Bureaucracy, creativity and resistance: a psychosocial framework for practice with parents in Child Protection

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> *At the time of his death, we, his friends, already knew that the organization was so seamlessly efficient that his successor, even if he had a thousand new plans in his head, would be unable to change anything of the old design.*
>
> Franz Kafka, 'In the Penal Colony' (2007 [1919], 151)

In his short story, 'In the Penal Colony' (2007 [1919]) Franz Kafka represents the juridical system or 'organization' as a grotesque form of torture. He imagines a dystopian situation in which the legal system is a clanking machine that inscribes the sentence with needles on the condemned prisoner's naked body. But the wounds left on the body are an unreadable scribble. The machine is a nightmarish metaphor, representing an organisation stripped of any pretence of humanity, democratic assent or even common sense. 'In the Penal Colony' appears to anticipate a postmodern world which Kafka could not have witnessed, but of which he certainly felt tremors. A world driven by the management of data in digital systems: one of the 'diabolical powers knocking at the door' of his work (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986, 41).

The idea of the self-replicating system or organisation can bring us from Kafka to a range of regulatory and governmental structures, including current social work practice in the western world. In this article I create a psychosocial theoretical framework to reconsider practice in the context of bureaucratised systems driven by the audited management of data. Technical procedural systems operate in a dependent relationship with neoliberal economies: services are shaped by marketisation, consumerism, and managerialism (Harris, 2014, 8).

Katheryn Margaret Pascoe *et al*'s systematic review of the empirical research examines the lived experiences of social workers within the context of managerial bureaucracy. The study demonstrates that the managerial model is largely not endorsed by workers who report feeling

oppressed by endless 'form filling' (2023, 523). Three themes are identified: 'deskilling of the workforce'; 'job insecurity and constrained practice'; and negative 'impact on person wellbeing and heightened frustration'. Social workers identified risks to service users: 'losing sight of the client and their needs'; 'shifting ethos from effectiveness to efficiency'; and 'service users unable to navigate systems' (2023, 518). Responding to this cue from the frontline, I have two aims: first, I suggest that creative and critical thinking can help illuminate the contradictions inherent in neoliberalised social work; second, I propose that this analysis may support the development of creative forms of engagement. My aim is not simply to state that creative strategies "work" better and "feel" less oppressive (although both points would be valid), but to offer a revised framework around the location of creativity in child protection social work as a necessary challenge to the formal characteristics of bureaucratic organisation.

I connect my discussion to earlier interventions that prioritised creativity and critical thinking, including Hugh England's book, *Social Work as Art*: *Making Sense for Good Practice* (1986), and two special issues of the *Journal of Social Work Practice* (*JSWP*) focusing on art and creativity. However, bearing in mind increased levels of child destitution (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2024), the exigencies of climate change, proliferating forms of global instability, and the decimation of Local Authority budgets (Murphy, 2023, 264), the ecologies of social work are now more urgently politicised. While there is a growing body of literature presenting the positive outcomes of working creatively, this has not been adequately theorised in relation to work with mandated parents in child protection.

In Part I, I analyse bureaucracy and the crisis of representation in dialogue with Kafka. In Part II, I consider how the current situation could be resisted through the theoretical contributions of psychoanalyst, D. W. Winnicott. I extend Winnicott's definition of the 'holding environment' (2005 [1971]), locating creativity in a dynamic set of politicised relationships between social worker, parent, child, and organisational setting.

Transdisciplinary thinking – social work, literature and psychoanalysis, a note on method

The demoralising conditions of frontline social work have been well-established by empirical studies (Murphy, 2023; Pascoe *et al*, 2023) and critical literature (Featherstone *et al*, 2014; Harris, 2014; Davies, 2023). On this basis, I create a psychosocial framework to reevaluate the structural conditions of bureaucracy and to propose strategies of resistance. The article is driven by critical analysis, creative engagement and reflection, creating bridges between theory and practice.

I suggest that in order to re-vision our future as a profession and to survive its current iteration within the neoliberal consensus, we need to reexamine the existing structures creatively. Through my engagement with Kafka, I hope to demonstrate the relevance of defamiliarisation for social work education and practice. As a concept, defamiliarisation (or the process of "making strange") first emerged from literary theory, introduced by Victor Shklovsky in his important essay 'Art as Technique' (1965 [1917]). For Shklovsky, art is defined by this process: it encourages the reader or viewer to slow down, invigorating perception and challenging automatic, habitual modes of thought (1965, 11). For playwright Bertolt Brecht, defamiliarisation involved a set of techniques (termed *Verfremdungseffekt* or alienation effect) intended to discourage the audience from empathising with characters and instead respond to the play's political message (1961, 131). Defamiliarisation has been taken up in the social sciences: for example, Dawn Mannay suggests that creative research methodologies can help 'make the familiar strange' (2016, 32). Focusing on the place of the visual imagination in social work education and practice, Martin Smith (2017) suggests that engaging with art can foster the development of insight. When facilitating continuing professional development sessions, I have used extracts from literary texts to initiate discussion

with social workers, unsettle assumptions and pose questions concerning the ecologies of our work.

In developing my method, Lynn Froggett's (2002) research remains an important reference point: she presents a call for action in the field of social policy by creating a psychosocial framework based in psychoanalytic thinking. Psychoanalysis is not foregrounded in current social work education or practice in England and Wales; however, this marginalisation has not been consistent historically or in wider global contexts. As the careers of D. W. and Clare Winnicott demonstrate, psychoanalysis was relevant to British post-war social policy (Stevenson, 2004, xii). Olive Stevenson explores the professional conflicts which led to the effacement of psychoanalysis within social work education. She outlines the increasing dominance of sociology in the 1960s and the lack of effective dialogue between different theoretical viewpoints (2004, xiii.). Stevenson suggests that attempts to create a model for social work which could take account of both 'internal and external worlds' were unsuccessful (xiii), concluding that various factors 'conspired to push psychoanalytic theory away from social work before there had been time for an emerging profession to use it appropriately' (xiv). Significantly, the Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust offers a Master's degree in social work in conjunction with the University of East London with an emphasis on psychoanalytic theory: the marginalisation of psychoanalysis is not total.

Stephen Frosh and Lisa Baraister have examined the location of psychoanalysis within the social sciences and discuss the controversies this has entailed for the development of psychosocial studies. The authors criticise what they term 'psychoanalytic certainty', a form of interpretation which 'sees [psychoanalysis] as harbouring the deep truths of human nature' (2008, 348). While acknowledging the 'legitimacy' (347) of psychoanalytic thinking, they propose a 'broader concept of reflexivity' to offer something more 'tentative and disruptive' (348). This call to reflexivity resonates with my own aims. I work on Stuart Hall's premise that

theory involves a necessary 'detour' to help us make sense of the world (2019 [2007], 304) not the search for a single truth. As I discuss in Part II, D. W. Winnicott was also nervous of psychoanalytic certainties and the risk of becoming a complacent 'clever analyst' (2005 [1971], 74). Perhaps in a wider sense a similar tension may be felt by social workers, wanting to care for others whilst uneasily assuming authority?

Bureaucracy and the crisis of representation

The introduction of systemic practice into social work, which followed the Reclaiming Social Work model in the London Borough of Hackney, emphasised reflective practice, relationality, and the use of therapeutically-informed strategies (Cross *et al*, 2010). Trauma-informed practice foregrounds the importance of attachment and loss to the lives of the families we work with (Levenson, 2017). However, despite these developments, the care management workflow remains dominant and dominating. By workflow, I refer to the discrete actions on the Integrated Children's System (ICS) (Featherstone *et al*, 2014, 79) which must be completed in order to adhere to statutory process, overseen by management and a focus within Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) inspections.

With significant exceptions, social work literature tends to lack engagement with theories of representation. England (1986) is an important outlier: writing in the wake of the Barclay Report (1982) and prior to the Children Act 1989, England redefined skilful social work practice as an empathetic art, rather than a rational technical procedure. He creates a conceptual basis for social work through two terms: coping and meaning. England argues that the purpose of social work is to support people who struggle to cope with their problems (1986, 11). Developing this, he suggests that the capacity to cope is related to how people understand and make sense of their experiences (16). To give an example: if a young person failed a school exam, their ability to cope with this situation would depend on the meaning they attribute to

the exam and their own performance. I would want to consider the following (and more): what is the relationship between the exam and their sense of self (did it symbolise their value, for instance)? Did they need a particular grade to progress and what does it mean for them if they have to take a different path? How do their parents or carers view this? What is the political discourse around school exams, and how does this impact young people more widely? Drawing upon literary scholarship, England argues that critical analysis must underpin effective social work practice: the ability to evaluate meaning. Although the term only appears once in his book, England foregrounds representation: how meaning is produced.

As Hall explains (1997), representation can never simply re-present a pregiven reality "out there" in the world: representation is a dynamic process. In social work, we can identify competing forms of representation, some of which are hidden from view or denied. As Froggett observes, the profession 'is occupied with meaning, culture and interpretation' but this reality is 'marginalised in a field where it yields to managerialist preoccupations with outcome measurement' (2002, 139). However, despite the ostensible standardisation of technology, the ICS is itself concerned with meaning: it is intended to create a controlled, coherent and efficient "story".

Paper records still predominated in the mid-1980s when *Social Work as Art* was published; Sue White *et al*'s research (2010) has revealed the negative impacts of the move from paper to electronic records through the introduction of the ICS. The authors analyse this shift in relation to the difficulties in creating, accessing and reading case material. These problems include data duplication, overly complex templates and the lack of family records. Further, the ICS record is 'not contextualized within a narrative' (2010, 411): cases are presented through 'fragmented documentation' (412). Developing this research, Wastell and White (2014) consider how these negative impacts could be mitigated through new digital methods.

However, despite these important interventions, as Smith notes, 'aesthetic intelligence' is still not routinely foregrounded in social work literature (Smith, 2017, 117). I interpret this gap (or in Smith's words, 'cultural amnesia' [2017, 117]) as indicative of a wider issue: namely, the troubled and troubling relationship between bureaucracy and representation. In *Capitalist Realism: is There no Alternative?*, Fisher demonstrates that in neoliberal educational bureaucracies, the seemingly compulsive process of auditing becomes more significant than the work itself (2014, 50-51). Fisher writes, 'work becomes geared towards the generation and massaging of representations rather than the official goals of the work' (2014, xxii). This statement is equally applicable to social work. The completion of the child protection or child looked-after workflow becomes confused with the work: procedure becomes an end in itself. This is not a new phenomenon: Eileen Munro identified damaging forms of defensive practice in 'over-bureaucratised' systems (2010, 18). In his ethnographic research, Ciaran Murphy (2022) identifies the lack of positive change resulting from the 'Ofsted anxiety disorder' reported by frontline workers. This very real anxiety is inseparable from the material *and* ideological conditions of social work.

Fisher observes, 'Capitalist realism refers to a set of political beliefs and positions, but also a set of aesthetic impasses' (2018, 445). Alternative ways of living appear unrealistic, even ludicrous in capitalist realism. Following Slavoj Žižek (1989), Fisher uses the concept of ideological fantasy to establish his position. In simple terms, an ideological fantasy is a *structural* illusion, which we are somehow compelled to enact, whether we believe in it or not. These unconscious fantasies maintain capitalism as a system. Fisher gives a helpful example: 'We believe that money is only a meaningless token of no intrinsic worth, yet we *act* as if it has holy value' (2014, 13). Another example may be the illusion that the Law is universal and righteous, rather than contingent and politicised (Wood 2020). I draw upon these ideas in the following section. I orientate my reading of Kafka's *The Trial* (2009 [1925]) around three

themes related to social work practice: personal responsibility, representational crisis, and deadening habits. These themes are situated theoretically in relation to ideological fantasy and dehumanisation.

Ideological Fantasies – rationality and compliance

Kafka was well-placed to investigate the conditions of bureaucracy, having studied law (Brod, 1960 [1937], 40) and later working in an insurance company (Kafka, 2022, 17). An emphatically modern author, he represents the ways in which organisational power is constituted through the individual's 'private' life. In dialogue with Kafka, I consider how the concept of ideological fantasy may help elucidate social work bureaucracy. Through a process of defamiliarisation, Kafka provides us with a useful lens through which to reevaluate the material conditions of the work.

In *The Trial*, Kafka's presents the bank official Josef K.'s deadly struggle with an opaque and diffuse bureaucratic organisation named the court. The novel opens in characteristically unsettling form with a suggested referral: 'Someone must have been telling tales about Josef K., for one morning, without having done anything wrong, he was arrested' (Kafka, 2009, 5). This 'someone' is never identified: the remainder of the narrative addresses K.'s encounters with the mysterious criminal court and its staff. The lack of knowledge expressed by the narrator in this opening sentence is important: there is no primary authority to whom K. can be referred, not even Franz *K*afka: himself, another 'K.'. This perpetual deferral of responsibility could be compared to the 'culture of blame and fear' described by Munro in her *Review of Child Protection* (2010, 38).

Throughout the text, Kafka insists upon the mystifying effects of procedure. From the point of his arrest, the court determines the minutiae of K.'s daily life, producing a threatening sense of surveillance, unease and cognitive dissonance. (A court anxiety disorder?) The court

does not have a single location; instead found throughout the town, tucked away in lofts and every dark corner. Kafka locates the madness of an entire system in neglected corporate and domestic spaces. This encroaching space can be directly compared to statutory social work. For children in care, every aspect of their lives is bureaucratised: medical appointments, school meetings, and the (borderline dystopian) term used to describe their home – the placement. The organisation is everywhere. Too often the child is framed as an organisational problem which needs to be "fixed".

Returning to *The Trial*, in a strange scene, K. finds a functionary of the court, a 'thrasher' (Kafka, 2009, 61), meting out corporal punishment to the guards Franz and Willem in the 'lumber-room' of the bank where K. works (62). Attempting to stop the violence, K. leaves the premises, only to find the same scene being replayed there the next evening. It reads like a narrative of a dream. In *The Trial*, the organisation interpellates the subject (brings him into being): at the same time, state sanctioned violence is played out purely for K.'s benefit and produced through his unwitting participation.

To unpack this: *The Trial* implies that the bureaucratic organisation is guaranteed or shored-up by a form of (unconscious/denied) complicity. K. may not believe in the court's right to persecute him without cause, but he increasingly *acts* as though he does. Kafka anticipates Žižek and Fisher's description of the ideological fantasy. K. must actively collaborate in a process of which he was never informed, and to which he certainly did not consent. And yet, at the novel's ending, K. correctly understands that his inability to contribute to his own execution is a source of 'shame' (Kafka, 2009, 165). In the moments before his death, K. considers grabbing the officer's knife to complete the task, but – as he reflects – 'That final test was beyond him, he could not do all the authorities' work for them' (164). The structural/ideological fantasy has not been maintained. K. has not been able to act *as if*.

I will take stock here. Through a dialogue with Kafka and Fisher, I would like to suggest that (as part of neoliberalism) the operation of the managerial bureaucracy in social work relies upon ideological fantasies: on people "acting *as if*" they believe in it. Thinking back to my own social work training, I remember my disbelief and frustration when I discovered that ordering a taxi could involve twenty-minutes of paperwork: disbelieving or not, I had to do it. This is only one example of a deeper problem. In exponential fashion, documentation becomes lengthier in line with the perceived risk. The ideological fantasies reinforcing this situation could be expressed like this: "paperwork makes us rational and efficient"; "a ticked box is a goal completed"; "procedure makes children safe". The actual situation: we (often reluctantly) feed the ICS to produce the impression of efficiency and safety.

For Kafka, the irrational proliferation of activity is endemic to bureaucracy: it is the nature of the thing. The rationality of social work bureaucracy is perhaps the profession's most stubborn as well as hegemonic ideological fantasy. As workers, even if we recognise this rationality as a delusion, we must by law act *as if* it were true because we have no choice. This is not an abstract issue: the situation has extensive material effects. First, on a practical level, excessive administration prevents practitioners from prioritising more meaningful work (Pascoe *et al*, 2023). Second, on a structural level, the ICS reproduces the wider system: the (necessarily messy, complex, near-impossible, sometimes wonderful) work is reframed in relation to measurable individual "outcomes". The supposed rationality of the ICS is more than a 'false belief' or 'magical thinking' (Featherstone *et al* 2014, 81), it is a structural/ideological fantasy. As Fisher (2014) recognised in a different context, this fantasy predicates the twenty-first-century organisation and guarantees neoliberalised social policy.

By making the familiar strange, *The Trial* helps us reexamine key issues for social work practice. The point is not that Kafka presents a universal truth, but rather he offers us a way of asking questions. The novel raises the following important dilemmas: is it possible for K. to

comply with the oppressive and mysterious court? And to what extent could his compliance be authentic – a held belief? Kafka invites us to reconsider how we can understand individual agency in the context of mandated service involvement: are there "good" and "bad" forms of compliance? Social work discourse would suggest so. 'Disguised compliance' is a criticism levelled at families who 'appear to co-operate with professionals in order to allay concerns and stop professional engagement' (NSPCC, 2025). It is a term deployed heavily in child protection (Leigh *et al*, 2020). A recent National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) report reaffirmed the validity of the term, while identifying the need for social workers to address parental barriers in the work (2025, 4). (As family law barrister Paul Hart (2017) points out, the language is flawed: social workers use the term 'disguised compliance' when they mean 'disguised resistance'.) The NSPCC present a list of behaviours associated with disguised compliance including parents 'saying the right things or doing "just enough" to satisfy professionals' (2025, 2). But taking a step back from this, the expectation that parents should do *more* than 'just enough' in response to a statutory legal process feels puzzling. As Jadwiga Leigh *et al* argue (2020), the term 'disguised compliance' is a discursive construct that produces power relationships and organisational authority.

I suggest that the concept of 'disguised compliance' is based upon a barely acknowledged thought or feeling that somehow the families we work with should be pleased or at least relieved that they have been brought into a statutory legal process. Through the troubling story of Josef K., Kafka reveals the disorientating effects of such omnipotent thinking. The emphasis on compliance may encourage social workers to feel and act as if parents and families could (*as a matter of course*) both wish and be able to fulfil the conditions of an unfamiliar system. A system which many have been "conscripted" into (see also, Harris, 2014, 12). I describe this half-suppressed thought as an organisational ideological fantasy. To return to K. at the moment of his execution: 'he could not do all the authorities' work for them'

(Kafka, 2009, 164). Parents in child protection may not be able to do the authority's work either, even if they wish to. The systemic misreading and misrepresentation of 'compliance' in child protection not only creates issues in building effective relationships with families, it also contributes to a misunderstanding of risk.

Dehumanisation

Writing in the early twentieth century, Kafka perceived all too clearly the logical endpoint of the bureaucratic function: the negation of personal responsibility. Nowhere is this idea more powerfully expressed than in Hannah Arendt's famous analysis of the Third Reich's genocidal machine in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*: *A Report on the Banality of Evil:*

> […] the essence of totalitarian government, and perhaps the nature of every bureaucracy, is to make functionaries and mere cogs in the administrative machinery out of men, and thus to dehumanize them. And one can debate long and profitably on the rule of Nobody, which is what the political form known as bureaucracy truly is. (Arendt, 2022 [1964], 288)

In making this theoretical connection, I do not imply that social work bureaucracy tends towards evil. But as Arendt argues, the point is that dehumanisation is endemic in 'every bureaucracy', not just totalitarianism, and this was understood and exploited in the governance of the Third Reich. Within the social work field, dehumanisation is at best a form of defence mechanism: Pascoe *et al'*s review demonstrates that a minority of social workers feel positively about the bureaucracy (2023, 526). These practitioners shared that 'conformity with technical procedures' could produce a feeling of job satisfaction and completion (2023, 527). Others associated managerialism with their professional identity, presenting the idea that equality is created through an adherence to rules (2023, 527).

The Trial represents the dehumanisation of the court staff as well as the alienation experienced by K. himself, the 'accused'. K.'s meeting with the prison chaplain is a key

moment. Through this encounter, Kafka implies that ethical relationality is not simply negated, but more precisely, is cannibalised by the bureaucracy. It is worth quoting Kafka here:

> 'Is there anything else you want from me? asked K. 'No,' said the priest. 'At first you were very friendly,' said K., 'and explained everything, but now you're dismissing me as if I meant nothing to you.' 'But you have to go,' said the priest. 'Well, yes,' said K., 'but you must understand.' 'First of all you must understand who I am,' said the priest. 'You are the prison chaplain,' said K., going closer to the priest – his immediate return to the bank was not as necessary as he had made out, he could well afford to stay there longer. '*That means I belong to the court,' said the priest, 'so why should I want anything from you? The court does not want anything from you. It receives you when you come and dismisses you when you go.'* (Kafka, 2009, 160 [my emphases])

Kafka charts the motion of this conversation with careful precision; without the standard format of printed dialogue, the exchange feels claustrophobic. There is no more space for K. The court is made up of a sequence of entrances and exits. This is an idea which could be applied, with little need of analogy, to statutory social work: defined by the cycle of referral, assessment, intervention, and case closure. And frequently, by a revolving door of referral and closure (Lonne *et al*, 2021). The problem is not that the priest *lacks* care, but rather that the question of his care has now become irrelevant. His statement that he 'belongs' to the court suggests that his care has been exploited.

Referring this discussion back to social work practice, the twenty-first-century organisation appears to rely on (exploit/consume) the relational capacity and goodwill of individual workers, precisely because it is a structure antagonistic to the development or even maintenance of those qualities (see Munro, 2010). Murphy's ethnographic work (2023) supports this proposition. While the child protection social workers in his study expressed pride in their work, this came with immense costs: receiving threats, living with chronic illness, and experiencing difficulty in caring for their own children. Practitioners frequently expressed the inevitability of leaving the profession.

Creativity as resistance, a psychoanalytic perspective

In Part I, I proposed that bureaucracy is an organisational form which works to conceal its oppressive regulation of meaning. This regulation of meaning reproduces existing forms of structural violence on the axes of race and poverty: analysing the 'policing' of black families in the US, Dorothy Roberts (2025) has called for the child welfare system to be abolished. The recent abolitionist literature offers an emancipatory vision of social change; however, at present, this does not feel achievable as we witness the rise in authoritarianism in the US and UK. With this in mind, how could we resist the current situation from within the existing structure? I suggest that whilst we inhabit the 'stuck time' (Davies, 2023) of 'capitalist realism' (Fisher, 2014) this would need to happen on the level of representation. But this argument is complicated by the hybridity of social work: a caring profession mandated by the state, where at the highest levels of risk, the Local Authority assumes parental responsibility for the child. What does it mean to talk about representation as a form of resistance when it is shaped by legislation? As Froggett (2002) implies, the only option is to orientate around an ethics of care. Here I think about care and representational practices through D. W. Winnicott, and his theory of creativity constituted within a state of dependency.

Creativity versus compliance

Consistently orientated to the 'outside world' (1964) as well as the intrapsychic, Winnicott remains an important psychoanalytic thinker for the social work field. Many of his writings connect directly to themes we find in the work: parental mental ill health (1959), adolescence (1965), schooling and crime (1964). His relational understanding of child development, society, and the political world can speak to our current crises.

Winnicott's liberal understanding of the world involved an outwards movement from the intimate sphere of family and home into society. The key aspect of Winnicott's maturational

theory is his idea of the 'holding environment': at first taken to be the relationship where the infant is physically held or managed by the mother, Winnicott extends this function to nurseries and schools (1964, 189; 2005, 187). This liberal motion, starting in the intimacy and privacy of the home, contrasts with Kafka's depiction of organisational power constituted through the individual's 'private' life.

Winnicott's lack of attention to ideology problematises but does not negate the importance of his theoretical intervention. His work reminds us of what we would like to do in the social work field, which is to promote care. Moreover, his theorisation of dependency provides a lens through which to understand the position of families and parents in child protection social work. Winnicott's theory of compliance also creates a more radical potentiality than his liberal foundation may at first imply.

In building his theory, Winnicott challenged Sigmund Freud's failure to provide an adequate account of the human need for and use of creativity (2005, 93). Winnicott (2005) repeatedly complicated Freud's theorisation of creativity as the transformation of the (sexual) drive. Instead, he situates creativity in the context of the infant's growing autonomy in their relationship with mother or carer. Creativity occupies a 'transitional' area between self and other: it is 'the resting place for the individual engaged in the perpetual task of keeping inner and outer reality separate but interrelated' (2005, 3). Winnicott develops his model through his analysis of what he calls the 'transitional object', often a toy or blanket: the infant's interaction with this represents their first creative act, the creation of a 'not-me' object. Crucially, however, the object was already there to be created because the parent allowed for this possibility. After all, an infant can only play with a toy if an adult or older child provides one. For Winnicott, this unresolved 'paradox' is essential: it contributes to the infant's facility to distinguish self and other and provides the basis for the child's creative capacity (xv). Winnicott does not read

the toy in material terms: he places 'transitional phenomena' in an 'intermediate' (xv) area, somewhere between 'inner reality' and 'external life' (3).

Winnicott's theory of creativity takes shape within his developmental model and is elaborated through his idea of the false self. For Winnicott, it is possible to live authentically through the establishing of a healthy relation to reality, driven by creativity, which as adults is located through culture (2005, 7). However, if the infant is not permitted this transitional space of play, if the central paradox is resolved too soon, then the child may develop a hidden true self and an outer compliant 'false self' (19). The false self attempts to 'comply' with reality, but cannot live creatively. This may lead to a sense of 'futility (87) and even the 'idea that nothing matters and that life is not worth living' (87). For this person, the situation of dependency has continued into adulthood: autonomy has not been facilitated. Winnicott clarifies:

> In some way or other our theory includes a belief that living creatively is a healthy state, and that compliance is a sick basis for life. There is little doubt that the general attitude of our society and the philosophic atmosphere of the age in which we happen to live contribute to this view, the view that we hold here and that we hold at the present time. (88)

Although Winnicott was not a radical political thinker, there is radical potential here. Winnicott situates compliance within the modern world, a world predicated upon the liberal political subject *and* the existence of political oppression. Winnicott refocuses the discussion by considering situations in which creativity could be entirely stifled:

> […] it is probably wrong to think of creativity as something that can be destroyed utterly. But when one reads of individuals dominated at home, or spending their lives in concentration camps or under lifelong persecution because of a cruel political régime, one first of all feels that it is only a few of the victims who remain creative. These, of course, are the ones that suffer. (2005, 91)

Oppressive dependency, compliance, and the (perhaps futile) attempt to avoid suffering brings us back to *The Trial.* Despite their differences, Kafka and Winnicott both trace the issues caused by the act or necessity of compliance. Kafka's writings present something similar to Žižek and Fisher's structural 'ideological fantasy', while Winnicott situates the initial problem in infancy. In *The Trial*, Kafka implies a tentative possibility of a relationship through the figure of the artist (if not the author himself); Winnicott insists on the power of a therapeutic encounter defined through creative play.

Throughout *Playing and Reality*, in a sequence of playful and serious interjections, Winnicott expresses his objections to the standard practice of psychoanalytic interpretation or meaning-making. He aimed to create a space where the child, and later the client, could 'surprise' herself and arrive at the possibility of meaning: 'It is not the moment of my clever interpretation that is significant' (2005, 68). Winnicott suggests that imposing interpretation onto the client can lead to unhealthy compliance (68). The analysis needs to allow nonsense as well as sense (74), facilitating a state of relaxation where meaning is not fixed by either analyst or client. This state can support integration if seen and mirrored back by the analyst (86). This form of relaxation is rarely permitted in statutory social work, where meanings are heavily determined by the audited workflow, and underwritten by the systemic anxieties of worker and family (Munro, 2010; Murphy, 2022). I conclude by thinking through this dilemma and offering some tentative strategies.

Thinking and learning, the negotiation of self and other through dependency

Winnicott's emphasis on compliance as a form of sickness, a false basis for living, presents an important address to the social work field, particularly in the context of child protection. Working on Winnicott's premise that compliance without creativity leads to a 'false self', where does this leave mandated social work practice with parents? What would it mean to open

a space where parents could connect with their own creativity while ensuring that children are kept safe? I think this is possible, perhaps not easy. In making this proposition, I do not exclude the realities of child abuse and neglect, nor dismiss the legal mechanisms which are needed to keep children safe in our current context, defined as we are by the ongoing lack of meaningful social change and deepened poverty in the UK (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2024). However, if we accept the necessity of creativity to the human subject, and follow Winnicott in making a connection between psychological health and the ability to live creatively, then this impacts our understanding of social work with parents as well as children. Children are certainly not helped by professionals taking a narrowed view to work with their parents (Bosanquet, 2015). In her psychosocial reframing of practice, Froggett (2002) suggests that narrative and biographical methods support relationships based in recognition. However, as her later research with young people in a youth offending service showed (2007), telling stories is not a utopian endeavour. Asking someone who has been brought into a service to tell their story is not a neutral act (see, Spivak, 2008). By adopting Winnicott's broad understanding of the cultural field as the (re)location of transitional phenomena, a wider range of creative possibilities becomes available.

Winnicott's insistence that creativity is situated first in the context of the infant's dependency refracts back in useful ways upon the position of parents brought into child protection. In stating this, I do not intend to infantilise parents, but rather highlight the structural dependency which the professional relationship creates. Further, as research shows, parents whose children are involved with statutory services frequently have significant vulnerabilities of their own. Mason *et al* (2020) argue that mothers' lack of trust for professionals is an adaptive, rather than maladaptive strategy in the context of their own childhood adversities. In psychodynamic terms then the social worker may be positioned (through both transference and a pragmatic recognition of the unequal power relationship) as a quasi-parental figure for the

adults as well as the children, whether loved, hated, rejected, tolerated or ignored. Rather than dismissing this phenomenon, I suggest that through Winnicott's ideas we can sensitively respond to it, resisting the dehumanising effects of bureaucracy by maintaining the possibility of a relational creativity. Winnicott conceives the clinical situation in developmental terms with the analyst as both adult and play fellow: 'playing itself is a therapy' (2005, 67). We can note that there is a difference here between dependency and compliance: the former allows for the developmental emergence of autonomy, but the latter is nullifying.

This line of thinking can be developed further. Michael Diamond (2017) creates his organisational consultancy model through the idea of the 'facilitating organization'. He uses Winnicott's theories to shape an intervention with the aim of supporting employees to find better ways of collective functioning. While Diamond does not discuss the potential of these ideas for mandated clients, his extension of Winnicott's theories into an organisational context is relevant for social work. He proposes that Winnicott's idea of early childhood provides a 'prototype of future self- and other-relations, inside and outside healthy and humane work organizations' (2017, 292). He considers the detrimental impact of organisational coercion, which indicates 'the absence of potential space and a suspicion and mistrust of subordinate workers' (293). Like Winnicott, Diamond does not offer clients an immediate interpretation himself, but rather creates an opportunity for members of an organisation to find their own meanings.

In child protection, the management of risk can engender suspicion and coercion of families, this often becoming a cycle where anxieties circulate between workers and families. As I suggested in Part I, the ICS gives an illusion of efficiency, but it is underpinned by the ideological fantasies of compliance and rationality which act as its guarantor. Thinking about this through a Winnicottian lens, the opening up of transitional cultural spaces may help lessen the circulation of anxiety. With this in mind, I offer a cultural reframing of work with parents,

drawing on responses to the television drama, *Adolescence* (Thorne *et al*, 2025). This is suggested as one possible modality of cultural engagement, not a definitive one.

Since it aired in March 2025, there has been an extensive global response to the Netflix drama. In six tautly constructed episodes, each played in real time *Adolescence* depicts the aftermath of 13-year-old Jamie's arrest for the brutal murder of a female school mate. As we gradually learn, Jamie's actions have been at least partially influenced by his exposure to toxic online spaces, specifically the 'manosphere' and its incel ideology. Following its broadcast, the creators Jack Thorne and Stephen Graham called for the series to be shown in both schools and parliament (BBC, 2025). Netflix has since made the programme available to secondary schools to stream for free, a move backed by the Prime Minister Keir Starmer (HM Government, 2025). In March 2025, co-writer, Thorne and producer, Jo Johnson, were invited to Downing Street to discuss the issues raised by the series alongside charities and young people (HM Government, 2025), and in April 2025, Thorne gave evidence at a parliamentary hearing (Reuters, 2025). The placing of *Adolescence* in parliamentary and school settings would imply that cultural artefacts can be situated in a dynamic set of relationships between organisation, professional, parent, and child. The location of the drama in schools works on two premises, explicit and implicit. First, the proposal relies on the idea that cultural production can be didactic: it teaches content. Second, there is perhaps an implicit acknowledgement that a fictional drama may provide a greater space for thinking as the content does not have to be immediately interpreted or concretely referred to self.

Framing this through Winnicott, *Adolescence* is placed in the transitional space of culture, an intermediate area between subjectivity and objectivity. This area can be seen as less defended, a potential place of 'relaxation' which allows new forms of meaning or understanding to emerge. With these points in mind, the possibility for cultural production to be used in front-line child protection practices should be further explored. If we are

provisionally content to consider that it could be beneficial for young people and adults to reflect on the dangers of incel ideology through a television programme, within an intermediate space, I suggest that it could likewise be less threatening for a parent in child protection to think about children in similar ways. To return to the opening of this article, I suggested that engaging with art/cultural representation may allow for a reinvigorating form of defamiliarisation. Would it be possible then to create engaging and reflective spaces for parents (either collectively or individually) where television, film, fiction, art or music could be encountered, considered, and later discussed? It would be essential not to reproduce existing structures of power and marginalisation through this: the space would need to invite engagement with diverse artefacts, making connections with parents' own cultural stories.

For Winnicott, the key to the successful formation of transitional phenomena was the unresolved paradox: the infant creates something which *was made available* to be created (2005, xv). In the context of social work, there is potential that parents could generate renewed meanings through cultural representation, and in a relationship with a practitioner who could sensitively hold a durational process. To deploy Winnicott again, 'the term transitional object […] gives room for the process of becoming able to accept difference and similarity' (2005, 8). This kind of work would naturally sit within a wider intervention, in which the child's voice and safety remained paramount. Working on this premise, child protection could at least start to work towards a transitional space; the possible site of creative, experiential learning, enabling greater differentiation between self and other: adult and child.

Conclusion

Despite repeated attempts to locate creativity in structural terms within the social work field, there is still a lack of research which evaluates the use of creative strategies with parents in child protection. By creating a revised psychosocial framework around this, I have suggested

that art and creativity could be situated ethically with adults in cases defined by risk. This creates a possibility to resist the mechanisation of bureaucratic process, and more specifically, the crisis of meaning which the latter (re)produces.

The capacity and opportunity to create meaning are essential to the formation of cultural identity and the maintenance of dignity. As Edward Said shows (2000), power is produced through othering, the rewriting and erasure of history. We need to find new representational modes in child protection social work, as well as less defensive ways of practising. I would suggest that skilful social work is at least partially grounded in the capacity to move between representational registers, of which creative communication can certainly form a part. Taking a psychoanalytic view, the more creatively we practise, the more we are able to connect with the idea of 'play' in Winnicott's broadened cultural sense, the more possible it may be to create spaces where the family's and social worker's processes of meaning-making could be safely bridged. To resist of course is not to defeat; this article represents an attempt to formulate, perform and describe a positionality: a tentative means of disruption.

Conflict of interest

The Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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Ethics

Ethical approval was not required for the present study because the research does not involve human or non-human participants.

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