THE ROLE OF AGENCY SOCIAL WORK IN ENGLAND - A CASE STUDY

by Peter Frederick Unwin

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University of Warwick, School of Health and Social Studies

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I would like to thank all the participants from Cowleyshire who gave their time to participate in this study.

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This work is dedicated to my late father, Richard Unwin, who passed away during its completion and whose advice to me was always "do your best".

DECLARATION

Some of the material contained in this thesis or arising from the research has previously been published in the form of two book chapters, namely:

Unwin, P. (2009) 'Modernisation and the role of agency social work', in: Harris, J. and White, V. (eds.) *Modernising Social Work; Critical Considerations.* Bristol: Policy Press.

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This work was published after the period of study commenced and before completion of the thesis.

The thesis and the research on which it is based are the sole work of the author.

The thesis has not been submitted for a degree at another university.

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Abstract

This study explored the views and perceptions about agency social work in England. At its core is the first known case study of adult services social work teams in a rural local authority. The case study took place over the period 2008-2010 and used qualitative methodology to capture perspectives from agency and employed social workers, agency and employed managers and agency and employed administrative staff.

Agency social work was seen to have developed from a background of deteriorating conditions in local government employment and in the absence of effective and flexible workforce planning. Labour process theory provided a meaningful framework to help explore the phenomenon of agency social work within a public sector increasingly dominated by markets and managerialism. A directional tendency towards a degraded workplace was noted despite some perceptions of upskilling in respect of agency social workers.   A range of explanations regarding the motivation and the experiences of agency social workers was found that largely supported previous case study findings from urban local authorities.

The roles carried out by employed social workers under the care management system were indistinguishable from those of agency social workers, several agency social workers having remained in post for periods of two years or more. No ways of working were identified as being particularly tailored to a rural context. The antipathy toward agency social workers noted in previous case studies was largely absent in the rural case study and agency social workers were not perceived as part of the private sector. Issues regarding the cost-effectiveness of agency social work and its affect on service users and carers were inconclusive.

Recommendations for further research were made and agency social work was seen as being likely to remain as a core feature of modernised social work while vacancies remain high and alternative models for contingency workforce planning remain absent.

ABBREVIATIONS

ASW	–	Agency Social Worker
ASYE	–	Assessed and Supported Year in Employment
BASW	–	British Association of Social Workers
CCETSW	–	Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work
ES	–	Employed Staff
GP	–	General Practitioner
GSCC	–	General Social Care Council
HPC	–	Health Professions Council
HR	–	Human Resources
I	–	Interviewer
ICS	–	Integrated Children's Services
IT	–	Information Technology
LA	–	Local Authority
NHS	–	National Health Service
NQSW	–	Newly Qualified Social Workers
OPT	–	Old People's Teams
PAYE	–	Pay As You Earn
SAE	–	Stamped Addressed Envelope
SCIE	–	Social Care Institute for Excellence
SWOT	–	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats
SWRB	–	Social Work Reform Board

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

This thesis explores the phenomenon of agency social work, its growth and its role within contemporary social work in England, focusing particularly on a case study of one local authority. This local authority is rural in nature and known as 'Cowleyshire' for the purposes of this thesis. The thesis adds to the growing body of knowledge about agency social work and explores the rise of agency work, the motivations to become an agency social worker and the nature of agency social work as perceived by agency social workers and managers, employed social workers and managers, agency and employed administrative staff and an employment agency manager within one local authority. This chapter introduces the background to the study, the scope of the thesis and its structure.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The decision to research perceptions and experiences about the role and nature of agency social work in an English local authority was shaped by a combination of personal, practice and policy factors. I began my social work career in the days when there was almost a state monopoly of social work services and, many years later, was intrigued by the introduction of market principles into social work. Agency social work, which is a private sector enterprise supplying social work staff to the public sector, seemed a particularly intriguing phenomenon as it was not directly badged as a private enterprise and seemed to have become incorporated in state social work without any discussion about its role until Carey (2003).

Although I was interested in exploring people's motivations for choosing to become agency social workers, my practice interest was particularly focused on whether agency social work produced any differences in outcomes for service users. Accordingly, I believed that this was an important topic for study.

On a personal level, I spent several weeks, shortly before beginning this current study, working as an agency social worker in an inner city children's team and had elected to do this work as part of keeping current with practice in my main career as a university lecturer. I had been directly approached for this agency role by a person I knew, and would not have been able to access such a short-term assignment easily or quickly within the statutory sector as a mainstream employee owing to the sector's recruiting systems and protocols. My experiences within the children's team, alongside several other agency social workers, caused me to reflect on questions about the efficiency of agency social work and ethical issues arising from its use. I am also a foster carer for a local authority and panel member of an independent sector fostering agency and have these additional two vantage points from which to interpret my study. My researcher position is considered further in Chapter 5. Having identified the background to my interest in agency social work, I now turn to its rising profile.

THE RISING PROFILE OF AGENCY SOCIAL WORK

The past two decades have been a period of substantial change in the social work environment and much debate has taken place regarding the continuing drivers of markets and managerialism in English social work. Central to this debate are issues concerning the extent to which social workers retain professional discretion

and whether their working lives have become degraded under the impact of these drivers (see, for example, Harris 2003, 2004; Carey 2003; Evans 2010a). Since the 1980s, state social work in the UK has been increasingly subject to managerial scrutiny and control (Harris 1998, 2003; Jones 2001; Clarke et al. 2000; Ferguson 2008). A considerable body of literature has charted the changes within state social work as it has changed from being a 'bureau-profession' (Parry and Parry 1979), a hybrid model accommodating both professional and administrative ideologies, to a profession operating in the context of 'new managerialism' (Pollitt 1990; Harris 1998, 2003; Jones 2001; Evans and Harris 2004). New managerialism is characterised by emphasis on control of professional practice and operates alongside market policies (Clarke et al. 2000; Harris 2003) that have increasingly been accepted by the social work profession with little resistance. This might be viewed as surprising, given that the core values of markets and managerialism run counter to the ethical base of social work (see, for example, the British Association of Social Workers 2002; Banks 2006) in their lack of regard for key principles such as the importance of relationships and social justice.

Alongside the embracing of markets and managerialism, social work has acquired an increasingly negative public image, notably in the wake of child abuse scandals (see, for example, Laming 2003, 2009). Partly as a result of these scandals, there has been some investment in the professional status and accountability of the social work profession, initially via the establishment of the General Social Care Council (GSCC) in 2001, with the title 'social worker' becoming protected and regulated in line with that of other human services professionals such as nurses and teachers. In addition, in 2002, the government established the Social Care

Institute for Excellence (SCIE) to promote learning and public confidence across social care. However, despite initiatives such as the creation of SCIE being intended to upskill and promote best practice across the social work profession, the past decade has seen high levels of vacancy rates within local authorities for qualified social workers (Parker 2002; Forde and Slater 2005; Cornes et al. 2010). This is the changing and uncertain background from which agency social work emerged in the 1990s.

In this context, agency social work is a particularly interesting phenomenon as it consists of private sector employment agencies procuring professionally qualified social workers to carry out work engagements in the statutory public sector. Such workers are self-employed and contracted by host organisations through an employment agency. The employment agency deploys them according to market demands, most assignments being short-term in nature (Laming 2009; Carey 2011a). Agency social workers are different from 'independent social workers', who are self-employed individuals, not signed to an employment agency, and more likely to seek 'one-off' engagements with statutory social work services such as undertaking assessments or court reports.

Despite agency social work having a significant presence within social work teams since the 1990s, it has been the subject of comparatively few studies (Carey 2003, 2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2008b, 2009a, 2009b, 2011a, 2011b; Kirkpatrick and Hoque 2006; Mollitt 2006; Hoque and Kirkpatrick 2008; Kirkpatrick et al. 2009; Cornes et al. 2010; Hoque et al. 2011). The increasing use of agency social workers over the past two decades has meant that a greater percentage of local

authority budgets has been spent on paying (higher) agency-level salaries as well as fees to the employment agencies that supply the social workers earning them. The rising profile of agency social work over the last two decades has led to an acceptance that hourly rates of agency social workers are higher than for their employed peers and that agency workers do not have associated employment benefits such as security of tenure and pensions provision (Kirkpatrick and Hoque 2006; Carey 2007a; Cornes et al. 2010).

The increasing levels of expenditure attributed to the use of private sector agency staff, including agency social workers, has attracted some government concern and was highlighted as an area for performance improvement by Gershon (2004) in an HM Treasury-commissioned review into public sector efficiency and later in *Options for Excellence* (Department of Health/Department for Education and Skills 2006). However, this issue, particularly in relation to social work, seems largely to have escaped media attention, despite the social worker allocated to Peter Connelly, a child killed in the London Borough of Haringey while subject to a child protection plan, having been named in the *Daily Mail* and *The Telegraph* as having agency status (Allen 2010; Telegraph 2007). The Inquiry that followed the death of Peter Connelly (Department for Education 2008) also drew attention to the fact that over half of Haringey's social workers were agency staff and yet the profile of agency social work in the mainstream and trade press has remained low. *Community Care* has run a series of articles over the last decade, variously extolling the virtues brought to social work by such a flexible resource (for example, Hunt 2008; Lombard 2010a) and criticising agency social work on the

grounds of cost and the lack of commitment of its practitioners (for example, Gillen 2007; McGregor 2011a).

The rise of agency social work and its consequences have been chosen as the focus of this study with a view to ascertaining perceptions and experiences about its nature and role in what I refer to as 'modernised social work' (Harris and White 2009). For the purposes of this thesis, the period of modernisation will be taken as having begun under the Conservative governments of the 1980s, whose embrace of markets and managerialism (Clarke et al. 2000; Harris 2003) ushered in business structures, cultures and language across public services. Modernisation continued and was consolidated by successive New Labour governments across the 1990s and continues under the current Coalition government, elected in 2010. New Labour was particularly associated with modernisation policies as far as social work was concerned, following the publication of its White Paper *Modernising Social Services, Promoting Independence, Improving Protection, Raising Standards* (Department of Health 1998). However, in this thesis the concept of modernisation is used in a wider sense to refer to changes rooted in neo-liberal views that markets are best, markets need customers and that competition within the marketplace will drive up standards. This era of modernisation has provided the ideal habitat for the growth of agency social work. The current Coalition government, despite the global economic downturn that has threatened all aspects of business and public service activity, seems wedded to the market place and has offered no alternative paradigm or discourse apart from an exhortation for us all to become part of 'The Big Society' (Cabinet Office 2010). Critics of this concept see it as a vehicle for

further privatisation and cuts to public services that are cloaked in the rhetoric of volunteerism (Hardill and Baines 2011; Scott 2011).

TERMINOLOGY

During the course of this thesis, the term 'employed' social worker is used to delineate such workers from agency social workers who are not actually employed, although some of their lengths of tenure may make them appear as employees. In some of the literature referred to in this thesis and in the data from the fieldwork discussed in Chapters 6 (Findings from the SWOT Analysis) and Chapter 7 (Findings from the Semi-Structured Interviews), other terms for agency staff such as 'locum', 'bank', 'pool' and 'temporary staff' are sometimes used. Similarly, alternative terms to my preferred usage of 'employed' staff can be found in terms such as 'mainstream' 'LA', or 'permanent' staff. Both employed social workers and agency social workers in adult care teams will also sometimes be referred to as care managers, care management having been the mode of service delivery during the period of study. The term 'senior prac' referred to in the data in Chapter 7 is an abbreviated form of 'senior practitioner'. Zealosoc is the pseudonym given to the newly introduced computer system within Cowleyshire, and Tempo is the pseudonym given to the master vendor employment agency that supplies all agency staff.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The study will explore perceptions and experiences about the role and nature of agency social work from a range of actors' perspectives with particular reference to the role of agency social workers carrying out care management roles within

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adult social work teams. The choice of a rural case study of agency social work is believed to be the first of its kind to have been conducted. I particularly wanted to research a rural local authority for this study as all previous case studies (see this chapter, 1:4) had been conducted within urban areas. In addition, I was interested to discover how agency social work might fit with the needs of rural communities, especially as there is a body of literature suggesting that social work in rural areas calls for a different approach from that employed in urban areas, one that places greater emphasis on local knowledge and relationship based work (for example, Pugh 2000, 2007; Martinez-Brawley 2006, 2010). The issues introduced above about agency work usually being short- term in nature might mean that its fit within rural areas is more problematic when compared to the findings from studies of agency social work in urban areas (for example, Carey 2003; Kirkpatrick and Hoque 2006). There is a body of literature (Pugh 2000, 2007; Martinez-Brawley 2006, 2010; Scharf and Bartlam 2006) that discusses the challenges of social work in rural areas. The comparative disadvantage of some rural populations with regard to the availability of social care, services and life chances in general are well-established (Shucksmith 2003; Pugh et al. 2007). Craig and Manthorpe (2000) found that rural life can be idealised in ways that deflect attention away from a range of rural social problems with assumptions sometimes being made that informal care networks are more supportive in rural areas. Wenger (2001) suggested that the realities of informal care networks in rural areas in Britain are variable and complex with, as we have seen, the need for a relationship-based approach in rural areas being highlighted by Pugh (2000) and Philo et al. (2003). The latter study found that some people in rural areas were particularly reluctant to talk about emotional problems while other studies, (for

example, Milbourne and Hughes 2005; Scharf and Bartlam 2006), found that some rural populations may not recognise their problems, which may influence perceptions of their needs and the provision of social care services. Rural service users were noted by Brown et al. (2003) as having little interest in the organisations that provide their health and social care services, rather they are more interested in what is available and effective. Pugh et al. (2007) found that person-centred approaches to social work were welcomed in rural areas, noting that the local social context of services is important in rural settings and that services which do not take into consideration the nature and capacity of communities appear to be doomed to failure. This study went on to emphasise that flexible approaches are appropriate for rural communities. The existing literature on agency social work does not address the needs of different communities and portrays agency social work as regimented and routinised rather than flexible. The choice of a rural case study in which to study agency social work is intended to illuminate the debate about the needs perceived within rural communities and whether agency social work is perceived as meeting these needs.

STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

This chapter has introduced the phenomenon of agency social work in England and the scope of the thesis. An aspiration of this thesis is to bring forth new knowledge based on a case study from a rural context that it is hoped will both add to the depth and complexity of debate as well as having an impact on future practice. This chapter has outlined the rationale for the study and the topic for investigation, a case study into agency social work within a rural local authority.

Chapter 2 sets out the context from which agency social work emerged by briefly examining the origins of social work before looking in greater detail at the development of social work under modernisation, with particular reference to the influence of markets and managerialism (Harris 2003). The significance of the centralising of policies will be debated along with what is known about the views of people who use social work services. Recent policy initiatives such as those of the Social Work Reform Board (2010) and the *Munro Report* (DfE 2011) will be examined with particular reference to their critique of some of the policies of modernisation. Chapter 3 examines the particular nature of care management with adults, a market- based system whereby a range of private providers are contracted by local government to deliver services using a business model, with contractual arrangements specifying types of services and eligibility criteria which limit choice for individuals and communities (Carey 2008). The effects of care management systems on ways of working, with particular reference to the use of professional discretion by social workers, are examined and the pressurised world of performance management within care management systems is explored for any resonance with Braverman's (1998) labour process theory, which was rooted in the world of industry.

Chapter 4 considers the rise of agency social work and reflects upon the distinctive position of the agency social worker as a self-employed professional, procured by a private sector employment agency and working primarily within statutory services. The positions of other agency workers in industry and in public sector occupations such a nursing and teaching are then considered with few parallels to agency social work being found. The commodified (Union of

Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers 2006) or portfolio career models (Handy 1994) of agency work from the industrial and commercial sector are discussed in terms of their fit with the motivations of agency social workers, many of whom seem to be in retreat from mainstream public sector employment, yet are working within the same organisations in their roles as agency workers. A sextupular model of agency social work is developed in this chapter, building on a tripartite model that has been used (Bronstein 1991) to characterise business sector agency work. Motivations of agency social workers are considered as are the possible effects of agency social work on service users. The chapter concludes by examining the recent move to managed vendor systems by local authorities and concludes that inefficiencies within local authority workforce planning have provided the opportunity for such systems to develop.

Chapter 5 is concerned with the methodology of the case study. Dilemmas around insider-outsider research approaches are discussed, as are the reasons why a case study was chosen as an appropriate research method. Issues of access and managerial gatekeeping are considered. Agency social work is presented as a sensitive area for research because of the different pay rates that agency social workers earn compared to mainstream social workers and also because of their different lines of accountability. The logistics of carrying out research in a local authority subject to on-going structural change are outlined, with the phenomenon of 'interim' management being explored as a possible factor helping to explain practices and cultures within the host authority, Cowleyshire. A timeline of the research is presented as is the basic demography of Cowleyshire. Awareness of researcher position is explored and the key research question is set out.

Chapter 6 presents and analyses the findings from the anonymously completed SWOT analysis which was used to inform the shape of the semi-structured interviews, whose findings are reported in Chapter 7. Chapter 8 discusses the overall thesis and revisits the literature in the light of the case study findings. Chapter 9 concludes the thesis by considering the extent to which the research question has been answered, making recommendations and stating the contribution of the thesis to knowledge and outlining possible areas for future research.

CHAPTER 2

THE LOCATION OF AGENCY SOCIAL WORK WITHIN THE SOCIAL

WORK LABOUR PROCESS

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will examine how the social work labour process has developed and

changed since its charitable beginnings up to the present era of modernisation

within which agency social work has developed. The era of bureau-

professionalism will be analysed as having provided the professional space for

relationship-based practice in the social work labour process, prior to the

introduction of care management systems whose concerns were primarily with

technical compliance with bureaucratic systems and control of staff and budgets.

Care management will be presented as having led to the decline of relationship-

based practice and to the dominance of proceduralism. The chapter will conclude

that the commitment to the marketplace and managerialism under modernisation

provided the environment in which agency social work was able to develop as a

significant presence in social work teams.

THE LABOUR PROCESS OF BUREAU-PROFESSIONAL SOCIAL WORK

In contrast to the organisational forms and preoccupations of the business world,

the welfare state's services were provided in the main through bureau-professional

regimes, such as that of social work in Social Services Departments, established

following the Seebohm Report (1968). Concerns about inefficiencies and

duplication within existing welfare services had led to this Report, which

produced structural change across social work. In these bureau-professional

regimes (Parry and Parry 1979), the 'bureau' element was seen as ensuring impartiality through 'administration', characterised by rules and procedures. Administration was 'the process whereby public officials, employed by state agencies, implement[ed] and execute[ed] governmental policies determined by the political authorities, within a framework of law' (Farnham and Horton 1993: 27). Within this overarching administrative framework, the provision of services that were seen as not being amenable to the straightforward application of rules, such as social work, were assigned to professional staff, who were given areas of considerable discretion within which to operate (Parry and Parry 1979: 42-3). Any concern with performance, even though not labelled as such, was delegated to the professional element in bureau-professional regimes. Professionals were regarded as possessing knowledge and skills that enabled them to decide what constituted acceptable practice.

The work carried out by social workers during this era of bureau-professionalism (Parry and Parry 1979) relied upon practitioner autonomy and individual professional judgement, with administration following the lead given by professional decisions. Social work was casework-based and the emphasis was on 'remedial rather than preventative social work' (Harris 2008: 669). In the promotion of the use of relationships in social work, the profession's focus was on helping clients (as service users were then called) to effect changes in their lives, rather than any focus on the impact of social divisions. Systems theory had begun to rise in popularity in social work education by the late 1970s as it became increasingly recognised that the needs of an individual should be addressed within their environment (Healy 2005). During this period there was an abundance of

influences from scientific and humanistic disciplines on social work which left practitioners with a diverse set of theories and little guidance as to what they were or how to use them. This allowed room for critics of the then current system to push for a more prescriptive, structured and evidence-based foundation for social work practice.

The election of a Conservative government in 1979, whose ideology promised to lessen the role of the state in individual and family life, heralded an attack on social work's bureau-professional labour process. The dual forces of markets and managerialism (Harris 2003) were subsequently used by the Conservative government to reshape the role of the state with regard to its provision of social work and social care. The retrenchment of welfare and the privatisation of state-owned services brought about by governments in response to globalisation have led to social workers operating in a quasi-business environment (Harris 2003) in which job degradation and rising levels of dissatisfaction have been reported (Jones 2001; Ferguson et al. 2004). Dominelli (2004) argued that globalisation is a socio-political and economic form of social organisation that has penetrated everyday life all over the world, including aspects previously deemed sacrosanct and invulnerable to commodification. It has subjected public services to market disciplines and to what she sees as a reification of human relationships at the interpersonal level. Under globalisation, people's allegiances to particular communities are dynamic and change is an ever-present factor. Traditional community ties are often replaced with less stable and more precarious bonds and the globalised workplace is similarly characterised by short-term and fluid jobs (Dominelli 2007).

This is the wider context that formed the backcloth to the decline of bureau-professionalism and subsequent changes in the social work labour process. The thesis is particularly interested in the changing dynamics of labour process within statutory social work services under the drivers of markets and managerialism, particularly the labour process of agency social workers. Their position as self-employed agents of private sector employment agencies working within statutory services can be seen to have come about as a consequence of neo-liberal policies that have encouraged a mixed economy of welfare (Harris 2003).

LABOUR PROCESS THEORY

In order to move towards locating and explaining the position of agency social workers in the social work labour process it is necessary to turn to the business world as the environment in which labour process theory evolved. The seminal authority regarding labour process is Braverman (1998) whose work was centred on the world of industry, a world where official accounts of mechanisation and later computerisation promised an enhanced workplace with upskilling for all. In contrast, Braverman's (1998) analysis regarding the labour process stressed that:

> Control and cost reduction structure the division of labour involving the design of work and the division of tasks and people to give the most effective control and profitability. This is sustained by hierarchical structures and the shaping of appropriate forms of science and technology.

> (Thompson and McHugh 2002: 367)

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Braverman has been criticised for having identified scientific management as *the* sole means by which control over the workforce is gained; for failing to acknowledge that not all industries had experienced workplace degradation; for failing to acknowledge the upskilling in some industries; for failing to acknowledge to acknowledge the role of worker resistance; for paying attention only to male-dominated workplaces and for failing to nuance the subtleties of the ways in which management can control.

Braverman's thesis was based on his personal experiences and political perspectives regarding what he considered to be capitalism's inherent drive to deskill and degrade work through the introduction and consolidation of systems that reduced workers to occupying passive instrumental roles rather than realising their potential in the workplace. He regarded the attainment of control via scientific management (Taylor 2006) as central to ensuring that work process within industry yielded maximum profits, profit being the core driver of capitalist enterprise. Scientific management is the name given to a system whereby the traditional knowledge and skills of workers are reduced to a 'scientific' series of tasks and rules that are drawn up by management with the intention of maximising productivity and profit (Taylor 2006). Braverman argued that scientific management required high levels of managerial control over employees and their work practices because it stems from the notion that there is one best scientific way to carry out all work tasks. Scientific management's demand for control necessitates the separation of the execution of work from the conception

of work, only management holding and understanding of the overall labour process which the workforce carries out in the form of technical tasks.

Although Thompson and McHugh (2002) went beyond Braverman in acknowledging that labour process also reflected local factors such as markets, ideologies and histories, they nevertheless saw such factors as subordinate to the capitalist mode of production. The challenges of globalisation have shifted the focus from the structural nature of capitalism to a greater focus on subjective experience and the opportunities in a rapidly changing and global workplace (Tinker 2002; Smith and Thompson 1999; Thompson and Smith 2010). Smith and Thompson (1999: 211) took a contingent perspective on labour process theory, and argued that 'Its core theory merely recognises that the competitive relations compel capital to constantly revolutionise the labour process and that within that framework, capital and labour will contest the character and consequences of such changes'. As a consequence, some workers can be shown to have improved their skills and working conditions while others can be seen to be increasingly degraded by their workplaces.

Thompson (1989:118) argued that, even if Braverman's (1998) model of the labour process was rather exaggerated, 'deskilling remains the major *tendential* presence within the development of the capitalist labour process'. Most criticism of Braverman has emphasised the lack of complexity in his analysis of the workplace which neglected consideration of the competitive nature of industry and the advance of technology which constantly required reskilling of the workforce. The essence of these criticisms was that his analysis was too

simplistic and that contemporary workplaces have not degraded in a simple and linear manner (Thompson 1983; Adler 2004; Thompson and Smith 2010). Friedman (1977) also saw Braverman's original thesis as too simplistic in its idealisation of the craftsman age before industrialisation and argued that there were two types of capitalist control in the workplace which indicated that degradation of work was not simple and linear. He identified these types of control as direct control of peripheral workers, using the techniques of scientific management and responsible autonomy for core workers, whereby workers exercised discretion over their roles.

Braverman's depictions of workers and managers were criticised as not being sufficiently nuanced and little evidence could be found to prove that scientific management was commonly present in its extreme forms (Thompson 1983; Adler 2004). Rather, commerce and industry were perhaps more accurately made up of a range of managerial systems from the fully despotic to the consensual. Braverman's portrayal of workers as passive and powerless to resist the march of capital and scientific management has also been criticised as being unduly pessimistic. Fleming and Spencer (2007:49) stressed that the contemporary workplace still held many examples of resistance, even if a different type of resistance to that of the Braverman era. In similar vein, Belanger and Thunderoz (2010:153) stated 'Many forms of oppositional practices and behaviour have been documented in recent studies in services settings, and significant attention is now given to oppositional practices such as cynicism, dissent and disengagement'. Meiksins (1994) was critical of those who had derided Braverman in the decades since his work on labour process was originally published although he

acknowledged that Braverman's concept of skill was perhaps too restrictive in its focus on industry without acknowledging the workplace skills of a globalised economy. Feminists (for example, Beechey 1982; West 1990) have criticised Braverman for according high status to male skills only and his description of the degradation of work under capitalism has been challenged by those who would argue that there has been a general upskilling in much of the working class, particularly in a postmodern economy (for example, Mathews 1994; Adler 2004). Braverman was defended by Meiksins (1994) as still being relevant in the globalised workplace where contemporary service, clerical and non-industrial jobs were subject to the same controls and exploitation that Braverman ascribed to an earlier industrial age. While he acknowledged that certain new management approaches were different to the scientific management that Braverman described, Meiksins (1994:56) went on to state that there was a dark side to new ways of working in 'their fragility, their tendency to be manipulated, the links between them and the rise of polarised wage structures, unstable employment'. Meiksins (1994: 54) also declared it 'an absurd tendency to conclude that we now live in some sort of post-capitalist, post-industrial utopia in which classes and class conflict have essentially disappeared'. For his part, Braverman held to scientific management being *the* method of achieving increased managerial power although, as we have seen, subsequent studies of labour process have pointed to a range of methods of increasing managerial power, underlining that capitalism is versatile in this pursuit. Wider consideration of criticism post-Braverman suggests that, even if full endorsement of his labour process theory cannot be translated into the globalised workplace, the tendential nature of capitalism towards deskilling and control still has resonance.

LABOUR PROCESS THEORY AND SOCIAL WORK

The relevance of Braverman's thesis to the social work labour process has been addressed by several authors (for example, Harris 1998, 2003; Carey 2007a; White 2009). The labour process within social work is far more complex than the world of industrial work which was primarily addressed by Braverman. However, Braverman's work has been seen as having transferable and continuing relevance as a framework which helps explain the nature of labour process within modernised social work (for example, Harris 1998, 2003; Carey 2007a). Although social work is not subject to the drive to produce surplus value, it is subject to processes that mimic this drive. Thus, social work can be seen to provide some protection for society's most vulnerable, but it also protects society from those most vulnerable via a system of laws, social sanctions and welfare benefits. Any surplus allocated by a capitalist state to welfare is only at a level that the economy can stand and, while welfare services such as social work are not charged with making a profit, they are charged with drawing as little capital as possible away from the coffers of government. Hence, especially in times of economic downturn, the pressure is on social work managers to ration and control services ever more tightly in the interests of ensuring what a business perspective might deem as maximum efficiency. Issues of efficiency when dealing with the moral and ethical considerations around poverty, culture, abuse and chronic illness in adult social work teams perhaps call for different measures than the ones that have been imported wholesale from commerce and industry. However, the drivers behind the government White Paper, *Modernising Social Services* (DoH 1998) drew heavily on the principles of globalisation, markets and managerialism

which have led to a social work environment preoccupied with systems and conformity (Jones 2001; Harris 2003). Harris (1998, 2003) noted the tendency of managerialism to increasingly place strictures on professional social workers' discretion and control over their working lives by systems of direction and surveillance that have parallels with much of Braverman's industrial world. The debate about discretion within social work is on-going (Evans and Harris 2004; Coleman and Harris 2008; Ferguson 2008) but the reality of e-government and computerised surveillance of social workers within a performance management culture has increasingly been recognised as having taken social workers away from frontline face-to-face work (for example, Jones 2001; Harris and Unwin 2009; DfE 2011).

The contention is, then, that modernised social work environments, driven by markets and managerialism, have led to workers experiencing forms of control that are different in nature to the traditional industries of Braverman's era. The rise of proceduralism in social work (Social Work Reform Board 2010), characterised by the breaking down of roles and tasks into discrete parts that are easier to control, can be seen to have some resonance with Braverman's industrial world as it led to a separation between conception and execution of work with only managers holding the overall knowledge about the shape and direction of work. It is contended, however, that the main drivers that have systematically affected the social work labour process have been those of markets and managerialism. Braverman has been criticised for portraying industrial workers as without hope of resistance and prey to the inevitable domination of their labour by capital (Friedman 1977) but this core criticism is refuted with regard to

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professional social work by White (2009) who cites Braverman as clearly having stated that resistance from the workplace will emerge as a social issue that demands solution. Derber's (1983) critique of Braverman was that his emphasis on the lack of control over the process of work had been at the expense of ignoring the issue of ideological control over the ends of work. Derber disaggregated technological and ideological control and distinguished between the technical control over task and ideological control over one's work purpose and argued that professionals were co-opted to compromise their ideological mission in a way that allowed them to accommodate their 'moral concerns for the well being of their client in a form of practice that served institutional ends' (Derber 1983: 333). The directional tendency under modernisation, however, has been that managerial control has also been focused on technical knowledge and skill. This is particularly seen in care management systems which have involved technical managerial incursion into areas of knowledge and skill over which social workers had much more control in the bureau-professional labour process era.

The co-option of agency social workers may be different from employed social workers, particularly if agency social workers acknowledge that employment agencies are private enterprises, driven by profit. Furthermore, the labour process of agency social work may fit more closely than those of local authority-employed social workers with the capitalist, profit-driven industrial world of Braverman's thesis. Agency social work can be seen to be subject to a different form of managerial control over the workforce, namely control in the form of short-term contracts which have few employment rights or job security. Agency social work

can also be analysed as a new form of exploitative or degraded work, as an upskilled form of working or perhaps as a contingent model of work with elements both of empowerment and oppression (see, for example, Carey 2007a). Analysis of the extent to which private employment agencies control or cultivate the productive power of their workers was seen as representing new and exciting territory for exploration in this thesis.

Having argued that there are elements of the modernised social work labour process that have an affinity with some of the characteristics of the labour process that Braverman explored, I have, nevertheless, also suggested that the impact of markets and managerialism have been crucial in shaping how the social work labour process has developed, the subject to which we now turn.

MARKETS AND MANAGERIALISM

Confronted with the challenges of a recession and a consequent drop in tax revenues, the Conservatives began a sustained campaign against welfare and what they saw as a 'dependency culture' (Lavalette and Pratt 2001: 193). The steep rise in welfare costs led to the commissioning of a series of reports, whose outcomes might have been predicted by looking at how they were commissioned and who led them. The most significant of these reports was the Griffiths Report (1988), Griffiths' own background having been in the commercial sector as a director at the Sainsburys supermarket chain. The recommendations of his report led to the National Health Service and Community Care Act (1990) whose directives embodied many of the New Right principles that still dominate contemporary social work. These principles were to lead to radical change and the development

of a range of services across a mixed economy of welfare (Harris 2003), which

spelt the end of state near-monopoly in the assessment and provision of services.

The establishment of a mixed economy of welfare reflected an ideological belief

in the market place whereby competition would drive standards up, to the benefit

of all, not least the service users. The most radical change in the social work

labour process as far as adults were concerned came about via the NHS and

Community Care Act (1990) as it introduced the role of social workers as care

managers, responsible primarily for assessing and reviewing services, rather than

being a provider of relationship-based interventions. Many managerial

mechanisms such as targets, performance indicators, thresholds of eligibility and a

series of sanctions for non-compliance were brought into play. However, despite

the NHS and Community Care Act (1990) having placed an emphasis on

autonomy and choice for service users, it failed to consider the limitations of a

means-tested residual model of welfare. Everitt and Hardiker (1996: 75)

suggested that local authorities used the assessment process to control those

eligible for services by 'gate-keeping, priority-setting and tightly specifying target

groups' in order to remain within budget following funding 'rationing' by central

government (McDonald 2006: 45). Means et al. (2003) took the view that in

order to make the costs of a potential care package acceptable, eligibility criteria

were defined ever more narrowly creating priority bands, which Fook (2002)

argued led to the stigmatising of those who fitted into them.

Presented as a return to community values, the subsequent formalisation of care in

the community policies led to the closure of many institutions. In their haste to

encourage entrepreneurialism, however, the care in the community policies were

financially sabotaged by supply, rather than demand, and this led to a rise in services such as private sector older persons' homes which could be set up comparatively easily, were lightly regulated and funded in the main by a generous system of benefits, all paid for by central tax-based public monies (Harris 2003). The NHS and Community Care Act (1993) took steps to halt this phenomenon by placing the core financing responsibilities for such welfare provision back onto local authorities, using the punitive mechanisms of 'rate capping' if such budgets were overspent (Harris 2003).

Commentators such as Harris (2003) and Evans (2010b) analyse the emergence of managerialism from this period, with managers exerting their 'right to manage' professional social workers. Team managers moved away from their previous roles as professional supervisors and were compelled instead to work under performance management regimes with most provision delivered by the independent sector. The term 'independent sector' was a product of what was at the time new management terminology that conflated the charitable and voluntary not-for-profit sector with the private for-profit sector (Harris 2003: 8). Such terminology disguises the pattern of ownership of services, which have come to be provided increasingly by the private sector under modernisation (Servian 2011). This 'consumerist' model of care also impacted negatively on professional decision-making and the exercise of discretion, creating what Adams and Campling (2002: 225) describe as a 'contract culture' in which bureaucracy, rather than trust and professional relationships, shaped social work. There has been on-going debate about the ways in which street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky 1980) has been curtailed under this managerialist culture (Harris 2003) or whether

social workers were merely constrained in their ability to continue to exercise discretion at grass roots level (Evans and Harris 2004; Evans 2010b). Evans (2010a: 7) nuanced the previously homogenous construct of managerialism into the sub-categories of 'dominant' and 'discursive' models, the latter of which is argued to facilitate the continuation of discretion. Evans believed that these models better reflected the complex position of managers within social work and was critical of the way that management has sometimes been aggregated into a single entity by previous commentators such as Jones (2001). Evans (2010a: 7) defined a domination perspective in social work managerialism as occurring when managers are 'fully in control, committed to the organisation, managing practitioners as workers, and using budgets and procedures to minimise discretion'. A discursive perspective viewed managerialism as 'an increasingly important principle in the structuring of services, but does not see its impact as uniform. In many areas it operates alongside pre-existing bureaucratic and professional principles, which support practitioner discretion' (Evans 2010a: 7). This issue of differentiation within the management of the social work labour process will be returned to later in this thesis.

When the Conservatives lost power, New Labour's 'Third Way' (Giddens 1998) was presented as an alternative to either a return to state monopoly or a reliance on the independent sector, as well as incorporating the challenge to address social exclusion and the drive for social justice. However, despite its rhetoric, the 'Third Way' became indistinguishable from neo-liberalist ideology within an increasingly predominant culture of markets and managerialism within social work (Harris 2003). New Labour policies such as *Valuing People* (DoH 2001)

and *Putting People First: a shared vision and commitment to the transformation of adult social care* (DoH 2007b) set the scene for later personalisation policies by expressing commitment to the individualisation of services via the sovereignty of the customer. This rhetoric echoed previous Conservative ideology in further reducing costs as individuals and families were increasingly exhorted to find their own solutions to problems. State provision was slowly wound down under the ideology that family members and carers were 'to be treated as experts and care partners other than in circumstances where their views and aspirations are at odds with the person using the service or they are seeking to deny a family member the chance to experience maximum choice and control over their own life' (DoH 2007b: 4).

New Labour launched a combined health and social care White Paper entitled *Our health, our care, our say: a new direction for community services* (DoH 2006a) which was a document that clearly stated individual users of service were to have more direct forms of influence over the services they received. Care managers in adult services were envisaged in care brokerage-type roles whereby their prime responsibilities would be for assessment and review of services. 'More choice and a louder voice' (DoH 2006a: 7) was promised for service users and this was to be achieved through the promotion of Direct Payments, and the introduction of legislation extending their availability to carers of young disabled people, people with dementia and people with profound learning disabilities. The use of Individual Budgets, intended to become compulsory by the year 2011, was piloted in thirteen sites during 2006. Individual Budgets differ from Direct Payments in combining funding streams to which the service user is entitled and can include

monies from local authorities, *Supporting People* (DoH 2006b) and/or the
Independent Living Fund (DWP 2006). Following self-assessment, a 'resource
allocation system' equates an individual's care needs to a cash equivalent which is
then taken either as a payment, services or a mixture of both. Services can be
purchased directly by an individual or commissioned on their behalf by the local
authority or a voluntary organisation. Unlike Direct Payments, services can be
purchased that relate to any aspect of care, including local authority provision. As
a result, Individual Budgets offered an option to those 'not wanting to take on the
responsibilities of Direct Payments', and so reduced some of the risks associated
with their use (Samuel 2011: 1).

A political desire for further change, cost reduction within adult social care and
closer working with the NHS led to the creation of a transformation policy,
Transforming Adult Social Care (DoH 2008b). This policy envisaged all adults
having choice and control over their services, such an ideology having resonance
with core social work principles such as empowerment. However, it also
presented a threat to adult social work in its suggestion that even the most
vulnerable service users could be self-determining without the need for
relationship-based social work, guidance and safeguarding. It is worthwhile to
reflect on how the emergence of such individualised forms of provision might fit
with an agency social work role. Agency work has been characterised as being
essentially short-term in nature (Laming 2009; Carey 2011a) and therefore not a
mode of working that lends itself to the development of the relationships needed
to design and effect quality person-centred services. It can be argued that if the
reality of relationship-based practice within mainstream care management is

essentially brief in nature, then perhaps agency social workers fit the care management role just as well as employed social workers.

Despite New Labour's investment in personalisation policies across adult care alongside initiatives such as *Every Child Matters* and *Sure Start* (DfE 2003) in children's social care, social work continued to receive a bad press and a poor public image under New Labour, largely because of a series of child deaths (see Laming 2003). The generic Social Services Departments that had been set up after the Seebohm Report (1968) had been split into children's and adults' specialisations after the Children Act (1989) and the NHS and Community Care Act (1990), partly in recognition of the need for further specialisation and partly in order to control expenditure. Continued failings in the child care system (see Laming 2009) led to the eventual incorporation of children's social work into Integrated Children's Services (ICS) which were largely dominated by education services (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee 2005). Adult social work became a separate entity within adult and community services, working more closely with health authorities and primarily being carried out under the care management model with its focus on assessment and reviewing.

Attempts at further regulating the social work sector came through the establishment of the General Social Care Council (GSCC) in 2002. The GSCC, replaced in 2012 by the Health Professions Council (HPC), was intended to increase accountability and public confidence by the establishment of a social worker register in line with the teaching and medical professions. The New Labour government also established the Social Care Institute for Excellence

(SCIE) in 2002, intended to raise standards of knowledge and practice across the profession. Despite such initiatives, however, the image of social work throughout the 1990s and the early part of the new millennium remained poor and vacancy rates were high, especially in inner city areas. Average vacancy rates in England for qualified social workers in 2009 stood at 11.3% (McGregor 2010c) and high sickness rates also characterised the profession (Asthana 2008; Morris 2009). Social work was increasingly constrained to act as though it was a business operation within the mixed economy of welfare (Harris 2003) and service users, now regarded as customers, were able, in theory at least, to purchase their services from wherever they chose, shopping around for the best welfare deal. Harris (2009) noted that these 'unwilling' customers often did not have the financial or social capital to benefit from the supposed choice scenarios available within the mixed economy of welfare.

SERVICE USERS AND CARERS WITHIN THE SOCIAL WORK LABOUR PROCESS

Little is known about what adult social care users and carers want from social workers and the literature contains no direct evidence from service users or carers about their experience of working with agency social workers.   Manthorpe et al. (2008: 142) used a mixed-methods approach to ascertain the views of over 1600 older service users, resulting in a core finding that participants: 'liked social workers who were able to work collaboratively with other organisations and families, were reliable and knowledgeable about services and took account of their wishes'. The expectations of an individualised working relationship between social worker and older person were clearly expressed in this study, as was a

sense of regret that more impersonal approaches seemed to characterise

modernisation in both health and social care. Managerial and procedural concerns

were clearly seen by the older participants in this study as taking priority over the

building of relationships. Participants were aware of some of the constraints

around social work practice and systems and did not seem to blame individual

workers for the shortcomings in services that were experienced.

Beresford (2005) carried out a focus group study with 112 service users across

adult services. The research contained criticism of the increasing use of agencies

in the provision of care services, agency care staff being criticised for their

variable quality:

> Services are often taken out on a block contract with little
>
> choice of flexibility for service users. People felt that the
>
> primary motivation was profits for the agency. If negligence
>
> was alleged, the local authority were sometimes unwilling to
>
> take any corrective action for fear of losing the contractor.
>
> Beresford et al. (2005: 7).

The service users quoted gave only negative descriptions of their experience of

agency care workers:

> "…the care workers are cowboys."
>
> "Care agencies just employ anybody – they are not interested,
>
> only want to make money."

"Any Tom, Dick or Harry coming into the house. You don't know who they are".

"I get sick of the in-out business (from care agencies). Come in, get up, go away, come back, put to bed, gone again. If you want a drink at night, tough."

Beresford et al. (2005: 7).

Additionally, social workers and the bureaucracy surrounding the provision of services were seen as unnecessarily procedural and paper-led:

"…the worst problems are red tape, inflexibility and lack of understanding."

"…too much paper goes round and round."

"…there's too much paperwork and not enough hands-on."

Beresford et al. (2005: 9).

Continuity of the same individual who had the time to listen was stated to be a valued attribute in social workers:

> "The last review I had was one minute over the phone. Social
>
> workers should come to your home and listen to what you have
>
> to say."
>
> Beresford et al. (2005: 9).

Evidence such as the above would suggest that adult service users do hold views about the nature of contemporary social work and views also about the employment status of people arranging and providing their personal care. Reviews of the literature regarding service user views of social workers (for example, Beresford et al. 2005; Manthorpe et al. 2008) strongly indicated that consistency, continuity and commitment were qualities sought. Consistency and continuity are qualities that are structurally absent in the agency social work model, although there is some evidence (for example, Carey 2004, 2011a) that agency social workers can stay in a post for several years. More direct evidence about the desired qualities of social workers comes from children and young people who have spoken about transience and lack of meaningful relationships with social workers. McLeod (2010) interviewed young people in care with a view to finding out the attributes they sought in social workers. Sustained relationships were highly valued and one young man is quoted as follows: "My last [social worker] I had her for a lot of years and we were really great together and had a good laugh and that, but the new one I don't hardly know her" (McLeod 2010: 779). The research carried out by Mollitt (2006) into agency social work within two London boroughs echoed these young people's views from the perspectives of employed staff who did not believe that agency work fitted with the long-term needs of children.

The claim is made by McLeod (2010) that positive relationships between child and social worker were linked to better long-term outcomes. McLeod's study does not specify whether any of her participants were working with agency staff, hence no firm conclusions can be drawn about whether children's needs are more likely to be met by employed staff than by agency staff. It may also be that within the children's sector, agency social workers did not declare their status hence children and young people would be unaware that they were dealing with agency social workers.

RECENT POLICY INITIATIVES

Some recent policy developments do offer the potential for a return to the types of relationship-based social work labour process that service users seem to value. Such alternatives to markets, managerialism and individualist models of social work are to be found in the final report of the Social Work Task Force (2009) entitled '*Building a Safe, Confident Future'* and the '*Munro Report'*(DfE 2011), the latter of which concentrated on child protection. The Social Work Task Force (2009) report could be seen to predict a positive future role for social work with adults, despite the threats presented to social work with adults by personalisation policies and talk of closer working with health authorities. This government-commissioned report, alongside the *Munro Report* (DfE 2011), presented positive images of future social work in England and made recommendations for the way forward, including the encouragement of a learning culture, better induction and support for social workers. However, neither report gave any significant attention to the phenomenon of agency social work. The *Munro Report* (DfE 2011)

mentioned the fact that agency social workers exist but offered no insight, suggestions or judgements about their contribution to modernised social work. This report gave high praise to the Hackney Borough Council initiative 'Reclaiming Social Work' which apparently brought about a 55% drop in sickness rates and a consequent 50% drop in reliance on agency staff. The inference here was that families in that authority are better off without such a degree of reliance on agency social workers, although no evidence to support this inference was produced. The Social Work Task Force (2009) gave agency social work only one mention, in relation to its need to be considered as a part of workforce planning. It can be hypothesised that perhaps agency social work does not attract a higher profile within adult social work services because its short-term nature is congruent with the short-term nature of care management work carried out by employed staff. This is a theme for further investigation in this work.

Both the Social Work Reform Board (2010) and the *Munro Report* (DfE 2011) seemed to represent missed opportunities to address the issues around agency social work and made no reference to its future direction. Both reports did, however, offer something of a challenge to the overly bureaucratic system that has come to characterise the modernised social work labour process. The *Munro Report* (DfE 2011) recommended that social workers should refocus on working with children, young people and families. The rigid time scales placed upon professionals to complete assessments were recommended for removal and experienced social workers were seen as needing to remain at the forefront of practice in order to pass on knowledge and skills effectively. Local services were

seen as best informed by service users' views and research findings instead of by imposed government targets and rigid performance management systems.

The *Munro Report* (DfE 2011) also recommended the establishment of a Chief Social Worker to advise the Government on social work practice and stressed that continuing professional development within a learning culture that valued relationship-based practice represented the best way ahead for children and families. Calls for a return to relationship-based practice as an alternative to care management's instrumental modes of practice, had previously been argued for by commentators such as Ruch (2010). Relationship-based practice is a social work approach designed to enable practitioners to work in-depth, rather than in a reductionist way, with children and families or with adults and their families. Adherents of relationship-based practice would argue that the insights that flow from a relationship-based approach are effective ones that help challenge power imbalances and structural oppression (Ruch 2010). Relationship-based practice necessitates varying degrees of relationship between social workers and their service users and, although the world of care management has largely brought about an environment in which cases are opened and closed as quickly as possible, relationships are nonetheless important and that much harder to successfully achieve for agency social workers, whose lengths of tenure have traditionally been short in nature (Laming 2009; Carey 2011a). Munro's message (DfE 2011) is clearly stated in the following extract;

> … the level of increased prescription for social workers, while
>
> intending to improve the quality of practice, has created an
>
> imbalance. Complying with prescription and keeping records

to demonstrate compliance has become too dominant. The

centrality of forming relationships with children and families to

understand and help them has become obscured.

(DfE 2011: 8).

This above statement from a government-sponsored report can be seen as a

significant criticism of the managerialised and performance management cultures

that have dominated social work since the 1980s. However, It remains to be seen

whether the largely anti-managerialist stance of the above reports will bear fruit.

The economic recession that peaked at about the same time as the production of

the *Munro Report* (DfE 2011) and that of the Social Work Reform Board (2010)

will perhaps be the major determinant regarding whether any of the initiatives

suggested in the reports actually come to fruition. The alternative outcome is that

economic pressures will lead to more outsourcing of services into the private

sector and the further growth of agency social work.

SUMMARY

Social work can be seen to have developed from its charitable origins, through

bureau-professionalism to a quasi-business activity (Harris 2003) under

modernisation. The criticism of modernised social work as being preoccupied

with markets and managerialism has been advanced by social workers, service

users and more recently by reports such as the Social Work Reform Board (2010)

and the *Munro Report* (DfE 2011). These reports called for a return to

relationship-based practice and a learning culture that would enable social

workers to concentrate their energies on service users rather than on procedural

compliance. This chapter's examination of the cultures surrounding markets and

managerialism helps to explain how and why agency social work has flourished in

both children's services and in the care management roles that have dominated

adult social work. The next chapter will examine the particular nature of care

management within adult social work; a system whose performance management

disciplines, eligibility criteria and rationing imperatives have shaped the labour

process within which agency social work has taken hold.

CHAPTER 3

CARE MANAGEMENT AND AGENCY SOCIAL WORK

INTRODUCTION

In order to locate agency social workers within their working context, this chapter explores the nature of care management, using a framework of markets and managerialism (Harris 2003), with particular reference to the advent of performance management. This has led to a climate in care management teams that is not conducive to staff satisfaction and retention, particularly in the light of continuing structural change and financial uncertainty (Carey 2003). Thus, the business models that have been imported into the social work labour process have not been proven to be effective in making the working environment of social work more stable (Carey 2003) and high absenteeism and vacancy rates within care management teams (Asthana 2008; Morris 2009; Pile 2009; Smith 2010) have created the environment within which agency social work has developed. The nature of care management and its performance-driven culture will be explored in relation to Braverman's (1998) thesis, which identified capitalism's tendency to separate the execution of a worker's skill or craft from the overall conception of the labour process, the knowledge and power associated with conception of work being seen as the sole domain of management. Braverman's view (see Chapter 2) was that managerial control of the labour process led to the deskilling of work via the introduction of systems that reduced work to passive instrumental roles rather than roles with potential for fulfilment and creativity. As we will see, parallels can be drawn between Braverman's perspective and the managerialist nature of care management that has led to increased proceduralism and emphasis on

instrumental completion of technical tasks (see, for example, Harris 1998, 2003; Carey 2003, 2008a).

CARE MANAGEMENT AS PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

With the advent of performance management as part of the modernisation agenda, public sector services such as social work came under pressure to become more efficient in order to reduce their demands on taxpayers, or at least not increase them, while maintaining the volume and quality of services provided to the public (Brignall and Modell 2002). It was in this pressurised environment that care management developed. The performance of professionals in local government now needed to comply with increased control in order to achieve managerial objectives (Loughlin 1994; Kloot and Martin 2000).

New Labour came to power in 1997 and not only took over the terminology and activities of business performance management from the Conservatives, such as the setting of explicit targets for services and monitoring performance against them, but also extended performance management, with more measures and greater attention to using performance management in pursuit of its policy goals (Newman 2005). This intensification of central government's performance management regime gave rise to detailed definitions of social work's objectives at national level, the setting of targets to be met locally and monitoring of the results. New Labour generated a strong performance culture with local politicians and managers being expected to concentrate on achieving New Labour's targets and ensuring that its programme was delivered by social workers. These expectations were reinforced by the production of 'naming and shaming' reports, star rankings

and league tables (Harris and Unwin 2009). Exposing performance in this way was assumed to stimulate continuous improvement, although the vacancy rates and sickness levels that continued to characterise social work might suggest a continuous degradation in performance and working environment rather than a continuously improving one (Baginsky et al. 2010).

The most significant initiative early in the life of the first New Labour government was the requirement placed on local authorities that they should meet the demands of 'Best Value'. This was a much more extensive, challenging and comprehensive performance regime than anything that had been attempted by the Conservative governments. As part of New Labour's wider modernisation agenda, the White Paper *Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People* (Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions 1998) stipulated that constant improvement in both quality and cost would be expected from local government, with 'Best Value' becoming a statutory duty from 1st April 2000. Thus, the modernisation of social work was based in the 'Best Value' regime and routed through the implementation of national performance standards and targets. Mainstream care managers now carried out their work in a world which no longer guaranteed them a job, where there was a constant pressure to save money and where efficiency measures were always being sought (Carey 2003).

DISCRETION WITHIN CARE MANAGEMENT

Harris (1998, 2003) noted the tendency of managerialism to increasingly place strictures on professional social workers' use of discretion in the social work labour process by introducing systems of control and surveillance that have

parallels with Braverman's (1998) theorising about the industrial world. The initiatives described above can be seen to constitute an environment of increasing control and scrutiny of social work performance that would seem to leave little room for professional discretion among care managers. The permeation of New Right ideology, particularly the manager's 'right to manage' (Harris and White 2009:11), into local government challenged the traditional ability of the professional social worker to exercise discretion over work priorities and content. This discretion has been asserted to have either been curtailed (Hadley and Clough 1996; Lymbery 2000; Jones 2001; Carey 2003; Harris 2003) or arguments have been made that it has continued to characterise contemporary social work (Baldwin 2000; Evans and Harris 2004; Evans 2010a). On the basis of findings from a case study in adult social care, Evans (2010a) argued that the loss of social worker discretion has been exaggerated and that street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky 1980), whereby policy is interpreted at grass roots level, continues to characterise some social work practice, especially when team managers are sympathetic and have a discursive approach (see Chapter 2) to decision-making. However, Evans' case study (2010a) did not explore whether this managerialist approach had led to any tangible indicators of job satisfaction such as less absenteeism or less staff turnover.

National findings regarding high absenteeism and sickness rates within social work suggest that social work has become an increasingly unsatisfying and stressful job wherein the continuation of discretion as part of professional job satisfaction is not commonplace (Asthana 2008; Morris 2009; Pile 2009; Smith 2010). The managerial demands for social workers to meet deadlines and targets,

coupled with a hostile media, were seen as adding to the inherently stressful nature of a contemporary social work role. McGregor (2009a) stated that social workers were not only overworked but also afraid to take holidays for fear of falling behind with targets or letting their managers know that they were not coping. Morris (2009) reported that, on average, social workers take almost 12 days off during the year due to sickness, with one in ten calling in sick at least 20 times. Such statistics could be the result of oppressive working environments, environments which have enabled agency social work to flourish by filling in the gaps left by absent employed staff.

Key legislation that has dominated both children's and adults' social work over the past two decades such as the Children Act (1989) and the NHS and Community Care Act (1990) can be seen to have proceduralised social work via systems designed to minimise the roles of professional interpretation and discretion at grass roots level. The priorities under such legislation are those of 'new managerialism', whose mantra is one of economy, efficiency, effectiveness and the meeting of targets (Jones 2001; Newman 2000; Harris 2009). Hugman (2001) argues that the development of 'post-welfare social work', stemming from New Right ideology, has led to an emphasis on competence-based, instrumental forms of work which Carey (2003, 2006) sees as essentially constituting a deskilling of social workers, in line with Braverman's (1998) view of the labour process.

In contrast, Post-Fordist interpretations of the ways in which modern economies have moved away from mass production and routinisation have tended to stress

the flexibilities and choices brought to workplaces by new technologies whose advent heralded new ways of working (Littler and Innes 2003). However, the promised improvements to the labour process offered by computerisation and new ways of working did not seem to have been realised in the care management case studies described by Carey (2006, 2011a). Modernised social work environments, characterised by markets and managerialism, can be seen to be subject to the drivers analogous to those identified by Braverman (1998). The managerial imperatives of social work teams were to save money and ration resources while meeting statutory minimum obligations. The effect on the workforce of such imperatives means that modernised social work increasingly parallels Braverman's (1998) thesis in that the process of conception and execution are separate. Only managers hold the overall knowledge about the shape and direction of what is a complex undertaking and social workers are directed to carry out a series of limited and discrete tasks. Braverman saw scientific management as being characterised by the breaking down of roles and tasks into discrete, small parts that were easier to control and, while there are different drivers within modernised social work such as those of markets and managerialism, there is the same imperative for management to control. The care management systems that dominate social work with adults in England are target-driven and procedural (Carey 2003, 2008a; Evans 2010a) and it may be that social workers, both agency and employed, accept co-optation strategies (Derber 1983) to help them rationalise their day-to-day work.

THE EFFECTS OF CARE MANAGEMENT ON THE WORKFORCE

Resourcing pressures increasingly characterised Social Services Departments in the 1990s and the development of the 'mixed economy of welfare' (Harris 2003) that came about as a result of the NHS and Community Care Act (1990) saw social workers being converted into care managers whose main role moved away from relationship-based work to 'purchasing' services from the independent sector, many 'in-house' provider services having been sold off (Harris 2003). Harris noted that social workers, of necessity, therefore had no choice but to work with the independent sector, which came to dominate the provision of services under the 'purchaser-provider' split that the advent of commissioning services brought with it, especially to adult social services via the NHS and Community Care Act (1990).

Further specialism within social work into children's social care teams and adult services teams came about after the government strategy papers - *Independence, Wellbeing and Choice* (DoH 2005) for adults and *Every Child Matters* (DfE 2003) in respect of children. The rationale for such reorganisation would appear to have flowed from political disquiet about failings within the child protection functions of Social Services Departments, particularly with regard to a lack of multi-disciplinary working (see Laming 2003). In the adult social care reorganisation, issues of cost seemed at the heart of matters and the closer workings envisaged with local health authorities would, it was hoped, cut down duplication and bring about greater cost effectiveness. Mental health services were now integrated more with NHS services and adult social work teams worked primarily with people with learning disabilities, physical disabilities and older people.

The increasingly prescriptive nature of care management systems within adult

social care has been lamented by social workers for leading to the demise of

meaningful relationships with service users (Carey 2003; Rickford 2011). Carey

further noted that the emancipatory aspirations of many of those leaving

qualifying social work courses soon disappeared as 'mere fantasy in view of the

daily grind in the office' (Carey 2003: 126). Carey (2003) noted social workers'

frustrations at being kept away from the 'social' or the 'community' by the

increasing burden of paperwork that characterised care management. He

commented that social workers appeared to regret spending such large portions of

their time in the office and paints a depressing picture of five area teams with a

middle manager who had to report to a senior manager in a separate location for

approval on budgetary issues. Evans (2010a: 139) referred to such a style of

management within adult social work teams as 'remote control' and suggested

that, by removing all personal contact with not only the service user but also with

the social worker, instrumental and technical rationing decisions can be more

easily made and justified. Changes in the role of middle management were

further noted by commentators such as Harris (2003) and Evans (2010a). The role

of team manager was explained as having changed from being a team leader,

whose skills would previously have lain in the areas of professional support and

guidance rather than in monitoring and being directive about practice priorities.

Social work has enjoyed a long tradition of professional supervision, wherein

agendas were usually led by the supervisee as part of a process concerned with the

development of an individual's skills, practice and career (Harris 2003).

Contemporary standards of supervision can be seen to have changed their nature

under modernisation and were now dominated by managerial agendas around such issues as performance measurement. The opportunities for resistance and street-level responses against imposed procedures and policies (Evans 2009) were less evident in such modernised supervision practices. The position of agency social workers, particularly if on short-term contracts, is likely to skew the supervision process to a concentration on performance management rather than any focus on skills, practice and career.

Braverman's (1998) labour process theory considered that all workforces lose skills in both an absolute sense (in that they lose traditional skills without gaining new skills that they see as compensating for such loss) and suffer loss also in a more relative sense in that the less the worker understands of the process at play, the more oppressive the workplace becomes. Within the public sector settings of care management teams, constant rounds of senior management reorganisation, top-down policy changes and the surveillance of performance by computerised systems can be seen to have constituted a parallel world of workplace oppression to that identified by Braverman (1998). Furthermore, the nature of care management has led to a breaking down of tasks into routines and procedures that serve to further alienate care managers from their own labour process (White et al. 2010; Ince and Griffiths 2011).   Braverman (1998) explored how capitalist ideology became an intrinsic part of the workplace and considered the way in which the labour process was dominated by the accumulation of capital. He went on to state that workers surrender their interest in the labour process and become alienated from their labour, their labour becoming commodified and the responsibility of the capitalist. Braverman's thesis can be seen to pertain to much

of the reported oppression in the modernised workplace experienced by social workers (Carey 2007a).

INFLUENCE OF THE BUSINESS SECTOR

Many contemporary senior managers now in the public sector are from a business background and budgets and staff performance are heavily scrutinised under increasingly intrusive and labour intensive IT systems (see White et al. 2010; Ince and Griffiths 2011). The adoption of commercial-style initiatives such as call centres (Coleman and Harris 2008) further serve to take social work out of the community and to commodify its 'customers'. The expenditure on all such cost-saving innovation within local government has never been established, whether in respect of actual financial costs or opportunity costs and qualitative costs as perceived by service users (Harris and Unwin 2009).

Commentators such as Carey (2003, 2006) and Ruch (2010) see the core business of care management as essentially comprising routine and instrumental duties that are far removed from any broader vision of social work. Discursive or dominant management styles (see Chapter 2:27) might feel different to those being managed but whether they make any real difference to the labour process of social work is questionable given care management's preoccupation with budgetary compliance, which was seen as a key factor in depressing morale within social work teams. Carey (2003: 129) states: 'Just about everything a care manager does now is defined by the availability of finances; normally it is assumed there is very little money, if anything, available'. This view of budget-led practice was supported by Dominelli and Hoogvelt (1996) who viewed budget management as another form

of rationing and control that further served to oppress service users. Jones (2001) noted how budgetary concern and time spent on computerised systems had taken over from welfare concern within the Social Services Departments he studied.

Time spent at computers by social workers in modernised workplaces was estimated at taking up approximately 80% of their time per week by the Social Work Task Force (2010). Having to meet managerially-imposed targets and deadlines instead of being able to concentrate on relationship-based work or community work can be viewed as making for oppressive and degraded working environments that are not likely to bring worker satisfaction. Such a working environment does also not reflect recently articulated government aspirations for greater localisation of services and the establishment of a learning, rather than a compliance culture within social work where discretion and professional judgement drive the labour process (for example, Social Work Reform Board 2010; DfE 2011). Evans (2010a: 33) identified the differences that social workers may experience in respect of 'de facto' day-to-day discretion as compared with 'de jure' discretion in respect of the strategic direction and control of work. Evans (2010a) drew out key differences between first-line (team) managers and senior (strategic) managers, and suggested that shared resistance on the part of team managers and social workers continued to characterise decision-making in some scenarios and thus helped make the workplace culture less oppressive than Braverman's (1998) labour process model might suggest. Braverman's original 1974 thesis has been criticised for a failure to nuance management (Friedman 1977) and for having only represented management as aggressive oppressors rather than having acknowledged the different management styles across industry

and the key role of consensual management approaches. Braverman did not live long enough to refute many of his critics but held the view that, regardless of the style or nuancing of management, capital essentially viewed workers as commodities and that the ends of any management style were the same, namely the maximisation of profit. The preoccupation of management within mainstream social work may not be with maximising profit but is with controlling costs. Employment agencies, however, are part of the private sector and have profit maximisation as their key driver. Agency workers are rather uniquely positioned in a labour process whereby their employment agency may agree contracts and pay rates but does not directly allocate or control work; hence the private sector cannot be argued to directly control the nature of tasks and roles of agency social workers. These tasks and roles are directed by the (non-profit) local authorities by whom they are engaged.

SUMMARY

Overall, the above commentaries on the state social work labour process suggest that the environment within which care management operates is a pressurised one characterised by top-down imperatives to be ever more efficient when working with service users whose complex situations do not equate with those of the discerning customer of the commercial sector. Parallels might reasonably be drawn between Braverman's (1998) model of an industrial workplace where profit is king and the public sector workplace of care management where cost control is king. Regardless of any nuances in management style, the oppressive nature of the drive for efficiencies might have similar effects on industrial workforces and professional, public sector labour process alike. Care management is a highly

regulated and assessed activity that is increasingly procedural and IT-led.   The

associated assessment documentation is very extensive with a series of deadlines

for completion at stages that flash up on the social worker's computer until they

are actioned. Several of these stages require approval by a manager before the

next stage can be progressed, thus causing logistical difficulties when managers

are otherwise occupied. The pressures of such a system may account for the high

sickness and absentee rates that have opened up opportunities for agency social

workers to fill the gaps. The task-centred nature of care management with its

emphasis on assessment and review rather than relationship-based practice might

also be seen to lend itself to adoption by agency workers who do not have local

knowledge or contacts. The labour process of agency social work, whereby

private sector employment agencies supply professional staff to the state sector

presents an unusual combination, and the next chapter will explore what is known

about agency social work practice and the research to date in this field.

CHAPTER 4

THE RISE OF AGENCY SOCIAL WORK

INTRODUCTION

The preceding chapter depicted the social work labour process as having been

degraded, despite there being some recent glimmers of change on the horizon

(SWRB 2010; DfE 2011). This labour process is located in a public sector that

has traditionally been associated with strong unionisation, security of

employment, meritocratic career progression and final salary pension schemes

(Andrew and McLean 1995; Means et al. 2003). However, the impact of

managerialism, increasing workload, stress on social workers and the falling value

of pension schemes can be seen to no longer make local government the attractive

employer of tradition (Harris 1998; Rickford 2001; Carey 2006; Cornes et al.

2010). Modernised social work has been subject to serious resource constraints,

prevailing government ideologies having looked only to the business sector to

supply answers in such challenging times.

The model of agency social work originates in the business sector, Bronstein

(1991) having identified a tripartite relationship as characterising the working

relationships of the commercial sector agency worker. These relationships

involved those between an employment agency, a host employer and a need for

income on the part of the worker. This chapter will suggest that this tripartite

model is not sufficient to explain the complex relationships within agency social

work and accordingly a sextupular model of relationships is advanced. This

sextupular model involves differing strengths in relationship between the agency

social worker, their host employer, their colleagues, their local community, their service users and carers, their need for income/career development, and their employment agency. The literature regarding agency social work in other human service professions such as teaching and nursing will be discussed and any similarities and differences will be examined. The chapter will conclude by noting the lack of media awareness of agency social work and the lack of recognition of the role of agency social work in recent policy initiatives.

THE POSITION OF THE AGENCY SOCIAL WORKER

Although agency social workers are used in independent sector settings, such as private foster care companies, they are mainly found in local authorities, where even their work is funded by the state and involves working alongside state social workers under the same legislation. The unique position of the agency worker, however, is that in many ways s/he are distanced from some of the negative factors associated with employed status in contemporary local government. Agency social workers are accountable only for their competence in respect of project or case management duties, duties they can leave behind if they find the working environment oppressive (Casey and Alach 2004; Cornes et al. 2010). The lack of need to get involved in local office politics, service or team development, re-structuring or to be affected by long-term performance measurement can be seen as attractive features of agency work.

Agency work had its beginnings in the business sector, whose capitalist ideology used to have very little resonance with the ideology of public service before its adoption of markets and managerialism (Harris 1998, 2003). The business sector

literature identifies two types of agency worker, commodified (Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers, 2006) and privileged (Handy 1994; Fraser and Gold 2001; Platman 2004). Into the former category would fall low-paid low-skilled workers such as agricultural labourers whose working lives are contingent upon harvests/seasonal fluctuations, whereas the latter form of agency working encompasses the highly-skilled specialists who can demand top prices for their labour, for example, consultant engineers. In the literature, these two types of agency worker are seen as fitting the supply and demand needs of a range of industries. Additionally, privileged agency work is seen as offering personal fulfilment by way of highly paid and skilled portfolio career paths (Handy, 1994; Fraser and Gold 2001; Platman 2004) in which a variety of different employment settings and projects are proactively sought by individuals rather than their seeking to build a career with a main employer. The attractiveness of portfolio careers has been identified by Handy (1994) and Platman (2004) as a factor accounting for the rise in agency work. Such models of a capitalist workplace are not ones recognised by Braverman (1998) whose original 1974 thesis received considerable criticism (e.g. Friedman 1977; Spencer 2000) for not recognising variation in the nature of labour process in different environments, such as those of the professions (Derber 1983).

A range of explanations has emanated from the business sector concerning the reasons why 'privileged' agency workers choose the comparative insecurity of agency positions over permanent positions, such as the higher pay for doing the same day-to-day job and the romanticism of being a free agent who can pick and choose workplaces and working conditions (Handy 1994; Engellandt and Riphahn

2003; Platman 2004). In contrast, the commodified agency worker has been seen as convenient cheap labour serving the supply and demand whims of businesses:

> [Agency workers] are often employed, quite deliberately, on inferior terms and conditions. They rarely have access to sick pay and pensions. They receive little or no training. They're exposed to greater health and safety risks, and they have little protection or maternity rights … Employers often use them to undermine established pay and conditions, and drive a cheap labour wedge through the existing workforce.
>
> (Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers 2006: 1)

Agency social work connects to some of the themes in this bifurcated perspective. For example, despite the argument that agency social work is located towards the 'privileged' end of the agency working spectrum, concern has been expressed about the lack of access of agency social workers to maternity pay, sickness pay and training opportunities (Carey 2008a). During the period of this present study (2005 – 2011) a range of initiatives such as the European Union Directive (2008) have been brought into play by legislation that gives greater rights to agency workers, the UK being slow to recognise this section of the workforce. Agency social workers now have many of the same rights in terms of pay, sickness and holiday pay and daily working conditions as do employed staff, once a contract has extended beyond twelve weeks. 'Privileged' agency workers are also beneficiaries of such legislation, the consequences of which apply across commercial and public service sectors. Some sectors of public service have

contracted with the private sector since the early days of the welfare state (Harris 2003), particularly in the area of nursing. The literature on agency nursing and also agency teaching will be explored below in the search for any resonance with the complex world of the agency social worker. The complexities of agency social work might be hypothesised via a model of sextupular relationships (see Figure 4.2 below). This model contrasts with Bronstein's (1991) tripartite model of the relational world of the commercial agency worker (see Figure 4.1 below).
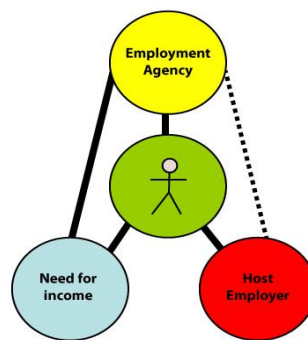
Figure 4.1 Tripartite Relationships of the Commercial Sector Worker

Figure 4.2 Sextupular Relationships of the Agency Social Worker

In their sextupular relationships, the social work agency worker can be hypothesised to have extra relationship considerations of commitment to professional colleagues, service users and carers, local communities and career development compared to the more instrumental role of the commercial sector agency worker who is concerned primarily with earning an income through maintaining strong relationships with a host employer and an employment agency. The statutory and ethical responsibilities of the agency social worker result in extra responsibilities, with professional and ethical commitments to service users and carers as well as colleagues. Before exploring agency social work in more

57

detail the following sections will consider the experience of agency working in two public sector occupations where agency working has been established for much longer than is the case in social work.

AGENCY WORK WITHIN NHS NURSING

The NHS has engaged private nurses and other staff via agencies or in-house 'banks' of staff since its early beginnings and such usage has been seen as normative within nursing in particular (Tailby 2005). The costs of such staff, rather than any ethical or competency concerns, led to a report by the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts (2007) on the massive expenditure on agency staff within the NHS which was calculated at approximately £756 M by the Audit Commission (2001). Approximately 50% of this sum was believed to be spent on nurses. Despite the introduction of a national in-house bank for NHS staff, National Health Services Professionals, the Healthcare Commission (2005) found little improvement in cost control. Further parliamentary scrutiny (House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts 2007) revealed a continuing lack of success in the management of agency and bank nursing, finding that the amount of money spent on temporary nursing staff had declined very little and very slowly despite an increase in permanent staff. There was also still a lack of information on demand factors and actual usage of temporary nurses. The Committee noted that the use of temporary nursing staff might impact on the quality and safety of patient care if such staff were not subject to strict regulation regarding their mandatory training and total hours worked. This report went on to set a guideline of 6-7% of total salary costs to be a reasonable level at which Health Trusts must hold their expenditure on bank and agency nursing staff and

reiterated the need for quality standards and reliable information that still appeared lacking across the NHS. However, success still seems to elude the NHS in the area of temporary workers and 'NHS Professionals' remains an unproven and costly managerial initiative (House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts 2007).

Although most of the concern expressed about agency nurses has been around costs, some qualitative concerns have also been raised. The Healthcare Commission (2005: 6) commented on a quality issue, namely that 'high usage of temporary staff is strongly linked to low levels of patient satisfaction'. This concern echoed the findings of a previous study into agency nurse usage in an English Health Trust by Purcell et al. (2004: 718), who found that 'the use of temporary agency staff raised issues of quality control and continuity of patient care…'

Martin Ward, Director of the Royal College of Nursing's mental health programme, has stated that bank and agency workers present inherent risks to patient care, given the transient nature of their relationship with the care environment and the patients themselves (BBC News 1999). Concerns regarding the nature of communication, continuity of care and lack of familiarity with institutional policies and protocols have been noted by Manias et al. (2003) in a small-scale case study involving employment agency managers and hospital nursing managers.

The Mid-Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust Inquiry (2010) makes salutary

reading, especially for proponents of managerialism, as it starkly demonstrates

how a cultural preoccupation with targets and budgets led to many avoidable

deaths. The following two extracts from this Inquiry are the only ones that refer

to the use of agency or bank nurses:

> The ward was noisy and chaotic and the patient was so distressed by other
>
> patients that he was unable to sleep. Water and food were left on his table,
>
> but he could not reach them and when a family friend questioned the nurse
>
> in charge she responded that she "was only a bank nurse" and was "too
>
> busy" to answer questions. On one occasion the patient told his daughter
>
> that he was afraid to spill his drink, as if he did his sheets would not be
>
> changed and he would have to stay in dirty, wet ones
>
> (Mid-Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust Inquiry 2010: 40).

> Mrs B1 and Mrs B2 said that they felt intimidated by many of
>
> the staff and that they were unapproachable. This contrasted with
>
> their views of the care workers and bank staff, whom they
>
> praised
>
> (Mid-Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust Inquiry 2010: 308).

The above examples provide conflicting perspectives on the potential ability of

agency staff being able to provide a valued service. The first example depicts a

bank nurse who appeared disinterested in patient care, whereas the second example picks out bank staff as being different to employed staff in that the bank staff were found to be more approachable by service users. Despite the theoretical position that agency staff are better placed to challenge practice within organisations, this is the only example found in any literature in which temporary staff were noted to have a different positive role in the eyes of service users.

AGENCY WORK WITHIN THE TEACHING PROFESSION

Turning to the position of agency work within teaching, supply teaching has been an accepted part of teaching for some years although it has received little academic or political attention, possibly because of its traditional usage as very short-term cover for absence or sickness and therefore its openness to interpretation as a helping hand rather than a structural threat to mainstream jobs. Grimshaw et al. (2003) note the potential for agency or supply teachers to offer a form of individualised resistance against degradation in professional standards brought about by an increasing predominance of managerial rather than professional standards within public service. However, an Ofsted survey (2002) found evidence that the incompetence of supply teachers was damaging the education of millions of children.

Ofsted (2002) inspected 93 schools, both primary and secondary and found that supply teachers make up 4.5% of the workforce at a cost of £600 million per annum. It was estimated that one third of secondary schools have their own in-house bank of local supply staff they can call upon, with the remainder using

private agencies who were reported as providing staff of very variable quality. Schools themselves were criticised for some instances of using agency staff for longer-term cover, both cost and quality of teaching being seen to suffer as a result of such practice. Evidence emerged from the Ofsted report that agency staff are given the most demanding classes, with the more able children being taught by employed staff. Parallels might be drawn here with work by Carey (2006), who reported that agency social workers were given the most difficult cases. Supply teachers in secondary schools were found to be four times more likely than permanent teachers to give sub-standard lessons. Lack of support to agency teachers was noted, as were schools that accept any stand-in just to comply with teaching ratios, regardless of that person's competence. Some agency staff were found to lack basic knowledge of the National Curriculum and the vetting process of some agencies also came in for criticism regarding a lack of robustness. Direct evidence was found whereby the attainment of pupils taught by agency staff over long periods contrasted markedly with those taught by employed staff, the report noting that agency workers are often not told about pupils' particular circumstances and learning needs:

> The quality of some pupils' work had declined in approximately
>
> half of the secondary schools as a result of being taught by
>
> temporary teachers for a significant period of time. Reasons for
>
> this decline included temporary teachers who were not specialists
>
> in the subject, a succession of short-term temporary teachers who
>
> had not been able to support pupils' progress systematically, and

the performance of long-term temporary replacements not being monitored sufficiently closely.

The Ofsted Report concluded with a number of recommendations intended to promote best use of temporary teachers and is noteworthy for its emphasis on qualitative issues. These recommendations included the following areas that were seen as constituting best practice:

- The careful induction of temporary teachers into the school by using materials that are matched to their period of employment. Teachers on short-term contracts are made aware, often through a simple and short document, of the key information that they need to enable them to perform effectively. Staff on longer-term contracts are provided with sufficient information on the school's procedures and practices to help them function, over time, as established members of the school's staff.

- The mentoring of temporary staff by a clearly identified senior teacher who provides guidance and support, especially with regard to managing classes and maintaining discipline, and gives constructive feedback on the quality of the temporary teacher's work.

- The provision of simply structured and clearly explained medium-term and short-term plans that also define the teaching expectations, the resources to be used, the demands that should be made of the class and the homework that should be set.

- The provision of information to the temporary teacher about the abilities and prior attainment of the pupils in the class and the targets that they

should be helped to achieve, to help the teacher focus the teaching and

provide adequate challenge.

- The provision of access to professional development opportunities to help

    long-term temporary staff, especially, to continue to improve their subject

    knowledge and pedagogical skills.

- The management of temporary staff so that all involved understand what is

    required and the professional standards that must be met.

<p align="right">(Ofsted 2002: 15).</p>

The Ofsted Report put the agency teaching issue onto the political agenda, the

response at the time by the then School Standards Minister, David Miliband,

reflected New Labour's belief in managerialism:

> Ofsted is right to raise this issue. We share their concerns about the
>
> quality of some supply teaching. We are working hard to develop a more
>
> systematic approach to covering lessons. We know that there are some
>
> good supply agencies but fly-by-night operations are not acceptable. Our
>
> Quality Mark scheme recognises reputable companies

<p align="right">(Clark 2002).</p>

The private sector, then, despite this example was not criticised per se and the

government continued to express a faith in performance measures such as quality

marks. Although the Ofsted report (2002) is noteworthy in its attempt to bring a

qualitative dimension into the work of agency teachers, no follow-up report has

ever been published and the serious criticisms about the effect of the inappropriate

use of temporary teaching staff on pupils' education have not been commented on

in any literature since. It would seem that an ideological belief in the private

sector within education has led to a situation whereby, even when faced with the

Ofsted (2002) evidence above, information that is critical of any privatised

initiative is not acted upon.   To date there has been no similar scrutiny of agency

social work, possibly because of social work having such a low profile in the

workplace and the media.

DIFFERENTIATING AGENCY SOCIAL WORK

The work of agency social workers differs significantly from the more public

workplace of teachers and nurses, largely taking place in private domains whether

in the homes of service users or in offices rarely observed by outsiders. However,

agency social work shares many of the issues and dilemmas of agency nursing

and agency teaching although it has not attracted a significant level of political

concern. The positive or negative effects of agency social work, particularly in

relation to service users, are perhaps less tangible to measure than the health

outcomes of patients or the educational outcomes of pupils. Cornes et al. (2010)

hypothesised, in their methodology for a national review that service users and

carers would not know if they were in contact with social workers with agency

status. Hence, service users and carers are unlikely to have raised any concerns or

expressed any satisfaction regarding service from agency staff.

Agency social work first began to make inroads into social work in the UK during

the mid-1990s when high vacancy rates among social workers began to occur

(Forde and Slater 2005). Regulation of the temporary employment industry in the

UK was minimal and the attractiveness to social workers of working for agencies

on a temporary self-employed basis soon proved to be commercially viable (Kirkpatrick and Hoque 2006). Agency workers were not employed in any significant numbers within Social Services Departments until around 2000 partly due to a lack of temporary employment agencies operating in this specific market. However, by September 2003 English Social Services Departments engaged 4506 full-time equivalent agency staff, this figure growing to 6981 by September 2003. Half of these agency staff were estimated to be social workers. The Social Care Workforce Survey for 2005 stated that there were 12,527 agency workers in English local authority social services, approximately half of whom were qualified social workers. Costs relating to social services agency workers rose from £148m in 2001 to £255m in 2005 (Local Authority Workforce Intelligence Group 2006).

The *Gershon Report* (Gershon 2004) on cost control within government had highlighted agency staff as an area for savings across the public sector. Cornes et al. (2010) were subsequently commissioned as part of the Department of Health's (2004) *Social Care Workforce Research Initiative* to study developments in the use of agency staff during 2007-2009 and particularly the progress of a declared policy goal in *Options for Excellence* (DoH/DfES 2006) that by 2020 social care employers would no longer need to rely on temporary agency staff to cover tasks that would normally be carried out by a permanent social worker. Cornes et al. (2010) conducted a large-scale study that included case studies and a survey across all 151 English local authorities and found that 80 per cent of them reported making significant use of agency staff, both social care staff and social workers. The main reason for the engagement of the agency social workers has

been identified by key commentators (Kirkpatrick and Hoque 2006; Carey 2006; Cornes et al. 2010) as being to cover for unfilled permanent vacancies. Social work agencies began to recruit from the mid-1990s and it is illuminating to study the pattern of agency staff advertisements over the period 1998-2010 that appeared in the largest social work weekly magazine '*Community Care*'. These give an indication of what agencies see as the working conditions and incentives likely to attract staff.

In June 1998, 13 Agencies were advertising for staff in *Community Care* and in July 2006 there were 19 Agencies advertising. A subsequent pattern of mergers and managed vendor arrangements with local authorities (Hoque et al. 2011) led to fewer and larger recruitment agencies in the marketplace as shown by the drop in advertising agencies to a figure of 9 by June 2010. Table 4.1 below indicates the number of references to working conditions and incentives offered by the advertising agencies across this time span:

	No. of Agencies	Equal Opportunities	Pay Rates	Bonus Scheme	Training
June 4 -July 1 1998	13	12	6	3	1
June 8 -July 5 2006	19	5	11	6	8

June 8 - June 24 2010	9	0	7	0	4

Table 4.1:

Content of Agency Advertising in *Community Care* June 1998 to June 2010

Differences in the above examples that cover three dates from 1998 to 2006 can be seen in the way that the profile on 'Equal Opportunities' as characterising a specific agency work ethic declines, the predominant theme by 2006 being upon financial remuneration. Two of the employment agencies still operating in 2006 had actually dropped their Equal Opportunities references. The wording within the 1998 adverts contain phrases such as 'flexibility without compromise', 'committed to equal opportunities' and 'flexible services with the highest of standards' whereas those from 2006 are clearly concerned with financial incentives that now include referral, signing on and loyalty bonuses. One agency offered a free laptop to successful applicants and another offered an iPod Nano for signing up. The marketing phrases used by two agencies in 2006, 'Because social work is tough enough' and 'All you have to focus on is where to escape', suggest that somehow a social worker who joins an agency might have an easier work life. By 2010 the terminology used was even more blatant in its emphasis on self and financial gain, for example, 'Have your cake and eat it', 'Earn up to £50 per hour' and 'Cherry pickers of the social care industry's élite', which fully reflect a market-based approach to social work employment. Training had been

highlighted by employment agencies in 2006, perhaps because of the registration requirements introduced by the GSCC. The fading profile of training in the advertisements by 2010 suggests that agencies, especially under master vendor systems such as the one in Cowleyshire, no longer needed to provide access to training as it was often available free within local authorities. Bonus schemes also seem to have disappeared by 2010, again probably due to the tighter control over costs under managed vendor systems that had not existed prior to the London Centre for Excellence (2007) report which suggested ways for local authorities to control agency costs. It can be seen from the above that social work employment agencies place emphasis on financial motivation as the key driver to successful recruitment.

A possible explanation for the growth in agency social workers put forward by Kirkpatrick and Hoque (2006), is that of workers choosing the agency option as an escape from recent undesirable changes in labour process in local authorities (see, for example, Coleman 2009; DfE 2011). This model contrasts with the 'proactive school' of explanations found in the business sector, such as free agent or portfolio career seeker (Handy 1994; Engellandt and Riphahn 2003; Platman 2004). Kirkpatrick and Hoque (2006) debate whether the commercial sector explanations for the popularity of agency work translate into the complex world of agency social work and go on to explore a range of possible factors that seem to differentiate the agency social worker from the commercial sector agency worker. They postulate that, despite recent changes, the long-established tradition of local government as a stable and fair employer is perhaps too strongly established in the social work culture for there to have been a radical and permanent move away

from permanent employment and towards agency employment. Their field research comprised interviewing twenty eight participants, twenty of whom were agency social workers, six of whom were managers with local authorities or employment agencies, plus one Unison representative and one British Association of Social Workers (BASW) representative. No clear evidence of any retreat from permanent employment as a long term career choice was found; rather they found a range of factors that had led to social workers choosing agency social work over permanent positions, particularly in the short-term. Participants spoke variously of using agency social work to expedite a breadth of experience, of using agency work to accumulate cash quickly for a specific need or because it offers the opportunity to be paid at higher rates without going through the qualifying periods that pertain to permanent employees wanting to progress through pay bandings.

Significantly, however, Kirkpatrick and Hoque (2006) found there was no emergent theme of social workers seeing agency work as a long-term way of working, in contrast to much of the evidence from the commercial sector (see, for example, Platman 2004). Indeed, there was an understanding that a return to permanent employment was a likely future option for the majority of participants and an acknowledgement that to have spent too much of one's career in an agency position would be detrimental to any future job applications for permanency. Agency social workers, then, would seem rather different to agency workers from the commercial sector and there would appear to be something of a 'push/pull' phenomenon present in terms of their on-going relationship with statutory employers, with some workers being pulled to the comparatively higher pay rates of agency work whereas others were pushed away from what was perceived as the

deteriorating nature of local authority employment (see Chapter 2: 22). Some of the participants in Kirkpatrick and Hoque's (2006) study were quite open and cynical about the ethics of their employment agencies and questioned the degree to which certain agencies were interested only in profit margins rather than investing in them as workers. Some participants still respected the greater training and career developments within local authorities and were uncertain about whether they were much better off overall in their agency position.

The labour process within agency social work is complex and the model of agency social work is perhaps more appropriately described as 'sextupular' in relation to its set of relationships with self, agency, place of work, colleagues, profession and the wider community. The triangular relationship between self, agency and place of work put forward in respect of the commercial sector (Bronstein 1991; Purcell et al. 2004) appears inadequate to explain a complex role that clearly embraces much more than financial considerations.

The quality of social work agency staff and their ways of working with service users and carers has received comparative little attention in the existing literature and no research about agency social workers has involved contact with service users and carers. Cornes et al. (2010) found that several respondents expressed concern about the effect on service users of working with agency social workers whose contacts might be abruptly terminated. Carey (2006, 2011a) identified that, despite some elements of portfolio or free agent perspectives (Handy 1994; Engellandt and Riphahn 2003; Platman 2004), the work carried out by social workers working as care managers across a range of adult services was in fact

characterised by highly stressful working tasks that did not bring fulfilment and did not offer the quality of work life that would traditionally be part of a portfolio career. The evidence to date regarding the quality of working life enjoyed by agency social workers (see Carey 2006, 2008a, 2011a; Kirkpatrick and Hoque 2006) suggests that there is little evidence of them experiencing improved working environments. Carey's (2006) research found that there was sometimes a propensity for management to give all of the difficult and complex cases to agency staff which resulted in unfulfilling working experiences. The phrase 'treadmiller' might accurately reflect this type of agency social work and be added to the other typologies of 'portfolio builders', 'escapees', or 'expedients' identified by Kirkpatrick and Hoque (2006). The difference is that the 'treadmiller' model is not a motivation but a consequential model that flows from the way that some agency social workers are treated.

The motivational drivers for agency social workers are complex but are all driven by individualism and might be located as part of a wider shift within the social work profession identified by Jordan (2004) who lamented the tendency of state social workers to become self-serving in their concerns for professional and personal advancement. Such individualised behaviours are interpreted by Jordan (2004) as natural consequences flowing from mainstream social policies that encourage the self rather than the collective. This underpinning culture of the self, which inherently discourages relationships with the role of the state and wider community, was given considerable legitimacy in the social work arena by the structural changes that were brought about by the NHS and Community Care Act (1990). Principles of choice and individualism, paralleling – at least rhetorically -

the commercial consumer who shops around for the best personal deal, became the dominant ideology across social work, particularly in adult care services. The structural changes brought about by the mixed economy of welfare were allegedly designed to give choice to the service user but an additional consequence of the significance of the contract for both provider and purchaser services was to offer similar choices in respect of workplace options to social care workers and social workers. Jordan (2004) further argued that the underpinning ideology across society which places emphasis on self, rather than more collectivised ways of thinking, is likely to encourage individual social workers, especially those who are young or recently qualified, to look at their own worlds in this way. Making a choice to work for an independent social work agency rather than choose state social work might be a consequence of this ideology, especially as such agencies have proliferated post-1990. Social workers are currently able to pick and choose assignments across a range of agency settings, especially if they are prepared to be mobile. Qualified social workers, for the first time in their history, have a range of employment settings competing for their skilled labour. Jordan (2004) claimed that the public still largely view social workers and their organisations as unsound and untrustworthy and it might be argued that were the pay rates and the short-term nature of the commitment of some agency social workers to become more widely known, then such detrimental images of social work would be made worse. Healy and Meagher (2004: 249) contrast the English position with professional social worker minorities in North America and Australia who 'actively oppose attempts to improve the industrial and cultural recognition of social services work'. These 'abolitionists' see the pursuit of economic reward and professional recognition as elitist and antithetical to the genuine needs of

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service users and their communities. There has been no significant evidence of

parallel movements within the British social work arena, suggesting that there is

either general support for, or apathy, regarding the professional status held by

social workers. The dangers in the individualistic work patterns of agency social

workers have been suggested by Carey (2006, 2009a) to potentially present risk to

service users and further support for such an hypothesis came from a manager of

an adults' care management team in the Cornes et al. (2010) study:

Locum workers have the freedom to move quickly but that poses

a risk for our service because there is always the risk that

someone may come in one day and say 'actually I'm not going to

be here at the end of the week

Cornes et al. (2010: 51).

The view expressed above can be interpreted as being essentially managerialist in

its core concern being with risk to the service, rather than to the service users'

quality of experience. There were no views expressed by managers in the Cornes

et al. (2010) study regarding risks to service users that might be occasioned by

agency social workers, suggesting that this concern is not on their agenda. The

discussion in Chapter 8 will further explore this area of risk in the light of the case

study findings.

PUBLIC AWARENESS OF AGENCY SOCIAL WORK

Agency social work has largely escaped public attention and media scrutiny. One

of the few national profiles ever given to agency social work was in reference to

the death of baby Peter Connelly in Haringey in 2007 when the *Daily Mail* (Allen 2010) mentioned the agency status of one of the social workers involved in the run-up to his death. The actual words used in this *Daily Mail* article were: 'Miss Ward was only an agency worker', the use of the word 'only' suggesting that agency held some kind of inferior status. The same article goes on to claim that there was an over-reliance in Haringey on agency workers where they made up 50% of all social workers. Similar facts had been reported by the joint inspection of Haringey's Children's Services (DfE 2008):

> The high turnover of qualified social workers in some social care
>
> teams has resulted in heavy reliance on agency staff, who make
>
> up 51 of 121 established social worker posts.
>
> (DfE 2008: 13).

Little was made of this finding in the mainstream press, possibly because the complexities and subtleties of agency status were not well understood. Unison (2008), in giving evidence to the Lord Laming progress report, stressed the dangers of reliance on agencies as well as giving a further list of issues that they believed were against good safeguarding practice.   These issues included poor working conditions in terms of budget constraints, cost-cutting, deletion of posts, not filling vacancies and an overwhelming emphasis on cost control rather than quality. The situation of instability that this caused was seen by Unison as a key factor in skewing priorities and fettering the professional judgement of social workers. The rigidity of time scales for completing assessments was noted as leading to a prioritisation of technical tasks over relationship-based tasks. A social worker from the south-east of England was quoted as follows: "since 2003

time spent behind a desk has moved from 50% to 80%" (Unison 2008: S.4). A Unison representative from the north of England is quoted as saying "our duty workers are unduly stressed by IT issues rather than being able to fully focus on the needs of children and families" (Unison 2008: S.5). The Laming Report (2009) stated:

> Many authorities are reliant on agency social workers, despite this being a short-term solution. Together with the high turnover of permanent staff and use of staff from abroad, it fails to provide vulnerable children with the continuity of the same worker with whom they can form a long term relationship.
>
> (Laming 2009: S.5.5).

The Laming Report discussed the initiative within Hackney social work teams, entitled 'Reclaiming Social Work' (Cross et al. 2010). This was a managerial initiative that might be seen as representing a resistance to over-bureaucratisation and was designed to better support families and social workers by encouraging team responsibility for service users, led by newly created posts of consultant social workers. Laming (2009: 48) stated 'Families and children want consistency and this approach goes a long way to securing that'. The key question about the type of support that children and families want has been addressed in literature around the needs of children. For example, *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2010: 29) stated that 'Children need to feel loved and valued, and be supported by a network of reliable and affectionate relationships'. This statutory guidance did not specifically refer to social work practice but is an inter-agency document

that exhorted all professionals to 'prioritise direct communication and positive and respectful relationships with children, ensuring the child's wishes and feelings underpin assessments and any safeguarding activities' (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2010: 32). With regard to policy in adult social care, the New Labour view was one that constructed family members and carers as experts and partners. Such partnership is challenged by the Social Work Task Force (2010) which noted that the public understanding of social work remained unclear. It might be hypothesised that, if the public are unclear about the role of social work in general, they are more likely to be unclear about what agency social work might entail.

Community Care magazine, widely read across social care and social work organisations, began to highlight the status of agency social worker in certain of its reports from 2009. For example, 'Agency social worker caught with drugs' (Lombard 2010b); 'Agency worker suspended for fiddling time sheets' (McGregor 2010a) and 'Wigan social worker jailed for burglary – agency worker Tony Child had passed CRB checks' (McGregor 2009b). This last piece of reporting included the statement that 'a spokesman for Wigan Council said Child was employed through an agency and the Council was assured he had undergone the appropriate police checks'. This statement from Wigan Council would suggest that managerial procedures, such as police checks, were all that was needed to employ a social worker with vulnerable people. The burglary in question had been at the home of a very elderly lady, the social worker's service user, who had been in hospital at the time. A further *Community Care* article by McGregor (2011a) 'Agency social workers to earn £230 a day at Pay-Cut

Council' reported that Southampton Council were cutting pay to permanent staff, as a result of which social workers had been taking industrial action including an overtime ban and not covering vacant posts. On reading the article more closely, it became clear that it was only senior practitioners who received £230 a day. The article went on to highlight how much higher this agency rate was than the rate for employed social workers in Southampton who were paid approximately £100 or £145 a day. This constituted a yearly salary range between £26,000 and £38,000. A year's agency pay at £230 a day would equate to approximately £50,000 per year. The cabinet member for Children's Services and Learning in Southampton stated that he made no apologies for putting child safety first in this instance.

Community Care (2000) reported ASA Locum Services as having stated that the quality of newly-qualified social workers was so poor that it was listing 20 workers whom it refused to offer out to councils as potential agency workers. The shortcomings identified by the agency in these workers were alleged to include misplaced motivation such as the desire for high pay and regular hours and a range of poor communication skills, including written work. The agency blamed colleges and the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work for these attributes in the social workers. This is an interesting business pitch and the article included a comment from CCETSW that seemed to extol the virtues of agency social work: 'to be a good locum, one has to be more competent than the permanent staff, because you must go straight in, hit the ground running and get the work done' (*Community Care* 2000). No evidence was found in any of the subsequent literature suggesting that there was any greater competency in agency staff than there was in permanent staff. McGregor (2011b) reported the findings

of research across the West Midlands that estimated the cost of agency social workers to be between 25% to 50% more than permanent staff and went on to say that they delivered poorer quality services. This research was carried out across 14 local authorities and included 80 interviews, a concerning finding having been that high quality agency workers were in the minority and that less experienced social workers had been engaged by local authorities as agency social workers because they had no other option in the market place. One acting team manager was quoted as saying; "there are often issues around capabilities which they deny. Then they will just up and leave" (McGregor 2011b). Examples were also quoted in this report of employed social workers who had been suspended from work but who were found to be working while suspended as agency social workers in neighbouring local authorities. The financial estimates in this report were that a senior social worker would cost £17,450 to employ for 12 weeks work compared to £11,770 for a permanent member of staff i.e. a yearly difference approximating to £24,000 extra per year. Sanctuary Social Care, a national recruitment agency, criticised this report:

> We are furious with the suggestion that social workers become locums in order to conceal problems with their conduct and performance. This is a slur on over 5000 professionals who hit the ground running every day, often under difficult circumstances and with the hardest caseloads imaginable.

(McGregor 2011b).

The Director of Children, Learning and Young People at Coventry City Council, Colin Green, who led on the Regional Retention Project (Social Worker Retention Project 2011) said that this report was accurate, well-researched and not written for the benefit of employment agencies but to help local authorities better manage their workforce issues. Green summarised agency social work with a succinct comment: "there are many very good agency social workers; we have had some at Coventry who have been first class. But some weren't." (McGregor 2011b). Issues of quality and fit are partly related to the ways in which agency social workers are procured and deployed, areas that will be explored below.

THE PROCUREMENT AND DEPLOYMENT SYSTEMS OF AGENCY SOCIAL WORK

As noted previously, Cornes et al. (2010) carried out a review across England of the procurement and deployment systems in what was the first national study of agency work in social care and social work. They were commissioned by the Department of Health to carry out a review of progress being made towards the DFES/DH initiative, *Options for Excellence* (2006), which was intended to reduce the amount of temporary agency staff being used across social care. Their research did not distinguish between social work and social care in parts but nonetheless it is a very relevant document to examine in more depth. Their methodology was to survey all 151 local authorities in England that had social services responsibilities for adults and they also carried out a range of case studies and spoke to local authority staff, employment agencies and agency workers. There was service user involvement in an advisory group that contained service user representatives who attended an expert seminar.

Bank, pool and agency staff had been estimated to take up almost 6% of the adult

social care workforce in England (Eborall and Griffiths 2008). Cornes et al.

(2010) found that 92% of the responding local authorities had used agency

workers during the 2008-2009 financial year. Eighty per cent of these

organisations had also attempted to bring down their use of agency workers. One

of the key strategies that had been employed to reduce their expenditure on

agency staff had been to dispense with the previous ad-hoc system whereby local

team managers exercised their discretion and used local networks to bring in

agency social workers as and when needed. Mollitt (2006) had noted earlier

managerial trends toward centralising control over agency staff procurement that

had occurred in some London Boroughs where agency usage was high. Owing to

concern over the cost of such localised initiatives, local authorities had brought in

a range of new procurement systems. Over 25% of participants had introduced

their own staff banks, although staff banks were seen as having problems with

economies of scale, particularly in small authorities. A majority of authorities had

brought in managed vendor systems, a business model that essentially outsources

all responsibilities for agency staff. There are a range of models within such

managed systems, the most controlling one being the master vendor system.

Cornes et al. (2010) reported that this system is the most widely used in England

and is a system that gives a monopoly to one employment agency for the supply

of agency workers. The figures below (4.3 and 4.4) illustrate how the high

discretion traditional procurement system worked compared with the low

discretion master vendor system, whereby all requests for agency staff have to go

through one contracted agency that either provides them itself or sub-contracts to
another employment agency:
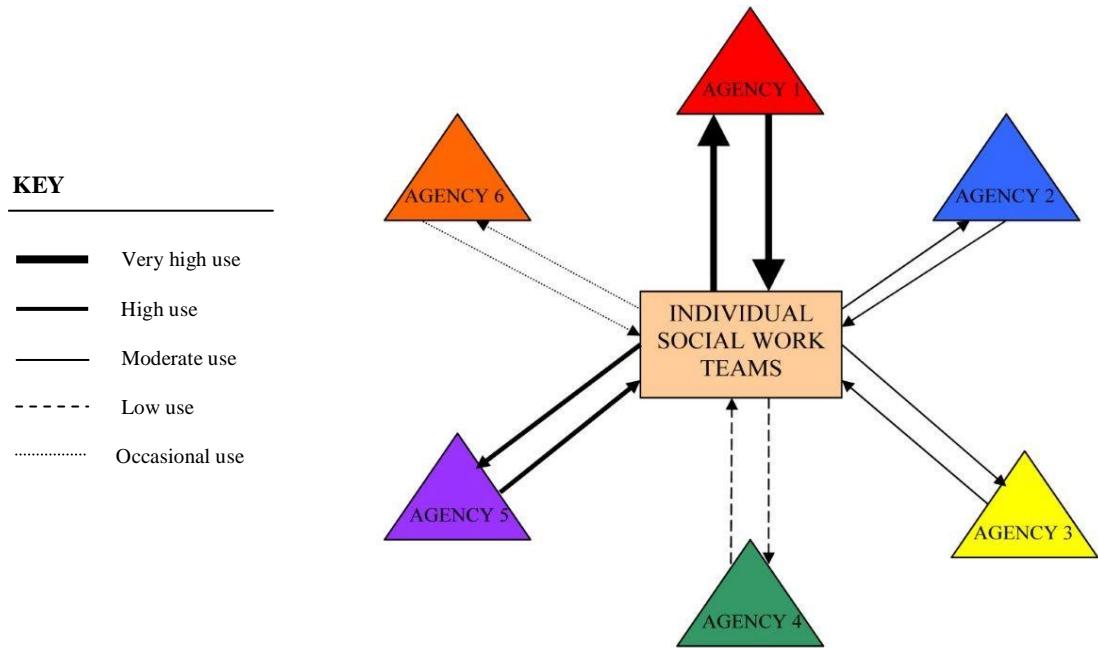
Figure 4.3

Traditional Procurement System (High Discretion)

The benefits of this traditional system were that individual social work team
managers could exercise high levels of discretion in engaging agencies that they
felt best met their needs. The above diagram illustrates that some agencies would
accordingly receive heavy usage whereas others would have occasional usage.
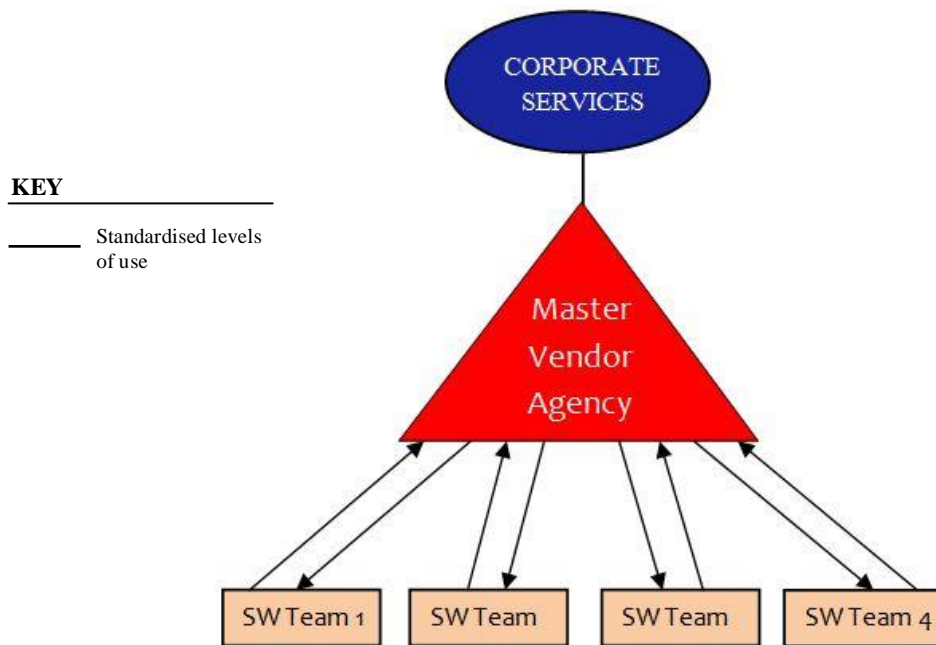
Figure 4.4 Master Vendor System (Low Discretion)

The standardised usage of master vendor systems provides low levels of discretion for team managers. They are essentially bound by the master vendor contract that states that all agency staff are only to be recruited though this corporate system.

The benefits claimed from such schemes are that they cut down administrative costs but, despite claims by local authorities that significant savings have been made, Cornes et al. (2010) found that interviews carried out with team managers elicited a very different picture. Some evidence was produced from these team managers that agency usage was actually on the increase. The adult services managers interviewed stated that the reasons they still used agency staff were to do with difficulties in recruiting permanent staff and the time it actually took to recruit using local authorities' systems (estimated by the London Centre for

Excellence [2007] at between 6 weeks to 3 months). Recruitment to permanent

posts and the efficacy of recruitment practices are both factors within the gift of a

local authority to rectify if they had the will to change systems. The frustrations

of the local authority recruitment system are reflected in the Cornes et al. study

(2010: 50):

> ... constant senior management reorganisation – it influences the
>
> managers' ability to make long term permanent post decisions,
>
> so you find that some teams have an agency worker for say 2 ½
>
> years which doesn't seem appropriate if you have too many
>
> agency workers then the (permanent staff) in the team think (the
>
> agency workers) are getting paid £30 an hour, I only get paid £14
>
> – I'd better become an agency worker. It can be very negative …
>
> they (agency workers) become the more dominant influence on
>
> the team.
>
> <div align="right">Agency worker.</div>

Most of the social work managers interviewed as part of the Cornes et al. study

(2010) were, however, positive about the contribution agency social workers

made and claims were made that good agency social workers were thought to be

able to get through high volumes of work and could refresh teams by challenging

practice and bringing in new skills and insights from other areas:

> … they come with a freer mind, they are more compliant
>
> …(teams), can get quite stagnant … agency workers bring news

of what's going on over the hill … having that injection of

freshness and difference to the team is quite a good thing … they

ruffle a few feathers and that isn't always a bad thing.

General Manager Adult Social Care – sensory impairment

(Cornes et al. 2010: 48).

Agency workers have pointed to the many advantages agency working can bring,

not just in terms of flexibility but also in opportunities for broadening their

practice experiences. This was especially the case for newly qualified social

workers who were often using agency work to give them the experience and the

insight they needed to secure the right permanent job (Kirkpatrick and Hoque

2006). Cornes et al. (2010) interviewed forty five qualified agency social workers

and found that the vast majority saw agency social work as a positive move and

that it fulfilled a range of needs, ranging from the ability to get new experience

quickly across a spectrum of work, enabling people to work part-time and

flexibly, allowing people who had retired or were leading up to retirement to

gradually wind down from work and bringing financial reward. The findings of

Cornes et al. (2010) supported the findings of Kirkpatrick and Hoque (2006) who

found a mixture of push/pull factors driving people to take up agency work, with a

balance towards those being driven or retreating from permanent employment.

Support was also found by Cornes et al. (2010) for findings in previous literature

(Carey 2006) regarding the lack of induction for agency social workers. A phrase

that occurs on several occasions throughout the interviews is 'hit the ground

running', an approach that suggests that an agency social worker should be able to

automatically fit into existing systems of work. Agency social workers reported

that they were discriminated against in terms of access to training and stated that

they got the difficult and complex cases:

> Full time members of staff use and abuse us by giving us all the
>
> gritty, nasty, horrible jobs and the clients they don't actually
>
> want to deal with themselves …
>
> (Cornes et al. 2010: 89)

The above findings support those of Carey (2006) who also found that agency

social workers were given the most difficult cases and were not always welcomed

as colleagues. Cornes et al. 2010: 48) found differing views regarding agency

social workers' experiences of integration such as: "on the plus side you tend to

be less drawn into the politics of the team and the more difficult personal

relationships that can occur" and "They need us but they don't like us". Cornes et

al. (2010) described agency social workers as largely viewing their recruitment

consultants and employment agencies as marginal and administrative, in contrast

to the views expressed by the agency consultants and managers. Very little

mention was made by the agency social workers of the impact of managed vendor

schemes, suggesting that the problems identified by the recruitment consultants,

employment agency managers and the local authority management regarding the

drawbacks of such managed systems were not ones shared by the agency social

workers. The potentially deskilling nature of agency social work for newly

qualified social workers was commented on by Carey (2007a) and Hoque and

Kirkpatrick (2008) in that, although a variety of work assignments might be

experienced, the cases will all be high risk. As an agency social worker, it was envisaged that the newly qualified person would be pressurised to close those cases swiftly with minimum service user contact and little in the way of support or professional development. The increasing demand for experienced agency social workers over recent years and the problems that newly-qualified social workers will find in meeting the more exacting requirements of the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) with its proposals for reduced caseloads, increased supervision, personal development planning and learning and development targets are likely to mean that less newly-qualified social workers will go into social work positions with agencies. The newly-qualified workers interviewed by Cornes et al. (2010) were largely very positive in their appraisal of their agency work, both with regard to pay rates and experience. They were also, with one exception, all intending to take up local authority employment in the long-run and hence accorded with the expediency model of agency social workers as identified by Kirkpatrick and Hoque (2006).

A further finding of the Cornes et al. (2010) research was that agency workers were often used for specific task-centred project work, which possibly contains less risk to service users than does the performance of casework. The fact that agency workers can leave at very short notice was identified by an agency social worker in the research:

> I had one particular assignment where I only actually did a few days (and left) unfortunately it was in Children and Families …

it was very much here is your caseload – an extensive caseload –

get on with it. I didn't like the practice, I felt very unsafe.

<div align="right">(Cornes et al. 2010: 11).</div>

Cornes et al. (2010: 71-72) also provided some critical insight into the views held
by managers and consultants from employment agencies, the commodification of
agency social workers via the vendor management system being articulated in the
following quote from a recruitment consultant:

… we probably get access to more jobs, but you get poorer job
quality. We will be informed that a qualified social worker is
required for children's services but that might be as much
information as we get. Before we would find out about the team,
the type of person wanted, what experience was needed. The
detail would be a lot clearer and therefore our matching and
recruitment skills were of much more benefit. We certainly
notice now that it is a volume driven business now with scant
regard to quality.

An employment agency manager states:

I do know of competitors who have teams who are just scatter-
gunning CVs and that's a long way off spending 2 hours
interviewing somebody and then having a relationship with the
manager that you know very well and speaking to them and fully

describing to that manager what this person – who you know

very well – is and what their capabilities are. So there is a loss

there.

(Cornes et al. 2010: 72).

These statements are particularly powerful indictments of the recent managerially-driven procurement systems in that they come from employment agency management staff. Wheeler (2008) is an employment agency director who states that managed vendor systems are advantageous in terms of reducing administrative overheads but he notes that it is the economic drive to cut costs that presents the sector with its real challenges:

…the negative PR and spin surrounding agency spend should be

challenged … the factual 'premium' borne by the client for

agency locums is approximately 3% to 5% of the total spend. It

should be clearly communicated to all parties in order that

balanced judgement can be reached.

(Wheeler 2008, cited in Cornes et al. 2010: 74-75).

Again, it is an agency manager who makes the following comments on the path down which local authority commissioning teams seem to be going:

I think Social Services Departments are being pressurised into

doing things by price and even though they have a commitment

to quality they are allowing themselves to be going down a

procurement model rather than a human resource model. A

procurement model is based on the lowest price and that is a

risky route.

(Wheeler 2008, cited in Cornes et al. 2010: 75-76).

Cornes et al. (2010) report these findings from employment managers and

consultants rather uncritically and it could be that such responses were the

expected responses given the vested interests present. It might be noted that the

examples cited by employment agency managers and recruitment consultants are

supportive of partnership-type working, pitched in such a way that partnership is

primarily seen as being in the best interests of local authorities and their

workforces. Such standpoints do not usually characterise business ideology, most

capitalist business being geared to domination and control of the market rather

than partnership (Foster et al. 2011).

In relation to the lack of induction training and supervision discussed by agency

social workers, Cornes et al. (2010) conclude that it is poor management of

agency workers, rather than agency working per se, that poses the risk to service

users. This very categorical statement is challengeable because, even with the

best management, the nature of agency social work is that agency social workers

can leave their posts at very short notice, even if they have been in post for

protracted periods (eight to nine months was described by the participants in the

Cornes et al. [2010] study as an average length of time for which they stay in

agency work). Some agencies stated that certain staff stay with them for many

years, particularly if that agency provides access to training and other benefits.

Kirkpatrick and Hoque (2006) made the case that many social workers choose

agency work because of the deteriorating conditions of employment that they

perceived to characterise much local authority employment, although they do also

note that most agency workers did not see their employment in terms of a

permanent portfolio career. Similarly, the Cornes et al. study (2010) found that

most of the agency social workers interviewed did not see agency work as a long-

term career and most did want to return to local authority employment once they

found the right fit with a team and their lifestyle. Office politics, unreasonable

caseloads and poor management were generally cited by the agency social

workers interviewed as being the reasons for seeking agency work rather than pay

and conditions. Cornes et al. (2010) concluded also that the big issue for local

government was the strategic management of their workforce and that, although

they noted that some efficiency savings did appear to be achieved by initiatives

such as master vendor systems or in-house banks, they were critical of the way in

which agency workers are seen as a 'variable' cost. They quoted a recruitment

consultant from an employment agency as follows:

> ... (local councils) tend to go round in cycles, so they will put a
>
> recruitment freeze on locums, saying that they are only going to
>
> recruit permanent members of staff through their own campaigns
>
> … it's really strict and then 6 months later they realise that

people have left or that they haven't been able to recruit and then

go back to using agency staff again

(Cornes et al. 2010: 14).

The Recruitment and Employment Confederation (2008), a trade group, report that increasing expenditure on social care agency staff is likely in a sector where recruitment remains challenging. Cornes et al. (2010) concluded by calling for partnership-working with the employment business sector that secured quality service at a fair price, coupled with good strategic and operational management of agency workers in the workplace.

SUMMARY

The literature on agency social work can be seen to contain a range of different perspectives on the nature of agency social work, its role and purpose. The literature base has developed considerably over the period of this study as the influence of markets and managerialism has continued to dominate the social work landscape, despite recent proposals by the Social Work Reform Board (2010) and the *Munro Report* (DfE 2011) suggesting a possible turn away from managerialism and proceduralism. Evidence about the motivations, working conditions and outcomes of agency social work is beginning to reach some common ground, despite relatively few studies having been carried out in this sensitive area. A clear argument that emerges throughout the research is that the failure of local authorities to offer employment conditions that are as flexible as those of agency social work lies at the root of agency social work's expansion across the social care sector.

The relationship of private sector employment agencies with local authorities is described by Cornes et al. (2010: 65) as 'shadowy', a phrase which suggests that there remains a good deal of uncertainty about how employment agencies operate, how they become approved to supply staff, what is the nature of any partnership and what values they hold. The advertising in *Community Care* over the period 1998 to 2010 suggested a move away from the values of equality of opportunity to the values of the market place. In line with the capitalist market model, the small local businesses that once characterised the social care employment agency sector have now, by a process of mergers and acquisitions, become part of a smaller number of larger corporations whose rigidities make them less locally responsive to the needs of social work teams as procurement becomes centralised through systems such as master vendor systems. This loss of discretion within social work agencies since the advent of managed vendor systems can also be seen as a degradation in working environment for the recruitment consultants who staff these agencies. Very few agencies are now small 'Boutique Sector Specialists' with expert professional knowledge of social work and its complexities (Cornes et al. 2010: 68), rather they are a niche part of larger corporations. Carey (2004, 2008b) identifies that the backers of some of the large corporations behind major employment agencies are in fact based in other countries, such as the USA. Servian (2011) also draws attention to the activities of venture capitalists in this area and the issues of profit transfer out of the UK, these profits having come from public services.

Questions for employment agencies in the future will be around the degree to which they increase in size and possibly begin to recreate the monoliths from which some social workers may have wished to flee, the degree to which they will be able to offer benefits such as pension schemes, the protection of the 'self-employed' status of their workers and their ability to avoid involvement in the types of individual human tragedies that have so often brought about radical and structural change within social care in the UK.

The case study approach has been the main vehicle that has developed the research base regarding agency social work (see Chapter 1:4). This knowledge base has flowed from urban settings and the first dedicated rural case study of agency work, that of adult social work teams in Cowleyshire, will be discussed in the following chapter which considers the methodology employed in approaching the case study.

CHAPTER 5

METHODOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

The discussions in chapters 3 and 4 have raised a number of questions about the nature of agency work, particularly with regard to motivations of individuals taking up agency roles and the effect that agency social work may have on team dynamics and service user experience.

The key data regarding the nature and contribution of agency social work have been developed from case studies (see Chapter 1: 4). A further case study of agency social work, the first of a rural authority, was chosen for this project. This enabled the existing knowledge to be built upon and enabled similarities and differences to be established between existing data and the data derived from this project (Robinson and Norris 2001).

Firstly, the research question will be set out. Secondly, the location of the current study, the English local authority of Cowleyshire, will be introduced. Thirdly, the methodological approach taken will be outlined, from negotiation of access through to the coding and thematic analysis of data. Finally, reflections on the methodology will conclude the chapter.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Given that my interest was in exploring the nature of agency social work in a rural county, my research question was: What are the perceptions and experiences of agency social work in a rural county?

The research issues involved in addressing this question are those of access, ethics and reliability. In order to get a range of views and explore new territory with regard to research about agency social work, the case study was originally envisaged as an exploration of perceptions and experiences of agency social workers and managers, employed social workers and managers, agency and employed administrative staff, employment agency managers, service users and councillors. The intention was to capture as wide a range of views as possible in a case study that included different perspectives across Cowleyshire. However, owing to access issues that are discussed later in this chapter, no service users or councillors were included in the study. Further aspirations of the study were to make recommendations for research, policy and practice.

THE CHOICE OF A CASE STUDY APPROACH

Yin (2003) emphasised that a case study is a form of empirical enquiry investigating a contemporary phenomenon within its naturalistic setting in ways that can capture the nuances of complex roles and relationships in both depth and detail. The component parts of a case study are of interest to the researcher who is also interested in how these component parts fit together and present a holistic picture. The choice of case study must be capable of producing the types of data that will enable the research question to be answered rigorously.

Yin (2003) identified five different types of case study - the critical case wherein the case study is chosen to allow a particular hypothesis to be tested; the extreme or unique case where the focus is on the aspect of uniqueness; the representative or typical case where the area of study is deliberately chosen to enable comparison with similar cases; the revelatory case where the area of study is seen as having the potential to illuminate a new set of dynamics and the longitudinal case whereby a case study site might be one that would enable repeat visits over a period of time to study changes that have taken place. Cowleyshire was chosen as a single case study because its rural nature made it partly a revelatory case with the potential to uncover new knowledge regarding perceptions and experiences of agency social work while at the same time its care management systems gave it elements of a typical case that provided the scope to enable critical examination of established theory regarding labour process theory within agency social work (Carey 2003; Hoque et al. 2006). Case studies often have a convenience element to them and this was true for the study of Cowleyshire, which was a nearby local authority, but any case study must be capable of producing material that will allow for critical analysis of emergent themes (Robinson and Norris 2001). All previous case studies (see Chapter 1: 4) had been carried out in urban areas and can be seen as typical cases that bear comparison with each other and hence help build up an aggregated picture of the phenomena being studied. Findings from the rural Cowleyshire study were seen as potentially comparable with the findings of urban based case studies, given the homogeneity of national care management practice. Even if findings emerged that demonstrated differences from the previous urban areas of study, such contrasting findings add to the knowledge

base about agency social work. The literature tends to lead to polarised positions about the kind of contributions that case studies can make but these contributions do not have to be seen as mutually exclusive. Case study research can be concerned both with capturing the distinctive elements of a case as well as using data as a way to draw empirical or theoretical conclusions. Walton (1992) rejected any intrinsic model of the purpose of case studies and argued that case studies should be approached from an instrumental perspective that focused on the ability of case studies to generate further theory. He saw case studies as having a dynamic relationship with theory and that the real value in debating the different perspectives and views within case studies was to produce new theory rather than to capture the empirical uniqueness of cases. Walton (1992) saw theory as necessarily tentative when working with the complexities of case studies and stressed that an open mind should always be kept by researchers who must resist the temptation to make the empirical findings of a case study artificially fit with elements of existing theory and be ever open to the need for adaptations and adjustments to that theory. Similarly, Hartley (2004), stated that a case study can effectively challenge preconceptions and hence stimulate new theory, such theory being reinterpreted throughout the life of a case study as new perspectives, similarities and differences emerge.

Becker and Bryman (2004) argued that the emphasis on the intrinsic, empirical value of a case study or on its theoretical potential depended largely on the purpose of the case study. In the case of the Cowleyshire case study, the research was interested in both of these approaches – to see how Cowleyshire participants perceived and experienced agency social work was seen as possibly revelatory in

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its own right but importance was attached also to exploring how the case study findings added to the established body of theory regarding agency social work.

The themes in a case study are likely to reflect different perspectives and experiences held by different groups of participants on the same issue. This is more likely to be the situation when the research question is a sensitive or contentious one that produces polarised opinions as part of its data capture. It was my intention to try to capture a holistic view (Punch 2005) by seeking as wide a range of participants as possible from agency social work - agency social workers and managers, employed social workers and managers, agency and employed administrative staff and employment agency managers. Multiple tools such as interviews and questionnaires can all be usefully employed within a case study site, each tool being capable of drawing out different interpretations of a topic that can add to the richness of emergent themes. As will be discussed below, multiple methods such as attending negotiatory meetings, SWOT analysis and semi-structured interviewing were all deployed in the search for data within Cowleyshire.

Ethical Considerations

Gaining informed consent from participants is fundamental to the practice of ethical research, particularly in areas of research that could be seen as sensitive. Sensitive research is defined by Becker and Bryman (2004) as research that has potential implications for society or key social groups and that can be potentially threatening to those taking part. As Gillen (2007) stated, agency social work is a sensitive area because agency social workers receive higher rates of pay yet work

alongside employed social workers doing the same work. There is evidence (Kirkpatrick and Hoque 2006; Sale 2007; Carey 2011a) that the differentiated pay scales of agency social workers, their emotional distance from employed staff and their ability to easily move on to new positions lead to strained relations within social work teams. These findings had implications for my research and made me aware of the sensitivities involved in trying to capture the views of agency social workers and employed social workers, a range of 'hidden agendas' possibly being inhibitive factors to the collection of reliable data. Ethical issues were envisaged in possible discussion of pay scales and comparative remuneration levels, equality of opportunity in pay scale progression, union membership and the effects of short-term relationships with colleagues and service users. There was also likely to be suspicion attached to any managerially-sanctioned research, whether from agency staff or employed staff and the challenge I envisaged was how to maximise participation in such a contentious area of enquiry.

Although I was fully committed to ensuring confidentiality in all aspects of my research, I was aware that I had offered to share the findings of my research with all the participants, including managers and aware also that any aggregated data or themes could be used by Cowleyshire management to decide their future usage of agency social workers. Therefore, particular care was called for in the construction of a research methodology and subsequent research conduct that guaranteed confidentiality and minimised any potential negative consequences for individuals, while remaining sufficiently robust in its sampling to produce data that was valid and reliable. It was also envisaged that there would be some

restrictions placed by the local authority regarding the extent to which certain information, such as financial information, would be made available.

RESEARCHER AS A HYBRID INSIDER-OUTSIDER

My stance as researcher could be seen as one of 'insider looking in' in that I was a qualified social worker with considerable knowledge and experience of the type of setting being researched. The insider methodological approach has both benefits and drawbacks**.** The advantages are: a superior understanding of the organisational culture; an ability to interact naturally with participants; previously established sets of relationships and a likelihood of being privy to sensitive information not easily available to outsider-researchers (Bonner and Tolhurst 2002; Unluer 2012). It is also the case, however, that an insider-researcher may not recognise important information because of its familiarity and there are also potential drawbacks such as role duality/overlooking certain routine behaviours/making assumptions/participants assuming that views and issues are already known to the insider-researcher/participants assuming that the researcher is already knowledgeable about areas and having a closeness to the situation that prevents a bigger picture being seen (Unluer 2012). However, the value of insider-research should not be under-estimated. It has the potential to produce knowledge from the inside at a local level that can have great value in developing nuanced complex understanding of social phenomena such as agency social work. My researcher position within Cowleyshire was something of a hybrid one with elements of both insider and outsider models (Paechter 2013). The characteristics I had of an insider were those of being a fellow qualified social worker and of having had some experience of working as an agency social worker. I spoke the

same insider language, understood the values, process and pressures of social work but had no knowledge of informal power structures and no pre-existing relationships to facilitate the research process that might have been available to true insider-researchers within Cowleyshire.

In introducing myself to potential participants at team meetings, I made it clear that, although senior management had granted me access to the organisation, I was an independent researcher from the University of Warwick and not part of any management or strategic plan regarding agency social work within Cowleyshire. I shared my basic background and lack of detailed knowledge regarding care management practice within adult social care teams with potential participants at team meetings, although this made me aware that this course of action may have led to them presuming that I had knowledge that I did not. My position in Cowleyshire was certainly to respect the knowledge base of participants and to see them as active participants in research as part of an approach that was clearly aimed at doing research 'with' participants rather than 'on' participants , while not purporting to conceptualise participants as co-researchers (DeLyser 2010).

It may be that the hybrid position is a preferred position for exploratory research as it challenges any simplistic dichotomy of insider/outsider and that such a position somewhere in the middle of the insider and outsider polarities, has a greater likelihood of maximising the advantages of insider perspectives while minimising the potential for disadvantage. The following section will describe how these complexities were negotiated in Cowleyshire.

I was by no means up to date with the latest developments in matters such as systems for agency staff procurement, computerised information systems, individualised budgets and personalisation practices and had a lot to learn regarding agency social work. From the outset, I had been open with research participants and shared that I had worked both in employed and agency positions as a social worker and hence had previous knowledge that might also be seen as offering some credibility and would help to establish rapport. Unluer (2012) stressed that the qualitative researcher must overcome some of these disadvantages by being reflexive in these areas and use research techniques such as discussions with supervisors, careful reading of field notes and transcripts to help best assure the quality of data. My guarantee of confidentiality across all stages of the planned research was geared to establishing trust between researcher and practitioner. The establishment of trust was seen as essential if authentic views were to be shared and I had resolved to develop an explicit awareness of any possible bias in my data collection and analysis at every stage of the research process.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research methodology was designed to capture perspectives and experiences from as wide a range of participants as possible in a sensitive area of research. The reasons for choosing to start the research with a series of negotiatory meetings which were then followed up with invitations to participate in a SWOT analysis, with a further invitation to a semi-structured interview, will be discussed below.

Negotiating Access to the Case Study

The planned timeline for my fieldwork was from the summer of 2008 until early spring 2009. However, due to the logistical problems detailed below regarding the negotiation of access to a case study site, the fieldwork did not begin until the autumn of 2008 and continued through until summer 2009. In choosing a case study site, my original ambition had been to identify a rural local authority that would allow access to their social work services across both children's and adults' teams.

Logistically, I was concerned to minimise travel time and hence made my first approach to my nearest rural local authority, making contact with a key manager in research and development who seemed interested in the topic, especially with regard to the costs of agency social workers across adults' and children's social work teams. He offered to 'tout' my proposal around the operational managers in the organisation to see if they were supportive. I was rather attracted to this relational approach to a research enquiry and saddened to hear some two months later when, having chased up progress, that the research and development manager in question had retired after suffering a heart attack. I was offered the name of his replacement, who asked me to send in a formal written request detailing the essence of my study. This I duly did, only to be told another two months later that the authority could not support my research request because there was little interest in participation, particularly as they were preoccupied with the introduction of a new computerised system.

I subsequently approached another rural authority, Cowleyshire, hoping to conduct a case study across the adults' and children's social work teams and was asked to submit a brief outline of my proposals. Cowleyshire is a small rural authority that has experienced problems in the quality of its services in recent years to such an extent that at the time of study it was graded a one star authority under a government performance ranking scheme (Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions 2001). The authority experienced high vacancy rates partly due to its rural nature and at the time of study made significant use of agency social work, managerial and administrative staff. The proportion of agency social workers was estimated as being 6% of all social workers across England (Morris 2009), whereas in Cowleyshire at the proportion was 13% (interview with Tempo employment agency manager, see Chapter 7: 168).

Cowleyshire had undergone a number of reorganisations over the last five years and was poised for further change within its adult care management teams due to financial shortfalls. Constant reorganisation, 'temporariness', a prevalence of 'interim/agency' posts at senior level, the beginnings of the personalisation/individualised budgets policy and the ever-tighter financial restrictions had led a challenging work environment. In addition, there was an overall impression that social workers saw themselves as working for 'the system' (see, for example, Chapter 7: 193) which was how they referred to the recently introduced computer system, Zealosoc.

I received responses regarding my request for research access from both specialisms within a month. Children's Services said that they were too busy to accommodate the research because of a preoccupation with the introduction of a new computer system. However, the Interim Director of Adult Services, a person who had been in post a little under a year, gave an encouraging response. 'Interim' was not a term that I had previously encountered during my social work career. 'Interim' management had apparently become the favoured mode of management in an increasing number of local authorities, the phrase being particularly associated with posts that were funded by 'transformation' monies flowing from a central government Social Care Reform Grant. This provided £520 million over three years to support local authorities in delivering the necessary changes to their choice and control and preventative strategies within adult social care, as promoted in the policy *Putting People First* (DoH 2008a). This transformation was to be achieved by 2011. As I was later to discover, 'interim' and 'interimness' were to characterise many of the managerial posts I subsequently encountered in Cowleyshire and to characterise the culture of uncertainty in this particular local authority. The Interim Director of Adult Services delegated the oversight of my research project to the Interim Services Manager of Adult Services (Older People and Disabilities), an agency worker who had been in post some six months. This manager invited me to a team managers' meeting intended to give me a platform to see if any of the teams were interested in supporting my research proposal. The Interim Services Manager informed me that gatekeeper approval for my research had been given by the Interim Director of Adult Services. I discussed these developments with my supervisor who confirmed that my fieldwork could commence, the University of Warwick having

already granted ethical approval for the fieldwork as part of its M.Phil upgrade process, which had taken place in 2008.

Once the first line gatekeeper access from Cowleyshire had been achieved, attending the team managers' was seen as best practice because the research project could be outlined and explained, including the discussion of ethical issues such as anonymity, confidentiality, access to transcripts and the final report. I stressed at this meeting that the proposed study of agency social work within Cowleyshire was being carried out as an independent PhD researcher from the University of Warwick to explore agency social work and add to the body of knowledge in this area. I stressed also that the same final thesis would be made available to all participants. The reservations of the team managers seemed to be about time commitment for staff. Much of the debate at the meeting centred on how overloaded the teams were and on the ubiquitous problems they were all having in coming to terms with the newly-introduced computerised records system, Zealosoc. Some team managers also said that they did not use many agency social workers, especially following a recently instituted system of only being allowed to engage agency workers through a master vendor system (Hoque et al. 2011), which acted as the broker for all of Cowleyshire's agency services. Prior to this system, the team managers had the discretion to call in tried, tested and local agency social workers in whom they were confident and who knew the local teams' dynamics and ways of working. These local agency social workers had apparently declined to be part of the new master vendor system. I left an outline of my proposed study with the team managers and left my email address for any interested parties to use to invite me to their next team meetings, where I

could make my research request directly to social workers. Subsequently, I was invited to three team meetings and again stressed my independence as a researcher.

I left participant information sheets with staff at the three team meetings which meant that they had initial information setting out that they could take part in an anonymous SWOT analysis and/or participate in an interview. Potential interview participants were able to reflect on my presentation to their teams about the nature of the research, its ethical boundaries and their ability to withdraw at any stage from participation in it. Prospective participants were asked to read a participation information form and to consider the options of non-participation, the completion of an anonymous SWOT analysis only or to complete both an anonymous SWOT analysis and sign an initial form agreeing to an interview. Separate stamped addressed envelopes for each option were left at the team meetings for participants to complete discreetly and in their own time, no link being made between the anonymous SWOT analyses and any individuals volunteering for interview. Participants who volunteered for interview were additionally asked on the day of the proposed interview to sign a consent form agreeing to the audio-taping of that interview. This consent form also reiterated ethical boundaries around issues such as confidentiality, data withdrawal and the paramount consideration of my having to report any issues of risk to adults or children that might emerge from practices disclosed during an interview. The fact that I had introduced three levels of consent (i.e. to complete an anonymous SWOT analysis only, to agree in principle to a semi-structured interview and to go on to take part in an audio-recorded interview) suggested that I was serious about

giving participants the time and information to facilitate informed consent. At the team meeting presentations I had stressed the voluntary nature of any participation and the right to withdraw from the process at any stage. On the day of the interview the proposed areas for questioning were repeated to participants before they were asked to sign the interview consent form, which again stressed ethical considerations such as the right to withdraw at any time. As a qualified social worker carrying out research, I was fully aware of the paramount nature of the welfare of vulnerable adults and children. Their welfare overrides any duty of confidentiality (DH 2000) and hence it was seen as significant to state the proviso at all stages of the research that any concerns brought to my attention during the research process about issues such as safeguarding would have to be referred on to the appropriate body. The participants all worked in a professional culture that reflected the paramount nature of adult and child protection and the inclusion of the clause in the consent forms at initial agreement to interview and prior to the audio-recorded interviews was accepted by all participants. Indeed, the inclusion of such a clause may have given the participants greater confidence in the research process than had such a proviso not have been explicit.

This process made me very aware that the negotiation of informed consent in organisations governed by institutional gatekeepers is complex and I became aware as my negotiations continued that there were secondary gatekeepers with whom negotiations also had to take place. The notion of voluntary informed consent was one which I was genuinely trying to achieve in line with established ethical guidelines such as those of the British Educational Research Association (BERA):

The Association takes voluntary informed consent to be the condition in which participants understand and agree to their participation without any duress, prior to the research getting underway. Researchers must take the steps necessary to ensure that all participants in the research understand the process in which they are engaged, including why their participation is necessary, how it will be used and how and to whom it will be reported. The securing of participants' voluntary informed consent, before research gets underway, is considered the norm for the conduct of research

(BERA 2004: 6).

Informed consent, alongside ethical concerns regarding avoiding deception, harm and exploitation, while also guaranteeing confidentiality and anonymity, is fundamental to best practice. The potential research participants were all employees of Cowleyshire who worked under a range of professional policies and guidelines including those of promoting safeguarding and the keeping of confidentiality. Hence they were likely to understand some of the research protocols that I discussed with them at team meetings, and subsequently before beginning their interviews, regarding boundaries and potential outcomes.
The replies requesting interviews came back slowly and I had to ring team managers to ask if they would remind their teams of my request, being conscious again that I did not want it to appear a managerial initiative because this would compromise the research and possibly be seen as a top-down initiative.

As my research progressed and the management structure and membership within Cowleyshire continued to change, the power and role of secondary gatekeepers became apparent. Several senior and middle managers moved on throughout the course of my year of fieldwork. The original Interim Director of Adult Services, who had initially given approval to my study, left a month into my fieldwork, quickly followed by the Interim Services Manager who had been designated as my lead contact. The Interim Director was replaced by a new incumbent who went off on long-term sick leave shortly after arrival and negotiations within what was by then a restructured department became difficult for me to conduct. A range of names (both interim and permanent) were suggested as replacements for my original senior management contacts. I got to know the senior management's secretariat well in my numerous attempts to locate a lead person both to validate my researcher position and also to offer a senior management view on agency social work. Eventually, a lead senior manager was identified and I was able to carry out interviews with her and another senior manager, both of whom were employed in interim positions.

The new lead senior management contact, unlike the original Interim Director, did not think it possible, or appropriate, that I should seek councillors' views. She thought it unlikely that councillors would have a view on the subject as no committee papers had ever been presented that were directly related to agency social work issues, other than global financial papers that contained agency figures pertaining to issues of cost only. It is difficult for researchers to challenge such decisions although I did try to persuade the senior manager in question that councillors might be able to give fresh insights into agency social work, but the

senior manager's stance was that such insights were her domain and that councillors need only see budget figures about agency worker expenditure and did not need to explore the phenomenon any more deeply.

Although I was disappointed to have been denied this access I had no choice other than to accept this decision as it would have been unethical to have, for example, attempted to approach councillors directly. The refusal was couched in terms of councillors being incompetent within the research process due to their having no knowledge of the role of agency social workers within the organisation. Such behaviour is described by Heath et al. (2004: 3) as 'effective denial of the individual agency of potential participants and in their construction as incompetent rather than competent within the research process'. Heath et al. (2004: 16) go on to suggest that such decisions may be 'based upon institutional inconvenience, through to an unwillingness to open up quasi-private worlds to public scrutiny, or the actual or assumed inappropriateness of the proposed research topic and/or its methods'. It can be seen as ethical that gatekeepers act to protect their organisations from unnecessary and intrusive research and the dependency of researchers on gatekeepers when researching organisations such as local authorities means that it is difficult to challenge such decisions. The secondary gatekeepers in this Cowleyshire instance could well rationalise that they were according with Homan's (2001: 342) perspective that 'Gatekeepers called upon to grant access should not act without considering carefully the reason why that entitlement is being withheld from the subjects themselves'. The Social Research Association's Ethical Guidelines (2003:29) state 'The acceptability of social research depends increasingly not only on technical considerations but also

on the willingness of social researchers to accord respect to their subjects and to treat them with consideration'. Denscombe (2002) noted that research that does not do this risks damaging the reputation of social research and possibly leading to the withdrawal of research opportunities. I believe that it would have been unethical and intrusive to have, for example, made direct approaches to councillors against the views of the senior management secondary gatekeepers and felt that I had no option but to accept this decision because to subvert senior management in this instance may have jeopardised my research as well as any future research within Cowleyshire. Denscombe (2002: 182) stressed that people have a right to privacy and that social researchers need to be sensitive that 'the research topic or methods might invade that privacy. The normal and routine aspects of people's lives deserve to be considered as valuable and researchers should not disrupt people's lives without regard for this'. Denscombe (2002) went on to note, however, that most codes of ethics are vague on the principles and pragmatism of unacceptable or acceptable levels of intrusion.

My decision to accept the blocking of access to councillors by senior management contrasts with my decision during initial negotiations when I was told by the Interim Service Manager that there were no service user groups in Cowleyshire who would have a view on agency social work. In this instance, access to service user groups was not gate-kept by the senior management in Cowleyshire and therefore I did approach several disability and care groups independently by letter. I only received one reply, a telephone call advising me that service users and carers would not be aware of social workers having agency status. My view regarding potential access to service users and carers with regard to the views of

this one responding organisation and the lack of response from the other organisations I contacted suggested that the issue was not a live one for service users and carers in Cowleyshire. Hence, I did not further pursue this avenue of research enquiry.

The Choice of SWOT Analysis and Semi-Structured Interviews

SWOT analysis was originally a tool used in business planning as a framework for reviewing performance, evaluating competition and forming strategy (Pahl and Richter 2009). It is a versatile tool that can be used in other contexts to encourage creative thinking from different standpoints. The identification of such issues in a SWOT analysis can point to areas for research which other more structured approaches such as questionnaires might not. A SWOT analysis does not have particular rules about what issues can be raised or how they should be categorised, rather it is a way of collecting wide-ranging views for further analysis. Hill and Westbrook (1997) point to the lack of rigour in the SWOT tool such as its inability to prioritise concerns, its inability to resolve conflict and its inherent ambiguity. Such considerations may be seen as limitations in a business sense but as an explorative research tool being used to draw out a range of perceptions and experiences, rather than solve problems, its strengths would seem to outweigh its weaknesses.   The fact that a SWOT analysis (see appendix 2) has grids for completion that are headed 'Strengths', 'Weaknesses', 'Opportunities' and 'Threats' gives permission for participants to have an opinion on any of those areas. A SWOT analysis can also be conducted privately and anonymously. The anonymous completion of a SWOT analysis was seen as a way of encouraging participants to put forward their views without having to take part in an interview.

Hence, a larger cohort of participants was able to take part than might have been the case if an interview had been the only option offered. Anonymously completed SWOT analyses meant that any issues identified could not be followed up by the researcher directly with the individuals who had raised them but, used alongside other means of data collection, such as interviews or focus groups, the SWOT analysis had the potential to make a positive contribution to this thesis, whose topic was a sensitive one. Furthermore, it was hypothesised that some people might write down anonymously what they would not say in a tape-recorded interview. The SWOT analysis method was also chosen because it was likely to fit with the busy lives of social workers as it is less time consuming than a questionnaire. Finally, its exploratory nature was seen as being likely to introduce the researcher to topics and themes that could inform the subsequent planned semi-structured interviews.

Semi-structured interviews have been described as 'conversations with a purpose' (Burgess 1984:102) and require a rapport facilitated by a mutual understanding of some of the dynamics and issues involved, active listening and being sufficiently reflexive to allow new lines of questioning to develop. Semi-structured interviews offered the opportunity to explore topics in ways not open to more structured interview styles. Agency social work might be a phenomenon that few in social work have fully recognised as significant and some of the issues pursued may have been invisible to participants. Hence, semi-structured interviews were seen to provide a method that would allow for prompts and adaptations as the research took place. Accordingly, a semi-structured interview schedule was drawn up (see Appendix 3), the questions having been informed by pointers from

the SWOT analysis and designed to complement the exploratory nature of the study by allowing for expansion and refinement of points.

Regarding the conduct of the semi-structured interviews, I was aware of the sensitive nature of my research and wanted to ensure as far as possible that my participants would suffer no disadvantage through having taken part in the research. I was aware of the potentially intrusive nature of audio recording, particularly with regard to the capturing of data from the semi-structured interviews, and had initially been reluctant to use audio recording as a means of data capture, as I believed that the nature of agency work meant that staff would not be comfortable committing their views to tape. However, I was convinced by my supervisor that the rigour of research at this level demanded such a system, with the proviso that participants could opt out of being tape-recorded, or indeed out of the interview as a whole (see Appendices 2a and 2d for consent to involvement documentation, which includes other information concerning data protection issues).

The audio tape system used ran on batteries, was very small and made for minimum intrusiveness. All participants, apart from four who came forward once interviewing had started, had originally given signed consent to take part in an audio-recorded interview and were again asked for written permission on the day of the actual interview. Participants were offered a transcript of their tape although none took up this offer. Transcription of audio-recorded interviews was seen both as time-consuming and expensive but transcriptions do offer unedited narrative and free the interviewer to attend to the participant rather than take

notes. On reflection, the ability of transcribed interviews to alleviate bias in recording by the researcher would seem to outweigh any perceived disadvantages of intrusion or fear of misuse of recordings. The ethical considerations regarding confidentiality and security of all data gathered were addressed in the information sheet prepared for all participants (see Appendix 2a). Transcripts of tapes were only be seen by myself, the transcriber and my supervisor and the transcripts themselves were to be password protected on a personal computer and destroyed at the conclusion of the Ph.D.

The Progress of the Fieldwork

I planned a pilot study of the semi-structured questionnaires to be carried out with personal social worker acquaintances after I had offered potential Cowleyshire participants the opportunity to complete a SWOT analysis. In small-scale qualitative research carrying out a pilot sample can detract from the main study's potential sample size and this is the reason why the three social workers in the pilot study were not from Cowleyshire. Pilot studies can be advantageous in their potential to draw attention to areas of the planned research that might not work, for example where proposed methods or tools are inappropriate or too complicated (Robson 2011). I piloted the SWOT analysis/questionnaire and semi-structured interview schedule with three registered social workers known to me personally, one of whom had recently worked on an agency basis. Minor adjustments were made as a result of this pilot (for example, the questions accompanying the SWOT grid were reduced to three questions only as pilot participants found the original, extra two questions to be repetitive in nature).

Over a period of six weeks, a self-selecting sample of twenty completed SWOT

analyses was returned and I was able to use their content to inform the nature of

the planned semi-structured interviews. Twenty one semi-structured interviews

were eventually completed with Cowleyshire staff, these interviews all taking

place within working hours and lasting approximately one hour. My office base

was too far away for participants' convenience and holding interviews there

would have meant that participants incurred extra costs. Interviewing staff in

private rooms in their own work bases carried some risk of other staff knowing

that an interview had taken place. In the absence of any other logistically

convenient 'neutral' venues in a rural county, it was mutually agreed that the use

of private interview rooms in venues across the county was the only option

available. Once respondents had agreed to an interview, they made the necessary

room arrangements and I was not involved in organising where the interviews

took place. During interviews I did not mention the details of any staff whom I

had interviewed, for reasons of confidentiality and sensitivity. Twenty one

volunteers for the semi-structured interviews suggested that my research design

had been an appropriate one that had encouraged participation. Seventeen replies

offering participation in interviews were initially received back in the stamped,

addressed envelopes which I had left at the three team meetings I attended. As the

interview schedule progressed and participants reported back informally to their

peers I did experience a small snowball effect (Becker and Bryman 2004) in that

four participants came forward at the instigation of staff already interviewed. On

a reflexive note, this serendipitous response led me to question whether I was

perhaps giving out messages that 'he's ok' or whether perhaps the interviews were

a beneficial experience for staff who had never before discussed this topic with

somebody independent. I found this snowballing process acceptable within my methodology as I did not know whether these were staff that had previously filled in my SWOT analysis or whether they were staff who had just not returned the form putting themselves forward for interview.

QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

Summarising and Category Building

The Cowleyshire interviews produced over twenty six hours and over 100,000 words of transcribed data from the semi-structured interviews and my chosen approach to dealing with such a large volume of data was one of thematic coding analysis (Robson 2011). Thematic analysis is an approach geared to detailed analysis of aspects of the data, seeking possible meanings behind narrative and identifying underlying constructs and assumptions (Silverman 2011). On reading through some of the transcripts I was aware that some of my 'Uh huhs' or 'Mmmms' could have sounded collusive and it may have been that my body language also gave signs when the participant and I were sharing similar experiences or teasing out issues that we had possibly both shared in our careers. Qualitative research does not, of course, claim to be value free, although I think that my being aware from the outset (subsequently underlined by reading the transcripts) of potential issues such as collusion or perhaps giving an impression that I was from 'management', helped me maintain a position whereby my interpretations were as balanced as possible. I had, of course, once been a part of the world the participants inhabited and we shared this common experience.

One of the main advantages of thematic analysis is that in an area of research which produces large volumes of data it is a practical approach that can help make the data manageable (Braun and Clarke 2006). This approach involves identifying all data that seem to be about or to exemplify the same issue with the same code. The coding process necessitates reading and re-reading the data until points of saturation are reached via techniques of summarising, linking and redefining themes in the search for analysis and interpretation (Gibbs 2007). The findings of the SWOT analysis and my previous knowledge of agency social work meant that not all of my theming was inductive because the prior knowledge I held meant that there was some predetermined theming that had preceded and influenced the guide questions in the semi-structured interviews. King (2004) recognised that qualitative research can sometimes involve a mixture of template analysis alongside inductive analysis that flows from immersion in the data. Such a blended approach to analysis can produce codes and themes not previously considered by the researcher. There is bias in all forms of qualitative research but such pre-existing knowledge can also be seen as encouraging a greater awareness to subtleties in the data. As a reflexive researcher, I was aware of the template analysis approach to data (King 2004; Waring and Wainwright 2008) but I was also open to having any predetermined ideas challenged by the data, particularly as I had not worked in a rural local authority under the most recent systems of care management. The interview style that I used in Cowleyshire was to encourage participants to take the lead in the conversation around the guide questions, such an approach also lending itself to the discovery of new insights and richer interpretation.

Robson (2011) outlines five stages of thematic coding analysis:

1. Familiarisation with the data

2. Generating initial codes

3. Identifying themes

4. Constructing thematic networks

5. Integration and interpretation

I followed these five phases in a systematic manner, first steeping myself in the data by continuous reading and re-reading, making contemporaneous notes of the codes and potential themes. Codes are defined as 'the most basic segment or element of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon' Boyatzis (1998:63). My generation of initial codes was performed manually using highlighters for specific sections of the data, coding coming both from the initial template of my research design and from the data.

The twenty completed SWOT analyses and the twenty one completed semi-structured interview transcripts were read over repeatedly searching for meanings and themes in an iterative process. Some transcripts were very brief and offered little in-depth perspective whereas others were richer in content. All transcripts were edited for data not seen as relevant to the research question and the remainder were coded manually using a colour code noting any possible themes from repeated patterns of meaning that occurred and interplayed. After familiarisation with the extensive data-set produced by the transcribed semi-

structured interviews and the SWOT analysis findings, initial coding was carried out with the research question - 'What are the perceptions and experiences of agency social work in a rural county?' - in mind. Each semi-structured interview and SWOT analysis response was paraphrased to assist in managing large quantities of data. Examples of how narrative chunks were paraphrased and then descriptively coded are given below:

Original narrative	Paraphrase	First Level Code (Descriptive)
I've had no problem with it. No, never ever. I think it's – I think as an agency staff worker, you have got to have that ability to be able to integrate very, very quickly because they are looking for someone to start work straight away, I mean, they haven't got the time to invest in – you know, in people to become part – you are either a good team builder, player or you're not. I think you would be pretty	Integrate quickly; start straight away; good team player; good interpersonal skills.	Skills of integration

soon found out if you couldn't integrate yourself within a team pretty quickly. I think you have got to have good interpersonal skills to be honest with you.		

Original Narrative	Paraphrase	Fist Level Code (Descriptive)
It's hard for agency social workers to 'hit the ground running' if they don't even know the financial systems for going to panel, for carers breaks, spot purchases, carers grants etc. You can't just go to panel blind, unless you're not going to get the result you want, it's going to be thrown back at you, so the panel expect things to be done in a certain way and again it's about knowing the	Difficult for agency social workers to "hit the ground running" Need for agency social workers to know financial systems Need for agency social workers to know working culture	Hit the ground running

head of panel, what they like, the right way to pitch it.		

Table 5.1 Examples of Coding

The development of themes became part of an interpretive process whereby the analysis was theorised rather than being merely descriptive in nature. Classification of the emergent themes was not straightforward, different participants holding quite different views on the same topic, which meant that a comment or perspective might fit a range of categories, depending on a participant's experience or role within Cowleyshire. For example, an agency social worker might see the ability to leave a team quickly as a positive whereas the employed team members would see this as a negative, particularly if they had to pick up extra work as a result of an agency staff member's swift departure. Choice of which theme to place such issues in were guided by the number of times an issue was identified as either negative, positive or as an ambivalent area.

In identifying themes from the above codes, I adapted the model outlined by Ryan and Bernard (2003) that suggested the following as key indicators of potential themes:

1. Repetitions – topics that reoccur
2. Indigenous categories, language and terms used by the
   participants within Cowleyshire

3. Metaphors and analogies used to described the setting

4. Transitions – participants shifting the content of their narrative

5. Similarities and differences – making systematic comparisons across the codings and comparing and noting any differences between the way a theme might be presented. For example, different participants might have quite different views on the same issue

6. Linguistic connectors words and phrases such as 'because' 'as a result' 'before' 'after' 'next', all of which might indicate causal relations

7. Missing data – looking, for example, at any gaps in the narrative that indicate pauses or hesitancies which might indicate something not being fully shared

8. Theory - related material – in addition to the emergence of indigenous themes, keeping an awareness of the template of the interview questions and pre-existing knowledge.

Themes and sub-themes emerged from the data and were built up into a table that placed similar coded data together (Table 5.2 below). These descriptive codes were then written out in a series of spider diagrams to help see their possible inter-relationships. Various re-workings of these diagrams led to further analysis and reflection which was further refined via an iterative process that formed thematic networks. The main themes that emerged from constant re-reading of the networks were those of 'General working environment within the social work teams'; 'Policy surrounding agency social workers – role and terms of engagement'; 'Motivation to become an agency social worker'; 'Positives in

agency social work'; 'Challenges in agency social work' and 'Ambivalence towards agency social work'. These main themes seemed to best capture the issues in the data set and the sub-themes were judged to comprehensively reflect the content of the findings. As Robson (2011:483) stated 'Thematic networks are a tool in analysis, not the analysis itself' and stage five accordingly consisted of taking the next steps, exploring and interpreting across the themes in an endeavour to understand the meanings that lay within them. The subsequent generation of meaning gave me the structure for presenting findings in the next two chapters.

General working environment	Policy	Motivation	Positives	Challenges	Ambivalence
Climate of uncertainty	Short term	Expediency	Competency	Lack of profile of service user	'Lead-in' times
Restrictive nature of care management	Temporary	Free agents	No baggage	Constant moves can mask inadequacies	Pay-levels
Absence of	Pay	Psychological	Better	Standards of	'Hit the

relationship-based practice	differentials	fit of agency work	morale	practice within employment agency	ground running'
Project work	Bridge gaps in teams	Ease of engagement/ disengagement	New insights	Costs	Lines of accountability
Ad hoc usage of agency staff	Master vendor system	9-5 mentality	Criticality	Lack of notice	Longer term agency contracts
Interimness	Lack of rural Dimension to care management	Flexible	Gelling with permanent teams	Lack of investment in Cowleyshire services	Innovators who moved on
Factory-made social workers	Length of contracts of agency staff	Ability to gain different experiences	Skills of integration	Non-filling of permanent vacancies	Bridge gaps in workforce to overcome heavy workloads

Time in front of computer	Local knowledge	Lack of flexible working opportunities in LA	Experience brought from other areas	Rigour of interviews	Agency usage as alternative to filling vacancies
Constant changes in systems	Adapting to different working practices	Family friendly	Importance of interpersonal skills	Lack of policy	Role of employment agency
Deskilling (admin. staff and social workers)	Lack of formal policy	Motivation	Avoid office politics	Negative attitudes from peers and management	Agency staff as rescuers
Remote control management	Funding pressures	Potential to progress up pay scale	Can leave badly-run teams quickly	Uncertain nature of agency social work	
Lack of Commun-ication Across Organisation	Access to training			Sharing agency status with service users	

Panel systems	In-house bank as alternative to agency			ASW's hesitant to take on complex work	
Absence of permanent positions in LA				Holiday and sickness pay	
Individual negotiations				Lack of loyalty to employment agency	
Knowledge of complex IT systems				Lack of financial awareness	
Discontent with local authority employment				Rurality	

Table 5.2 Display of Descriptive Codes

Key to Colour Code:

1. General working environment
2. Policy
3. Motivation
4. Positives
5. Challenges
6. Ambivalence

The systematic approach to thematic analysis - the first stage of familiarisation with data, the second stage of generating initial codes, the third stage of identifying themes, the fourth stage of constructing thematic networks and the final stage of integration and interpretation led to the emergence of key themes (Robson 2011). These key emerging themes were re-visited and analysed continuously over a three month period until a set of six main themes emerged that seemed to reflect the concerns of participants. These themes (colour coded above in Table 5.2) were 'General working environment within the social work teams'; 'Policy surrounding agency social workers – role and terms of engagement'; 'Motivation to become an agency social worker'; 'Positives in agency social work'; 'Challenges in agency social work' and 'Ambivalence towards agency social work'. These themes reflected the contested nature of agency social work, the different backgrounds of participants, their position within Cowleyshire's hierarchy and whether they were agency staff or employed staff. Integration and interpretation across the themes was then undertaken in a

quest to generate meaning and significance for the presentation of findings in Chapters 6 and 7 for further discussion and analysis in Chapter 8.

SUMMARY

In summary, this chapter has discussed the reasons for my choosing a case study as a methodological approach and why the benefits of a case study approach were found to outweigh any shortcomings. Although Cowleyshire was a single site study, any findings were intended to bear comparison with previous case studies (See Chapter 1: 4) through the use of rigorous thematic analysis based on the work of Robson (2011). The stages of this data analysis system - familiarisation with data, generation of initial codes, identifying themes and constructing thematic networks which were then integrated and interpreted to generate meaning were discussed. The sensitivities of researching in a contentious area such as agency social work were also discussed as were issues of managerial control surrounding the research. My personal position as researcher was made explicit and my consideration of ethical considerations such as confidentiality and security of data were explored, including the role of gatekeepers.

The following chapter will present the findings of the SWOT analysis which was designed to inform the template of the in-depth semi-structured interviews, the findings of which will then be thematically discussed in Chapter 8.

CHAPTER 6

FINDINGS FROM SWOT ANALYSIS

INTRODUCTION

Over the course of the fieldwork, twenty SWOT analyses (see SWOT analysis grid, Appendix 2b) were completed, followed by twenty one semi-structured interviews. In the reporting of findings from the SWOT analysis, 'AS' (n.4) represents the views of staff with current or previous agency roles whereas 'ES' (n.16) represents the views of current employed staff who have had no agency experience.

The SWOT analysis was chosen as a reflective and more creative opportunity for participants than a standard questionnaire, although three extra questions (optional) were appended offering participants an opportunity to expand on any points as well as asking them to state whether they were working, or had ever worked, for an agency. The reasons for initially offering potential participants the opportunity to complete a SWOT analysis was that they might feel more comfortable with the anonymity of such a method and that they might also be attracted to its comparative brevity when compared with participation in an interview. Some of the views expressed anonymously on paper are perhaps a little more direct than those reported in the next chapter relating to the semi-structured interviews but the differences are nuanced rather than marked. Some of the SWOT analyses will have been completed by individuals who also went on to take part in the semi-structured interviews but participants were deliberately not

matched, the SWOT analyses being anonymous and used to inform the subsequent development of the semi-structured interviews.

FINDINGS FROM THE SWOT ANALYSIS

Twenty completed SWOT analysis forms were returned, five participants having answered the three extra questions. Four out of these five identified that they had agency staff experience and their results are grouped at the beginning of each section below. The reason for this separation was to examine whether the views of staff who were, or had been, agency workers were any different to the other participants. The roles of the participants who completed this analysis were deliberately not recorded due to the possibility of them being identifiable in the final thesis due to the small size of Cowleyshire and therefore it is unknown whether the responses are from managers, social workers or administrative workers. Two employed participants did not fill in the 'Threats' section, hence there are only eighteen responses recorded there with all other three sections – Strengths, Opportunities and Weaknesses – receiving a full complement of twenty responses. The findings from the SWOT analysis are presented below under the standard headings of a SWOT analysis –Strengths. Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats:

Strengths

Agency Staff

Agency staff who completed this section saw themselves as innovators who were able to bring fresh ideas to hard-pressed teams, pointing out their strengths in time management and lack of sick leave. These more collegiate views were balanced

by AS 4 who gave the personal perspective that strengths included being able to leave a badly-run team. AS 4 also provided a view of agency work as a supporter, or perhaps rescuer, of teams under stress. The following were the verbatim responses of agency social workers with regard to the perceived strengths in agency social work:

AS 1: Innovative practice, flexible and quality cover and introduce new skills to team.

AS 2: Reduces stress of caseloads. Have no induction requirements, take work from day one. Do not take high levels of sick leave and manage their time better.

AS 3: Bring skills to team/fresh ideas/knowledge of different systems, prevents stagnation. New skills and insights.

AS 4: Being able to leave badly run teams/sharing new ideas, hitting the ground running to alleviate stress and overwork in a team.

<u>Employed Staff</u>

The views of employed staff covered a wide range of strengths regarding their perceptions and experiences of agency social workers, possibly reflecting views that they were grateful to have any extra staff to help with workload. Employed staff 1 – 16 below stressed the practical and flexible help afforded by agency social workers, representing them as being experienced workers who were capable

of hard work. Such positive views of agency social work were close to those of the four agency staff above, suggesting that there is some consensus between employed and agency workers in this area:

ES 1 Very professional and keen to carry out work well – also experienced.

ES 2 Vast experience, different focus on social work.

ES 3 Increased work completion. New ideas into team. Range of experiences.

ES 4 Very useful for team due to sickness.

ES 5 Varied experience. Reduced caseload for other team workers.

ES 6 Agency workers usually have a broad range of knowledge and experience. Fill vital roles within team without which teams would suffer enormously. Often workers are very experienced and can hit the floor running.

ES 7 Bridge gaps in workforce and help overcome heavy workload. They are able to be employed on an 'as and when' basis.

ES 8 Support short staffed teams.   Experience from other areas brought into team.

ES 9 Provide cover at short notice. Allow time to reflect on future staffing needs.

ES 10 A fresh outlook.   Previous experience. May take pressure off workload. Create a breathing space.

The following views from five employed staff demonstrated some support for Kirkpatrick and Hoque's (2006) finding that one attraction of agency social work might be that it offered a role that avoided office politics. The better morale of agency staff as perceived by employed staff may be a combination of the avoidance of office politics and the consequences of more frequent job changes. Agency staff were clearly portrayed below as bringing fresh ideas to social work teams and as bringing new learning, experiences and insights:

ES 11 Acquiring increasing knowledge, skills and experience. Learning from different methods of working, different systems etc.

ES 12 Not becoming over involved in local politics.

ES 13 Fresh ideas, information from other areas, take on lots of work, less stress / more light hearted?

ES 14 Most agency SWs usually join the team with enthusiasm, fresh ideas and a wealth of experience and knowledge brought with them from having worked in other local authorities.

ES 15 They do not appear to be affected/demoralised in the same way as full time appointed SWs

ES 16 To learn their new ideas.

Weaknesses

Agency Staff

Agency staff recognised that their own roles could be disadvantageous to service users and other professionals due to a lack of continuity and stability in their contacts.   The potential lack of commitment to an organisation by not engaging in training was noted as was a view that a person who moves regularly from job to job may be masking their skills inadequacy. AS 4 saw it as a weakness to an organisation that an agency worker can choose their days and hours of work and the uncertain nature of agency social work is seen as a weakness by AS 3 in that it is stated that there is always an awareness that "this week could be your last". The following were the verbatim responses of agency staff with regard to the perceived weaknesses in agency social work:

AS 1 Service users denied continuity / stability. No knowledge of complex IT systems. Other professionals / agencies denied continuity of social worker contact.

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AS 2 Inadequate skills can be masked by moving from job to job.

Hesitation to take on complex work.

AS 3 Negative attitudes – always aware this week could be your last.

AS 4 Can choose days and hours. Do not have to engage in
holiday/training.

Employed Staff

The comments of employed staff 1 - 16 reflected concerns with the predominance
of systems within care management. The amount of time taken to induct an
agency social worker was seen by ES 1 as disproportionate and there were six
more comments that referred to a lack of procedural knowledge as being a
weakness. Only two comments referred to the possible negative effect of short-
term agency social workers on service users, possibly reflecting a reality of care
management wherein even the relationships between employed social workers
and service users were transitory in nature. ES 13 stated that service users might
feel that they are receiving a second-rate service from agency social work staff.
ES 15 and ES 16 made comments about the possible structural effects on
workforce planning that might be brought about by reliance on agency staff. Both
of these comments posed questions about whether investment in agency staff was
at the expense of investment in employed staff. The following were the verbatim
responses of employed staff with regard to the perceived weaknesses in agency
social work:

ES 1 Not familiar with system.   Disproportionate amount of time on induction. 9 -5 mentality. No continuity.

ES 2 No knowledge of systems. Little or no commitment to team - does person really want to get involved? No local knowledge. Limited time to follow through work with a service user.

ES 3 Having to have systems explained 'outside' the team. Easy to scapegoat. Get burnt out quickly. Maybe 'risky' in practice as 'untried' in this culture.

ES 4 Can take some time to pick up 'systems'.

ES 5 Short-term involvement. Unsure of our process.

ES 6 Only there for a short-period of time. Once they have finished stress increases in other workers.

ES 7 Agency SW's need a significant amount of time to familiarise themselves with procedures and time to network. Often they have to leave at the point where they have just begun to find their way around the system and have made a difference.

ES 8 Being left on the outside looking in.

ES 9 Sudden unemployment.

ES 10 Teams suffer a loss when good working relationships are formed
and then they leave. No local knowledge and no induction period means
they need to depend on the team.

ES 11 Just get into flow, then have to leave.

ES 12 Takes a while to adapt to teams' working practices. Foreign staff
not able to communicate with elderly due to language difficulties.

ES 13 They do not always have enough background knowledge of family
issues, with regard to service users. May not have local knowledge of
area. Can make service users feel as if they are getting second rate
service.

ES 14 Question of commitment. May be seen to have no authority. Lack
of continuity. What history they leave behind.

ES 15 Prevents investment in permanent staff.

ES 16 Local authorities tend to become dependent on agency workers in
the longer term, this means long term recruitment issues are never
addressed. Expensive. Potential lack of continuity – agency workers have

no obligation to give periods of notice, can leave at short notice. May lead

to less training and 'grooming' of in-house staff who would stay in longer

term and strengthen the team.

Opportunities

<u>Agency Staff</u>

Agency staff responses to this section of the SWOT analysis provided support for

the view expressed by Kirkpatrick and Hoque (2006) and Mollitt (2006) that

agency social work offered an opportunity to try different types of social work

before settling upon a permanent post.   Kirkpatrick and Hoque (2006) suggested

that agency social workers did not see agency social work as a portfolio career but

more a stepping-stone to eventual employment status.   Agency social work was

also seen by participants as a way of gaining experience without the interview

system and time delays that were seen to characterise employed local authority

posts.   A further point was made by AS 3 that posts might be attainable via an

agency application that might not be open to the same worker were that post

advertised as an employed position. This was possibly because the full person

specification that would accompany an application for an employed position

might insist upon a range of experiences that an agency social worker did not

possess. If presented as a short-term agency position, however, the criteria

applied may be less rigorous. The following were the verbatim responses of

agency staff with regard to the perceived opportunities in agency social work:

AS 1 Learn new systems 'test the waters' before considering a permanent

position and spreading new ways of working.

AS 2 Fresh ideas and enthusiasm. Can stabilise a team through a period

of change.

AS 3 Interviews are less formal and stress provoking without lengthy

waits. May get work via agency that would not get as mainstream post.

AS 4 Gain wide experience. Experience new areas of work.

Employed Staff

Employed staff produced a range of largely positive views regarding the

opportunities that might be presented by agency social workers within their teams.

Positives in bringing new ideas were mentioned by eight participants, suggesting

that agency social workers can bring benefits to the working environment. The

use of agency social work contracts as a possible stepping stone to finding a

permanent job were remarked upon by two social workers. One respondent (ES

8) cited the use of agency social workers as advocates for the team, particularly

noting that some agency staff who had chosen to attend in-house training events

made valuable contributions. The attendance of agency staff at in-house training

would indicate that Cowleyshire embraced agency workers as professionals with

training needs. It might be hypothesised that the more independent status of an

agency social worker would enable them to speak up at events such as training

and to act as an advocate for the team in ways that employed colleagues, more

dependent on an on-going career within Cowleyshire, might not. ES1, ES 13 and

ES 15 all suggested that the availability of agency staff offered opportunities for

project work, such time-centred tasks perhaps fitting well with an agency role. The following were the verbatim responses of employed staff with regard to the perceived opportunities in agency social work:

ES 1 Project work and boost team morale.

ES 2 An agency social worker I worked with took up a permanent post, so possibly a way to permanent work.

ES 3 Change/adapt to new ideas from other authorities and cultures. Teach us new skills.

ES 4 Opportunity as route for mainstream employment. A new look at service users' needs.

ES 5 Bring new ideas, outlooks to existing team.

ES 6 To watch and learn from someone who has experience from different settings.

ES 7 A chance to share experiences. A chance to ask advice.

ES 8 Agency staff are offered a wide range of opportunities with casework. They have acted as excellent advocates for the team (at in-house training events).

ES 9 To draw on colleagues' ranges of experiences. To gain an understanding of how other authorities work from Agency workers' point-of-view.

ES 10 Gain a wider experience of different approaches. Keep a fresh approach to your work. Improve your interpersonal skills. Working in different countries. Try different areas of work to decide on a pathway.

ES 11 Meet new people, make new friends. Variety of work. Enjoying the challenge of having to learn quickly and cope with new experiences.

ES 12 May bring a fresh approach to work, have knowledge of how services are used in other areas.

ES 13 To learn from other worker's experience. To take on a specific piece of work.

ES 14 Full time job opportunities.

ES 15 To do project work.

ES 16 Encouragement to take up training.

Threats

<u>Agency Staff</u>

The views presented below from agency staff acknowledge that their role could bring with it threats of destabilisation in that they might be seen as tools of management and as a threat to employed staff. The threats perceived by AS 2 and AS 4 pertained less to any threat that might be experienced by colleagues or service users and are concerns regarding threats to their own well-being such as the erratic availability of work, combined with the loss of friendships as contracts end. The threats identified were as follows:

AS 1 Destabilise existing good practice. Undermine existing workers by carrying out management initiatives that are not seen as helpful.

AS 2 Subject to budgets whims/periods of unemployment.

AS 3 Permanent staff can feel threatened by an experienced agency worker.

AS 4 No work being available. Always making friends only to lose them.

<u>Employed Staff</u>

On a structural level, employed staff saw agency social workers as being a threat to investment in employed staff and that their usage may provide distorted pictures of staffing levels. Only ES 14 viewed agency social workers as taking

jobs although the theoretically divisive roles of agency social workers within teams are hypothesised by ES 9 and ES 12, the latter of whom reflected on the potential of agency staff not to have any investment in wanting to build a better team. Only one social worker referred to a belief that agency social workers were expensive. Issues of the reliability of an agency social worker in terms of their likelihood of leaving at any time were commented on by two employed social workers (ES 3 and ES 6). ES 5 was the only respondent to mention the lack of knowledge regarding service user backgrounds held by agency social workers. These comparatively low levels of threat identified by employed staff within the SWOT sample might reflect an overall view of agency staff as a necessary helping hand to hard-pressed teams:

ES 1 Team unity.

ES 2 None, except that they are expensive.

ES 3 Reliability, could walk out at any time.

ES 4 Bolster up flagging system without changing them. Agency managers seem quite ineffectual because of the isolated nature of their role which seems to have no real power.

ES 5 No knowledge of service user backgrounds. Time spent is supporting a new person.

ES 6 Could leave at any time.

ES 7 May make social workers in the team appear to be putting less effort into their work. Question over issues of using agency workers rather than employing full time staff.

ES 8 Training is limited, often they are excluded from attending events, other than in-house training. I feel that they are often thrown in the deep end.

ES 9 As above, authorities can become dependent on agency staff as a solution to long term staffing issues. Potentially team members could begrudge agency workers being in a team and not incorporate them into team dynamics fully as they are seen as being their short-term and not worth investing in.

ES 10   Could make a team disjointed. Not happened in my experience however.

ES 11 I do not detect any threats towards me or my position and I would like to think that my position does not threaten anyone else's position.

ES 12 Agency social workers may give a distorted picture of staffing levels within a team. May not wish to support co-workers to build a better team.

ES 13 To own professional integrity.

ES 14 Taking jobs.

Expanded comments

The standard SWOT analysis grid (Appendix 2a) was followed by three questions – two closed questions about current or previous experience of agency positions and a question that gave the opportunity for staff to expand on any of the points made in their SWOT grid. The five expanded comments (two from agency workers and three from employed workers), additional to the SWOT grid responses that are themed above, are presented below.

<u>Agency Staff</u>

The first participant in this category took the opportunity to expand on issues concerning views that were believed to be more widely held about the financial motivations of agency social workers and attempted to balance any view that money is the main driver by drawing attention to the loss of pensions and other benefits:

AS 1: The idea that agency work is about 'take the money and run' does not apply to me. I feel uncomfortable with this view of agency social workers. I am not significantly better off financially being an agency social worker than I was on

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permanent contracts, when you take into consideration loss

of pension and other benefits.

(The value of pensions has fallen over recent years and this may have an effect of making employed status less attractive). The semi-structured interviews in Chapter 7 return to consider this issue of differences in remuneration in more depth.

The second agency staff member indicated a choice of agency status to enable different pathways within social work to be tried out, the access systems to agency work allowing for such experimentation in ways that local authority employment procedures do not:

AS 2: It gives you the opportunity to try different

pathways. Also to be a good agency worker, attitude is

an important part of integrating into a team.

Employed staff

The three employed staff who gave expanded comments presented mixed views, the first two responses suggested that it was the individual worker, not their agency status that mattered whereas the third participant offered a more pessimistic view that consistency was inherently lacking in agency staff. Furthermore, this participant reported a feeling that agency staff in higher positions have no commitment to the team, little local knowledge and bring in systems change that affects employed staff.

SUMMARY FROM THE SWOT ANALYSIS

The SWOT analysis produced a range of mixed perceptions and experiences across a wide range of issues (skills / fresh ideas / consistency/ induction time / speed of engagement and disengagement that echoed the findings of Kirkpatrick and Hoque (2006), Carey (2006) and Cornes et al. (2010) regarding agency social workers who could help plug gaps but whose lack of strategic deployment brought difficulties. Little of the antipathy from employed workers towards agency workers revealed in Carey's studies (2006, 2011a) was found in this rural environment, although the ambivalence about agency social work that permeates the literature was very apparent. Differentiation was evident between the contents of the responses of agency social workers and employed social workers; the former stressed what was in it for them as an agency worker whereas the employed staff tended to reflect more on the effects on team cohesion and service user experience.

The limitations of a SWOT analysis that was conducted anonymously were that some of these themes could not be pursued in greater depth. However, the themes indicated in the SWOT analysis gave pointers for exploration and checking out in the semi-structured interviews that were designed to follow on from this analysis, particularly in areas highlighted such as motivation, access to induction and training, lines of accountability, loyalties, integration with employed colleagues, the systems used for engaging agency staff and the overall issues of costs,

efficiency and effectiveness. The semi-structured questionnaire guide (Appendix 3) accordingly reflected these issues in order to facilitate their deeper exploration. The next chapter will discuss the findings of the semi-structured interviews based around the themes of 'General working environment within the social work teams'; 'Policy surrounding agency social workers – role and terms of engagement'; 'Motivation to become an agency social worker'; 'Positives in agency social work'; 'Challenges in agency social work' and 'Ambivalence towards agency social work'.

CHAPTER 7

FINDINGS FROM THE SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

INTRODUCTION

Semi-structured interviews were held with a total of twenty one staff who comprised two senior managers (LA – both interim); four team managers (two LA / two Agency); ten social workers (four LA / six Agency); four administrative staff (two LA / two Agency); plus the manager of Tempo (master vendor employment agency). Eight of the participants were men and thirteen were women (no further gender breakdown is given in the interests of confidentiality). All social workers had been qualified for over three years. All names of individuals, counties and organisations have been changed in the interests of confidentiality. Given the sensitive nature of the research, I have additionally made it difficult to identify specific roles within specific settings and have been careful not to include too much detail about a person's length of service/career experience as these can be identifying factors in a case study.

The narratives presented and analysed below are quite extensive, largely because I wanted to capture as holistic a range of views as possible on the issue being discussed with a view to identifying commonalities and differences. The grammar in the narratives has been cleaned of "ums" and and "ers" but is otherwise presented as spoken. Initials are used to introduce the participant in the semi-structured interviews, 'I' standing for 'interviewer', all interviews having been carried out by myself. The phrase "senior prac" appears in some of the narrative below and is a shortened form of 'senior practitioner', a social worker

with extensive experience who carries a reduced caseload together with a consultancy role within their team. 'Zealosoc' and 'Tempo' are fictitious names given to the newly introduced Cowleyshire computer system and master vendor organisation respectively.

The findings from the semi-structured interviews are presented under the themes of 'General working environment within the social work teams'; 'Policy surrounding agency social workers – role and terms of engagement'; 'Motivation to become an agency social worker'; 'Positives in agency social work'; 'Challenges in agency social work' and 'Ambivalence towards agency social work'

GENERAL WORKING ENVIRONMENT WITHIN THE SOCIAL WORK TEAMS

The literature on agency social work regarding integration with teams in urban areas (see Chapter 1: 4) reported tensions between agency staff and employed staff on account of their differentiated roles and status. Picking up work after the sudden departure of an agency staff member and the time spend on induction and orientation to local systems were particularly noted by Kirkpatrick et al. (2009) as challenges associated with agency staff. In general terms, collegiality and integration into the teams of agency staff at all levels and in all roles seemed to characterise the working environment in Cowleyshire. The SWOT analysis reported in Chapter 6 had produced several indications that feelings of antipathy might exist toward agency social workers (see, for example Chapter 6: 138 - 141) but the semi-structured interviews only produced one example of any antipathy

towards agency social workers when **Eric, LA team manager,** spoke about the tensions involved when agency staff appeared to pick and choose their work, particularly when cases were difficult:

E   Most agency social workers have been proactive, proactive in sort of saying "you know I'll fit in here, I'll fit in here, whichever you want". I think we are very fortunate really we've got quite skilled, experienced practitioners but I have experienced where that's not the case and where teams have felt growing antipathy to people who say as soon as the going gets tough "right I'm off" or "I'm off for the day" or you know "I'm not actually working tomorrow so I was doing this case but can you pick this up now"? I've had that experience of agency workers as well.

In Cowleyshire, apart from this example, such tensions in relationships were not characteristic and it seemed to be accepted that agency staff would move on, even though it was time-consuming and costly to engage them, especially for short periods of contract. **Matthew**, **LA social worker,** gave an account of this issue below:

M   …having a locality manager in through an agency and that was ok though it took the team about four weeks before he knew the ropes and he was getting all that cash, almost double, while we told him the job. He was ok but left after four months.

Alan, agency social worker, felt that interpersonal skills were key to what he perceived as integration of agency social workers with employed staff. He also took the view that he needed demonstrate to colleagues and managers that he was there to earn his money at the outset:

I   Has there been any 'us and them' or has there been very much you're an equal colleague?

A   I've had no problem with it. No, never ever.I think it's – I think as an agency staff worker, you have got to have that ability to be able to integrate very, very quickly because they are looking for someone to start work straightaway, I mean, they haven't got the time to invest in – you know, in people to become part – you are either a good team builder, player or you're not. I think you would be pretty soon found out if you couldn't integrate yourself within a team pretty quickly. I think you have got to have good interpersonal skills to be honest with you.

This view was strongly supported by **Harriet, agency social worker:**

H   The feel at the team meeting was that here in Cowleyshire we all get on. I have found this team very easy to work with. I think as an agency worker, you definitely, definitely have to go in with a certain attitude, you have to be – when I decided to go into agency I said "you've got to go in, you've got to be very willing, extremely flexible, you have to get on with people" you know, so you have to bend, you know, compromise.

On balance, it can be seen from the above responses that within Cowleyshire agency staff were largely welcomed as colleagues, despite the difference in their status and higher levels of pay. They were not perceived as representatives of the private sector but were viewed primarily by employed staff as individuals and colleagues who had to work under the same care management systems.

There seemed to be much misunderstanding and uncertainty on behalf of both social workers and management, both agency and employed, regarding the remuneration levels/full costs of agency working. Sickness levels in agency staff are believed to be very low and quite different from the sickness profiles of permanent staff. Morris (2009) reported from a national survey that, on average, social workers take 11.8 days off during the year due to sickness, with one in ten calling in sick at least twenty times. The average for all other council employees was 7.4 days, compared to a figure across the whole private sector of 6.4 days absence due to sickness.

Theresa, master vendor manager, made out the case that agency social workers were reliable and have virtually no sickness absences. This was stated to be in direct contrast to employed social workers and as constituting a considerable saving to local authorities. No data, however, was produced during the period of fieldwork to substantiate such a claim:

I   What do you see as the main benefits offered by agency staff?

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T   Well, firstly they always turn up for work, they are reliable and adaptable

        types of people – I don't have many ringing in sick – in fact, in the last

        twelve months I don't think anyone has been sick and very few have even

        taken holiday. They don't, of course, get sick pay and the sickness rates in

        social work are really high.

Barbara, interim LA senior manager, was my new lead research contact. She
did not offer any perspectives on why her employed staff might take high levels of
sickness leave and took a rather confrontational view that agency staff kept
employed staff "on their toes". This view echoed that of a senior manager in the
national study undertaken by Cornes et al. (2010) but such a divisive perspective
did not seem to be shared at any other level within Cowleyshire. The similarity in
role for agency and employed social workers in a care management system that
that demanded rapid closure of cases was seen as making relationship-based work
marginal for both categories of social worker. Hence any issues around the length
of tenure of agency social workers and the effect of any short tenures on the
ability to develop relationships with service users and carers did not seem to have
raised any concerns for senior management. **Barbara, interim LA senior
manager**:

B   We can get agency in quite quickly so staff are grateful for the helping

        hand. They usually hit the ground running as I understand it and we only

        keep them for as long as we have to. Plus they are never off with sickness

        or stressed out.

I   Why do you think that is the case?

B   Probably because they don't get paid if they are off. It is difficult to get

         rid of staff who are always off sick; it takes a long time in-house.

I   Do you see any other positives in agency staff?

B   Yes – they keep the others on their toes.

I   Do you mean they are a threat?

B   No, not that, more that they set an example of how to crack on with a

         caseload.

I   What about the area of relationship building with service users and carers

         and others across the discipline?

B   They have to have good adaptable people skills and pick things up

         quickly, like Zealosoc, but even the full time staff don't keep cases open

         now. Once they are satisfactorily reviewed, we close them so relationship-

         based work is only a part of the job now anyway.

Agency workers themselves seemed to be unsure of their terms and conditions

and were unsure whether they were better off or not whereas employed staff

seemed unsure of the pay differentials. Several staff were very open about this

issue, one agency social worker having volunteered sight of her last pay slip during the interview (see this Chapter: 177).

Gordon, agency social worker, estimated that he received approximately 25% more pay by working for Tempo whereas **Neil, LA social worker,** put the difference at nearer to 50%, a figure he had gleaned from seeing the timesheets on the desks of administrative staff:

N   … maybe not quite double, but I mean at £39 an hour for an agency locality manager, our locality managers aren't on anything like that – I mean I think it's probably £20 an hour, something like that if you work it out on an hourly rate. I think the social workers were coming in at £28 an hour, or some of them were coming in at £30 an hour, but I think average was £25 with £28 an hour as a senior prac. Our senior pracs are on about £16 an hour, you know …

Agency workers interviewed did not seem to be aware of some of the financial and tax benefits of having agency status and had not taken advantage, for example, of the tax benefits in becoming a limited company. Most were of the mind-set of **Karene, agency social worker**, when it came to 'doing the books' and preferred the employment agency to do this on their behalf, meaning that the agency staff within Cowleyshire came under the P.A.Y.E scheme just as they would under a standard contract of employment:

K   No, I've just stuck with – I'm a bit of a coward really, yes, I'm just like

         "no, you do that, I'll put in the time sheet; you sort out my tax and

         everything and just pay me".

Dave, agency team manager, believed that engaging agency staff was not as

expensive as many believed:

D   I mean, you – I wouldn't say retaliate, but you do say "well of course you

         on the permanent staff do get sick pay; you do get your pension paid". I

         think what you pay the extra for is because you could be out in a week and

         you pay for people to start when you want them and finish when you want

         them. When you weigh it all up it's not that much more expensive for the

         authority to employ an agency worker.

The difficulty in actually ascertaining the real financial costs of engaging agency

staff was appreciated below by **Vic, agency team manager:**

I   Do you think agency usage is value for money?

V   Well, that's a difficult one because the comparative wages are higher and I

         am not concerned about pension as I already have one. If I were an

         accountant here I might clamp down on a few things but most agency staff

         seem to do the business – not many duffers around. The real costs are

         perhaps questionable, especially if newcomers don't know the ropes and

         need a lot of hand-holding.

This above view indicates that agency workers have insight into issues around their comparative cost implications. **Harriet, agency social worker,** went as far as to suggest that the creation of an in-house staff bank would make greater sense and that she would be happy to work for such a service. Mollitt (2006) and Cornes et al. (2010) had suggested that other forms of procurement arrangements for temporary staffing needs, such as in-house banks or different recruitment strategies, might usefully be explored rather than only turn to private sector managed vendor systems. The NHS model of in- house bank arrangements for nurses, however, has not proven successful (Unwin and Harris 2009). Kirkpatick et al. (2009) are sceptical whether any other model than that of the private sector employment agency will develop in the current economic and political climate. Harriet's views below suggest that it is the disorganisation of local authorities that have meant other solutions such as in-house banks have not been explored more and she also expressed a belief that agency rates have actually been capped in Cowleyshire, in contradiction to evidence presented later in this chapter (this Chapter: 169). Furthermore, she does not see that agency social work over a long period is a financially attractive option:

I   Are agency workers value for money or not?

H   Am I value for money? Well, I mean, financially I think they probably
         are, they drain the pocket of local authorities there's no doubt about it. I
         would like to think that I give a good return for the money that I receive. I
         think the fact that local authorities now contract with one agency, they've

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put a cap on hourly rates, and I think that's probably made a difference. I think there may be some issues about what the agencies actually charge and then what they pay their agency workers and the cut they are taking. Sometimes I think would it not be more sensible for local authorities to set up their own group of peripatetic temporary agency workers that they could call on?

I   Like a nursing bank?

H   Yes, yes, I think sometimes that would be more sensible. I think that because local authorities perhaps haven't organised themselves to do that..... I am concerned that I am somehow sucking money out of the system and I am conscious that you know, that I am value for money; that I work hard and I do a good job. That's something that's very, very important to me, I feel I need to come in here and earn the money that I'm receiving. Although I would argue that actually I don't think there's any financial advantage long-term being an agency worker.

Olwyn, interim LA senior manager, gave a rather unexpected answer to the question about how she saw the role of agency staff within Cowleyshire and expressed faith that the impending reorganisation would bring about an in-house solution:

O   Why would any authority want agency staff? – they are expensive even if they do a good job. Our reorganisation should solve the staffing and other

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problems. We only use agency because we have to. I don't see why we

can't run our own bank of staff more cheaply once things have settled

down.

The general working environment within the rural county of Cowleyshire can be

seen to have experienced many of the features of modernised social work such as

increased financial pressures, rising caseloads and a preoccupation with

managerial control, performance management and proceduralism that are

discussed by Harris and White (2009). The absence of a clear policy on the role

and terms of engaging agency social workers will now be examined as part of this

working environment.

POLICY SURROUNDING AGENCY SOCIAL WORKERS – ROLE AND TERMS OF ENGAGEMENT

Agency social work has been traditionally associated with short-termism with

questions being asked about issues of consistency and quality of work (see, for

example, Carey 2004; Kirkpatrick and Hoque 2006; Mollitt 2006). However, as

the data below indicates, much of mainstream care management is itself

inherently short-term in nature and several agency social workers in Cowleyshire

stayed for periods of up to two years (one stayed for a five-year period),

suggesting that the nature of agency social worker contracts is changing and

possibly supporting some of the SWOT analysis views (Chapter 6: 145 - 148) that

agency staff are being used rather than permanent jobs being offered. This

represents a change from the earlier usage of agency staff to fill in for short-term

sickness absence and vacancies that were in the process of being filled (Carey

2004; Kirkpatrick and Hoque 2006). Cornes et al. (2010) estimated that the average length of social worker agency contract in their large scale study was nine months. This extended type of usage of agency social workers was also found in the work of Mollitt (2006). In most Cowleyshire teams agency social work staff had become indistinguishable from employed staff, both in their length of tenure and in the nature of the work they carried out. **Fiona, agency social worker,** gave the following perspective on the gap filling nature of agency work, a perspective flavoured with ambivalence:

F   I kind of get the feeling that in a way it's, some of it's to do with the structure of the team anyway, it may be in the sense, sort of like, as kind of as a quick fix "Oh God, the amount of work is increasing we need something, so we'll get a locum in for a short period of time" so in that sense, the authority must see it as a cost-effective thing, but on the other hand they are not keen to employ locums.

Susan, LA social worker, thought that agency social work was best suited to project-type roles, such as conducting a review into non-allocated cases or introducing new initiatives that did not involve case work. Similar perceptions to these about the most appropriate use of agency social work staff were also reported by three SWOT completers (see Chapter 6: 135-136) and in an interviews with Justine, LA Team Manager (this Chapter: 187-188). Susan was one of two social workers (the other was an agency social worker) who attributed importance to the need for social workers in rural areas to be employed staff rather than agency staff. She stated that her experience was that although service

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users accepted, for example, that GPs are sometimes locum, they did not like this and preferred contacts with social workers with whom they were able to build relationships. A model of preventative social work might encourage service users to ring up and ask to see social workers with whom they had previously worked, but the care management system and its imperative to close cases as quickly as possible did not allow for this type of choice and discretion to be exercised:

S   No, I just think, probably what you were saying about, you know, I think there probably is a difference with a rural area, you can have the same with GPs you can go and see people and as soon as they say "oh, I've had to see a locum. ...".
But they don't like it do they? The majority of people I meet say "I want to see doctor … because they've known me for 30 years" … but whether that's the same for those people, the same for social workers, but you do get phone calls from people that even though they are 'closed' to you they say "actually I want to see x or y worker".

Karene, agency social worker, had very positive views regarding the flexible role that agency work has offered her for three out of fifteen years post qualification work. Karene's position might be seen as prioritising her own needs but her requirement for flexibility to accommodate family commitments might be viewed as a requirement that local authorities should more widely be able to meet. She presented as an enthusiastic and committed professional who did not see agency status as significant:

K I would stay in one post and when I'm doing substantive I tend to stick around 2 to 3 years so not a vast difference really. So my experiences have been mixed, I've worked with some fantastic teams and it's given me so much variety, you know I've worked in learning disabilities and older adults and physical disabilities, mental health, you know all sorts of things and getting the learning experience is great … and people forget you're an agency worker, I don't think it's very significant anymore.

Dave, agency team manager, acknowledged that he is a commodity who could be hired and fired to suit managerial demands. He clearly saw that his ability to come to a job with no agendas or histories within an organisation to be of great benefit, particularly when a team needed support:

D It can be good, it suits me, it gives me flexibility, keeps me up to date, gives me opportunities to go to different authorities, I like it. And it works for me and I like to think it works for the authority. It works for the team here, you know. I mean, I've come at a time which was very difficult for them and they've been welcoming and supportive to me and I like to think that I've, in turn, been able to support them. So I think it can work for everybody... I mean I can offer a lot of flexibility, if they don't want to fill the post they can ask me to stay on for a couple of months until they are ready to fill the post and when they want to fill the post they can say to me "well, after next week or next month, we shan't need you". So that's the simple part of it I think, it allows the managers or the authority the flexibility of using their resources.

Dave went on to reflect on how he believed that agency workers can make breakthroughs in ways that perhaps employed staff cannot:

D   It was him and his girlfriend or his partner, absolute murder – but, with a lot of input and keep plugging away and a bit of team working with the community nurse and we eradicated the police, we took him right out of that situation…actually it did settle down to be quite a quiet and reasonably easy case, but I mean, it was a complete pain at the time and I don't think anyone could just face dealing with it.

Vic, agency team manager, planned his year around agency work and commented that his work performance had not been checked upon despite his having worked for agencies for some time. Such experience is contrary to Carey's (2009a) findings that agency social workers were subjected to greater scrutiny of their day-to-day work:

V   Well, it suits me – I can plan my year around the agency work. I only want to work locally so it's all positive to me, except for the computers – we didn't need all that before but that's how it's gone. You have to roll with it even if you question it inside and know you've done similar jobs in the past with a lot less accounting for what you'd done. You just got on with it, which is what I do now really. No one's really checked up on my performance yet and I've done agency for a few years now, on and off.

The issue about the relationship between length of contract and the effectiveness of agency staff was a theme that ran through the fieldwork interviews. Despite the introduction of a master vendor system in Cowleyshire, the use of agency social workers within Cowleyshire was presented as an essentially ad-hoc arrangement, and not as part of any wider workforce planning strategies, this pattern also according with the findings of Cornes et al. (2010).

Theresa, master vendor manager for Tempo, supplier of all agency staff to Cowleyshire, stated the following regarding the lack of any strategic use of agency staff as an integral part of financial and workforce planning:

T   It varies really, some staff have been here over two years and I just keep getting asked to renew the contract. There are no hard and fast rules really, especially with all the change. The budget cycle and overspends tend to dictate things so it's always quieter after Christmas awaiting a new budgetary year.

Theresa stated also that agency social workers constituted 13% of the social work workforce at the time of study and was frank about the profit drivers within Tempo, who apparently worked to a 14% profit margin markup. Her presentation of the realities behind the master vendor system are illuminating and demonstrate a culture wherein agency social workers negotiate their own rates:

T   We have guidelines here on pay rates but not as strict as some authorities who cap rates to the penny. Here social workers in Children's get

approximately from £28 - £32 per hour if they are limited company and £23 – 26 in Adults; mainly cos' Children's are harder to fill. On P.A.Y.E the rate comes down about £5 to £6 per hour but most are limited company status here, it's easier for us as an agency that way. After stoppages or self-employed tax, a social worker on the agency here is probably clearing £20 per hour. Team managers earn from £29 - £35 in Adults, again depending on P.A.Y.E and a few pounds more in Children's.

I   How do you decide what to pay an individual?

T   To be honest, it's usually a case of they get what they ask for – I've just had a woman ring up who is very good - she'll be mopped up anywhere asking £28 per hour.

Regarding this absence of policy**, Barbara, LA interim senior manager,** said that it was quite possible that a policy was being re-written and stated that in the meantime team managers would have to make out a business case for an agency post and process this through their line management. Barbara's views on the effectiveness of agency social workers were that they were expensive but did a good, flexible job. Her justification for this view was that she never heard of problems associated with agency social workers. She was unaware of any financial savings that the master vendor system had brought to Cowleyshire:

I   I have asked several people if I can have sight of the policy about

        engaging agency   social workers, and it has not appeared yet. Are you

        aware of this policy?

B   I have seen something but I have only been here a matter of months and

        have had bigger fish to fry.

I   I have been told on a few occasions that it is being rewritten?

B   Quite possibly.

I   What do you understand the basic policy to be?

B   Team managers would have to make out a business case for an agency

        post, identify the budget, put it through their manager who contacts Tempo

I   Do you have any views on how effective agency social workers are in

        Cowleyshire?

B   Well, they are expensive but I think they do a good job – we wouldn't use

        them otherwise. No problems have crossed my desk.

I   I understand that the master vendor service was to bring in £1M worth of

        savings for the authority?

B   Well, that's certainly the intention. I haven't actually seen a target update

        yet although they do cover the whole county, binmen etc.

The absence of policy in Cowleyshire was seen to have led to situations whereby agency staff had been engaged for periods of several years. The current literature (for example, Carey 2004; Kirkpatrick 2006; Cornes et al. 2010) presents the case as being axiomatic that agency social workers will be different from employed staff, although the increasingly proceduralised world of care management may well make any such difference less marked.   Despite the promised efficiencies and economies of the master vendor system (Hoque et al. 2011), no evidence was produced about any savings in Cowleyshire and agency staff still seemed able to negotiate their own rates. No evidence was produced to suggest that agency social workers or agency team managers operated at any higher or lesser level than employed staff. Despite the introduction of a master vendor system, there was no transparency in Cowleyshire about pay rates of agency social workers, agency staff not knowing what each other earned and employed staff making informed guesses.

Throughout the fieldwork period from autumn 2008 to summer 2009, several requests were made to have sight of the Cowleyshire policy on the engagement of agency staff, these requests having been met with the reply that the policy was in the process of being rewritten. Consequently no senior manager, team manager, social worker or administrative staff member knew the precise policy. There seemed to be no guidance on length of time for which an agency worker could be taken on and no guidance on access to training or disciplinary matters as the

following exchanges illustrated. The length of time for which agency social workers were engaged was an important consideration when considering any difference in practices between agency social workers and employed staff. The lack of policy regarding agency staff and workforce planning also seemed to have led to a situation whereby agency staff were used as stop-gaps only.

Harriet, agency social worker, agreed that agency social work was used as a gap filler and went on to speak candidly about the lack of knowledge within Cowleyshire about the policy regarding the engagement of agency social workers. Her description of the ad-hoc nature of contract renewal also underlined what can happen when any local authority becomes over-reliant on agency social workers. Harriet's impression was that Cowleyshire had difficulties in finding agency staff because of its rural nature:

H   The other problem is that we need agency staff who can come in and hit the ground running and I think actually in a rural area, I mean you need to consult other people on this but the impression I get is that they've enormous difficulties in finding people. So for example when I signed up with Socco, I said "Oh, you probably won't find work for me locally?" They said "don't kid yourself, we are desperate for people in those rural areas we can't find people; it's in the city we are fine, it's in the rural areas we are not so, it's not so easy" and I believe that before I started here, they had been struggling for some time.

Theresa, master vendor manager, clearly attributed importance to the issue of speed when filling vacancies and pointed to her system as having advantage over local authority HR process in this respect. She said that her job was to process applicants through to team managers and that she had never sat in on an interview with a team manager:

T   We look to supply quality staff quickly – we have that advantage over local authority HR process and can fill a post in a day or so, already police checked and referenced. We look for relevant experience, reliability and ability, preferably experience, with Zealosoc. It can take some workers three weeks to get competent on the system so it's best they have previous knowledge really.

Matthew, LA social worker, spoke below about the system prior to Tempo becoming a master vendor for Cowleyshire, whereby team leaders were able to exercise considerable discretion. Team leaders previously seemed to have their own bank of local people who knew the team, the job and the locality:

M   Well absolutely, yes I mean you could, I think they – I know some years ago we'd have a few retired social workers that we could ring up and say "Oh, can you come in and do a month for us?".

I   And send a form to personnel with how many hours you've done?
M   Yes

This point of view was shared by **Gordon, agency social worker,** whose experience prior to the introduction of the master vendor system was one of team leaders using local agency staff, such as himself, who knew the culture and practices within the team. Gordon placed high value on relationships with colleagues, particularly when teams were under pressure:

G   Yes, but we shared the office space and I was friends with a lot of the children's social workers and they were under a lot of pressure and the agency workers just couldn't cope with it. The management was dreadful whereas the team I was in was superb; we had a really good team manager and she was just really supportive and we did tend to stick to the same agency worker.

I   Did you? Is that because you could? You could ring him up and?

G   I think she could ring him up and he was there and he knew the system you know, and I think they used him more through convenience, he was a nice fellow, you know, he got on with everyone.

Eric, LA team manager, had not found the master vendor system a better one because of its focus on short-term issues at the expense of any longer term planning. He gave the example of Cowleyshire's senior management being aware that four agency workers' contracts were coming to an end but not advertising these posts, meaning that the gaps would remain unfilled pending engagement of employed staff or the engagement of new agency workers, all of whom would

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need induction periods. The amount of induction time spent on agency social

workers was seen as poor value for money and such costs have hardly been

considered in the case studies on agency social work (see Chapter 1: 4) with the

exception of Carey (2006).

The agency workers interviewed had different understandings and experiences

about their tenure: some said their contacts were formally renewed every three

months, others said they had never signed a contract yet had been in post for over

two years. Mollitt (2006) and Carey (2006) noted that the rigour of interviewing

for agency social work posts was not comparable to those for an employed

position. **Karene, agency social worker,** described an interview process that

appeared less than rigorous:

K   I think it is as it is with most locum jobs, where you turn up and you meet

        the team leader and maybe the senior prac and one of the social workers.

        You have a bit of a chat, decide whether you are going to fit in and it's

        always very informal and then it's kind of like "well how long do you

        need me for?"   "Well we're not really sure, we don't know if they are

        going to advertise the post, it might be or it might not, it might be a few

        weeks or longer". So, it's just kind of – you know, "can you go with the

        flow?"   "Well, yes" you know, and that's what suits me because I don't

        have a problem with uncertainty so it's kind of like, I know that I could be

        told – you know, because Cowleyshire haven't impressed me as a local

        authority at all, and it wouldn't surprise me if they turn around and say

"we're dropping all the locums and pack your bags, you are going next week", it wouldn't surprise me.

The absence of a policy regarding the role of agency social work staff in Cowleyshire appeared to be part of an overall climate of uncertainty and it is against this background that agency staff are being engaged within Cowleyshire. The next theme discussed is a consideration of what might motivate staff to enter this working environment.

MOTIVATION TO BECOME AN AGENCY SOCIAL WORKER

A range of motivations for the choice of agency status emerged out of the fieldwork findings, including those who sought choice and freedom from what was often viewed as the oppressive nature of contemporary LA employment and those for whom agency work was expedient, not driven by any specific desire to work for private sector agencies. There are a range of views expressed in the literature (Carey 2006, Hoque and Kirkpatrick 2006, Cornes et al. 2010) that make different estimates about the financial benefits associated with agency work. Cash benefits are certainly higher in comparison with employed positions but when pension and sickness benefits are considered alongside the financial effects of any gaps in between agency positions, the overall monetary gain was more open to question.

Louise, agency social worker, mentioned money as a factor in her move to agency working:

L   Constant and incessant pressure of work and a lot of people from that

        particular team left in that year and I decided that, you know, I would try

        branching out and doing something different and I started to think that

        money, you know, monetary reward was the answer to my problems.

Agency social workers were open in their discussions about their levels of pay

and in general did not seem to be embarrassed by any difference in pay rates.

Karene, agency social worker, actually volunteered sight of her pay slip:

I   Did you say your bottom line wage was £800 or your top line was £800?

K   No, well I take, what I actually take home is, let me check now. Do you

        want to have a look?

I   No, that's ok.

K   It's usually – I do my 35 hours on average and I take home about 560,

        between 540 and 560 a week take home

I   So, you have deductions of about £240 then?

K   Probably.

Literature from the commercial world (Handy 1984; Platman 2004) put forward a

model of agency workers as free agents. The agency social work literature

(Kirkpatrick and Hoque 2006; Mollitt2006; Carey 2006, 2009a) reports that some agency social workers identified strongly with the free agent perspective. Mollitt (2006:145) reported on a case study in two London boroughs at a time when a third of the agency social workers there were newly qualified, where she found freedom often cited as a motivator –'Constantly, the word `freedom' was mentioned in response to questions relating to the advantages of agency work'. Kirkpatrick and Hoque (2006) found evidence of the free agent motivation in a labour process that had placed social workers in a very strong position to voluntarily move into agency social work as the preferred option. Both of these studies included examples of newly qualified social workers taking up the free agent position, the demand at the time of the Cowleyshire study having moved on to be a demand for experienced social workers only. The comments below, however, would seem to offer some limited support for this model of working from two agency social workers whose personalities and lifestyles fitted with the free agent model.

Harriet, agency social worker:

H   I do really like the freedom of agency work, I think that's a very sort of common feeling amongst agency workers, I like the freedom to be able to move around to have that freedom of choice to be able to do it quickly and just knowing that I can – you know, just experiment.

Karene, agency social worker:

K Well I would say, I've probably done agency social work, out of the

   fourteen to fifteen years I've been doing social work, maybe three of them

   I've been doing agency work and that's been usually as a consequence of

   – I tend to change jobs every couple of years anyway so it fits in with

   lifestyle.

The literature (Hoque 2006; Carey 2006, 2009a) offers considerable support for

agency work being a matter of expediency. The following participants who range

across agency administrative workers, an employed social worker, agency social

workers and an agency team manager, offered strong support for such a model:

Dave, agency team manager, was a retired social worker who did not want to be

involved with reorganisation issues and therefore left his employed position. He

still wanted to work and chose agency social work as an expedient, rather than a

career option:

I   What motivated you to go into agency social work?

D   Well I suppose the quick answer is to – I enjoy social work, to keep up my

   skills and I'd have some money.   I took voluntary early retirement …

   Agency work wasn't really a career aim. It was expedient.

The two agency social workers below were both very open about their motivation to sign on with an agency, namely their inability to find permanent employment. The paradox here may be that the very existence of agency social work as a form of contingent employment takes pressure off local authorities who are reluctant to offer permanent employed positions, particularly in times of resource constraint, reorganisations and mergers (Carey 2006).

Gordon, agency social worker:

I   Okay. What motivated you to go on to agency in the first place then Gordon?

G   Lack of work, I had to move because I relocated and I couldn't get permanent employment so it wasn't through choice, in a way, it was, that was, you know, forced.

Fiona, agency social worker, put the issue of expediency even more succinctly:

I   Why did you choose a locum rather than going on permanent staff?

F   Because I couldn't get a job.

The two views presented below also support an expediency view of agency social work and see agency work as being family-friendly, in a way that local authority

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employment, despite declared policies of family-friendly working, would seem unable to match, at least in Cowleyshire.

Matthew, LA social worker, reflected on the agency motivation of a colleague:

M   I think it was around her personal things you know, I think her marriage broke up and she still had other problems within her extended family. I think which needed that flexibility plus she wasn't from round here and she liked to go back home quite often I think.

Rose, agency administrative worker:

R   At the time, agency suited and I'd done a few secretarial temping jobs – largely, it fitted in with the kids.

I   So, if you had the choice now, would you go for a permanent job?

R   I probably would now, when I first started as a temp it was what I wanted to do, but now, yes I probably would – it would suit better, especially pension wise.

Hoque and Kirkpatrick (2006) were the first to recognise that the choice of an agency position may not be motivated by the lure of a portfolio career, but a retreat from the conditions of permanent employment within local authorities. Resource constraints, reorganisations and office politics have been seen to

combine in recent years to make local authority employment no longer the premier choice that it once was, particularly as benefits such as pensions have declined in comparative terms (Mollitt 2006). There seemed to be little recognition among participants that the ideologies and drivers of private sector employment work might be in opposition to those that have characterised the traditional principles of the public sector in respect of issues such as stability and unionisation (Jones 2001; Mollitt 2006). Only one agency social worker (Karene, this Chapter: 194) talked about the profit-driven motives of Tempo as a private sector enterprise. Although not posed as a direct question as part of the interview schedules, no other participants in the fieldwork positioned Tempo as a private sector enterprise; rather they saw it as an integral part of Cowleyshire's Human Resources system.

This point regarding the potential for agency social workers to advocate in ways that employed staff might not be able to has not appeared previously in the literature on agency social work (for example, Hoque 2006; Carey 2006) and merits further exploration.

Theresa, master vendor manager, offered the view that the staff who approached Tempo were confident individuals whose motivations were balanced between lifestyle needs and cash aspirations:

I   What would you say were the main drivers of staff who approach Tempo?

T   It's a mix really, lots like the flexibility and the cash but others just want the variety and not to feel stuck in one job. 50/50 maybe - lifestyle and cash. We attract people with confidence who have transferable skills.

Motivations identified by agency workers in Cowleyshire mainly concurred with the expediency model regarding fit with lifestyle and circumstances. There was some support for the 'free agent' model, none for the 'portfolio' career model and none for the 'treadmillers' model, with no evidence emerging in Cowleyshire about the most difficult and complex cases always being given to agency staff. This finding contrasts with the findings of Carey (2006, 2009a) and Cornes et al. (2010) where agency social workers were given the most difficult cases. The retreat from what was perceived as the essentially oppressive nature of local authority employment (Carey 2004; Kirkpatrick and Hoque 2006 and Mollitt 2006) was noted by several participants, whereas three of the ten agency staff (one social worker and two administrators) actually wanted to join Cowleyshire and would have applied for suitable employed positions had any been available. The lack of flexibility within local authority employment process and lack of flexible working opportunities in employed posts also emerged as a factor pushing individuals toward agency status.

POSITIVES IN AGENCY SOCIAL WORK

Karene, agency social worker, gave an analysis of the role of agency social workers that centred on an individual's capabilities, rather than on their terms and conditions:

K   Yes, I suppose the people to ask that question often are going to be the

team leaders and the colleagues, people who I work with would be able to

see what kind of contribution I've brought. Certainly when I think about

when I've worked in substantive placements we've had agency workers.

They're a mixed bunch, you get some who are very skilled professionals

who can dip in and out and they bring a huge amount to the team because

they can walk in the door, introduce themselves, pick up a case load, take

a couple of cases off everybody, everybody has a big sigh of relief and it

just takes some of the weight off... I think in that respect when you get a

good locum they are worth their weight in gold.

Harriet, agency social worker, clearly viewed her job as an upskilled one, partly

because she did not have to get embroiled in office politics:

H   I don't have to deal with those long term issues that can wear you down

because you get embroiled in discussions with local authorities about

whether they can deliver that or whether they will do that, whether it meets

the target and so forth, there's a kind of freshness always to the workload

that I have, it's demanding in its own way, but it's fresh.

Harriet went on to describe further upskilling in her agency social work role, a

role that fell into a 'project' category:

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H   ...the money is available; I can get care in...and I don't have to deal with

         those long term issues that can wear you down because you get embroiled

         in discussions with local authorities about whether they can deliver that or

         whether they will do that, whether it meets the target and so forth, there's a

         kind of freshness always to the workload that I have, it's demanding in its

         own way, but it's fresh.

Christine, agency administrative worker, stated that she was unable to

differentiate agency social workers from employed staff in terms of the quality of

their work and in their development of working relationships:

C   From what I've seen and the ones that we've had certainly in this team

         have all been very experienced social workers so far, from what I've seen,

         they've settled in really well and quickly.

I   And do you notice any difference in the quality of their work or their

         relationships as you see them as compared to people who are permanent

         staff?

C   None at all.

I   You'd have a job to, say 'oh she's agency'

C   No, you would never know they were agency.

I   You would never know?

C   To be honest, I've not noticed any difference between the agency or social
         workers.

Karene, agency social worker, saw agency workers in a very positive light, and
that they brought a much-needed criticality to settings:

K   Not just a critical eye, because sometimes it's kind of like, you know, the
         team can be on their knees. When I came in here, people were feeling
         very demoralised by what was going on and I sort of said "what you do
         here is amazing in the respect that you are doing a very specialist form of
         social work that isn't recognised."
         I just think that, you know, what they are dealing with here in terms of
         having to advocate so strongly for people and digging your heels in against
         consultants who are seen as powerful and saying "no, that's not okay"
         bloody hard, because you feel so intimidated by it.

Justine, LA team manager, would appear to support Karene's views about the
new insights agency social workers can bring to hard-pressed teams:

J   I think they bring a fresh feel to things sometimes, I think what's
         good myself, having worked in different areas, people get very stuck
         into one way of doing things for the best reasons. It's a pressure, tough
         job and that if you get somebody new coming in they bring new ideas

with them and they very often say 'well, why do you do it that way?'

The above comments would suggest that agency social workers were generally accepted by employed staff as competent practitioners who did a good job, despite one comment above that they were a "mixed bag". Such overall positive findings about the competency of agency social workers have not been found in any of the previous case studies (see Chapter 1: 4), where concerns about fit with teams and consistency are more characteristic, despite individual examples of positive contributions. The ability to hire them reasonably swiftly and let them go when no longer needed was appreciated by team managers and senior managers, despite the master vendor system having recently taken away the discretion of team managers to make individual contracts with agency social workers. Agency social workers were generally appreciated for their wide experience and potential to bring new ideas and insights to a team. Their fit with 'project' work, for example reviewing unallocated cases, was seen as a positive role contribution that freed employed staff to concentrate on their everyday work.

Justine, LA team manager, gave her interpretation of the policy on agency social workers below. Her view was that short-term project work was a useful role for agency social work. She also saw the benefits in being able to engage an agency worker while a full-time, employed post was in the process of being filled:

J   I suppose if in that gap between very often if somebody leaves before the new person comes into post that you've often got a gap there haven't you? We can slot an agency in.

I   Project work?

J   Yes, that sort of thing – management want something done from the top or a backlog of assessments or reviews done – work that leaves us to continue to do our case work – it wouldn't be taking us off the job and would mean less stress and therefore possibly less cost in the long run.

Paddy, LA social worker, took the view that agency social work was a practical way for management to deal with the peaks and troughs of demand:

P   Whether it's value for money is open to debate. The workload does peak and trough here, if you can employ agency staff to come in at the peaks to take on the busy work, the heavy workload and then, you know, not employ them during the less busy times then I guess financially it makes sense when there's not much in it, but to my mind it would be better to have a fully staffed team and a fully resourced team than employ agency staff to have to deal with that work. But I guess hiring agency staff is always valuable because you have always got an extra resource to tackle a heavy workload if you need.

As illustrated above, most of the experience of agency social work in Cowleyshire was perceived as positive, in contrast with many previous findings from urban

case studies (see Chapter 1: 4). There were also views in Cowleyshire about the challenges of agency social work, however, and these challenges will now be discussed.

CHALLENGES IN AGENCY SOCIAL WORK

In contrast to the above views about the positive role of agency social workers, **Justine, LA team manager**, gave an example of inappropriate use of agency social workers, who had followed senior management directives relating to a project that she believed had negative consequences, both in human costs for the service user and in financial costs because of a crisis situation that had arisen due to the cutting of care by agency staff:

J And they weren't meant to be touching anybody who had got – was an open case to a social worker they were meant to be contacting you or at least for you to do the review. And I had one or two people that they went to, two of mine and I didn't know until, you know, they came in they did it. They cut the care, within 2 or 3 days in some cases – crisis because they've come in – they don't know the person, they didn't even speak to me about it before they did the review.

Agency social work has traditionally been seen as short-term in nature (Laming 2009, Carey 2011a) and the following examples give a variety of perspectives on negative factors associated with some agency staff, particularly managerial staff, who came into Cowleyshire wanting to change things and make an immediate impact. Some of these staff were contracted for short periods, whereas others

stayed for longer periods. Increasing lengths of tenure on behalf of agency social workers had served to lessen any difference between agency staff and employed staff but the immediacy with which staff can be asked to leave, however, has disadvantages for colleagues, service users and carers.

Susan, LA social worker, had a view that some interim senior managers wanted to make their mark and then move on and she gave an example of the rapid staff turnover which meant she could not recall colleagues' names: :

S   I think they come in, it sounds as if you are old and staid, but you feel as if they are coming in to change everything, to be able to move on to the next place to say "well this is what I did in this post, sort of blah de blah" and then leaving you with the pieces to pick up. I don't think there's any kind of wanting to see a project through and wanting to see it carried on...One layer of management has already gone. Christine Cross was here, she was well liked: we had an interim service manager – Helen Corr, she went. Jan Caruthers was a service manager, she went. There was – I can't remember the names now but they all got squeezed out. It's madness – Joan got promoted: Eric then got a secondment when Jon Bowers and Helen Crow and all those whizz kids arrived. They put out a secondment for a service manager - Mick O'Hara, interim team manager, got that and then they put out another one or I think it came from that interview I don't even know if it went out to secondment, to do something with the service user and carer involvement and now someone else is doing that.

Agency administrative worker, Sheila, had taken an agency position as an expedient in the absence of permanent posts being available within Cowleyshire pending reorganisation. Her comments below point to the precariousness of relying over heavily on agency staff and include a reflection on service users:

I   So, both administrative staff are agency?

S   Yes, which is ludicrous when you think about it but we're both on notice periods for about a week, so within a week they could lose all their administrative staff which is mad. But I also suspect that if they put people like myself on a temporary contract with the council it would cost them less than what they pay the agency.

I   Yes and ... is the commitment level the same?

S   It's, okay, different people have different reasons to be agency social work staff, sometimes, you know, I'd say we've been lucky the ones we've had have been very good, but are they always like that ? Is the commitment the same? Can you expect the commitment to be the same when they are not getting the same back? I don't know. If you are on the agency for a series of every six months, probably three months, renewed contracts then you might always avoid an annual appraisal. If you are an agency social worker you could be here for a year and never have had a one to one with your team manager in terms of your development – is that good for the service users?

The above point about agency staff avoiding managerial scrutiny is an interesting one and accords with those of **Vic, agency team manager,** who stated (this Chapter: 168) that his work had never been checked. This Cowleyshire experience contrasts with Carey's (2006) findings that agency social workers were closely managed. Carey (2006; 2011a) also found that it was the practice to only give the most demanding and stressful cases to agency staff. No such evidence emerged within the Cowleyshire fieldwork where workloads seem to be equitable and not differentiated in terms of difficulty or challenge between employed staff and agency staff. All staff worked to the same care management system and to the targets monitored by Zealosoc, the computer system. Only Mollitt (2006) had reported agency social work staff having avoided carrying out as much paper and computer systems work as employed staff. **Justine, LA team manager,** recognised the increasing challenge regarding the amounts of time all social workers spent at computers:

J Administrative work has gone up a huge amount with the Zealosoc

   computer system, ... I don't know – somebody said to me the other day "it

   must be 80% of my time spent behind the computer" certainly it's more

   than half, I would say. I don't know, it's difficult.

Neil, LA social worker, sought extra reassurance about the confidentiality of his interview before speaking critically about his perceptions and experiences regarding the challenges that systems held for agency social workers:

N   It's hard for agency social workers to 'hit the ground running' if they don't

even know the financial systems for going to panel, for carers' breaks, spot

purchases, carers' grants etc. You can't just go to panel blind, unless

you're not going to get the result you want, it's going to be thrown back at

you, so the panel expect things to be done in a certain way and again it's

about knowing the head of panel, what they like, the right way to pitch it.

Neil also saw the 'system' as not being in the interests of relationship-based

practice with service users:

N   I mean, I get say X carer ringing me ...because the situations changed or

they want to review – they're not on my case – I've got to say "I'm sorry,

you've got to ring customer services and it's got to be a new referral" you

know, whereas in the old days you could say "yes, okay, when can I come

and see you?" and you know, you could allocate it to yourself really,

because of that relationship over the years, but it doesn't happen like that

now - its system-run rather than relationship-run.

Administrative staff have rarely been involved in social work research, despite the

core roles of administrative teams in public service. The following views

reflected a degraded labour process in which administrative staff had become

deskilled as social workers now carried out tasks that would previously have been

administrative ones. The managerial imperative that administrative work had to

take priority for social workers was clearly reflected in the following interview

with **Christine, agency administrator** who was critical of managerial systems such as panels and had a view that a preoccupation with details was deskilling:

I ... do you have a view on what percentage of time social workers in general, agency and – spend behind the computer?

C At any given working day, I think it's taking up maybe 3 or 4 hours a day.

I So at least 50%. Is mastering the paperwork/panel/computer system a problem for agency workers?

C Yes, it's becoming more and more...it's deskilling you if you have to sit in front of a computer. I think it's all about sort of, performance indicators and things, you have got to be seen to meet certain performance – you've got to tick that box here and there and da, da, da and your paper work has to be of a certain standard to be approved by the funding panel.

Rose, agency administrator, gave some very insightful perspectives on the work tasks of social workers and the effect that modernised care management practices have had on administrative workers' quality of work. She regretted the degradation within her own administrative role and commented on the lack of economic sense in higher paid social work staff carrying out tasks that administrative staff could carry out more cheaply and efficiently:

R   So they are wasting their time where, you know you can be trained as a

        social worker and you can't help people

I   Some social workers could be on double your pay I would imagine

R   Yes. I can remember we never had computers and that and now social

        workers do their own typing now, they've cut administrative, "we're

        cutting administrative we don't need you, you can type your own letters"

        and that's what professional is and I'm not so sure it is and I am starting to

        question that. I don't think it is for social workers because at the end of the

        day they are providing a service for a person who needs it, surely the fact

        that they haven't done their computer work therefore the service doesn't

        start when it should, can't be right?...from another angle they are not

        creating meaningful or interesting jobs for the administrative staff, because

        they are basically left with pretty drossy stuff because everything else, all

        the interesting things that they could get involved in and they could do

        because they are quite capable people are being taken away from them.

        Well, you know, why are you paying the manager forty grand a year or

        whatever you are paying them, to sit and type things that somebody else

        could do in five minutes, they should be working on the higher levels of

        things surely?

Braverman's (1998) labour process theory can be seen to have resonance with the

working environment of the Cowleyshire administrative staff who had no control

over the conception or execution of their work. The lack of interpersonal contact

reflected upon in the extract below suggested further degradation in the workplace for Cowleyshire's administrative staff.

Wendy, LA administrator:

W   I've worked here a long time and what we get now is "factory-made social workers".

I   How do you mean?

W   Well, they don't see many clients: they spend about two thirds of their time behind computers doing things we could do much quicker. Our work has got really dull, I help with a few reports and do customer services but we don't get that many callers. You're the first person I've spoken to in weeks really, we get quite depressed. We are not allowed to think these days….

This above view echoed the participant in Carey's (2009b) study who compared contemporary social work with working in a factory. Wendy's expression "we are not allowed to think these days", suggested an unfulfilling working environment where workers were expected to be unthinking and passive. The administrative staff cited above saw that social workers were unable to spend much time with service users. The following interview with **Zana, LA administrative worker**, takes this point further and presents a scenario

in which the administrative staff saw the service users while the social workers did computer work:

Z   Social workers spend about 80% of their time, four days a week about, at their computers so we tend to take the phone calls and even see the service users if they call in, usually because the social worker is preoccupied with administrative tasks and can't spare the time.

These above views from administrative staff posed very clear and unambivalent challenges to the nature of care management in Cowleyshire and echoed themes in both the labour process literature (Meiksins 1994; Braverman 1998) and the care management literature (Harris 2003; Carey 2008a) regarding degradation of the workplace. The issues of ambivalence as a theme surrounding agency social work will now be discussed.

AMBIVALENCE TOWARDS AGENCY SOCIAL WORK

Ambivalence towards the issues surrounding agency social workers have been highlighted in the literature by Carey (2011a). The rural context of Cowleyshire was new ground for a study of agency social work and it was found that, despite the largely positive perceptions and experiences about agency social work in Cowleyshire, there was also some evidence of ambivalence toward agency social work in the interviews, although not stated as directly as had been the case with the SWOT analysis completers.

Despite the findings of Martinez-Brawley (2000; 2006) and Pugh (2000; 2007) that pointed to the necessity of delivering social work services in ways that were customised to the needs of rural communities, little significance seemed to be attached to finding ways of working that best suited Cowleyshire's rural communities. The generic care management systems, largely structured by computerised forms and procedures, did not seem to allow for customisation of approach, even if the need were to have been recognised by staff. For example, a concern might be whether the staff member is going to understand their culture and stay around long enough to build up a trusting and effective relationship, as illustrated in the extracts below. **Harriet, agency social worker,** was unusual in that she was a local person, born and living in Cowleyshire, but she had agency status. Although she stated above that she did not declare her agency status to service users and carers, she articulated below that she believes establishing a local link is important, especially to older people:

H   …because I am from the area, I think that makes a huge difference, you know, they always usually like to know where you're from don't they and I think that if they know you're from – you're local and sometimes I say "well look, I'm from Cowleyshire" you know, that's usually enough.

Susan, LA social worker, was the only other social worker who was born in Cowleyshire and she believed that local knowledge and a long-term commitment to local communities were important if effective social work is to be carried out with adults:

S   Absolutely – the skill of making of links without obviously breaking

         confidentiality, they can get too close can't they in Cowleyshire but, it's

         almost like before you could engage with a person, a family, and they'll

         trust you, they'll want to know you're of them. I'm local, certainly the

         Queentown end of the county, and I find it an advantage in most cases.

Paddy, LA social worker, placed less importance on local roots, and pointed out

that many of his service users were from elsewhere, having retired to the rural

county of Cowleyshire:

I   Do you think it's important from your experience with rural service users

         you're meeting that they want to know who you are and where you are

         from and did your dad go to this school etc. or have you not particularly

         seen that as an issue?

P   I don't think that's the case, I think that a lot of people have retired to the

         area.

I will now turn to the issue of whether social workers adopted a policy of telling

service users and carers that they were agency staff, who might leave at short

notice. This area of practice was not given a great deal of consideration by

participants in Cowleyshire and has not been an issue discussed in previous case

studies of agency social work (see Chapter 1: 4) The fact that Cowleyshire agency

staff often stayed on contract for several years meant that some agency social

workers might remain in teams for longer than employed social workers.

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Therefore, the issue of declaration of agency status perhaps becomes less of an issue to service users and carers although there remains the issue of a right to know who you are working with and, in theory at least, to be able to decline the services of an agency member of staff.. Agency social workers in Cowleyshire did not declare their agency status to service users and carers. **Olwyn, interim LA senior manager,** was unequivocal about this issue and stated that the background of the staff with whom they are in contact is of no interest to service users and carers:

O   There is absolutely no need for clients to be told that their social worker is from an agency; all that should concern them is that they are representing Cowleyshire County Council…

Agency staff were more thoughtful in their responses to the issue of declaration of agency status. **Fiona, agency social worker,** suggested below that staff were aware of her status but not service users:

I   Do you introduce yourself to service users as agency or?

F   No. Don't think it was an issue really, because my experience from the start was I was kind of accepted by, there were other agency workers in my first job and there wasn't in the second but I was perceived as a social worker but staff knew that I was employed by an agency but there wasn't this that "I'm a proper worker and you're not" kind of thing because you're agency.

Alan, agency social worker, also did not tell service users of his status and did not see the relevance of this issue:

I   So when you're in your actual work Alan, how do you, if you do at all, introduce yourself to service users, to colleagues, how do you advertise that I'm from an agency, or you don't?

A   It doesn't make any difference to a service user whether you're an agency social worker or – you're just a social worker to them.

I   I was thinking about whether in rural areas, it might be people want to know you're permanent, you'll stick around.

A   Well I've worked in, well this is a rural area, and I live in a rural county and I've never been asked that question yet, in all the time I've been doing it.

Alan went on, however, to suggest that the issue of longer term involvement might be more of an issue in children's social work.   There has been one case study (Mollitt 2006) that included views from a London borough children's social work team about the unsuitability of agency social work for the longer-term needs of children.   The core evidence regarding agency social work, however, has come almost exclusively from adult care management teams (see Chapter 1: 4).   Alan

went on to say that he thought the pressure to open and close cases as quickly as possible was less evident in children's social work:

A   Children like the on-going involvement, you're doing assessment, you do your reviewing put in a review team where children work, you're involved with them all the time, so they like permanency there, there like to know Alan is going to be there for a while. I think it's more of an issue in children's teams.

Gordon, agency social worker, made explicit reference to the fact that permanent staff can also present difficulties with continuity within the care management system**:**

I   Do you, or is your experience, that agency social workers in the field introduce yourself as an agency worker? How do you explain your status to service users?

G   No, I don't think I do really … I just introduce myself as a social worker and I'm here to do this assessment … the people I'm working with have been let down by permanent staff, continuity is a problem I think for a service user is you know, I can see that as being a weakness but it's often the same with permanent staff, especially with the push to close cases.

Karene, agency social worker had not introduced her agency status to service users while in Cowleyshire:

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I   So in terms of current practice then Karene, how do you introduce yourself

        to service users? Do you say 'I'm from the agency, or do you say, I'm

        Karene from …?'

K   No, I don't and the reason I don't here is because, we tend to – referrals

        come in sort of thick and fast, and we pick it up, we do a very quick

        assessment so it doesn't make any difference to them whether I'm locum

        or not.

Harriet, agency social worker, used to tell service users her status but, having

been with the team for over one year, no longer did:

I   How would you introduce yourself or explain your status, if at all, to

        service users and colleagues?

H   Not at all, it was never an issue really and never an issue with colleagues

        either. I mean at first again when I was sending emails, I'd always be

        quite strict about putting agency social worker, agency duty social worker,

        particularly in those first 12 weeks but that's gone now.

The other employed staff interviewed did not know whether agency social

workers introduced themselves as having agency status or just as social workers.

This suggested perhaps that the issue of openness regarding status was a non-issue

for employed colleagues because the agency staff all now came from Tempo, Cowleyshire's master vendor partner and sometimes stayed for extended periods.

The issue of access to training opportunities for agency social workers is also an area of debate in the literature, Carey (2007a) having reported that agency staff were denied access to training opportunities whereas the approach in Cowleyshire seemed a different one that allowed agency staff to access training free of charge. Access to training opportunities had also been noted as limited for agency social workers by Hoque and Kirkpatrick (2006). Despite the free access to training for agency social workers within Cowleyshire there seemed to be a lack of transparency to agency social work staff about this access to training. The practice of the master vendor, Tempo, in retaining an element of agency workers' pay, ostensibly for use as a personal training budget but without this being known to the agency workers, was clearly unacceptable practice, particularly in a county where agency staff could access training free of charge. It appeared that agency workers had to be proactive with Tempo, the master vendor organisation, as illustrated in the exchange below from **Karene, agency social worker:**

K Tempo do pay a quarterly lump sum of £250.

I To you?

K But you have to ask for it.

I As a good practice sort of thing?

K   You are entitled to £250 every 3 months.

I   Whether or not – do you have to prove you use that on training or could you spend that on G and Ts.

K   No you don't, you can spend it on whatever you want.

Theresa, master vendor manager, offered the following views on this issue of training allowances:

I   There seemed to be some confusion about training allowances among agency staff I have interviewed.

T   Well, that's probably because lots of the staff worked for different agencies and some can be a bit 'fly by night' – we hold back £1000 per year training allowance.

I   But don't the agency staff in Cowleyshire get access to free training?

T   Sometimes, yes but not always and the agency staff can always have the money – it doesn't actually have to be spent on training.

The findings below regarding individual wage rate negotiation were interesting because part of the rationale for the introduction of a master vendor service had

been to standardise agency wage rates and hence control expenditure. **Dave, Agency Team Manager,** spoke openly about his concerns regarding the business practices of his agency, Locumotive, whom he had been with prior to Tempo being awarded master vendor status with Cowleyshire. The following extract demonstrated unacceptable practice on behalf of Locumotive, under whose terms of contract Dave was still engaged:

D   I wanted Alan, agency social worker, to work for my team. I said to him "You're on £19.50 per hour in the other Cowleyshire team you are currently with …". He said "No, I'm on £19 an hour" so I said "No, no you're on £19.50". "No, no" he said "It's definitely '£19" I thought well that's strange, so I rang our own HR who said "Well, the only thing I can say then is that Locumotive are telling him one thing and charging us another". HR said "The next thing you'll be saying is that you don't get £30 an hour" and I said that "I don't - I get £28". Locumotive were telling us one thing and charging the authority a different rate. So he and I wrote in separately and said "We want this money" and we'd been doing it for 10 months, about £4000 each owing in all. Locumotive's response was "That's the training pot you're contributing to". I said "I've never heard of this".

The question of lead-in times for agency staff and formal induction periods have been discussed in the literature (see, for example, Mollitt 2006) with a mix of views being put forward from agency social workers and employed staff about the

need to either see induction as an overhead in cost terms or an essential safeguard to protect vulnerable service users from bad practice.

Dave, agency team manager, saw it as important that agency staff produced the goods from day one:

D   Organisational systems are just different. So the way I tend to see it is I think anyone who comes into a job, it's good to give them something to do straight away, they've got a role, they've something to focus on. If you have this prolonged induction of visiting here, going there, going to see this centre and going to see that, actually tends to generate a bit of anxiety in my experience, people are just waiting to get started.

Justine, LA team manager, took a different stance on induction needs:

J   … I have worked in teams where agency workers have just been given the files and "there you are – go off and get it sorted" and I wouldn't do that to anybody.

I   Because you don't think that's efficient or ethical or what?

J   I don't think it's ethical, I don't think it's fair to them and I don't think it's fair to the service users either.

Fiona, agency social worker, appreciated that colleagues might have concern at the 'lead-in' time associated with agency staff, who were earning agency rates while being 'taught' the job but, unlike her first agency experience, believed that a reasonable amount of induction was necessary in all cases:

F   Yes I think definitely induction anyway, I don't know - it would worry me slightly if they had none at all but then that's how I got into work wasn't it? I was employed straight from finishing my course back then…yes, and I mean, to be honest, for most people, it takes quite a while, you know, to get to know like, the computer system, to get to know the paper work, get to know the area, to get to know how you complete an assessment in this, you know.

Justine, LA team manager, talked about her ambivalence toward actually finding out what the policy was on use of agency social workers with regard to both their engagement and their opportunities for training:

J   I don't know what the official policy is because I haven't – this is confidential, I haven't pursued that too far in case I've got a no – but I have enabled agency staff to access training and courses … The training that's being given, you know, like the Zealosoc training, the new system, they need to know that - something about the individualised budget training, they need to know that, they need to be part of it if they are going to be working here.

The following comments from an agency social worker reflected a view of a degraded workforce and a feeling that decisions regarding structural reorganisation were taken at some high level without the involvement of the workforce. **Harriet, agency social worker:**

H   I do think people feel very, very brow beaten and weighed down, there's no doubt about it, there's a very big element of that and I think it leaves a lot of social workers feeling disheartened.

However, as an agency social worker, Harriet was in a role that involved working with a range of local authorities in terms of placement decisions and her perspective reflected a high degree of satisfaction with her ability to use discretion, suggesting that she enjoyed a role still characterised by a considerable degree of professional freedom.

However, she did appreciate the tensions in her agency role and talked about compromise, stating that although she has to work within policy and procedure she felt that she would be better able to resist carrying out any activities that she felt were undermining of social work values and knew that, if she was not comfortable with the values in a social work team, she could move on. She believed that it would be harder for a colleague in a permanent position to resist in this way:

H.   I think local authority work is pretty tough and getting tougher at the moment, the bureaucracy and so forth. I think you have to approach agency work with a certain mind-set.

I   Which is?

H   I think you have to be willing to some extent to be, to compromise, to perhaps work with policies and procedures sometimes that you feel uncomfortable with and you have to balance that position. I think you have to be true to yourself even though you are an agency worker....I think that it's nice to be in a position to say 'well thank you very much I need to move on'.

I   OK.

H   And I think in a permanent position it's harder to do that.

The evidence below further illustrated perceived different value bases of senior managers and the workforce and a lack of workforce resistance. A lack of resistance by workers was noted by **Matthew, LA social worker,** who viewed management as requiring compliant, passive workers who do not challenge:

M   I mean, some of these people that they brought in as interim managers - I mean, my view is that they try to run a business but we are trying to run a service and that's the difference and that is, that is, new to us in social work, and almost in a short space of time, suddenly – and I nearly said it one day, but I thought "you have got to be so careful of what you're saying at meetings because you don't want to be card marked and you have got to

be a bit careful" and you know, I felt like saying "look, you know, I'm sorry but, you know, we're trying to run a service, you're trying to run a business".

M   It's going to be a disaster site – I mean I just, you know, and a lot of people here, some of the younger social workers, it wouldn't mean anything to them because they are not as politicised they don't come from that background that I came from.

One example of resistance to managerialism was given by **Justine, LA team manager**, in respect of an agency social worker who was instructed by an interim senior manager, Ralph (since left Cowleyshire), to cross a Unison picket line:

J   Well she, I think she was in the union actually. So she was a very principled person and immediately said "Sorry Justine, I'm not" and returned the emails saying "I'm not coming in, I'm not covering, called out on strike, feel solidarity" and she actually she put, a bit antagonistically "In actual fact I've decided that I'm not coming in because I'm going to join the picket line" so Ralph went absolutely mad and sent an email saying ... "If you don't come in, I will take it that you have terminated your contract".

Ralph relented at the last minute and the agency social worker kept her job. This scenario was unlikely to have happened with an employed social worker because of their employment rights and the formal recognition of the trade union role

within local authorities. However, in respect of agency staff, Ralph had the power to hire and fire agency staff on a whim.

Fiona, agency social worker, gave an example of covert resistance in comments about how she prepared reports for the panel system used for approving packages of care. She saw this panel system primarily as a system of financial control, combined with a role as a vehicle for promoting senior management's commitment to new policy regarding the introduction of individual budgets. Some evidence was produced in the interview below of resistance in a de facto (Evans 2010a) manner in setting the balance of priorities between paperwork and visiting service users:

I   Yes, these panels seem to loom large as well in the dynamics of the
         working week.

F   You can't get the care in unless it's approved. Yes and you have deadlines
         and I mean, they keep changing that, they've changed that recently;
         they've moved it from one day to another day so it's a Friday here at the
         moment and quite a lot of people in the team have Friday's off, right?

I   So, the individual budget policy is being pushed by management?

F   Very much so, which can work for some people but not everyone; they're
         saying it's about choice and more choice but actually it isn't.

I   And where do you currently see the place of professional judgement?

F   Well then what you do is you write stuff in such a way that you know the panel will agree it.

Karene, agency social worker, was the only person interviewed who brought up the issue of profit as the key driver of employment agencies, which she perceived as being interested in profit and not being interested in issues such as personal and career development:

K   There's one thing you do have to deal with as an agency social worker which is, I suppose, the consultancy agencies are a business full stop. They are not interested in your professional development, they're not interested in social work ethics, they don't care, that's your problem; their problem is getting as much money in as possible that you earn the most money for them as possible. And whether you're happy or not really is irrelevant to them. I do get that type of support here, I get the support I need as professional social worker within the team, but the agencies never provide anything in a sense.

SUMMARY

The absence of a clear policy on the role and engagement process for agency staff meant that individual team managers used the system as they saw fit and enjoyed a limited degree of success in accessing resources that would not have been available to them in any other way.   This would seem to offer some limited

evidence of discretion still being exercised. The argument of Evans and Harris (2004) that professional discretion can exist even in environments where there is a proliferation of rules and regulations , did not seem to be supported in the Cowleyshire situation. It was the absence of a policy on agency social work that has led to some professional discretion being exercised. The potential of an alternative in-house 'bank staff' was raised by two agency workers and an interim senior manager, who considered it a cheaper and more acceptable form of supplementary staffing provision. The turgidity of local authority staffing procedures was seen by several participants as a disincentive to apply for a position on the employed staff and longer terms of engagement possibly narrowed any differences between the way agency social workers were perceived by colleagues, managers and other professionals. Some elements in the views of social work staff harked back to an era where professional discretion was more in evidence. However, much of social work has always been constrained by legislation and directed by central government, even if not to the extent of the levels of control associated with care management. Much uncertainty surrounded agency social work within Cowleyshire and agency staff usage was ad hoc rather than part of any strategic workforce plan. Agency social work staff were largely welcomed as helping individuals whose work was perceived as competent. The agency social worker participants, despite claiming that they represented value for money, also recognised the cost to the public purse occasioned by their use. No evidence emerged to support any hypothesis that the role of agency staff does not work in rural settings, particularly in care management roles, and the issue of needing local knowledge regarding service users, carers and the community hardly appeared in any narrative. Only one agency social worker and one

employed social worker, both born in Cowleyshire, gave any importance to the need to know the rural context in order to carry out effective social work. The strictures of the computer-dominated care management systems and a largely remote, and often interim, senior management can be seen as having led to a largely degraded workforce, with only four agency social workers, both agency team managers and both interim senior managers and the manager of Tempo perceiving their work as being fulfilling.

The next chapter will discuss the issues that have brought up under the key themes and locate the Cowleyshire experience of agency social work more fully with labour process theory and the modernised drivers of markets and managerialism. Strengths and limitations of the study will be discussed alongside key issues of costs, rurality and the working relationships of agency social workers.

CHAPTER 8

DISCUSSION

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will discuss the overall relationship of findings from the Cowleyshire case study with the literature regarding agency social work, making particular links to labour process theory (for example, Braverman 1998; Thompson and McHugh 2002; Adler 2004). The strengths and limitations of the study will be considered, particularly in relation to how well the research question – 'What are the perceptions and experiences of agency social work in a rural county?' – has been answered.

Managerial perspectives on the role of agency social work as part of change and transformation will be discussed as will the costs of agency social workers. The position of service users and carers working with agency social workers will also be considered. The sextupular model of agency social work presented in Chapter 4 will be reconsidered in the light of the Cowleyshire findings and exploration of the issues of ambivalence that ran through the findings will conclude the discussion.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The case study of Cowleyshire was the first one known to have been carried out on agency social work in a rural authority. Any small-scale case study is necessarily limited in terms of the generalisability of findings, although the ability to explore issues in depth can provide valuable data for comparison with similar

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studies and hence help develop wider arguments (Robinson and Norris 2001).

Yin (2003) drew attention to the importance of external and internal validity with regard to the ability of a case study to engage with any wider issues. In terms of external validity, Cowleyshire is a small rural English local authority that has demographic similarities with several other such authorities but it is not claimed that the findings of this thesis regarding agency social work would be necessarily replicated in these other local authorities. All English local authorities work under shared legislation such as the NHS and Community Care Act (1990) and all are subject to resourcing constraints and have to work within the challenging environment of the mixed economy of welfare (Harris 2003). The care management labour process operates under national legislation and is very similar across local authorities, meaning that agency social workers could often commence work without a great deal of lead-in time. The care management environment is one that facilitates agency social workers moving across different contracts.

The case study was chosen as a case that contained revelatory elements in its being the first known of agency social work in a rural area and also as a case which was typical in that the care management system under which the agency social workers operated was similar to those in urban areas (see Chapter 1: 4). The study sought to explore the relevance of labour process theory to agency social work with adults, with a particular interest in Braverman's (1998) concept of degradation in the workplace. There are limitations in transferring Braverman's (1998) thesis from its original industrial locus to the contemporary and complex world of professional social work, but the findings from

Cowleyshire would suggest that Braverman has some continuing relevance. Administrative staff within Cowleyshire reported that they had suffered degradation in the workplace through doing less interesting work than was the case prior to care management and not having a great deal of interpersonal contact. However, with regard to the agency and employed social workers interviewed, the evidence about upskilling / deskilling was mixed in similar ways to the findings of Carey (2007a) and suggested that any degradation in the workplace was not a simple and linear one (Thompson 1983; Adler 2004; Thompson and Smith 2010). Four agency social workers reported a general satisfaction with their role, even if this role had been chosen for reasons of expediency rather than as part of any free agent or portfolio career perspective. Four of the participants, who had become agency staff through reasons of expediency, (two social workers and two administrative staff) were hoping to gain employed status in the future within Cowleyshire. All employed social workers and team managers perceived that the care management system, the sense of uncertainly at the top of the organisation and the overall financial imperative to save money had led to a working environment that was perceived and experienced as degraded. No positives in the care management system were identified by any of the employed team managers, social workers and administrative staff. This finding contrasted with several positive examples from agency social workers (see, for example, Chapter 7: 183-185). Some agency staff expressed the view that they could always move on if the workplace did not meet their needs. However, the fact that the majority of agency social workers and team managers stayed in Cowleyshire for extended periods (several for over two years), perhaps suggested that it was the psychological knowledge that a change in contract could

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easily be effected that kept them in post. Agency social workers and managers in

Cowleyshire seemed to have been co-opted (Derber 1983) into the mindset of

Tempo without experiencing any professional or personal value conflict. Only

one agency social worker (see Chapter 7: 213) acknowledged that Tempo was a

private sector enterprise whose driver was profit.

Regarding the internal validity of the case study, the key issue concerns the extent

to which any findings have enabled the research question to be answered

(Edwards and Talbot 1999). The methods used to gather the data regarding the

role and contribution of agency social work within the modernised social work

environment were those of a SWOT analysis and a series of semi-structured

interviews. These research tools produced a total of twenty one participants in the

semi-structured interviews and twenty participants completed a SWOT analysis.

The SWOT analysis produced a range of considered responses that were used to

inform the content of the semi-structured interviews. The issues discussed in the

process of the semi-structured interviews might also be seen as having depth and

as having produced new insights. For example, the senior management

perspective regarding the lack of rights of service users to know the status of their

social workers, the perspectives on the way that administrative staff have

sometimes stepped into a care manager's role and the issues around some of the

business practices of an employment agency can be seen as rich and unexpected

data. The influence of managerialism can be seen throughout the case study and,

despite access to the study having been negotiated through management, I did feel

that people were willing to engage with me and trust the research protocols that I

had initially declared. In terms of the validity of the research, responses from

team managers and social workers were frank and critical. My open sharing of the fact that I was a registered social worker, who had once performed in an agency role, possibly led to a more candid exchange of views. The sensitive nature of the research, in an organisation about to undergo more structural change, was underlined by two participants who, despite having agreed to the conditions of the interview both verbally and in writing, double checked during the course of their interviews that the research was confidential and that they would not be recognisable from any output of the research. The offer to feedback my research has not been taken up as yet by Cowleyshire, partly because they are still in the throes of reorganisation and also because no one person within senior management has seemed able to agree such an initiative.

The attempt at a holistic case study meant that I was able to note the recurrence of themes across different groups of staff and to reflect on similarities and differences. I was aware of the need throughout the case study research to protect the identity of the participants, and believed that the way I conducted the interviews in private offices and by not having shared the details of any other participants, went a considerable way towards ensuring confidence in my methodology. The fact that four participants offered themselves for interview via a snowball effect (Becker and Bryman 2004) also appeared to validate the nature of my approach to the sensitivity of agency social work. In addition, I have given limited information in this thesis about the characteristics of the workers interviewed, particularly with regard to their ages and background experiences. Similarly, I have only given limited detail about the demography and current issues of reorganisation within Cowleyshire as I was anxious to avoid its identity

being discovered.

The original intention had been to conduct a holistic case study that would have, for the first time in a study of agency social work, captured the views of local councillors, service users and carers. However, due to the lack of any service user or carer groups to approach independently within Cowleyshire and the senior management-endorsed practice of agency social workers not declaring their status to service users or carers, it was impossible to realise this aspect of initial research design.   A further aspiration of the Cowleyshire fieldwork had been to discover what councillors' views were about the use of agency social workers within local authority services. This element of evidence would have gone some way towards making the case study more holistic and would also have represented new knowledge in that no councillors' views about agency social work are recorded within the literature. However, owing to access to councillors having to be negotiated through senior managers who were adamant that it would not be possible to have such access because councillors would not have any views on agency social work, this line of enquiry was thwarted. It would have been unethical to have gone against the wishes of the senior management gatekeepers in pursuing this issue (Denscombe 2002).

During the time of the fieldwork, Cowleyshire Adult Services were in a state of flux and trying to cope with another impending reorganisation, a new IT system and with the dynamics of a new set of interim managers brought in to effect 'transformation' in line with government policy (DoH 2008b). A climate of uncertainty, with many staff being designated as 'interim staff', set a working

culture in which the inherent uncertainties of agency social work seemed to fit. The routinised nature of much adult social work described during the interviews would suggest that Braverman's (1998) thesis about the degradation of work is partly supported within Cowleyshire, particularly by comments about Zealosoc, a new computerised system designed for performance management. Senior management envisaged that the impending reorganisation would solve vacancy issues and therefore obviate the need for agency staff. However, both employed team managers, all employed social workers and all administrative staff, both employed and agency, believed that agency social work would remain in use as a stop-gap in the absence of any strategic workforce planning. Such a gap in perceptions between senior strategic-level management and all strata below is also noted by Evans (2010a) in his case study of adult services teams in a rural authority.

The majority of the work in adult social work teams in Cowleyshire, as succinctly put by a senior manager, was short-term in nature with an expectation that cases were closed as soon as possible. Such a climate hardly encourages relationship-based social work, although the likelihood of agency workers being able to perform any kind of relationship-based work is even less than that of the hard-pressed local authority social workers, given their overall shorter stays of tenure. Different possibilities emerge, however, when agency staff stay for periods of over two years and up to five years, as was the case in Cowleyshire.

Administrative staff, so often neglected in studies of social work teams, came up with a range of perspectives on social workers and IT. Their view was not only

that it was costly to employ qualified professionals as typists but that it led to a diminution in their own quality of work in that they only got to input basic data and no longer, for example, typed up case notes which had given them a greater feeling of ownership of social work and made the work inherently more interesting. One administrative worker used the phrase "factory-made social workers" (See Chapter 7: 196), which resonated with Carey's (2009) view of care management and suggested a working environment that closely resembled Braverman's (1998) model of degradation.

Agency Social Work in Rural Contexts

The fit of agency social work with the needs of adults in a rural community was hardly mentioned in the interviews despite considerable literature on this topic (for example, Martinez-Brawley 2000, 2006; Pugh 2000, 2007) that has indicated the need for different, relationship-based social work practice approaches within rural settings. The fieldwork findings in Cowleyshire suggest that the managerial imperatives of performance management and rationing are more important than any fit with rural culture or the exercise of professional judgment and discretion within the adult social care teams. The care management system did not seem to allow for local flexibility or variation and little awareness was demonstrated by staff of any ways of working that might have been more acceptable within rural communities.

Senior management's view about the loss of relationship-based practice was that this was not a particular phenomenon of agency social work but was the reality of what social work with adults consisted of these days, namely the role was now to

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signpost, to assess and to review. Long-term relationships or anything other than brief relationships were seen either as a thing of the past or somebody else's business. Accordingly, senior managers and frontline workers shared the view that service users need not be told that their social worker has agency status, frontline workers seeing this as irrelevant and senior managers thinking that all service users should be concerned about is that they are getting a service from a qualified professional endorsed by Cowleyshire Adult Services Department. I had hoped to interview service users as part of surfacing what would have been a new area of knowledge but access to service users did not prove possible in Cowleyshire because both management and social workers stated that they did not declare their agency status to service users. I did not see it as appropriate, or possible, to access service users directly to verify this claim and my pre-fieldwork information from a voluntary organisation had also suggested that in Cowleyshire service users would not be aware of staff having agency status. No participants in Cowleyshire expressed the view that this was an unacceptable way of working. However, such an approach does not demonstrate openness nor offer any opportunity for service users and carers to decline the services of an agency social worker. The senior management's view was clearly that service users and carers should just accept that Cowleyshire had engaged a worker and it was not for them to question their status. The general view of team managers and practitioners seemed to be that service users and carers had enough to worry about other than the status of the social workers with whom they came into contact. The inherently brief nature of the contact experienced by many older adults under care management meant that contacts were often not relationship-based but were brief and instrumental in nature, regardless of the agency or employed status of the

social worker. In addition, there were no existing adult service user groups in Cowleyshire that I was able to access. The most recent period of reorganisation within Cowleyshire seemed to have led to a demise of certain initiatives in the area of service user/carer involvement and at the time of the study there was talk of such initiatives being merged with those of the local health authority, but no one was quite sure where the initiatives were currently placed. Such findings resonate with the findings of Banks (2008) that practitioners did not report high levels of service user/carer engagement and empowerment in their practice. One employed social worker stated that service users were not best served by agency staff but she also acknowledged that the inherent short-termism of care management meant that relationships with the service users were usually brief in nature across adult social care teams.

Overall, the findings from the Cowleyshire research are not very different from findings of the previously reported urban case studies (see Chapter 1: 4) other than perhaps revealing a more welcoming culture towards agency staff within Cowleyshire where hardly any antipathy towards their presence was evidenced.

Management Perspectives on Change

Senior management within Cowleyshire seemed to accord with Evan's (2010a) domination model (see Chapter 2: 24). The senior managers seemed to have a quite different perspective on the climate within social work teams compared with staff at team management level or below. While team managers and social workers, both agency and employed, largely expressed concern about a lack of organisational clarity above team manager level, the senior managers were of the

mind that consultation around the county had clearly explained the need for further organisational change and that the on-going process of transformation and commitment to staff had not only been fully understood across the county but also embedded in care management practice. The two interim senior managers interviewed believed that because 'road shows' had taken place and information communicated in a variety of other forms it must be misunderstanding or unwillingness to change that had prevented the workers from being clear about the future shape of their working organisation.

Senior management viewed the IT systems (seen as so cumbersome and oppressive by social workers) as having teething problems only and they considered that there was a need for some of the old-fashioned thinking within Cowleyshire to be shaken-up. Both senior managers interviewed stated that they were here to stay and that they appreciated that rural areas needed some continuity, particularly after a period of organisational change. Agency social workers, administrators and even some team managers did not know the names of the various interim and agency senior managers who had come and gone over the past two years and were unable to provide any clarity about the current incumbents and their changing roles within Cowleyshire. The contacts available regarding my research at senior management level also all disappeared during the year of fieldwork.

The Labour Process of Care Management
The predominance of the care management model in the adults' teams, to the exclusion of all other social work methods, was perhaps the greatest area for

concern that arose in interviews with employed and agency social workers. The managerial imperative to close cases was openly articulated by one of the two senior managers interviewed (see Chapter 7: 158). Views were expressed, particularly by the SWOT analysis completers, that service users might receive an inferior service from agency social workers who were not familiar with Cowleyshire. However, the only two examples put forward regarding poor practice by agency social workers were attributable to them following managerial instructions. The first example concerned agency social work staff getting involved in cases that were already open to employed social workers and the second example was in the review of out-county placements being pursued by an agency social worker in ways that he thought were unethical. In this latter case the agency social worker did not resist as he was seeking employed status within Cowleyshire. The only clear example in the literature regarding possible harm to service users from an agency social worker is given by Mollitt (2006) where an agency social worker had apparently been taking service users through the wrong procedures, this agency social worker having been unfamiliar with the correct procedures to follow. No evidence, however, was given regarding the nature of any detriment suffered by the service user in this example and no evidence of any detriment to employed colleagues by agency social workers was produced in the Cowleyshire case study; rather they accepted each other as competent colleagues working under challenging systems. The shared perceptions and experiences of these systems, particularly those of Zealosoc, did seem to fit with Thompson's (1989: 118) view that, even if Braverman's (1998) original model of the labour process was rather exaggerated, 'deskilling remains the major *tendential* presence within the development of the capitalist labour process'. Little evidence emerged

of agency social workers taking advantage of their non-contractual status to exercise discretion; rather they were seen as, and judged according to, their performance as compliant and efficient workers in the same ways as employed staff.

Loss of discretion was experienced across the workplace by administrative staff, social workers and team managers. Administrative staff saw their jobs as degraded - "we're not allowed to think these days" (Chapter 7: 196) and as having largely been taken over by social workers. Estimates across Cowleyshire regarding the amount of time that social workers spent carrying out computer based administrative tasks ranged from 50% - 80%. These were often tasks that administrative staff spoke of having previously done more quickly and for less cost and the administrative staff also presented a picture of a domination management (see Chapter 2: 27) who did not encourage debate.

There was little culture of resistance (White 2009; Evans 2009) across the workforce, apart from agency social workers stating that they could move on if conditions were unacceptable. More tangible evidence of resistance came from the agency social worker who refused to follow senior management instructions to cross a picket line (see Chapter 7: 211) and the reports of employed staff (see Chapter 6: 143) that agency social workers advocated on their behalf, and raised issues in more effective ways than employed staff, the latter of whom would have to take more consideration about the effects on career of such actions. At team manager level there did seem to be some degree of sympathy and empathy for frontline workers, both employed and agency. This shared experience could be

attributed to the practice of agency social workers having spent months, and even years, within Cowleyshire during which time they built relationships with team managers in similar ways to employed staff. Most of the findings of the fieldwork relate as much to the mainstream adult social workers as they do to agency social workers and as such challenge previous views that the differences between agency social workers and employed social workers were axiomatic (Carey 2003; Kirkpatrick and Hoque 2006; Cornes et al. 2010).

The argument of Harris and Evans (2004) that a proliferation of rules and initiatives may not extinguish discretion did not seem to be in evidence in Cowleyshire, despite the fact that there were so many new initiatives – personalisation, the introduction of a new computer system and an impending large-scale reorganisation. Working for the system, particularly Zealosoc, seemed to be the dominant 'must do' (Evans 2010a: 118) and its far-reaching surveillance sent out a series of reminders whenever targets were being missed, making it difficult to subvert. The modernised world of social work, as represented in the present case study and illuminated in the work of key academics such as Harris (2003, 2008), Carey (2003, 2006, 2008a), Ferguson (2008) and Harris and White (2009), is characterised by having moved away from a bureau-professional service (Parry and Parry 1979) to a systems-led service under new managerialism. The opportunity for professional discretion would largely appear to have been curtailed by the top-down imposition of a performance management culture, particularly manifested in the use of computer systems as forms of surveillance in the workplace (Garrett 2005; Coleman and Harris 2008; Coleman 2009). Arguments regarding whether discretion within social work has been curtailed or

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contained were made by Evans and Harris (2004) who proffered that the complex nature of social work and the inability of management to control its every aspect, particularly in complex work environments, led to the continuation of discretion being exercised by social workers. This suggestion, however, is not supported by the Cowleyshire case study. Evans (2010a) further noted that Lipsky (1980) had a rather one-dimensional definition of management and did not acknowledge the nuances of management. Evans (2010a) noted that practitioners within the older people's teams he studied saw their roles as being significantly constrained by policies, procedures and resources;

> OPT practitioners see their freedom to act in terms of their
> professional role, constrained by policies, procedures and
> resources that focus their work on the much narrower care
> management role; and they see the emphasis on managing
> resources within care management as sitting uncomfortably
> with professional values
>
> (Evans 2010a: 104).

The above description would fit neatly with many practitioner and team manager views expressed by employed and agency workers alike in Cowleyshire, an authority whose commitment to modernised, technological forms of social work delivery had not yet gone as far as other authorities such as Northshire (Coleman and Harris 2008). Many other local authorities (see Garrett 2005; Coleman 2009) have introduced centralised call centres that make for an even greater dominance of technology in an already-degraded workplace. Service users and carers were

still able to visit the neighbourhood offices in Cowleyshire, although the demands of Zealosoc possibly meant that the social worker might delegate an administrative worker to see the service user, while they got on with systems work.

Transformation, Change and Agency Social Work

The senior management's transformation and change policies, which declared a commitment to giving choice to service users and carers and a voice in the delivery of local services, are not principles that the social work profession would rally against. Indeed their potential accords fully with most social work philosophies. However, the rhetoric in these policies was exposed by many social workers and team managers as being another way of introducing cut-backs at a time of economic stringencies. The very fact that agency social workers were significant players within the adult services teams was partly because of reluctance on behalf of Cowleyshire management to fill vacancies on a long-term basis. The short-term costs of agency social workers were seen by senior management as being a price worth paying, particularly as the number of establishment posts required would not be known until the impending reorganisation was finalised. Senior management expressed faith that the impending reorganisation of services within Cowleyshire would bring about the economy, efficiencies and effectiveness (Audit Commission 1983) that characterises much modernised thinking in local government. The move towards more and closer working relationships between health and social care has been heralded as holding potential in modernised services from the 1990s onwards (Lymbery 2006), but all such ambitions never accept that the current resource

base for providing adult social care to growing numbers of adults with higher needs is an inadequate starting point on which to base any new structures for delivery. The costs of reorganisation were not explicit in Cowleyshire, and senior managers could not state the likely costs of the impending reorganisation and neither could they comment on the opportunity costs involved, only commenting that Cowleyshire needed to change its ways. Such a senior management view was fully 'on message' with government policy such as *Putting People First* (DoH 2007b: 2) which clearly stated; 'the time has now come to build on best practice and replace paternalistic, reactive care of variable quality with a mainstream system focussed on prevention, early intervention, enablement and high quality personally tailored services'.

Within Cowleyshire it did not prove possible to ascertain whether or not the above aspirations for high quality tailoring of services was a reality for service users and carers due to the lack of access to any service user groups by the researcher. Cornes et al. (2010) had hypothesised in their national survey that service users and carers would be unaware of the presence of agency social workers and there is no available literature which gives first-hand service user or carer views of the experiences of working with agency social workers. Carey's (2009a) research described social workers' perceptions that service user experiences of agency social work were largely negative and Mollitt (2006:197) stated that 'Key findings suggest that the injurious implications of agency work mainly arise in social services, when the long term continuity of client care is compromised by the short term nature of the agency contract'. However, the only example given by Mollitt

(2006: 165) is the following in respect of a team mangers experience of a care manager working in a London Mental Health Trust:

I had an experienced member of staff ...and where he fell down was that he had taken the wrong course of action and given the wrong advice as he was unaware of the policies and procedures. They clearly didn't recognise what guidelines they needed to work within because they are coming in completely blind of the local procedures.

Team Leader E, the Trust.

This example does not detail the nature and extent of any injurious implications. It might also be argued in this scenario that the host organisation, not the agency social worker, was at fault for not better ensuring that he was familiar with core practices and policies before being sent out to work with service users.

The above discussions regarding the relationships surrounding agency social workers suggested that the sextupular model of agency social work required amendment. Figure 8.1 below contrasts the original sextupular model (see Chapter 4: 57) with the revised sextupular model that reflected the situation found in Cowleyshire whereby agency social workers spoke little about their relationships with service users and carers and with local communities but appeared to enjoy moderate levels of relationships with colleagues and their employment agency. The original model hypothesised stronger relationships with service users, local communities, colleagues and their employment agency than proved to be the case within Cowleyshire. The introduction of managed vendor

employment agencies, such as the master vendor system within Cowleyshire, also

strengthened the relationship between the managing vendor and the host
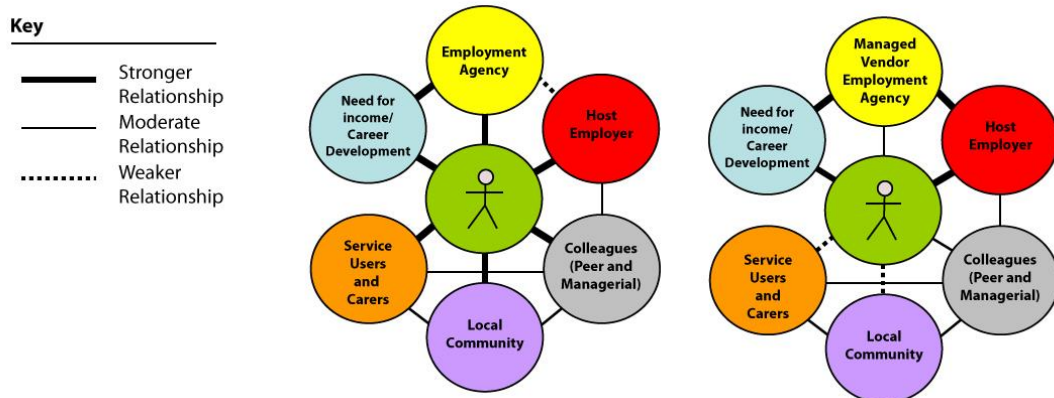
employer.

Figure 8.1 Comparison of Sextupular Model with Revised Sextupular

Model

The absence of a formal policy regarding the role and engagement of agency staff

can be seen to have added to the climate of uncertainty around perceptions and

experiences about agency staff. The lack of a workforce planning strategy

regarding the use of agency workers was evident in Cowleyshire and agency staff

usage was ad hoc and expedient. This finding resonated with the national study of

Cornes et al. (2010) and the findings of Hoque et al. (2011).

It was noted that the majority of agency social workers within Cowleyshire had

been there for over a year and hence they were often accepted as mainstream

colleagues, not subject to any antagonism or different treatment within the

working environment. There was no evidence that they took on harder or more difficult cases, rather they shared the essentially procedural care management tasks in the same way as employed colleagues. Their performance was seen largely as competent, rather than of a different level or nature, although one example was given by Dave, agency team manager, regarding how intervention by an agency social worker produced a breakthrough in a case where employed social workers could no longer cope (see Chapter 7: 167). There was some evidence of agency social workers being used for project work in Cowleyshire, a role also noted as an effective use of agency staff by participants in the Cornes et al. (2010) national study.

All the evidence that emerged regarding positive views of agency social workers were views that related to individuals and their qualities; no participant put forward any views about agency social workers in general and there seemed to be no perception of agency social work as representative of a separate, private employment sector. Agency social workers were seen as essentially being flexible, able to pick up workloads quickly and also able to develop effective working relationships.

Agency social workers and employed social workers within the care management teams in Cowleyshire were difficult to differentiate in terms of length of tenure and role and experienced similar pressures in the workplace. The use of agency and employed staff in Cowleyshire seemed to be equated with speed, which is regarded as a recognised and valued attribute of care management (Carey 2006, 2009a). The computerised procurement systems for agency staff, which came

with the introduction of managed vendor systems, have led to a situation whereby best fit between an agency worker and a team became a secondary consideration to the need to fill a vacancy swiftly. This procedure was not seen as offering equality of opportunity to all staff.   Agency social workers could, for example, be employed at the top of a scale which it might take employed workers some years to achieve. Both agency and employed staff stated that the type of work some agency social workers were currently doing would not be a choice open to them if they applied for that job on a permanent basis, partly because they did not have enough experience to be successful in a competitive interview. The fact that it was relatively easy to engage them, via the master vendor system where references and CRB checks were already complete, offered agency staff choices not open to employed staff. Hoque at al. (2011) found evidence that master vendor systems had led to a reduction in the quality of matching between agency social worker and host authority, although there was no such evidence in Cowleyshire.

The Costs of Agency Social Work

Despite the uncertainties in Cowleyshire around the future shape and direction of services, what did emerge unambiguously was the overriding need to save money. The introduction of a master vendor system shortly before the fieldwork started was stated by the master vendor manager to have promised savings of up to £1M over five years for the authority as a whole, although no figures were made available to prove whether or not these savings were being found. Such a lack of tangible results often characterises large-scale performance measurement initiatives, although Cornes et al. (2010) reported senior managers as stating that

savings have been made nationally as result of the introduction of managed vendor initiatives for the engagement of agency social workers. Cornes et al. (2010), however, did not produce any figures that substantiate this claim. Managed vendor systems had been introduced into local authorities as a result of the *Gershon Report* (Gershon 2004) and were basically designed to cut costs by standardising and capping pay rates. Cowleyshire had chosen a master vendor system, a system that promised to maximise savings by monopoly control of all agency staff procurement. However, the manager of the master vendor employment agency, Tempo, revealed that it was her experience within Cowleyshire that certain agency workers would talk to each other and discover that one was on a slightly higher rate than the other. This was often so because of historical legacy or the fact that a worker could negotiate a higher wage because of her/his experience. The employment manager of Tempo then had to spend time negotiating individual deals with agency social work staff which went against the spirit of her role but she felt she had to do this in order to keep placements going.

Some of the practices revealed in the fieldwork findings also showed employment agencies in a bad light regarding a lack of transparency over training monies and holiday pay arrangements and claiming to the LA that they were paying agency staff one rate while paying them another (see Chapter 7: 206). Agency social workers seemed to get the same wage levels under managed vendor schemes; it is the employment agency whose margins are cut under such schemes, although they have the volume of an authority-wide contract to balance out this factor.

The Cowleyshire findings gave a range of different views about exactly how costly agency social workers were, especially when opportunity costs were considered. Estimates in the literature were that the extra financial costs per year of each agency social worker were between £14,400 (Social Worker Retention Project 2011) and £25,000 (by a respondent in Carey's [2006] study). In the Cowleyshire study, the manager of Tempo said that the agency made about 15% profit on each worker placed and that social workers in adult services earned an average of £20 per hour on P.A.Y.E or a little under £3,000 per month, which would equate to £36,000 if twelve consecutive, four week months were worked. Employed staff in adult services in Cowleyshire were on a pay scale that ranged from £24,600 - £30,000 i.e. a difference at the top of the scale of £6,000 per year. A further £4,500 fee would go to Tempo, bringing the extra financial costs to £10,500 per agency social worker. These pay levels could help explain why Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSW) were attracted to agency work although the demand for experienced staff and the recently-introduced requirements of the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) have already stemmed this earlier trend. The latter requirements demand the attainment of a range of capabilities as part of a formally assessed programme of work; such professional training only currently being available for social workers with local authority employed status. The opportunity costs of introducing new temporary staff in terms of induction, lack of local knowledge and dealing with any cases after they have left were not referred to in any depth in the Cowleyshire study and have only been discussed in the literature by Carey (2011b).

A further issue that arose from frontline workers, team managers and one senior

manager in Cowleyshire was their interest in the alternative creation of an in-house bank for temporary staff, although such services have proved inefficient in the past (Cornes et al. 2010), primarily because of issues of scale. In-house banks could, however, perhaps usefully be shared with other public service bodies such as the NHS, the resultant economies of scale being important in small rural authorities. Ethically, such developments would pose a different type of threat to social work in a national climate that has seen the social work role, particularly in adult services, diluted and lessened (see, for example, Carey 2003, 2008a, 2011a), but could mean a non-profit and local enterprise might become feasible as a more responsive, cost-effective and accountable resource. Such a system might also mean reduced induction periods and the provision of temporary workers already familiar with IT systems, localities and the ways that teams work.

Motivation and Agency Social Work

Regarding issues of motivation for seeking agency status within Cowleyshire there was compelling evidence that expediency was a key reason why staff chose agency status. The general picture that emerged regarding expediency as a motivation for agency social work within Cowleyshire lent support to the work of Kirkpatrick and Hoque (2006) and Carey (2006) in that there was no support for the notion of a portfolio career, although several participants did allude to the free agent notion (Handy 1994). For the majority of participants, agency work was a choice made out of expediency and, although in some cases it was clearly also a retreat from permanent employment, aspirations were expressed by several participants that they would prefer to take a local authority employed position, if suitable working conditions and fit with a particular team could be found. Such

findings support those of Kirkpatrick and Hoque (2006) and Cornes et al. (2010).

A lack of family-friendly employment policies within Cowleyshire was cited by two agency social workers as the reason for having been pushed along the agency route. Agency social workers were candid about their financial situation within an agency position, one agency staff member even volunteering sight of her pay slip. All of the agency social workers denied that their main motivation was financial, despite a consensus that they were approximately 20% better off in cash terms than employed staff who were carrying out the same role. Agency staff do not have holiday pay or pension pay and were presented by a range of participants as hardly ever having any sickness leave in contrast to the high sickness levels among employed staff.

Agency social workers' views of some of their own work might be seen to fit with Adler's (2004) contingency model of the labour process in that their perceptions were of an upskilled workplace. The opportunity costs of agency social work were clearly identified by a senior LA interim manager who saw agency staff as a second best choice whose utility was in bridging gaps pending reorganisation (see Chapter 7: 162). This view was echoed by other employed social workers and agency social workers along with recognition of the fact that in Cowleyshire use of agency staff was ad hoc and not carried out in any strategic manner. Cornes et al. (2010) found that this was also characteristic of the national picture. The lead-in or induction times of agency social workers were identified as problematic by one employed team manager in particular but most agency social workers took the view that they did not need induction periods and preferred to 'hit the ground

running' and take on cases from day one of their engagement. Similarly, access to Cowleyshire's in-house training opportunities was presented as a problematic area because certain opportunities were offered free of charge to agency social workers. The master vendor agency's practices of withholding training monies and not being transparent about pay rates enjoyed by fellow agency social workers were seen as problematic by a number of agency social workers and managers.

The findings of Carey (2006) and Cornes et al. (2010) that agency social workers could be oppressed in their roles by being given the most difficult cases was not found to be applicable within Cowleyshire, although a team manager's example of senior management wanting to use an agency social worker as a strike-breaker suggests that the lack of security in agency positions could lay them open to such forms of abuse and they could be set up against employed colleagues.   Similar concerns can be seen in the responses of an LA interim senior manager whose view of Cowleyshire staff was that they had become too cosy and that they needed to be kept on their toes by agency social workers. In contrast to Carey's (2006) findings that agency staff were tightly managed and scrutinised by management, one agency team manager in Cowleyshire stated that his work had never been subject to scrutiny. Such a situation cannot make for best quality of service and neither does the point made by an agency administrative worker that poorly performing agency staff could, via a series of short-term contracts, avoid any in-depth evaluation of their work. Such differences between employed staff and agency staff are, however, contractual in nature, and do not detract from the core finding in Cowleyshire that the work carried out by agency staff and employed staff is indistinguishable in terms of content and quality.

Agency Social Work and Ambivalence

Agency social work, as depicted in the literature (Hoque and Kirkpatrick 2006; Carey 2006, 2009a, 2011b) and in the present case study would seem to be seen to be characterised by elements of ambivalence. Agency social workers represent a significant part of the workforce across England, yet their presence has largely been accepted without question. Only Carey (see, for example, 2007a, 2009a, 2011a) seems to view agency social work as a private sector threat to state social work. Unions have made some disparaging comments (Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers 2006; Unison 2009b), whereas BASW (2009) has accepted agency social work as part of the modernised landscape. The nature of social work is such that temporary cover may need to be called upon but it is the privatised model of employment agencies, rather than in-house banks or local discretionary contracts that have dominated the systems within the social work labour market.

Despite some research findings, largely propounded by employment agency managers (Cornes et al. 2010; Hoque et al. 2011), that there was an essentially supportive and developmental relationship between agency social workers and employment agencies, there were no such views expressed in Cowleyshire. Relationships between agency social workers and the employment agencies seemed ambivalent and only concerned with technical, administrative issues in Cowleyshire. Staff were uncertain about, for example, where their lines of accountability lay in any disciplinary proceedings that might arise. Such

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uncertainties were, however, concerned only with contractual differences in role with the vast majority of staff not seeming to have given any thought to issues regarding lines of accountability. One agency team manager was quite clear that he would be seen as a commodity by the master vendor agency and one agency social worker was explicit that the role of employment agencies was clearly to make profit rather than to develop staff. Both of these agency staff, however, seemed to accept this situation without issue. It was noteworthy how few agency workers were precise in their knowledge of pay rates and terms and conditions, most believing they were better off in cash terms with the agency but being unsure about how their overall financial benefits might look once issues such as pension schemes had been taken into account. No comment was made on the employment agency regulation changes (Official Journal of the European Union 2008) that some of the agency workers had seen come into play, suggesting that the real beneficiaries of such legislative change were perhaps not the privileged agency workers such as social workers but the commodified workers of commerce and industry ((Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers 2006).

SUMMARY

To conclude this discussion, it is argued that the findings emanating from Cowleyshire concur with much of the previously published material on agency social work (see Chapter1: 4) and, as such, add to a growing body of knowledge. This body of knowledge is largely based on the English experience of three case study sites used by Carey from 2000 to 2009, a case study of contacts from across the country by Kirkpatrick and Hoque (2006), a case study of London boroughs by Mollitt (2008), a national survey and mixed-method approach by Cornes et al.

(2010), case studies of three London boroughs by Hoque et al. (2011) and this current rural case study of one local authority. The empirical evidence that arises from these studies would now seem to constitute a considerable body of knowledge that does not significantly support the portfolio career (Kirkpatrick and Hoque 2006) or the free agent model (Handy 1994) of the privileged agency worker in the business world. The model largely suggested as relevant in the Cowleyshire study is the model of expediency (Kirkpatrick and Hoque 2006), whereby social workers seek flexible modes of employment in the only way that they can, that is, by 'going agency'. No evidence emerged from this study, or from previous studies, that the conscious choice to work for the private sector is a driver for those seeking agency employment. Similarly, participants in all reported studies (see Chapter 1: 4) offered little reflection on the issues concerned with working for private employment businesses, albeit delivering services within statutory organisations. Mollitt (2006), however, reported that some agency social workers felt guilty about their fee levels and were hurt by jibes from employed staff about the resources they were taking away from the local authority.

The attempt by senior (agency) management to use agency social workers as strike breakers in Cowleyshire is an extreme example of how a domination mode of management might use agency staff. Notable also was the discovery that it was not the practice of agency social workers to declare their status to service users and carers. This practice reality meant that no service users and carers were available for interview as part of the case study. This finding also supported the hypothesis of Cornes et al. (2010) that service users of adult social work teams

were unlikely to know the status of social workers who were working with them. The lack of such evidence also meant that the ways in which service users regard the agency status of staff remains unknown.

The role of agency social work within the modernised social work labour process would clearly seem to be an expedient one and one which fills gaps in statutory services, whose own employment procedures and structures do not allow for the flexible types of working that many of the largely female workforce of qualified social workers demand. The perceptions and experiences of administrative staff in care management teams clearly pointed to a degraded working environment that shared much in common with Braverman's (1998) vision of the workplace; the experiences of employed social workers and some agency social workers seemed to accord with Thompson's (1998) view of a tendency towards deskilling. However, both interim employed senior managers, both agency team managers, the Tempo manager and four agency social workers might be seen as upskilled, at least in certain elements of their care management work. The following chapter will draw conclusions and make recommendations for future policy and areas for research.

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will review the thesis and draw conclusions from the Cowleyshire case study regarding perceptions and experiences of the role of agency social workers within the labour process of adult care management social work. The rise in agency social work will be presented as having been made possible by the forces of markets and managerialism which exploited the gap brought about by a lack of workforce planning on behalf of local authorities. The continuing relevance of Braverman's (1998) thesis regarding the labour process will be discussed in relation to agency social work and care management. Managerial control under the care management system in Cowleyshire can be seen to have followed a directional tendency to control both the means and ends of work in ways that Derber (1983) would not have recognised. However, despite these levels of managerial incursion into the tasks of social work, the workplace cannot be said to be a wholly degraded one. Agency social workers carried out a range of duties that could not be distinguished from those carried out by employed staff, they often stayed for periods of several years and were generally more positive about upskilling elements of their labour process than employed social workers. A number of recommendations for future policy and practice regarding the use of agency social workers will be made at the conclusion of the chapter. Claims for making contributions to knowledge are also made. Reflections on the research journey will conclude the chapter.

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REVIEW OF THESIS

Despite the rise in agency working in local authorities, there have still been comparatively few studies (see Chapter 1: 4) of agency social work, possibly because it is a sensitive and difficult area to access for research purposes. The access to Cowleyshire was not a straightforward process as detailed in Chapter 5 but the resultant data has enabled the research question – 'What are the perceptions and experiences of agency social work in a rural county?' to be answered. Chapter 1 presented the rationale for studying the phenomenon of agency social work in a rural county, introduced issues around the growth of agency social work and set out the scope of the study. Chapter 2 explored labour process theory and its relationship to the professional world of social work, with particular attention to agency social work. Labour process theory and its potential relevance to agency social work was debated to include Braverman's (1998) seminal thesis up to more contemporary critiques of the labour process theory (for example, Adler 2004; Thompson and Smith 2010). Chapter 3 was concerned with the modernisation of state social work over the past two decades and presented a picture of the progressive incursion of business models, driven in particular by the forces of markets and managerialism whose fit with globalisation's need for flexible and mobile workforces had provided the environment from which agency social work developed. The procedural nature of care management systems and the role of computers in structuring the labour process and priorities of both employed and agency staff in care management teams was discussed as having come about as part of the drive to save money and close cases as quickly as possible. The consequent demise of relationship-based practice was discussed alongside considerations of the most appropriate type of service delivery for rural

populations were discussed, drawing on the work of Martinez-Brawley (2000:2006) and Pugh (2000; 2007). It was found that social workers, managers and senior management did not customise services within Cowleyshire to accommodate any such cultural needs. Chapter 4 first considered models of agency work in the business sector and developed a more complex sextupular model that better encapsulated the extra strands of professional social work agency work. Models of motivation for agency workers - free agent/portfolio builder/escapee and expedient developed by key theorists (Handy 1994; Kirkpartick and Hoque 2006; Carey 2006; 2009a; 2011) in the field were explored and the model of 'treadmiller' (Unwin 2009) was introduced to the debate. Recent initiatives to control the variance in agency staff usage via managed vendor systems were also explored, with a perspective on the effect of such initiatives on the use of local discretion and the fit of agency staff with team needs. Chapter 5 considered the benefits of a case study approach to addressing the research question in the search for explorative depth of agency social work issues and to enable comparison with the previous case studies (see Chapter 1: 4) on which the knowledge base regarding agency social work had been built. The development of the fieldwork was discussed in depth as were the issues regarding insider/ outsider research (Unluer 2012; Paechter 2013). The reason for choosing a SWOT analysis to inform the subsequent semi-structured interviews was explained. The ethical considerations of the study were also discussed as was the process regarding thematic analysis of the findings. Chapter 6 presented the findings compiled from twenty SWOT analysis forms completed by an anonymous range of agency and employed administrative staff, social workers and team managers. The findings of the semi-structured interviews with twenty

one agency and employed administrative staff, social workers, team managers and senior managers were reported in Chapter 7 under the themes of 'General working environment within the social work teams'; 'Policy surrounding agency social workers – role and terms of engagement'; 'Motivation to become an agency social worker'; 'Positives in agency social work'; 'Challenges in agency social work' and 'Ambivalence towards agency social work'. Chapter 8 discussed the findings and their fit with the empirical and theoretical findings of existing case studies and found a range of evidence to support the continuing relevance of labour process theory to care management and agency social work. This Chapter brings the thesis to a conclusion, makes claims for contributions to knowledge and makes recommendations for future areas of research.

MARKETS, MANAGERIALISM AND THE CONTINUING RELEVANCE OF BRAVERMAN

The overall aim of this thesis had been to explore the perceptions and experiences of agency social work in a rural county. Agency social work has been theorised as a labour process that fits with flexible ways of working, driven within care management by the forces of markets and managerialism. Braverman's (1998) thesis regarding the nature of the labour process is supported in part by a majority of views from Cowleyshire participants who largely reported an increasingly degraded, rather than improved, workplace under the care management system. There is a need, however, to nuance this view in relation to the various occupational groupings across the local authority. Most workers reported being driven by a performance management culture (Harris and Unwin 2009) and not being involved in the conception of their work in ways that drew parallels

between Braverman's (1998) industrial world and the world of professional social work where increased control over both the means and ends of work had become apparent. However, both interim senior LA managers, the manager of Tempo, both agency team managers and the majority of the agency social workers (other than those expedients who were working as agency staff because no employed positions were on offer) accorded more with a contingency view (Smith and Thompson 1999; Adler 2004) of their labour process in that they saw some upskilling benefits in the agency way of working, particularly in respect of the flexibility of working patterns, not available in Cowleyshire to employed staff. The perceptions and experiences of employed social workers and team managers seemed to agree with Thompson's (1989:118) assertion that 'deskilling remains the major *tendential* presence within the development of the capitalist labour process' whereas the degraded workplace of agency and employed administrative staff was seen more fully to accord with Braverman's (1998) thesis.

This lack of flexibility within Cowleyshire's employment contracts had pushed four social workers to private sector employment agencies, this finding having resonance with the findings of Kirkpatrick and Hoque (2006). In the case of agency administrative staff, two out of three would rather have been employed and were only in agency positions for reasons of expediency (Kirkpatrick and Hoque 2006) at a time when Cowleyshire was not recruiting to permanent posts pending further reorganisation.

Senior management occupied a position within Cowleyshire that accorded with Braverman's (1998) view of management being a separate world to that of

workers. Senior management's view of the modernised labour process was that targets had to be met and that the flexibility of agency social workers helped them to deliver on these targets, even if one senior manager (see Chapter 7: 162) thought that agency staff would not be needed once Cowleyshire's workforce had been reorganised. The same senior manager also expressed the view that very presence of agency social workers was a message to employed staff that they were not indispensable.

Cowleyshire, in line with all local authorities since modernisation, had only looked to markets and managerialism for solutions to their adult social care challenges and had introduced interim managers, 'remote control' allocation panels, a new computer system and a managed vendor system to facilitate the engagement of private sector agency staff. Agency social work can be seen to have become a core part of English social work services without any resistance and, having a more discrete presence than other privatised forms of service, has largely gone unnoticed except by a small number of academics (for example, Carey 2006; Kirkpatrick and Hoque 2006; Unwin 2009; Cornes et al. 2010). Only Carey (2004) highlights the fact that employment agencies are private sector entities that make significant profits from public funds that often end up abroad. Servian (2011) has uncovered a labyrinth of organisations behind organisations that include international companies and governments whose ethical bases can be in direct opposition to the ethical basis of social work.

MODELS OF AGENCY SOCIAL WORK

Established models of agency social workers as ' free agents' and 'portfolio builders' (Handy 1994); 'expedients' and 'escapees' (Kirkpatrick and Hoque 2006) and, 'treadmillers' (Unwin 2009) were discussed within this thesis to try and explain a range of perceptions and experiences about agency social work. There was little evidence in Cowleyshire that agency social workers were free agents or portfolio builders (Handy 1994) and no evidence of agency social workers as treadmillers. Some evidence emerged that would support the escapee model of motivation (Kirkpatrick and Hoque 2006) and the majority of agency staff could be classed as expedient (Kirkpatrick and Hoque 2006) because their life situations, or the lack of permanent positions in Cowleyshire, had led them to agency roles. Unlike previously reported experiences of antipathy towards agency social workers by employed social workers in urban-based studies (Kirkpatrick and Hoque 2006; Mollitt 2006 and Carey 2006, 2009a, 2011a), very few such experiences were reported in Cowleyshire. One agency worker referred to colleagues as a "mixed bunch" (see Chapter 7: 166) and an employed team manager reported examples of agency staff who had not committed to work and had left when things got difficult. A sextupular model of agency social work was developed (see Chapter 4: 57) that was believed to better reflect the complexity of the agency social work role compared to the previous tripartite commercial sector model of Bronstein (1991). The extra complexities identified in the agency social work model were the professional and ethical ones of commitment to colleagues, service users and carers and the wider community. The original sextupular model had suggested that links to colleagues, service users and carers and local community would be strong ones and that the link between host employer and

employment agency would be a weaker one. A strong relationship was originally

theorised as characterising the relationship of agency worker with employment

agency. However, the fieldwork in Cowleyshire was conducted after the

introduction of a master vendor system for the procurement of agency staff, which

led to this model being further adapted (see Chapter 8: 234) to reflect a stronger

link between host employer and employment agency, moderate links to colleagues

and the master vendor employment agency and weaker relationships with service

users and carers and the local community.   Agency social workers did not seem

to have strong allegiances towards either the professional community of social

work within Cowleyshire nor towards the service users and carers of Cowleyshire.

Rather, their work was separated and only spoken about at case level and not

conceptualised or aggregated to higher levels of interest, concern or strategic

vision in accordance with a Braverman's (1998) view of the separation of

conception and execution in labour process. However, this separation of the

conception and execution of work held true also for employed social workers,

whose preoccupations were with case process and the achievement of

performance targets, largely dictated by the demands of a computer system which

tracked their performance. The master vendor agency was seen by all staff as

part of Cowleyshire's HR Department, endorsed as it was by Cowleyshire County

Council, as the only organisation contracted for the supply of agency staff. This

endorsement might also be another explanation why agency staff were not seen as

representatives of the private sector who were different from employed staff

within Cowleyshire.

The study was also the first known to have sought the views of administrative staff about agency social work. All administrative staff interviewed, both agency and employed staff, described a working environment where they had been deskilled. The advent of care management and its expectation that social workers are largely responsible for their own administrative work was seen as taking away much of the interest that had previously existed (see, for example, Chapter 7: 194). Administrative staff have unique perspectives on the work of social workers and their views on the costs of agency social work are very consistent. They saw the extra cost incurred in paying agency rates as a very poor use of resources, particularly when all ex-agency administrative staff were only in agency positions because no employed positions were on offer. Although they do not give empirical examples, the practice that they revealed whereby they met service users face-to-face because the care managers were preoccupied with computer work, was perceived by them as constituting an inferior service.

THE SIMILARITY IN THE WORK OF AGENCY SOCIAL WORKERS AND EMPLOYED SOCIAL WORKERS AND THEIR ASSOCIATED COSTS

The Cowleyshire study found that agency social workers were largely perceived as competent and carried out the same roles and duties as employed colleagues. No evidence emerged from the literature review or from the Cowleyshire case study that the work carried out by agency social workers was, in any measurable way, better work than that carried out by employed staff. Some agency workers claimed to bring new views and ways of working although no examples were given. Very little resistance (Harris and Evans 2004; Evans 2010a) to markets and managerialism was found in Cowleyshire from either agency social workers or

employed social workers. Team managers were perceived as enjoying predominantly discursive relationships (see Chapter 2: 27) with social workers, whose concerns and work pressures were largely shared at team manager level. However, apart from four agency social workers, both agency team managers, both LA interim senior managers and the manager of Tempo, the majority of participants interviewed in the case study reported characteristics of the workplace that could be associated with degradation, including the demands of the Zealosoc computer system, the resource allocation panel system, the pressure to close cases and the overriding imperative to cut costs.

The pressure on local authorities to cut expenditure has led to them being increasingly reluctant to offer permanent posts (Cornes et al. 2010) and local authorities are constantly reorganising in a quest for managerial solutions to their problems, often at such a pace that as soon as one reorganisation has taken place another is being planned. Such a fast-moving environment also means that clear measures of effectiveness both in terms of finance and quality are difficult to make. In Cowleyshire, for example, no evidence was produced during the period of fieldwork that the master vendor system for agency staff procurement had brought any cost savings, largely because there was so much reorganisation going on and nobody could clarify the budget figures. Evidence emerged that, despite the imposition of a master vendor system, agency staff still negotiated their own rates. These facts echo the views of Harris and Unwin (2009) that many performance management initiatives are not properly evaluated but are presented nonetheless as successful. Agency staff are expensive when compared to the hourly rates paid to equivalent employed staff and Cowleyshire agency staff were

candid about the financial benefits of agency status. Agency staff did not seem driven by financial greed, however, despite being paid an estimated average of 20% more than employed staff. Rather, they were mainly forced into making choices of expediency determined by personal circumstances and the lack of flexible and permanent job opportunities in local authorities.

INFLUENCE OF THE RURAL CONTEXT ON THE LABOUR PROCESS OF SOCIAL WORK

The case study of Cowleyshire was the first known study into agency social work within a rural setting, although no detailed evidence emerged from this study regarding the fit of agency social work within rural communities. The issue of rurality in Cowleyshire had not been considered in any depth by other than by two participants, both of whom were born in Cowleyshire. This lack of consideration given to the rural context suggested that the views of Martinez-Brawley (2000; 2006) and Pugh (2000; 2007) regarding the need for a sensitivity to rural culture being essential in the delivery of effective services did not apply to the care management service within Cowleyshire. The hegemonic nature of care management systems and procedures would probably have prevented any such customisation of services, even if Cowleyshire staff had seen the need to deliver services differently. Evans' (2010b) study of care management in a rural authority also made no mention of the rural context as a dynamic in the delivery or effectiveness of service, further suggesting that care management might thus be seen as a homogenous creature whose labour process are of the 'one size fits all' variety.

SERVICE USERS AND CARERS

It had been hoped, as part of the original plan for a much more holistic case study, to interview service user and carer groups in Cowleyshire. However, such access was not realised partly because, in the planning for reorganisation, the commitment to service users and carers had been neglected and no current groups appeared to be operational during the fieldwork period. Furthermore, interviews with social workers and managers revealed that agency social workers did not disclose their agency status to service users and carers. The finding that agency social workers were supported by their team managers and senior managers in not informing service users and carers that they were from an agency is the first empirical finding of this nature, although Cornes et al. (2010) had hypothesised that this might be the reality of practice. The senior management view was that there was no need for a service user or carer to know the status of an agency worker, rather it should suffice that their worker had been engaged by Cowleyshire County Council and was therefore 'fit for purpose'. Agency social workers followed this line, with only two agency social workers having stated that they had sometimes discussed their agency status with service users and carers. One of these agency social workers reported having previously informed service users and carers of her status, a practice she had ceased after having spent an extended period with Cowleyshire. Employed social workers had not considered the issue of how agency staff presented themselves, several social workers echoing the senior management line that the vast majority of casework with adults was essentially short-term in nature so why should being an agency worker make

any difference? The difference is that to deny this knowledge to a service user or carer is to deny them the exercise of choice.

INTERIMNESS AND UNCERTAINTY

An overwhelming perception that pervaded the Cowleyshire case study was that of a remote senior management structure in which every post seemed to be 'interim', even non-agency posts. The uncertainty of 'interimness' was seen as having led to a culture in which consistency in senior management or having staff in the organisation who had been around for some time and had historical perspectives and local knowledge were neither apparent nor valued. In line with Carey's (2007a) findings of urban-based agency social work, the managerialist culture in Cowleyshire had led to practice across care management teams that did not value relationship-based practice. In contrast, speed and compliance with computerised systems were perceived as being equated with efficient and effective social work, whether agency or employed. The careerist tendencies of interim senior staff to come in for short periods, effect change and then not stay around to see the consequences of such change, were commented on as a further degradation by several participants in that these interim staff were seen as leaving employed staff on their own to sort out the problems that subsequently arose.

MOTIVATIONS FOR CHOOSING AGENCY STATUS

The lack of flexibility in Cowleyshire's employed positions was cited by several social workers as their motivation for going agency, and there are messages here for a local authority that claims to be 'family-friendly' in terms of employment policy. No significant evidence emerged that staff were being pulled toward

agency status owing to its enhanced financial levels of remuneration and the

candour of respondents with regard to their fee levels suggested that many were

not much better off overall by virtue of their agency status. Some agency social

workers in Cowleyshire seemed genuinely unsure of their actual levels of

remuneration. These findings contradict some of the views of unions and the

trade press (for example, McGregor 2010b; 2011a). A finding of the study, based

on interviews with agency staff and the manager of Tempo, suggested that agency

social work staff were something in the region of 20% better off in cash terms

than their employed counterparts. They have no pension scheme, however, and

no sick pay; not that any agency staff were reported as ever being off sick, in

contrast to employed social workers.

 Reasons for choosing an agency position, whether social work, administration or

team management, seemed to be largely ones of expediency and, in the case of

social workers particularly, an escape from what was sometimes perceived as the

oppressive nature of local authority employment. This finding supports the

findings of Kirkpatrick and Hoque (2006), Mollittt (2006) and Carey (2006,

2009a), whose urban-based case studies also found that a retreat from

deteriorating conditions and issues of expediency were key factors in the choice of

agency status. No evidence was found within Cowleyshire of agency social work

being chosen as a 'portfolio' career, this model having been identified as a key

motivation in the commercial sector (Handy 1994) and no evidence emerged of

agency social workers being driven by a desire to work for the private sector

rather than the local authority. Indeed, only one participant (an agency social

worker) associated the work of agency social work with the private sector and the

hard-pressed social work teams within Cowleyshire largely welcomed agency

staff as an extra pair of hands. Cornes et al. (2010) found similar views expressed

in their nationwide survey which concluded that agency social work had

flourished due to a lack of effective strategic workforce planning by local

authorities, as seemed to have been the case within Cowleyshire.

CARE MANAGEMENT AND THE USE OF DISCRETION

Agency social workers might be theorised as able to exercise professional

judgement without fear of accountability to a management whose control over

their work is at best temporary, but this perspective does not consider the extent of

control now exercised by systems, particularly those of performance management

and the computerised monitoring of all stages of the care management labour

process (Harris 2003). In line with their employed colleagues, agency social

workers in Cowleyshire largely complied with the demands of organisational

procedure as was also found in Carey's (2006) study, suggesting that the

dominance of markets and managerialism left little room for discretion or work-

fulfilment in care management work. The findings across administrative, social

work and team managers that the demands of computer systems degraded the

Cowleyshire workplace closely reflected the Social Work Task Force's (2010)

finding that social workers spent too much time completing procedural tasks.

Social work staff in Cowleyshire followed the actions required by the information

technology system as an alternative discourse to that of the exercise of individual

professional discretion and judgement, estimates of the time spent at computers

having ranged from 50% to 80% of the working week. Indeed, the newly

introduced Zealosoc computer system was seen by frontline staff, both agency and

employed, to dictate the labour process of care management system in

Cowleyshire, computerisation having become '*the* way to do social work' (Harris 2003: 70) in a way that afforded dominance and oversight of performance to senior management.

Frontline staff, both agency and employed, perceived senior management as sharing a different occupational space that was distanced from the realities of the labour process within Cowleyshire. The allocation panel that senior management operated was perceived by all other staff as a further form of labour process control and an obstruction to professional practice and decision-making. Evans (2010a: 139) described such a system as 'remote control' by senior management who did not trust social worker decisions. The fact that social workers did not even appear before the Cowleyshire panel, to present and humanise their cases, added to a sense of foreboding and distancing to this system. Such distancing also made it easier for senior managers to refuse/stall requests for funding which frontline workers saw as a further degradation in their labour process, particularly when reports were returned for reasons that seemed unnecessary. Constant reorganisations and frequent changes of staff at senior management level and at peer level meant that frontline staff might not even know the names of colleagues (see Chapter 7: 190). Such a lack of working relationships was further seen as a degradation of the workplace.

CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE
- The finding that agency social work was not perceived by the majority of agency and employed staff as being associated with the private sector;

rather it was accepted as part of the modernised managerialist, social work market-place.

- The inclusion of administrative staff, both agency and employed, as participants in research about agency work and the similarity of their perceptions and experiences with those of social workers and team managers.

- The sextupular model of agency social work developed from the literature and its subsequent modification in the light of the Cowleyshire findings.

- The finding that the work of agency staff and employed staff in Cowleyshire's care management teams was indistinguishable, other than in the technical terms of their status and lines of accountability.

- The finding that rural agency social work was similar to urban agency social work and that issues arising from the rural context were not found to be significant in the delivery of care management to adults.

- The finding that agency social workers did not disclose their status to service users and carers.

- The phenomenon of 'interimness' in managerial posts and its effect upon the social work workforce is also believed to constitute a new contribution to knowledge within social work literature.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Procurement of Contingency Staff

At the time of study, the private sector model of employment agencies was universally used as the means by which local authorities addressed their needs for contingency social workers. Alternatives to these private sector models, however,

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do exist and local authorities could effect change in different ways if, for example, they invested in their own banks of temporary staff or in 'grow your own' (GSCC 2009) or 'return to work' (Children's Workforce Development Council 2010) schemes, possibly joining forces with local not-for-profit providers such as the NHS. Within the Cowleyshire study, support for such types of initiative came from agency social workers, employed social workers and from one local authority interim senior manager. Reasons for not having explored such alternatives were attributed to a lack of effective workforce planning. Local authorities have used agency staff as stop-gaps only and have not taken a long-term view of contingency workforce planning or evaluated the full costs in economic, human and opportunity cost terms of managed vendor systems (Cornes et al. 2010; Hoque et al. 2011). This area of private enterprise is contentious also in its involvement of venture capital, and research is recommended into the backgrounds of the private employment agencies that are now part of the modernised social work landscape. Further recommendations are that local authorities develop a range of employment policies that reflect the flexibilities that agency participants stated that they need but which they can currently only find via private sector employment agencies or in a limited number of local authorities. The lengthy recruitment processes in local authority Human Resources Departments such as Cowleyshire were also seen as disincentives to staff taking up permanent positions and it is recommended that Human Resources Departments within local authorities look at their employment systems with a view to streamlining their processes.

The Need for Policy

Cowleyshire staff were unable to produce their policy for the engagement of agency staff during the period of research and it is recommended that all local authorities should have clear policies on the role and deployment of agency social workers. Included in all agency working policies should be a statement that agency staff must declare their agency status to service users and carers at the first appropriate opportunity. This proposal would afford rights and choice to service users and carers and would also lead to the possibility of research into the views of service users and carers, from both rural and urban settings, about their experiences of care management and how they perceive agency social workers. Such research is not possible at present as the indications in Cowleyshire and further afield (see, for example, Cornes et al. 2010) are that service users and carers are not told when they are working with an agency social worker.

Challenging Proceduralism

The need to redress the balance between proceduralism and professional judgement has been recognised in The Social Work Reform Board (2010) and the *Munro Report* (DfE 2011) and it is recommended that local authorities such as Cowleyshire do not wait for a national lead but take their own initiatives in cutting down paperwork and challenging procedures.

The Missing Voices of Administrative Staff

The Cowleyshire case study was believed to be the first one into agency social work that considered the perceptions and experiences of administrative staff about agency working. Their views were illuminative and it is recommended that

further research into care management and agency social work should, wherever possible, include the voice of this research-neglected section of the workforce.

The Need for Research into Agency Social Work with Children

It is also recommended that future research into agency social work should explore its role within children's services, where issues of consistency may be more critical than in social work with adults.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Ending on a reflective note, this research journey has been a difficult and fascinating one that has explored perceptions and experiences about the role of agency social workers in a rural local authority. The very nature of care management within adult social work services can be seen to lend itself to an impersonal systems-driven form of social work into which agency social work has fitted easily and without resistance. If local authorities had introduced flexible working conditions that were responsive to the needs of their own workforce and developed care management systems that offered professionals a less procedural and more discretionary professional role, agency social workers might never have emerged within the modernised social work landscape. The oppressive nature of much of the modernised social work environment has been recognised in the findings of the Social Work Reform Board (2010) and the *Munro Report* (DfE 2011) which offer new possibilities of an alternative discourse based on a learning culture and on building community capacity. However, these reports have come at a time of serious economic stringencies within the public sector. These reports do not pay particular attention to agency social work but do argue strongly for a

return to relationship-based forms of practice, which is a more difficult challenge for agency social workers who, unlike the case in Cowleyshire, might only stay in teams for short periods of time. However, vacancy rates remain high; local authorities and government show no strategic commitment to new structural approaches to recruitment problems and social work shows no concerted signs of resistance to the forces of markets and managerialism. Given this environment, it is likely that more social workers will be pushed away from the deteriorating conditions of employed status into agency working. The range of opportunities and flexibilities in the private sector of employment agencies might just present the more attractive option in both the short and the long-term, agency social work no longer being a short-term only phenomenon.

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University of Worcester

THE UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK

Peter Unwin
University of Worcester
Henwick Grove
Worcester
WR2 6BH

02/09/08
(Direct Line 01905 855126)

Dear xxxxxxxx

Initial Consideration of Request to Carry Out PhD Research within xxxxxxshire County Council Social Work Teams

I am writing to enquire whether you would be able to support the fieldwork element of my PhD by affording access to your social work teams. I would ideally like to be able to carry out my fieldwork between October and December this year, the subject of my PhD study being concerned with the role of agency social workers and whether they are effective in terms of their professional output and value for money. As you will be aware, agency social work has become an accepted part of social work over recent years without there being any critical evaluation of its contribution. The existing, limited literature is inconclusive seeing agency social work variously as essential and productive or as expensive and tokenistic.

I am hoping to capture a holistic local authority perspective on the role of agency social work and hence would propose to interview social workers, managers, service users and councillors as part of my methodology. I am very aware of the time pressures on your staff and would hope to be invited to attend part of, say, three social work team meetings after which social workers would be asked to volunteer for interviews in their own time. I would seek additionally to interview volunteers from within management and councillors and would probably request that I attend meetings of your service user forums, again with a view to seeking volunteers for subsequent individual interviews. I will of course seek guidance as to the best way to proceed in these areas and may be able to adapt my methodology to include telephone conversations and on line questionnaires to better accommodate the time pressures on your staff.

The normal protocols of confidentiality will be respected and explored through any formal channel of application and, on a personal note, I am a Registered Social Worker as well as Senior Lecturer here at Worcester University and have recently begun working with your trainers and practice assessors as part of the M.A. in Social Work and proposed Post Qualifying training. We are looking to increasingly develop working relationships with xxxxxxxshire and are hopeful that several of our first cohort of M.A. graduates will go on to find permanent employment within your services.

I would be hopeful also that in addition to adding to wider academic knowledge, my research could provide a useful form of consultancy to yourselves about the effectiveness of agency social work within your own services. I would be very pleased to give feedback in whatever form was deemed most useful once the fieldwork was complete.

I look forward to hearing back from you about the potential to progress my proposed fieldwork within xxxxxxshire. I have also written to xxxx xxxx with a similar request regarding children's social work teams.

Yours Sincerely,

Peter Unwin
Senior Lecturer

University
of Worcester

THE UNIVERSITY OF
WARWICK

Peter Unwin
University of Worcester
Henwick Grove
Worcester
WR2 6BH

AGENCY SOCIAL WORK
(PhD Research Project)

My name is Peter Unwin, and I am a senior lecturer in social work at the University of Worcester, having previously worked as a social worker, inspector and manager. I have also worked as an agency social worker. I am undertaking a part-time PhD at the University of Warwick on the basis of an exploration of the little researched area of agency social work. I am seeking your involvement in this research through the completion of this brief questionnaire (completion time approx. 15 minutes) and/or participation in a one-to-one interview.

Any data connected with participation in this research will only be seen in its original form by myself and, possibly, by my supervisor. All data will be stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act and will be destroyed at the end of the research project (January 2010). Those of you choosing to participate in a confidential, one-hour tape recorded interview will be asked to give written permission regarding the boundaries of the interview prior to its commencement. If such permission is given, it can be withdrawn at any time. Feedback to participating teams and managers at the conclusion of the research will be in a form that identifies trends and themes and will not identify any individual's views.

Two stamped addressed envelopes are attached One is for the return of the questionnaire, which is completed anonymously. The other envelope contains a separate form for completion should you wish to take part in an interview. No attempt will be made to match completed individual questionnaires to specific respondents.

I hope you will feel able to assist in this research. If you need any further information before making a decision, please contact me on 01905 855126 or at p.unwin@worc.ac.uk.

Yours Sincerely,
Peter Unwin

Appendix 2b

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<div style="text-align:center">

1. <u>SWOT ANALYSIS - AGENCY SOCIAL WORK</u>

</div>

You may already be familiar with 'SWOT' analysis, which is a simple framework for assessing how people regard the impact of a particular development, by seeking their views on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats they associate with that development. Using 'SWOT' analysis, please insert below brief notes concerning the impact of agency social work on your team. If you would like to expand on your views, please continue at 2. below or on a separate sheet.

STRENGTHS	**WEAKNESSES**
OPPORTUNITIES	**THREATS**

2. Would you like to expand on any of the points you have made above? If so please use the space below, continuing on a separate page if necessary.

3. Are you currently working as an agency social worker?

Yes / No   (*Please circle*)

4. Have you ever worked as an agency social worker?

Yes / No   (*Please circle*)

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of Worcester

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WARWICK

INTERVIEW

If you would be willing to take part in a confidential interview lasting for up to one hour at a time and venue convenient to you, please provide details below and I will contact you.

Name……………………………………………………………………

Position …………………………………………………………………

Work Address…………………………………………………………….

………………………………………………………………………..

Telephone contact……………………………………………………

E mail contact…………………………………………………………..

Yours Sincerely,

Peter Unwin
University of Worcester
Henwick Grove
Worcester
WR2 6BH

Appendix 2d

Permission for Interview – Agency Social Work

Name: _____

Contact telephone number: _____

E-Mail: _____

I have received and read a copy of the research information sheet and I am aware of the purpose of the research. I understand that any information I contribute will be on an anonymous basis and will be treated in strict confidence, unless information gained through the interview raises concerns about adults or children at risk. In that eventuality, the information would be forwarded to the team manager. I also understand that information given in interviews does not enjoy legal privilege.

I agree to be interviewed and for the information to be used in the research study. I agree to the interview being tape recorded and that anonymous quotations can be used in the final research report and/or other publications.

I understand that I can withdraw from the interview at any time, if I choose to do so.

Date: _____Signature: _____

Appendix 3

Semi Structured Interview Question Guide – Agency Social Work

1	What has been your experience of agency workers within social work?
2	What motivated you /might motivate you to become an agency worker?
3	How do you introduce yourself / think that agency social workers introduce themselves to service user/carers and other professionals?
4	How do you find agency social worker's integrate with mainstream staff and other agencies?
5	What is your experience / views on induction and access to training in respect of agency social workers?
6	How do you measure the costs, efficiencies and effectiveness of agency social work?
7	Do you consider that the lines of accountability and loyalties of agency staff are any different to those of mainstream staff?
8	What is your understanding of the system for engaging agency staff and has this changed in any way recently?
9	What do you think the role of agency social work should be within Cowleyshire?
10	Are there any other issues you would like to raise about agency social work from present or past experience?