberculosis test and psychiatric evaluation). Although the case-workers are supposed to construct client plans collaboratively, pre-construction makes sense in those first meetings. Lipsky (1980/2010) argues that routinisation is a central component of street-level bureaucrats managing large caseloads with efficiency and according to the benchmarks stipulated by the institution.

Moreover, ample time is spent completing documentation in situ (lines 12 and 14). The normative expected response to a question is an answer (Pomerantz, 1984; Sacks, 1992; Schegloff, 2007). If a lengthy pause stands in the place of a respondent’s reply, that is usually a signal of interactional trouble (e.g. line 16, as his response in line 17 is not a clear ‘yes’ answer). However, the pause in line 12, which precedes the case-worker’s question, does different work, highlighting the presence of a third and silent participant in the interaction: the form. Latour (1999) suggests that inanimate objects may be part of and ostensibly shape social interaction, making those objects part of a large network. The presence of paperwork and the interactional space it occupies in the interaction highlights its positionality as an actant, shaping the talk around it.
The housing application is another meeting predicated on form questions. The housing application meeting could occur as part of a more generic check-up or on its own, but it usually marked a caseworker’s final steps in front line policy implementation for each client. In Excerpt 2, the same dyad begins a housing application. As with Excerpt 1, this excerpt is representative of how housing applications were introduced and executed across the corpus. This housing application meeting was the Julio’s second meeting with his CM:

Excerpt 2: Housing application

1. CM: ((to herself)) no medications. ((to client)) okay, what I’m >filling out here< is your housing application.
2. C: for [‘housing alright’]
3. CM: [housing ](.) okay? we gonna try to find you somewhere to live. (.) quickly.
4. C: quick (.r)apidio
5. CM: rapidio.
6. C: hehh
7. (.65) ((caseworker types already known information in his housing application))
8. CM: You don’t take no medications right?
9. C: “mm”
10. CM: no medications,
11. C: ‘yeah’
12. (.8) ((typing))
13. CM: (sighs)-kay
14. (.)
15. CM: Do ya ever use drugs?
16. C: No
17. CM: drug?

This excerpt introduces the housing application in conjunction with language suggesting efficiency and brevity (e.g. ‘quickly’, ‘quick’ and ‘rapido’, lines 3–5). The pause preceding ‘quickly’ sets it apart as an added concern. Question–answer sequences are asymmetrically driven by the caseworker, with little room for expanded client talk and client-initiated questions. As these findings are indicative of larger patterns of form-related talk across the corpus, they challenge De Witte et al. (2015), who suggest that practitioners make space for narratives within routinised structures like computer forms. This excerpt also has evidence of pre-construction, as the question the CM asks the client (line 1) is the first question from the housing application restated later (line 10). Lines 7 and 12 in particular highlight the presence of the documentation as a
participant: one who is able to hold an extended turn (line 7) and one for whom participants wait for completion of turn.

Importantly, however, coping strategies like routinisation have both positive and negative outcomes (Lipsky, 1980/2010). While the talk in intake, psycho-social and housing application-related meetings was highly routinised, bureaucratic and caseworker-controlled, these interactions were transparent, establishing the interactional rules for talk and establishing a platform, albeit minimal, for client participation. These instances of form-related talk are contrasted with the interactions for ILP meetings, which were more flexible, while maintaining the same end result: the completion of a form.

Flexible talk

ILP interactions evade an adherence to the kind of routinisation found in other types of meetings. The ILP is not a series of questions or blanks to be filled in on a form, allowing for discursively flexible meetings, allowing time for casual conversation, client-initiated questions, client-initiated topics and the ability for clients to hold longer spans of talk time, often for narratives. ILPs must be renewed minimally once a month, and they include tasks for both the caseworker and the client to complete in a specified time. They measure caseworker–client goal achievement and serve as a contract, allowing the caseworker to hold the client accountable for his (in)action, which could include recommendation for sanction.

Excerpt 3 reveals the conversational flexibility of ILP meetings. Italicised text indicates client narratives below. This excerpt comes from the fourth meeting between a different client, Michael (C2) and the CM:

Excerpt 3: ILP meeting
1. CM: What are you doing to try to get up outta here, Michael?—
2. C: =What am I trying to do right now? (. ) I’ve been very, very busy. (. ) That’s one. (. ) Two, the guy
3. that I was working with as a driver, you know the driver that was working with me, (. ) he got
4. fired. He got arrested, (. ) because he was stealing money. He was doing embezzlement, so
5. I now, ‘m doing my truck (. ) my route and helping the guy that’s driving also do his route. So
6. that’s why,=
7. CM: =are you driving now?
8. C: I wish I was. I don’t have my license. ( .6 ) But been trying to, you know, trying to find
9. another driver, to do my route, that way, I don't have to be working two, two trucks. You
10. know that way the guy that's dri- that's doing my route he could concentrate on his own route
11. not do my route and his route. That's the problem there.
12. CM: How much money you making? Are you saving [any money?]
13. C: [Umm] I'm not saving nothing what I'm
14. making is shit that's why I'm pissed off, because I'm doing double work (. ) and they're not
15. paying me(. ) I even took a whole week off, you know, I even told 'em look, you know, that's
16. I how frustrated I was. I was so frustrated that, you know, I'm busting my ass helping them
17. out, and you know, they don't treat me like, you know, like shit? No fuck that. But who
18. come out losing? me.
19. CM: °Alright°. (. ) What do you want to do to get outta here? Yeah, what are we doing—
20. C: What do I want to do to get outta here (. )I'm trying to do anything. (taps bottle on hands)
22. C: Whatever' what—
23. CM: Are you on public assistance?
24. C: Well, they're only giving me food stamps.
25. CM: Why?
26. C: I don't know.
27. CM: Have you opened a full PA Case?
28. C: I did I I I'm still- I passed the 45 days. and then (. ) they haven't sent me no letters or
29. anything.
30. CM: Okay, I'll check tomorrow and see what's going on with that status, okay? =
31. C: =Okay.

In this excerpt, the CM questions her client's efforts to secure housing. Rather than explicitly saying 'I am doing nothing', he restates her question and follows this with a pause, which suggests some upcoming interactional trouble (Schegloff, 1987). He works to mitigate this unanticipated 'no' response through a justification narrative for his inaction (lines 2–6). Justification narratives excuse the client from wrong-doing or untoward behaviour (Buttny, 1993) and are one common way to deflect responsibility in social work interaction (Matarese and Caswell, 2013). The caseworker, however, does not allow him to finish
his excuse but instead asks a follow-up question, which prompts an entirely new justification narrative to manage yet another veiled ‘no’ reply. Lines 13–18 further justify his lack of progress.

These unscripted interactions allow lengthy replies from the client, noticeable in the italicised content. ILP interactions categorically included more client-initiated narratives and talk that moved across various topics. While topics tended to revolve around similar issues for all clients, the topics that surfaced in these meetings were generally specific to individual client’s needs.

However, these rich, client-centred ILP interactions conclude with documentation, as illustrated below. The client’s disclosures mentioned during an informal check-up meeting are integrated into his ILP. In contrast to intake and housing interactions, ILP meeting data collected rarely showed evidence of opening sequences that introduced the client to the task at hand. While there was space for client talk, there was less transparency. This excerpt with Julio (C) is taken from the conclusion of meeting four, which culminates in an ILP; the service plan was not mentioned in their prior talk during this meeting:

Excerpt 4: ILP meeting closing sequence

1. CM: I’m gonna do a service plan on you. (.) It’s gonna say reactivate public assistance, it’s
2. because you need to get your PA back on. because it’s off, (.) follow shelter rules and
3. regulations, and attend case management meetings with me (.)
4. and I’m gonna be working a lot closer with you now (.) in order to- so
5. we can try to move you outta here, okay?
6. C: (nods)
7. (.34)
8. CM: you need a new psych.
9. C: hmm?
10. CM: you need a new psych. (.) a new psych.
11. (1.70) ((filling out paperwork for psychiatric evaluation))
12. CM: “seven”(mumbles date under breath)
13. (1.50) ((typing))
14. CM: So what do you do during the daytime?
15. C: Hmm?
16. CM: What are you doing in the day now?
17. C: In the day?
18. CM: Yes
(3.10) ((typing))

21. CM: So this is your new service plan. For this month, alright? Because you told me that you

don’t have no (.).

22. public assistance I included that in this in this month you trying to

23. activate your public assistance with them because you need to reopen it in order for us

24. to find you any type of housing for us to do any type of assistance right now your

25. public assistance case is closed.

26. C: Right

27. CM: you need a new psych- psychiatric evaluation cause you had one- it’s been-, you need a

28. new one. okay? so I’m going to schedule you for that.

29. C: a new, right?

30. CM: A new one. I have one but we need another one, cause you’ve been here three months

31. it’s time.

32. C: three month?

33. CM: yeah every three months you gotta get one of these. Follow shelter rules and

34. regulations, attend case management meetings and reactivate your public assistance.

35. C: Alright

36. CM: Everything that’s highlighted in the front we’ll discuss here at the back. Client must

37. Maintain (.).

38. benefits, entitlements, this is basically going to XXX, getting your PA

39. check turned back on I referred you already I already set up the appointment that’s how

I did all of that. (.).

you’ll keep the appointment made for you, You will comply

40. with all the criteria for public assistance in order to get it on, you’ll being all

41. documentation your referral letter, and so forth and so forth, okay?

42. C: Right

43. CM: Follow shelter rules and regulations, (.).

44. basically every month we have to do a new

45. service plan and once we do in between the month just to make sure it’s going okay.

You must sign for your bed every night. If you don’t sign for your bed every night.
46. You gonna **lose** it, you know no fighting [no arguing]

47. C: [yeah yeah ye]ah=

48. CM: no none of that. **alright?** Meet with me twice a week-, twice a **month** at least.

49. If I need to see you more I’ll send you more **appointments**. Okay?

50. **this is the psychiatric evaluation, you need a psych.** I’ll refer

51. you to the psych you keep the appointment with the psych be honest with the psych

52. and that’s basically it. That’s everything I’ve discussed here is highlighted in the **front**.

53. If you have any questions you can ask me I need you to **sign** it here and date it **there**.

This final excerpt, which concludes a flexible meeting, begins with a commonly used phrase with this caseworker: ‘I’m gonna do a service plan on you.’ Passive client participation is referenced through the preposition ‘on’—‘on you’—in which ‘on’ is synonymous with ‘about’. Whereas ‘with’ would indicate working together, ‘on’ implies an asymmetrical hierarchy. In the subsequent phrase ‘It’s gonna say ...’, the use of the present participle with the present tense verb to be suggests that the content of the ILP has already been decided. Lengthy pauses indicate the active participation of the paperwork (lines 7, 11, 13, 20). Lines 20–21 highlight the way in which the earlier discussion factored into the construction of the plan (‘because you told me’).

CM’s use of past tense ‘included’ (line 22) and phrases like ‘because you told me’ signpost her incorporation of discussion from earlier in the session into the service plan. The caseworker’s subsequent lengthy turns at talk explain the content of the service plan contract. Like the pre-constructed ILP from Excerpt 1, the ILP constructed during the meeting reveals a trade-off between time and active client participation. Is the client actively participating in ILP creation, if he is not aware he is doing so?

Excerpt 4 includes many invocations of policy language, most of which are given vocal emphasis (underlining), as the client is asked to ‘follow shelter rules and regulations’ (lines 33, 43), ‘attend case management meetings’ (line 44), ‘maintain benefits’ (line 37) and ‘sign for your bed every night’ (line 45).

In these ILP meetings, routines still play a role. While, in the intake and housing meetings, the paperwork more tightly controls the unfolding of caseworker–client talk, in the ILP meetings, the talk is more flexible. There, the routine, combined with the importance of paperwork, is integrated at the end and the talk across the majority of the meeting is less routinised. Drawing on Brodkin (2011) and Lipsky (1980/2010), we argue that these latter interactions reveal the ways in which policy tools
with particular goals have unintended outcomes—in this case a lack of transparency regarding the relationship between the interaction and paperwork introduced at the conclusion of some, but not all, check-up meetings. Moreover, while exposure to the ILP procedure with that CM may illuminate the process over time, some clients, even those who had previously established ILPs, became frustrated with the process, seemingly surprised by the requirements in the ILP, which, due to time constraints, are not overtly jointly developed.

For example, one long-term-staying client who spoke little English was confused about his caseworker’s request for a new tuberculosis test on his ILP. It was not discussed in the meeting, so he became confused and frustrated. Yet another became angry and called his caseworker a ‘moron’ for suggesting a drug programme on his ILP. Another client, an elderly man working with a different CM, became angry when he read his caseworker’s recommendation that he pursue a nursing home in his ILP. While senior housing was mentioned, it was not introduced as a point of discussion, but rather as an aside under her breath. Several meetings in this last dyad ended this way. While these responses to the ILPs were the exception rather than the norm, they are worth noting.

Discussion and conclusion

Restricted talk

Client participation in intake and housing interactions was constrained by the participation frameworks established by the caseworker vis-à-vis documentation. Options for extended caseworker–client talk were narrow during intake, psycho-social evaluations and housing application meetings. Efficiency took precedence. Both participants are conversationally constrained by the paperwork practices at the shelter, though, given the rising importance of client-centred social work (Rogers, 1959), conversational asymmetries are worth examining. While De Witte et al. (2015) suggest that social workers were able to maintain a ‘relational and narrative approach’ despite computerised systems, Parton (2008, 2009) argues that technology in human services has led to an emphasis on information at the expense of the social and critical thinking. Our findings do not corroborate De Witte et al., but we are also not suggesting that form-related talk diminishes critical thinking. There are, in these social work interactions, many moments for questions and discussion just not during document-driven meetings. This finding is relevant not only in the example of homelessness and housing, but also in many related areas of social work that have implemented new standardised technology such as different kinds of forms used for interacting with the client.
Documentation as participant

The presence of forms working as actants in the policy implementation network reveal the subtle ways in which administrative requirements constrain everyday practice. Through the marking of pauses in conversation, we highlight the paperwork as an interactional participant (Latour, 2005). Drew and Heritage (1992) suggest that institutional interactions ‘involve an orientation by at least one of the participants to some core goal, task, or identity (or set of them) conventionally associated with the institution’, and their talk will subsequently be shaped by norms for appropriate topics (p. 22). The paperwork is oriented to by both participants: the caseworker through direct reference, the client by waiting silently.

Flexible talk and neo-liberalism

Meetings that were geared toward ILPs were generally very open, including space for client topic initiation and narratives. However, as the ILP was not introduced and explained at the beginning of the meeting, those interactions were less transparent to the client. Some clients became angry or confused when their disclosures or undiscussed items were integrated into documents that carried legal weight. Transparency for the client is essential. In order to be a participant in the development of a service plan, the client must be aware that the contents of his conversation may contribute to the development of such a plan. Without this preface, the client cannot actively participate.

Given the systems that social workers work within, they must balance the need for efficiency and routine with the need for relational work, narrative and critical discussion. While routinised conversations may be useful for the initial elements of client processing, when service plans are developed, active client participation is necessary and can best be achieved when clients are prepared for the service plan clearly, including explanations of how the conversation will operate and the development of the plan.

Appendix

Transcription Conventions (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 2008)

(1.8) Pause. The number represents duration of the pause in seconds, to one decimal place. A pause of less than 0.2 seconds is marked by (.)

[ ] Overlap with a portion of another speaker’s utterance.

= Latch: no time lapse between two utterances, used when a second speaker begins their utterance just at the moment when the first speaker finishes
:: Extended sound

(hm, hh) Onomatopoetic representations of the audible exhalation of air)

.hh Audible inhalation of ai. The more h’s, the longer the in-breathe.

? Rising intonation.

. Falling intonation.

, Continuation of tone.

- Arupt cut off, speaker stops speaking suddenly.

↑↑ Sharply rising or falling intonation. The arrow is placed just before the syllable in which the change in intonation occurs.

Under Speaker emphasis on the underlined portion of the word.

CAPS Higher volume than the speaker’s normal volume.

° Utterance is much softer than the normal speech of the speaker. This symbol will appear at the beginning and at the end of the utterance in question.

>_<, < > Noticeably faster (>faster talk<), or slower (<slower talk>) than the surrounding talk.

(would) Transcriber has guessed as to what was said, because it was indecipherable on the tape. If the transcriber was unable to guess what was said, nothing appears within the parentheses.

(XXXX) Indistinguishable speech

References


