Room to Relate in Centrelink?
Attempts to Engage Supportively by Drawing on Guidance from Social Workers

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Abstract

Contact with the Australian social security and human service provider Centrelink offers opportunities for vital support, both financial and social. However, it can also invoke significant challenges, particularly where people struggle to relate and to make their voices heard. Centrelink has been criticised extensively as beset by machine-like bureaucratic processes, stigmatising ‘participation’ expectations, intrusive compliance interactions and a customer service framework inadequate for the serious needs of people seeking assistance.

There has been extensive research attention to constrictive aspects of the Centrelink context. In keeping with this, interest in the small but significant body of social workers in Centrelink has largely focused on their struggles to maintain professional discretion and insulate themselves from challenging organisational surroundings. There has been less attention to alternative directions and organisational attempts to develop more freedom around relating in service situations despite recognition of the need for such.

This dissertation addresses a gap in understanding by considering the relational challenge in Centrelink with reference to some alternative developments which have attempted to draw on social workers to guide service provision towards supportive relationships. The dissertation focuses in particular on a direction which involved opportunities for social workers to provide guidance and work closely with customer service staff and managers at the frontline. It explores how this developed and worked on the ground through case studies, first looking back at some small-scale antecedents, and then focusing on two early adopters of a larger scale attempt to change frontline service which were studied between 2011-13.

The thesis draws on extensive literature which links oppression within Centrelink to dehumanising approaches with little or no freedom to relate. In this regard, Centrelink is conceptualised as a constrictive context where recent developments which have drawn on social workers to create more freedom to relate are of significant interest. These reforms are conceptualised in light of a
relational social work perspective and a discourse around the possibility of a relational, anti-oppressive turn in welfare contexts. Attempts to construct alternative, supportive relationships are seen as raising emancipatory possibilities, where new relationships contribute to new understanding and new options. Attempts are also seen as a point of tension, as struggles evolve between reforms and entrenched historical directions. The possibility of social workers influencing and guiding service provision in a particular constrictive setting is seen as a case of interest for social workers elsewhere and for other human service workers, managers and service users. The thesis contributes to understanding how social workers can work to humanise human service settings and the challenges around this.

The thesis uses a case study methodology, with understanding sought through exploring organisational case situations as well as practice case examples. Given concern about the silencing of voices in the Centrelink context, the dissertation is oriented methodologically to a valuing of multiple voices, and pursues a ‘polyphonic’ rendering of service experiences. The dissertation draws extensively on the voices of those involved to illustrate changing practices, including social workers, managers, customer service workers and people accessing Centrelink. Some methodological innovations around drawing out multiple voices and comparing perspectives around the same practice experience are presented which may be of broader interest. Case study findings reveal the complexity of service relationships, how assumptions influenced service actions, and that changes to ways of relating at the frontline resulted in dramatically altered service experiences.

Analysis of case examples and a tracing of changes over time revealed alliances developing where social workers, customer service workers and, in some cases, managers challenged machine-like processes and service impasses. Developments also created risks which were professionally challenging, as social workers sought to rein in what they saw as overzealous or risky practices.
Social workers struggled with additional demands on their time, a lack of resources and limits to their capacity to monitor or oversee customer service workers. Confusion around organisational roles and resourcing, and parallel policy and organisational reforms which romanticised quicker digital servicing and re-iterated conditionality, presaged a hardening of office environments and difficulties for sustaining reform.

Overall, relational reforms were dramatic but fragile. Changes expanded the knowledge of workers, and in some cases influenced service delivery towards more flexible outreach and mobile service options, particularly where social workers fostered local connections and a situated understanding of client experiences. The promise of a more humanising alternative was met in part, as remarkable examples of workers relating supportively emerged, but developments were subject to ongoing struggle.
This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

(Signed) ______________
Gregory Hall 22/5/2016
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Finally, my wife Tania assisted with editing, criticism and through engaging in dialogue which helped me to develop the thesis. Her support was fundamental to the completion of this work.
Acknowledgement of Papers included in this Thesis

Included in this thesis are published papers in Chapters Four, Seven and Nine which are co-authored with other researchers. Chapter Eight is a co-authored paper currently under peer review. My contribution to each co-authored paper is outlined at the front of the relevant Chapter.

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Appropriate acknowledgements of those who contributed to the research but did not qualify as authors are included in each paper.

Gregory Hall (Countersigned) (Date) 20/5/2016

Supervisor: Jennifer Boddy (Date) 20/5/2016
## Acronyms

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<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>APS</td>
<td>Australian Public Service (Federal Government)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BAU</td>
<td>Business As Usual</td>
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<tr>
<td>COS</td>
<td>Charity Organisation Society</td>
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<tr>
<td>CSIRO</td>
<td>Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>CSA</td>
<td>Customer Service Advisor</td>
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<tr>
<td>CSU</td>
<td>Community Service Unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOCS</td>
<td>Department of Community Services (State Government)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DHS</td>
<td>Department of Human Services (Federal Government)</td>
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<tr>
<td>HSDRA</td>
<td>Human Services Delivery Research Alliance</td>
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<tr>
<td>KPI</td>
<td>Key Performance Indicator</td>
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<tr>
<td>PBS</td>
<td>Place Based Services</td>
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<tr>
<td>SaiL</td>
<td>Shared Assessments in Logan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCSA</td>
<td>Senior Customer Service Advisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAMS</td>
<td>Text Analysis Markup System</td>
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Chapter One

A Margin of Freedom in Centrelink?

A margin of freedom is crucial in the ‘hot zone’ of interaction between the organisation and life… (Folgheraiter 2004, p. 144)

This thesis explores the topic of relating in the Centrelink service context, and the role for social workers in guiding organisational practices towards a supportive orientation. It is, on one level, a close examination of some attempts to draw on social workers to reform practices in an historically constrictive Australian context. On another level, the thesis forms part of a broader international conversation around the possibility and value of relational social work and of social workers guiding human services towards humanising work, characterised by freedom for dialogue and cooperation.

The thesis draws on a variety of cases, focussing on original case study research in and around two Centrelink offices between 2011-13. These sites were early adopters of a frontline reform attempt which was being implemented in forty-four sites. This attempt at widespread reform drew on developments in some smaller local projects, (cases discussed at length in Chapter Four), where attempts were made for social workers to collaborate with and guide customer service staff and build supportive relationships recognising people’s strengths and community connections.

Central to reform was an attempt to enhance the capacity of the frontline service context to foster dialogue and support for people seeking assistance. Scripted questions and targeted assessments typical of Centrelink were abandoned and workers were expected to focus on naturalistic conversations with voluntary participants. Social workers were expected to provide training, coaching and ongoing support to office staff as well as to work closely with them in the front office environment to develop support options for people seeking assistance. For social workers, reform represented an invitation to contribute to organisational service development but also contained challenges.
as they sought to develop supportive alternatives in a complicated organisational context associated with oppressive interventions.

**Positioning the Researcher as Insider and Outsider**

This thesis brings together Centrelink and the relational perspective in social work. These might seem unlikely bedfellows from an outsider perspective, and Centrelink has been characterised in many studies (detailed in Chapter Two) as a stigmatising and alienating setting where interactions can be confusing, coercive, and punitive, and also as machine-like, detached and remote. Conversely, relational social work conjures up images of humanising interactions in which people can be listened to rather than marginalised, and where a relatedness with their context and interests is central to guiding actions and outcomes.

As a researcher who had an insider background in managing and developing social work services in Centrelink for over a decade, the connection between the relational social work paradigm and Centrelink service delivery seemed less unlikely. I had been a social worker and then manager of social work services prior to moving into a research role in 2011. My own experience in Centrelink included involvement with numerous service projects which attempted to improve opportunities to relate and humanise service encounters. For example, developing support to people in remote rural areas of Queensland who were unsupported by other services (Hall & Scheltens, 2005) or encouraging more engaging assessment frameworks which gave young people scope to share difficult experiences in a positive way (Dalyell, 2008).

As a social worker, my experiences also involved me in developments that were not supportive and reflected international directions towards a more constricted and withdrawn practice (Parton, 2008; Rogowski, 2010). As a social work manager, I began to wonder if these moves were not just troubling but
troubled and unsuccessful from an organisational perspective, diminishing organisational capability in a simulation (Baudrillard, 1983) of social work. I was interested in attempts to improve experiences at the frontline, where people looking for help with (or beyond) payments were dealing with confronting situations face to face with customer service workers.

**Insider - Outsider Research and Ethics**

The opportunity to undertake research into some new developments around relationships at the frontline of Centrelink was facilitated by the Human Services Delivery Research Alliance (HSDRA) between Centrelink and the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO). This invited PhD research through an Australian University, and involvement with the CSIRO Science into Society team (a relationship discussed at length in Chapter Seven).

Moving into a research role effectively led to both ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ experiences. Research involved some contact with workers who I had previously had a working relationship with and with others to whom I was unknown or saw my shift in roles as a move away from Centrelink. Ethically this meant applying considerations about my own power, dealing with role ambiguity, and being mindful of participants’ expectations. For example, I had to be mindful of the participation of some workers with whom I had previously worked, and ensure that those who participated in research were doing so voluntarily and did not anticipate particular benefits or encounter detriment from participation. Although, I communicated research invitations through a third party, I also found participants approaching me directly asking to participate, and had to be careful to be respectful of their interest and wishes, whilst maintaining formal processes for consent and a consistent interview schedule. Research was conducted in accordance with ethics approval from Griffith University (Protocol no: HSV/30/11/HREC) as well as approval from the Centrelink Families, Social Inclusion and New Policy Branch.
Centrelink staff, managers and ‘customers’ appeared excited and keen to participate in the research, but this excitement itself raised an ethical issue around dealing with possible expectations that, as an insider, I might have special access to follow up participant concerns or right perceived wrongs. Addressing this required clear communication and a willingness to be open about the limitations of the role. At the same time, I did produce presentations around findings from the research which shared concerns raised by participants, particularly in the later stages of the study. As discussed in Chapters Seven and Nine, these did resonate organisationally, so the research was by no means indifferent to participants expectations.

Power was not all one way, however. Mulgan (2007) has highlighted the challenges in public services engaging with critique and frank discussion. During the course of the research, there were opportunities to present and discuss findings within Centrelink, and to witness excitement and anxiety around research which was, perhaps inevitably, critical of some organisational practices and organisational history. The balance between being both an insider and outsider was sometimes difficult. For example, when, at an internal Centrelink conference, presenting a review of the literature pertaining to people’s historical experiences dealing with Centrelink (Chapter Two) there were some confronting criticisms in the literature from an organisational perspective.

Positive experiences arising from criticism of organisational practices were also significant, as discussed in Chapter Seven and Nine. These were in part made possible through engaging in dialogue and reflection (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009), particularly with PhD supervisors from Griffith University, and developing robust and impactful presentations (Nowotny, Scott & Gibbons, 2001). Drawing on insider and outsider experience also helped increase involvement of other CSIRO researchers with Centrelink, as discussed in Chapter Seven.

An area of personal ethical reflection from undertaking research as an insider-outsider was that ‘customer’ participants appeared to draw distinctions
between social workers and other Centrelink ‘insiders’, and identified my social work background as a positive when sharing stories of their experience, even where these contained negative comments. Furthermore, a ‘social work manager’ appeared to ‘customer’ and ‘worker’ participants to be an ambiguous creature, ‘neither fish nor fowl’, or, as one participant observed, a contradiction in terms. Continuous reflection pursued through supervision led me to see the insider-outsider dichotomy as vexed in its application as my own history within Centrelink. This encouraged a view, in line with Bilson and Lawler (2010), that social work managers, and perhaps all social workers involved in leadership (Hughes & Wearing, 2013), have an opportunity for organisational creativity and for leading in alternative ways which encourage greater mutuality across a spectrum of workers and clients. Possibilities around this are discussed extensively in Chapter Eight.

(Re)Conceptualising Centrelink

Centrelink was created in 1996-7 following a restructure of the Federal Department of Social Security and the dismantling of the Commonwealth Employment Service. The creation of Centrelink has been linked to a broader neoliberal agenda of marketising social security provision and activating people on income support (McDonald & Chenoweth, 2009). A major function of Centrelink has been the implementation of ‘mutual obligation’ policies, with additional expectations on benefit recipients to report and engage in activities, and increased potential for suspension and cessation of benefits for non-compliance (Murphy, Murray, Chalmers, Martin & Marston, 2011; Schooneveldt, 2004). However, the application of ‘mutual obligation’ within a public service organisation which was also founded on a promise of customer service (Vardon, 2000b) created tension as workers dealt with conflicts between enforcing obligations and promoting customer interests (Kennedy and Corliss, 2008; Howard, 2003). Originally trained as a social worker, Sue Vardon, the inaugural CEO of Centrelink, argued that the development of
customer service in Centrelink reflected a desire for a more humane direction which would improve the experience of people accessing assistance (Vardon, 2000a, 2000b). Centrelink is predominantly staffed by customer service workers, who are permanent public servants, usually employed at Australian Public Service (APS) level 4 and reporting to managers (largely at the APS 6 level.)

Over the last two decades the Australian government has maintained an interest in interventions drawing on the relationship which exists between people accessing assistance and Centrelink workers. Interventions have often been oriented to enforcing behaviour through directive and structured conversations such as occur around income management (the control of benefit spending) and the various iterations of mutual obligation. Whilst many coercive interventions have continued and in some cases intensified over the years, reforms to Australian Government service delivery have also included approaches focussed on support and cooperative relationships. These have particularly involved linkages to social workers. A rebadging and inclusion of Centrelink within a broader Department of Human Services in 2011 was accompanied by renewed interest in redesigning the relationships people experience in Centrelink, being more inclusive and listening more closely to people who appeared to have significant concerns in everyday living (Bridge, 2012). Reform was informed by research which framed Centrelink as a widely geographically accessible ‘first to know’ organisation (Institute of Child Protection Studies, 2009, p. 6) for people who are more likely to be disconnected from social supports (Storme & Sullivan, 2003), or in need of personal support (Butterworth, Fairweather, Schmidt & Anstey, 2006).

Centrelink can be thought of as a large decentralised service network, made up of over three hundred offices, as well as call and processing centres where thousands of payment claims and enquiries are dealt with on a daily basis. In practice, it is also an interface with the lived distress and aspirations of human beings who are often experiencing complex concerns
(which are in turn further impacted by the experience of interactions in the Centrelink environment). Centrelink offices have been well positioned geographically to provide opportunities for developing more supportive and helpful interactions to engage with people who might otherwise not access services or support. However, engaging interpersonal practices, local knowledge and supportive working have not typically been associated with the large government service provider. In organisational jargon, spending additional time to listen to someone’s concerns was easily characterised as overservicing. This tension, as well as pressures to enforce compliance around customer activities and payment, have been found to lead Centrelink staff to close off opportunities to help or to direct them towards help (Howard, 2006; Blaxland, 2008). Whilst such tensions have also impacted social workers in Centrelink, they have historically been viewed as seeking to support people accessing Centrelink and engaging with their personal and local community context, as discussed at length in Chapter Two.

Whilst numerically marginal (2-3% of total staff), social workers occupy leadership level roles in Centrelink (largely APS 6). Previous research has shown social workers as constricted in their influence in Centrelink, distanced from customer service workers and struggling to influence a more supportive service provision particularly through engagement with community services and with people referred to them due to a clearly identifiable crisis. Some alternative examples where social workers provided guidance to and worked closely with customer service staff are discussed in Chapter Two, with more recent examples reviewed extensively in Chapter Four. These examples were precursors to a more widespread reform focused on service and case coordination which contributes the central cases in this thesis, studied for just over a year between 2011-13. This reform promised that by 2014-15 forty four sites would provide alternative frontline service provision geared to relating more supportively with people seeking assistance. In doing so, it invited Centrelink’s social workers to provide training, coaching and work closely with customer service workers at the
Thesis Questions

This thesis asks six questions oriented around a core concern. At its core, it asks how did attempts to engage supportively by drawing on guidance from social workers in Centrelink work? The thesis seeks a detailed understanding of how attempts worked by exploring the multiple perspectives and experiences of Centrelink workers, managers and social workers involved in attempts as well as people who accessed Centrelink (customers). Supporting its central concern it asks:

- How did attempts develop over time?
- How were attempts experienced in practice?
- How did attempts differ from past service provision?
- What new relationships emerged? (particularly between social workers and customer service workers);
- What factors encouraged or inhibited attempts;
- What do experiences of attempts and their development have to say about the scope for relational social work in this (and other) context(s)?

The thesis frames service experiences in terms of relationships involving multiple voices. The silencing or neglect of diverse voices, particularly through machine-like processes which intimidate and dislocate attempts at dialogue is framed as centrally problematic for human services. In dialogical terms, these hide “the polyphonic nature of clients’ reality” (Seikkula, Arnkil and Eriksson, 2003, p. 185). The problem is both a human failure for the individual client, but it is also an organisational problem because actions and processes result which are poorly informed, confusing, inefficient and harmful to organisational workers and the organisation itself. It is also a problem which besets research, and the ethical and practical importance of polyphony is
central to the thesis. In this regard, questions presuppose a contribution from diverse voices, including those of:

- people seeking assistance from Centrelink;
- social workers in Centrelink;
- Centrelink customer service workers and
- Centrelink managers.

**Significance of the Thesis**

... despite their rigid and restraining organisational culture, public social services may offer a significant platform for launching alternative professional messages, for creating subversive organisational microclimates, for forging islands of counter culture, for exposing professionals and clients to alternative visions of social problems, to a search for shared solutions within a highly regulated and controlling organisational milieu. (Strier and Binyamin, 2013, pp. 14-15)

There has been growing recognition of the scope of the Centrelink environment for accessing marginalised people, but this has largely been considered in terms of control and regulation. The thesis illustrates an alternative beyond coercive interventions as well as the challenges around this. In drawing attention to supportive alternatives within this environment, the thesis considers social work roles outside of a focus on professional insulation from organisational challenges and explores how social workers influence and guide others within their organisation. It considers, in turn, how this impacts the practice context which underpins their own scope for social work.

The thesis positions the study of the Centrelink context with reference to a broader conversation around relational possibilities in human services and in social work. This conversation has emerged in a
growing body of work concerned with relational social work, particularly in constrictive human services (discussed in Chapter Three). Such literature reflects longstanding concerns that powerful public institutions, when devoid of a humanising influence, may descend into ways of interacting which are degrading and destructive, and fetishise order and security (Bauman, 1998), delivering a kind of banal evil (Arendt, 1963).

The thesis conceptualises alternative developments guided by social workers in light of discourse around alternatives in powerful public institutions (Strier and Binyamin, 2013) and the possibility of a relational turn (Dominelli, 2012) or ‘relational heart’ developing in human services (Spratt et al., 2014). Understanding of supportive relating is framed in terms of how service experiences reveal and integrate voices into service discussions and decisions. The thesis considers the struggles, successes and missteps of attempts at reform in Centrelink, as well as relevance to other similar contexts where social workers struggle to humanise human service delivery.

Unpacking the ‘Welfare Machine’ Metaphor and Searching for a Relational Heart

The notion of a duality to Centrelink, as both machine-like and also as a place in which relationships are pivotal, is developed and scrutinised in this thesis. It was common for people (workers and clients) interviewed to refer to Centrelink using machine metaphors, but one of the most interesting aspects of participant discourse around change attempts was the juxtaposition of new relationships with past machine-like experiences, as participants emphasised human qualities, feelings and a sense of being cared for. The thesis seeks to go beyond the machine metaphor by framing these organisational experiences as (re)constructions of identity and opportunity.
The thesis bears witness to how past negative relationships were obscured by machine-like elements of Centrelink and stigmatisation and dehumanisation was hidden behind apparently indifferent, automatic processes. This is characterised as a kind of reification, where surface conventions obscured an oppression/colonisation (Hughes & Wearing, 2013) of people accessing benefits.

Following Folgheraiter (2004, 2007, 2012), the thesis explores how and whether social workers might guide organisational workers and managers in a network of service provision. The challenge of developing mutuality within an organisation which can struggle to integrate less powerful voices is key. The issue is both how social workers practically guide service engagement to achieve better outcomes through better understanding, and also how they might invoke a ‘common humanity’ (Gaita, 1999) which can inspire alterations to service provision itself. Given the focus of the thesis on humanising directions, it pays considerable attention to reporting participant perspectives in their own words, and honouring their contributions, successes and struggles.

**Thesis Outline**

The thesis is composed of ten Chapters, three of which are peer reviewed, published journal articles. These articles appeared in Australian Social Work (Chapter Four), Nordic Social Work Research (Chapter Seven) and Child and Youth Services (Chapter Nine). These journals address audiences in Australasia, Europe and North America respectively (as well as an international readership). Chapter Two is based on presentations at internal Centrelink conferences. Chapter Eight is an unpublished paper under review. It is anticipated that this thesis format may be unfamiliar for some, but that readers will take away a sense of dialogue with international research and practice, and see the thesis as a lively document contributing to current discourse around social work and human services.
The overall construction of the thesis uses Stake’s (2006) concept of the ‘quintain’, which draws together different cases. Stake saw the quintain, a rough, shared target used in jousting, as a way of thinking about how different cases can be examined in terms of a common challenge. In this study, the common challenge which marks different ‘cases’ (and defines the quintain) centres on attempts to engage supportively by drawing on guidance from social workers in Centrelink. In this respect, a ‘case’ may refer to how a site comes to grips with such attempts, or it may refer to individual practices or even to one specific practice intervention.

**Thesis Flow**

Subsequent to this introduction, this thesis flows in a gradual progression, from identifying alternative directions and backgrounding Centrelink in the literature (Chapters Two and Three), to reflection on some localised cases which preceded recent reforms (Chapter Four), and then an in depth study of those recent reforms over the course of approximately one year in two early-adopter sites (Chapters Five and Six). Later Chapters then drill down within this in depth study into detailed case examples or ‘mini-cases’ (Stake, 2006). Chapter Seven explores practices in an individual intervention. Chapter Eight looks at changes in organisational relationships, and Chapter Nine explores how and why service design was altered in relation to a marginalised group. This progression draws together different players’ perspectives on changing relationships. In Chapter Ten, conclusions about attempts to engage supportively and how these drew on guidance from social workers are offered.

**Chapter Outline**

Chapter One provides an introduction, background to the thesis development, key concepts, and argues for the significance of the thesis. It provides an outline of the thesis Chapters as well as positioning the researcher and explaining the personal-professional import of research as well as the researcher’s status as insider and outsider.
Chapter Two explores literature relevant to the experience of service delivery in Centrelink over the years preceding recent reforms. Difficulties integrating the voices and perspectives of social security customers, particularly where these dealt with increasing compliance and activity obligation issues were identified as a key problem for Centrelink. Accounts of experiences where people felt heard, encouraged and valued were also reported, and some specific social work and community initiatives are highlighted in this regard. The Chapter highlights the dominance of constrictive and dehumanising tendencies as well as noting some supportive directions (and particularly the role of social workers in these). Review findings are discussed with reference to reforms seeking to enhance relationships in frontline service drawing on guidance from social workers.

Chapter Three situates the reform direction with reference to international literature concerned with a relational social work perspective and with how social workers struggle to provide guidance and influence opportunities for people to relate in human service environments. Reform in Centrelink is framed as both opportune and problematic, a twist towards a potential relational turn. Attention to management and organisational directions, to how practice experiences give voice to multiple perspectives, and to the emergence of supportive networks are highlighted as significant for research.

Chapter Four is an article published in Australian Social Work which details experiences with some past cases of local, small scale alternative servicing. These initiatives involved social workers I had provided supervision to and drew on new relationships in and outside the office setting and were direct precursors to recent organisational reforms which are the focus of the thesis. Case vignettes are used as an element of method polyphony which is taken up in more detail in Chapters Five and Seven. Developments in offices
and in servicing out in the community are discussed. Possibilities for grounding frontline service in the realities of client and community experiences are highlighted, as is the contrast between distressing, dehumanising encounters and a more humanising, cooperative approach. This Chapter, as with subsequent papers, is presented in the style of the relevant journal, with references included in the Bibliography.

Chapter Five explores the case study method applied to an in depth study of two sites which were early adopters of more widespread reform during 2011-13. It details the processes undertaken to engage with the diverse perspectives of front-office workers, social workers, managers and social security recipients in one metropolitan and one regional Centrelink office across a little over one year. It argues that although case study approaches have been maligned as descriptions lacking scientific rigour, rich description is central to understanding how such settings work and whose interests they serve. Attending to multiple voices (polyphony) and drawing out of multiple perspectives around a shared service situation are discussed in this Chapter and more extensively in Chapter Seven.

Chapter Six describes the implementation of reforms in two sites in detail, describing site differences as well as common experiences. Experiences of training and implementation are traced. The emergence of increased community engagement and referral are highlighted, as are changing organisational relationships. The perspectives of workers, managers and people seeking assistance are reported with reference to changes over time and site location.

Chapter Seven is an article published in Nordic Social Work Research which details how a polyphonic approach to practice case studies was developed, and introduces a detailed analysis of a mini-case. It details learning from the case with reference to broader organisational changes and highlights benefits and risks around new practices. It identifies challenges for social workers in maintaining influence within organisational constraints, but also reveals dramatic impacts from the perspective of the person seeking assistance.
Chapter Eight explores progress around new relationships as they developed between customer service workers and social workers. It conceptualises this with reference to a debate around heroic possibilities and the capacity for social workers to influence and guide in difficult service contexts. It reveals social workers caught between scepticism and joy as new relationships improved people’s experiences of Centrelink. It highlights how customer service workers gravitated towards alliances with social workers which produced more beneficial outcomes for people seeking support, but could also drift into risky practices which caused social workers' worries.

Chapter Nine is an article published in Child and Youth Services which considers an experience from one site where engagement through social workers with young parents influenced service delivery directions. The paper explores the engagement process undertaken and details learning about young parents’ experiences, aspirations and difficulties (both with Centrelink and more broadly). Findings from engagement, and how engagement between social workers and young parents impacted local policy implementation and service design, are discussed. The paper illustrates the development of insights and understanding around young parents and how changes to Centrelink service provision respected and built on strengths connected to young parents’ parental role.

Chapter Ten provides a conclusion to the thesis and reviews learning from different case experiences to highlight areas where guidance from social workers appeared to offer the greatest promise. The conclusion argues that reforms in the two early adopter sites between 2011-13 underestimated the investment required in social work support and overestimated the capacity of customer service staff to deal with difficult issues on the frontline, particularly in a busier office environment. Despite this, dramatic shifts in interpersonal and community engagements revealed possibilities for a more humanising service at and beyond the frontline.
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Appendices: Interview Guide; Information and Consent Sheets

Bibliography
Chapter Two


This Chapter presents findings from a literature review concerned with service provision in the Australian income support service (Centrelink). It spans from the formation of Centrelink as a ‘customer service’ agency in the late 1990s until just prior to frontline reforms planned for late 2011 which invited closer links between customer service workers and social workers. The review provides a context for understanding this invitation, its promise and possible complications.

The review found that historically there were widespread difficulties relating in Centrelink, particularly for people whose support network was fragile and (ironically) might benefit most from a supportive service relationship. Common themes included stigmatisation, oppressive monitoring and machine-like processes. Alternative experiences were also evident, particularly around localised social work and community initiatives. Findings provide some justification for reform but indicate longstanding challenges and complications around this. Implications are discussed with reference to a larger question around relational possibilities in human services.

Review Rationale

In 2011 the Australian government showed signs of attempting to reshape its federal ‘customer service’ delivery agency (Centrelink) to be more inclusive of the views and needs of citizens, pursuing a variety of programs oriented around social inclusion (Bridge, 2012). A key aspect of this direction involved drawing on guidance from internal Centrelink social workers, with expectations that they would work more closely with customer service staff. The Australian government has employed social workers within the income support setting for over 70 years, and employs over 600 in Centrelink (which
represents around two and a half percent of the total Centrelink workforce). Typically social workers in Centrelink have focussed on complex assessments to assist payment decisions, particularly with young people, as well as some other crisis oriented work (Hart, 2013). Reforms emphasised opportunities to coach, support and collaborate with customer service workers and improve service experiences at the frontline. At a practical level, 44 (approximately 1 in 8) Centrelink offices were earmarked for reform.

In order to understand a wide range of perspectives around the Centrelink context and historical experiences which might be relevant to studying this reform, a review was pursued of research and organisational literature which dealt with experiences of engagement within Centrelink historically, prior to new reforms. The review asked, what were perspectives on service delivery experiences with Centrelink, and how do these inform understanding of a reform to engagement drawing on social workers?

**Method**

Peer reviewed journal articles or books which appeared between 1996 and prior to the field study of reforms in late 2011 were considered in an initial review and then supplemented during the course of the thesis with further relevant retrievals up until April 2016.

The review was conducted using the following retrieval tools and databases: ProQuest Central; EBSCOhost; Scopus; Informit; Wileyonline; Google Scholar; the Australian Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) Library catalogue and the Griffith University Library catalogue. Google Scholar and the FaHCSIA library catalogue were also scanned for highly relevant ‘grey’ literature. The keywords “Centrelink” and “experience” were used (through the Boolean operator AND), as were “Centrelink” and “engagement”, and “Centrelink” and “support”,

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except in Google Scholar, where the keyword “Centrelink office” was substituted for “Centrelink” to refine retrievals.

As a review interested in diverse perspectives and including insights from smaller studies, the review covered a broad publication context with varied levels of detail around study methods and design. Studies which demonstrated relevance to the review research question were checked for clear, useful findings which were informed by a method appropriate to their particular study focus. Retrievals were synthesised using a matrix approach and analysed thematically drawing on tactics outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994) in order to develop a review narrative.

Triangulation within studies was not common. Most studies focused on either particular customers’ or particular workers’ experiences of service, and whilst it is problematic (and potentially unhelpful) to ‘adjudicate’ between different accounts within studies (Mays & Pope, 2000, p. 51), we have elsewhere discussed the value of assembling different perspectives in terms of developing ‘polyphony’ (Hall, Boddy & Chenoweth, 2014) and ‘robust’ knowledge (Nowotny, Scott & Gibbons, 2001). In this regard, the review values how accounts of experiences were conceptualised or made sense of by study participants and by researchers, but also pursues a level of triangulation within the review itself, by comparing and contrasting perspectives across studies and identifying core themes with reference to multiple studies.

**Findings and Discussion**

The review literature focussed largely on experiences of people reliant on social security assistance over the longer term, who had to engage in conversations which meshed discussion of their personal and social circumstances with discussion around eligibility and compliance (reflecting the means tested and increasingly conditional nature of the Australian social security system). Some studies discussed experiences of people in crisis as well as people in temporary need of assistance because of a particular life event.
(such as students claiming financial assistance). Centrelink emerged as a highly important (and highly complicated) point of contact, where issues of access, and how and whether people were related to, appeared central to both financial and personal outcomes.

Access

Whilst accessing and maintaining income support was sometimes thought of as straightforward (Saunders & Stone, 2000), there was considerable evidence that it was more complex (Bodsworth, 2010; Carney, 2006; Marston & Walsh, 2008; Murphy et al., 2011; Schooneveldt, 2004; Team, Markovic and Manderson, 2007; Watson, 2001; Ziguras, Dufty & Considine, 2003), had been complicated by increased conditionality (Bellamy & Cowling, 2008; Blaxland, 2008; Schooneveldt, 2004) and involved the use of resources (Mackay, 2004) which were not always available to those most in need of income support (Bellamy & Cowling, 2008; Savage & Carvill, 2009).

In mapping these resources, Mackay (2004) found that university students who successfully accessed payments had to draw on significant organisational and self advocacy skills as well as the advice and support of others, including family and friends, in order to access and maintain payments. Relating well to staff in Centrelink was seen as important to getting correct payments. Mackay’s participants also reported anxiety around unhelpful or distant Centrelink staff and around depersonalised processes.

A range of studies found that accessing or maintaining income support could be a difficult and discouraging experience for: sole parents (Blaxland, 2008; Darab & Hartman, 2011; Grahame & Marston, 2012; Winkworth, McArthur, Layton & Thomson, 2010) families with complex needs (Cox & Priest, 2008), women in unstable relationships (Hughes, 2008; Tranter, Sleep & Stannard, 2008); Indigenous people (Poroch, 2006); people who experienced homelessness (Grace, Batterham & Cornell, 2008); disability
(Humpage, 2007); were migrants (Team, Markovic and Manderson, 2007) or refugees (Fozdar & Torezani, 2008).

Research also found that trends in casualised employment had added complexity to dealing with Centrelink (Bodsworth, 2010) and that unexpected reductions in income support were liable to have dramatic effects on families (McArthur, Thomson, Winkworth & Butler, 2010).

Alston and Kent (2009) found that a lack of local engagement options in rural areas reduced the quality of relationships with Centrelink, resulting in young people being penalised, disengaging or not engaging at all. Some quantitative research suggested widespread rates of people failing to access payments due to stigma and challenges negotiating the income support setting (Baker, 2010), whilst other research has suggested modest rates (Mood, 2006).

### Strengths and Labels

A lack of engagement was found to discourage disclosure of significant issues (Croft, 2002; Poroch, 2006) or of strengths and achievements which might have clarified more appropriate pathways for people (Kossen & Hammer, 2010; Murphy et al., 2011). Impersonal and detached interventions were viewed as creating narrow and inappropriate understandings of people. Whilst these experiences could be framed in terms of the impact of punitive policies (Schooneveldt, 2004), accounts of disconnection and distress were also grounded in a basic lack of interpersonal recognition and a confusion around service relationships (Howard, 2003; Murphy et al., 2011). In some cases, where more supportive engagements were pursued, issues as complex as domestic violence could be responded to better in Centrelink (Hall, Boddy, Chenoweth & Davie, 2012) or through Job Service agencies (Costello, Chung & Carson, 2005).

Experiences of labels as indicators of low status and deficiency were reported in relation to unemployed people (Kossen & Hammer, 2010) and women who had assumed caring roles after dramatic changes in circumstances (Savage & Carvill, 2009). These carers also reported feeling treated as deficient...
despite having histories of considerable strengths and resilience. Experiences around more formal labelling, such as in medical characterisations, were reported in relation to Disability Pension interactions as controlling and discouraging (Humpage, 2007). A focus on medical labels through scripted direct questioning was found, ironically, to lead to issues being avoided or resisted (Croft, 2002).

Marston and McDonald (2008) identified controlling engagements as demotivating and hampering the development of pathways to employment. A study of refugee experiences suggested a need to be overtly supportive given some refugees would purposely avoid criticising or questioning Centrelink for fear of repercussions (Fozdar & Torezani, 2008).

**Dealing with Distress**

Distress, anxiety and humiliation were linked to interactions where people felt they were not listened to or respected in conversations with Centrelink workers. (Blaxland, 2008; Commonwealth Ombudsman, 2010; Humpage, 2007; McArthur, Thomson, Winkworth & Butler, 2010; Murphy et al., 2011; Tranter, Sleep & Stannard, 2008). Humiliation, and experiences of feeling treated as having no status (Savage & Carvill, 2009), not being fully human (Murphy et al., 2011) or subhuman (Tranter, Sleep & Stannard, 2008), were linked to perceptions that a degrading identity was constructed in intrusive relationships with Centrelink (Blaxland, 2008; Patrick, Cook & McKenzie, 2008; Savage & Carvill, 2009).

Discomforting experiences were related to the potentially embarrassing nature of conversations (Humpage, 2007; Patrick, Cook & McKenzie, 2008) and perceptions that receiving benefits eliminated rights to privacy (Cook & Marjoribanks, 2005). Experiences of distressing conversations could be mitigated by access to other resources or people outside of Centrelink. For example, in Mackay’s (2004) study with university students, confusing or confronting engagements with Centrelink were experienced as invoking
anxiety, but this was lessened by talking with friends, family, or another trusted support.

A lack of support could be particularly significant in investigative and compliance engagements (Hughes, 2008; Murphy et al., 2011; Tranter, Sleep & Stannard, 2008). Tranter, Sleep and Stannard’s examination of cohabitation investigations found that these dealt primarily with vulnerable women who were often carers involved in ambiguous personal relationships and had limited resources. Relationships with Centrelink during investigations were perceived by participants as intimidating and threatening. The study found that participants felt confused and humiliated within a blurring of administrative and criminal investigative conversations.

Confusion could undermine people’s ability to contribute to interactions. A study of community based workers’ experiences of Centrelink likened this effect to dealing with a complaints based system, where people without advocates or a network of support could not make themselves heard (Bellamy & Cowling, 2008). Similar findings were made in a study involving youth workers (Beadle, 2009). Marston and Walsh (2008) found that people who incurred overpayments could become caught up in processes influenced by a discourse of serious fraud which did not match their circumstances. This was also discussed in audit reporting of Centrelink (Australian National Audit Office, 2011, p. 37).

**Stigma**

Hartman and Darab (2006), in a study of welfare reform experiences, suggested that stigma permeated service delivery in Centrelink. However, there was evidence that some negative experiences reflected occurrences and attitudes in the broader community. For example, people on income support could themselves demonstrate stigmatising attitudes towards other people on income support, and interacted with people in day to day life who expressed stigmatising attitudes (Murphy et al., 2011). Unspoken derogatory labels such
as dole bludger (Blaxland, 2008), beggar (Connelly, 2010), criminal (Murphy et al., 2011) or welfare cheat (Marston & Walsh, 2008) were sometimes linked to media or public discourse rather than the engagements in Centrelink (Blaxland, 2008). This was particularly evident in a study which found that some people entitled to concession entitlements failed to use them because they did not like identifying themselves publicly as receiving income support (Baker, 2010).

Grahame and Marston (2012) argued there was stigma in single mothers’ dealings with Centrelink due to the intrusive nature of contacts, and because of a moral dimension in welfare reform which idealised the independent individual. Drawing on the concept of relational autonomy, they linked experiences with Centrelink and job services to an inhibiting of self-efficacy and autonomy. Similarly Darab and Hartman (2011) drew on relational psychology to argue that shame and humiliation are influenced by expectations. They argued that income support obligations created unrealistic expectations and anxiety, particularly amongst people who lacked substantial alternative social resources or had a history of poor institutional experiences and not being heard.

Preventing Harm

The possibility of harm through not being heard was highlighted in Commonwealth Ombudsman reporting of people experiencing mental health issues (Commonwealth Ombudsman, 2010, p. 18) which found the need for an environment where customers are encouraged to feel comfortable to disclose relevant information about their medical situation and ensure customers understand that disclosure...will be treated respectfully and may be used to their benefit.

Elsewhere the Ombudsman expressed the need for service delivery to recognise communication as central.

I suspect...agencies see the way they communicate as a side issue to the services they provide, whereas the two are inextricably linked or indeed the same.
The importance of government services relating more supportively with marginalised people has been influential in government statements (Moran, 2010) and research around inclusivity (Baldry, Green & Thorpe, 2006; Australian Social Inclusion Unit, 2009). One early attempt to design a positive relational context was the introduction of a customer service focus, instituted with the creation of Centrelink (Vardon, 2000a, 2000b).

The Promise and Limits of Customer Service

The ‘customer service’ discourse central to Centrelink’s creation has been criticised as inadequate for welfare and human service settings because it misrepresents people with limited choices and power (Peel, 2003), but it has also been linked to attempts to personalise service and pay attention to and value unique individual experience (Yeatman, 2009). Sue Vardon (2000a, 2000b), the first Chief Executive of Centrelink, argued that the introduction of an individualised customer service approach was aimed, in part, at removing stigma around the social security system.

Howard (2003) found positive experiences occurred in ‘one to one’ customer service in Centrelink where workers could develop relationships over time through more personalised interactions (particularly where this was desired by customers). Positive experiences around offices were also reported by Howard around the physical open plan design, but this was criticised elsewhere in terms of privacy concerns (Blaxland, 2008, pp. 131-33). Howard concluded that attempts to construct personalised customer service relationships were eventually undermined by high workloads and less democratic ‘activation’ directions characterised by tighter rules and machine like processes. A similar study, focused on workers’ experiences, found that workers struggled to reconcile the needs of customers with organisational demands, often leading to worker stress, resistance and sporadic deviation from policy in attempts by workers to be more supportive (Kennedy & Corliss, 2008).
Research into the development of Centrelink found that experiences of tension around customer service delivery were influenced by conflict at a national level between policy departments and Centrelink (the service delivery agency), particularly where welfare reform policy agendas pushed the boundaries of Centrelink’s customer service agenda (Halligan, 2007; Halligan & Wills, 2008; Yeatman, 2009).

**Welfare Reform, Personal Advice and Social Exclusion**

A growing policy focus on individual obligation and market outcomes was identified in a review of social service literature covering the end of the twentieth century (Cass, 2005) reflecting neoliberal directions internationally (Harris, 2003). In Centrelink, a focus on addressing ‘social exclusion’ through requiring evidence of participation in social and economic activities determined in plans agreed with Centrelink was pursued, with an increasing focus on job-search and unpaid work related activities linked to the privatised employment services network (Sawer, 2005).

The pursuit of a ‘personal advisor’ approach between 2002-2006 focussed on mandatory activity interviews in Centrelink to motivate and connect sole parents and other ‘target groups’ into community and economic participation. Alexander, Baxter, Hughes and Renda (2005) found positive impacts as parents became involved in more social or income producing activities but noted negative stress where plans involved parents in longer hours per week in required activities. They also found that plans often involved activities parents were already doing rather than creating new ones. Blaxland (2008) framed this in terms of idealised premises within welfare reform not fitting actual experiences of people’s complex lives.

Blaxland found some positive experiences where Centrelink workers attempted to construct interviews more respectfully and with reference to the women’s own circumstances, this was difficult in the context of a structured mandatory interview which required workers to address issues which were not
always relevant. Blaxland found the nature of relations to be significant, reporting
the personal contact they have with staff in Centrelink offices as central to
whether they experienced Australians Working Together as respectful or
disrespectful. (Blaxland, 2008, p. 5).
Blaxland was highly critical of attempts to motivate mothers. In her detailed
study of the personal experiences of a small group of mothers, she identified
that intentions to build participation understated the often complex mix of
formal activities and busy informal roles women were already doing: caring;
working part time or doing unpaid work.

Marston and McDonald (2008), reporting on long-term unemployed
people’s experiences at the intersection of Centrelink and employment agencies,
found that engagements were often experienced as impersonal and confusing.
They found people tended to “bounce from the Centrelink to the Job Network
providers” and “… not make the distinction between ‘hassle’ (sanctions) and
help (employment services)” (Marston & McDonald, 2008, p. 263).

Accounts of feeling distressed, discouraged or confused within the
income support environment were commonly reported around increased
intrusion by Centrelink. Webber and Boromeo (2005) reported that sole parents
felt uncomfortable, unwelcome, unsupported and intruded upon by Centrelink.
Experiences which threatened a loss of income support were prominent and
often occurred at the interface with employment services (Bodsworth, 2010;
Carney, 2006; Eardley et al., 2005; Kossen & Hammer, 2010; Marston &
McDonald, 2008; Murphy et al., 2011; Sawer, 2005; Ziguras, Considine & Dufty,
2003).

In looking at attempts to motivate individuals and couples through
intensive questionnaire based counselling interactions in Centrelink offices
(designed to identify ways of increasing economic and social participation),
researchers found that this appeared to increase study and social integration but
did not increase employment outcomes and appeared to increase reliance on
payments, at least over the short term (Breunig, Dunlop, Cobb-Clark & Terrill,
McArthur, Thomson and Winkworth (2013, p. 5) raised concerns from a position critical of increasing conditionality in relation to sole parents, the overwhelming feelings expressed by sole parents in this research project was how hard it was to get what they needed, how humiliating and frustrating the experiences were and how they feel under constant scrutiny by Centrelink and other services to ensure they do not get anything they may not be entitled to. It also led them to not getting what they needed or giving up asking for assistance.

Personal advisor roles were removed in 2006-7 as further welfare reforms expanded target groups with activity expectations and increased the volume of participation interactions (Grahame & Marston, 2012) so that general customer service staff were required to assume a focus on engaging people in economic and community participation as well as payment issues.

**Behaviours, Values and the Mixed Promise of Social Inclusion**

In some accounts, study participants blamed Centrelink payment receipt for undermining community values (McMichael & Manderson, 2004) or it was understood as promoting welfare dependency (Saunders & Stone, 2000). The possibility that experiences with Centrelink could influence values was also highlighted with women who had migrated to Australia from places where their caring work was unpaid and encountered options for carer payments (Team, Markovic & Manderson, 2007).

Developing conditionality to enforce or push people towards certain social behaviours and values underpinned early social exclusion and later social inclusion discourse in Centrelink, so that government assistance was framed around a notion of dependency (Grahame & Marston, 2012). A number of studies criticised policy preoccupations with welfare dependency, welfare cheating or abuse of the system as underpinned by myth and stereotypes (Marston & Walsh, 2008; Hartman & Darab 2006), echoing an historically oriented critique by Block and Somers (2003) of myth laden representations of
welfare recipients as morally deficient. Marston and Walsh (2008), in describing a kind of moral panic around perceptions of stereotypical ‘welfare cheats’, criticised a discourse within and outside of Centrelink which constructs dehumanising identities and limits opportunities for dialogue through stigmatisation.

The emergence of ‘income management’ intensified focus on dependency, using income support receipt to influence behavior by controlling spending through planning conversations with Centrelink workers and store payment cards. Whilst largely associated with government intervention in Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, income management has developed in some other locations with a focus on people framed as vulnerable with options for voluntary participation. Income management has been criticised, particularly where compulsory in some indigenous communities, as engendering experiences of disrespect and undermining self determination (Equality Rights Alliance, 2011). Other research has indicated that a focus on monitoring and controlling payments may operate as a protective mechanism, although finding that it is unlikely to enhance capabilities (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, 2010; Bray et al., 2012).

Recent research around capability by the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) raises some challenges for approaches such as income management if they aim to enhance capabilities and move people away from a perceived dependence (Mason, Spinks, Hajkowicz & Hobman, 2014) but are perceived as controlling, threatening or result in Centrelink workers “micro-managing the people on it [income support].” (Saunders 2008, p. 22). It found that promoting a sense of trust and wellbeing was significant for building the capability of payment recipients (Mason et al., 2014). Mendes, Waugh & Flynn (2013) in a detailed review around income management highlighted opportunities for social workers to enhance participants’ input and self-direction in service experiences.
A focus on voluntary income management, subsequent to a change of
government in 2007, heralded a (re)turn to social inclusion strategies in
Centrelink (Bridge 2012), echoing early stages of the development of customer
service (Vardon 2000b). These strategies appeared to include a softer ‘citizen-
centric’ approach focused on inclusion and voluntary participation but also
reinforced continued mandatory intervention and conditional policies (Bridge,
2012). Some developments drew more specifically on Centrelink’s social
workers, who were invited more directly to participate in both conditional and
in more open, supportive directions.

Social Work and Community Engagement

... if you can kind of find someone that you connect with, it just makes
dealing with that whole service a lot easier, like we had a social worker at
Centrelink ... (Anonymous customer)

(Australian Department of Human Services, 2011d, p.16)

In Australia, social work has a longstanding tradition as a university
qualified profession, and social workers in Centrelink are employed as
‘professional officers’ at relatively senior levels (congruent with office managers).
The potential for internal advocacy, a critical perspective to organisational
directions, and links to outside networks have been identified as areas of
opportunity for social workers in Centrelink (Hart, 2013; Hall, Boddy, Chenoweth
& Davie, 2012). At the same time, social workers’ experience in Centrelink has
been characterised as one of ongoing struggle (Hart, 2013; McDonald &
Chenoweth, 2009).

McDonald and Marston (2006), in comparing Centrelink social worker
perspectives with those of case managers in contracted employment service
agencies, found significant differences around how the two groups of workers
framed their relationships with the unemployed. Centrelink social workers
were found to favour an empowerment perspective and perceived structural
causes of unemployment, whilst case managers were more likely to see
unemployed people as responsible for their unemployment and supported
punitive approaches.
The ‘business’ framework created around Centrelink (Fitzgibbon, 2000; Fitzgibbon & Hargreaves, 2005) and an increased policy focus on benefit conditionality has been reported as creating tension around engagement and dialogue for social workers (Hart, 2013; McDonald & Chenoweth, 2009). Hart (2013) raised concerns about Centrelink social workers being drawn into oppressive actions through increased demands for them to buy into organisational attempts to motivate and ‘activate’ people seeking assistance.

Tension in practice was also evident in Squires and Kramaric Trojak’s (2003) study where social workers felt pressure to speed up interventions to meet targets. However, they also found that social workers drew on critical reflection and made use of multiple relationships, particularly outside the organisation, (in line with Peut (2000)), to balance these tensions. Diaz (2008) reported social workers assisting staff to avoid punitive measures in perhaps one of the most tense areas of Centrelink, the Orwellian named ‘Participation Solutions Team’, a call centre type operation assessing failure to comply with job seeking requirements. Diaz described an initiative involving social workers training and coaching customer service staff towards supportive engagements which could help them recognise jobseekers with, for example, mental health problems.

Patrick, Cook and McKenzie (2008) found that extending conversations beyond a narrow focus on organisational business opened up opportunities for support otherwise missed. The role of social work in training and mentoring staff was also evident in a small scale localised program, where staff’s expressed concern about wanting to help people more appropriately was instrumental to social workers working closely with those customer service staff to improve capacity to relate with people accessing Centrelink (Hall, Boddy, Chenoweth & Davie, 2012).

**Supporting Key Groups and Communities**

Jope and Beaumont (2003) identified social workers as a key support for young people dealing with Centrelink, although Dalyell (2008) raised concerns that social workers did not spend enough time listening to young people’s stories and could be stuck in routinised assessments. She led a small trial using
a narrative framework in interviews with young people who left home after family breakdown. Dalyell suggested that this enhanced opportunities for understanding broader needs and contributed to an improvement in engagement, as young people could tell their own story.

Despite such calls for improving experiences of engagement, social workers failed to feature in key studies of the Centrelink frontline context (Howard, 2003; Kennedy & Corliss, 2008) and in much of the research around customer experiences of Centrelink service provision. Social workers have, however, influenced a number of alternative service approaches focused on overcoming organisational barriers to assistance.

A number of pilot programs in Centrelink have focused on developing supportive relationships in local settings, in offices or community spaces (Darcy & Gwyther, 2010; Bowles, Jones-Mutton & Barton, 2011). Improving community relationships has been shown to increase accessibility (Grace & Coventry, 2010; Watson, 2001) and more supportive service experiences (Darcy & Gwyther, 2010; Mason, Spinks, Hajkowicz & Hobman, 2014). Social workers have played a lead role in post-disaster support promoting relational practices centred around assisting people within a network of government, third sector and informal support (Fitzgibbon & Hargreaves, 2005; Manning, Millar, Newton & Webb, 2006).

The Shared Assessments in Logan (SaiL) program, a direct precursor to recent reforms, involved a senior social worker leading a mixed team of customer service and social work staff in a disadvantaged location. This focussed on providing interpersonal support within a network of relationships built in the local community (Hall, Boddy, Chenoweth & Davie, 2012). Similarly, Centrelink social workers and Centrelink outreach officers have partnered internally and with community agencies around support for people experiencing homelessness (Australian Department of Human Services 2011; Grace & Coventry, 2010; Hadson & Peck, 2011; Manicas, 2011).

Sanders (2003) identified the development of small community based Centrelink offices as a key method of supporting Aboriginal people who
might otherwise be excluded from payments and struggle to deal with Centrelink, as they could relate directly with decision makers they knew and who lived within or close to their communities. The scope to use Centrelink offices in communities to provide access for other services was reported in a study of enhanced vaccination access provided through a Centrelink office (Thomsen, Smyth, Gardner & Ketchell, 2012).

Winkworth’s (2005) research around community engagement initiatives within Centrelink undertaken by social workers and some community focussed staff found evidence of Centrelink relating more supportively and listening to community voices. Collaboration with other agencies led to a blurring of service boundaries and a recognition of the limits of service silos. She found that Centrelink had begun to look at people’s needs beyond payment and to see interactions between payment need and broader needs. A caution identified by Winkworth was the need to commit to relationships “with members of local communities and the personal trust engendered by these relationships…” (Winkworth, 2005, p. 34), something acknowledged in recent national attempts at ‘co-designing’ service (Bridge, 2012).

Technology

Hall and Scheltens (2005) reported that placing social workers in Centrelink rural call centre offices facilitated voluntary supportive consultations with people in need who would otherwise have failed to access professional help. Whilst there was evidence that the development of call centre and information technology expanded access to some disadvantaged groups (Humphries & Camilleri, 2002), there was also evidence that call based interactions which involved complex payment discussions could lead to misunderstanding and confusion (Hughes, 2008). Some studies found that the increasing use of information technology in Centrelink could reinforce elements of control and promoted an organisational dependence on technological rather than cooperative human or practice solutions (Dearman, 2005; McDonald, Marston & Buckley, 2003).
Developments to ‘speed up’ interactions and increase the use of technology were a concurrent focus of Centrelink as it pursued other reforms around improving engagement. Whether technology facilitates responsiveness (Bridge, 2012; Colineau, Paris & Dennett, 2011) and efficiencies which allow for more time to be spent with customers (Australian Department of Human Services, 2011d), or curtails interpersonal engagement and attention to social context (Coleman & Harris, 2008) is a significant issue of interest for further research.

Further Discussion and Implications

The Centrelink context is a complicated mix of diverse internal actors, such as customer service staff, managers and social workers, as well as a diversity of ‘customers’, from people on benefits, pensions, family payments, and people accessing some other federal services. Highly differential service experiences, from natural emergency responses with people who may in fact require no welfare assistance on an ongoing basis (Manning et al., 2006) through to ongoing enmeshment in personal circumstances (such as occurred around income management) invoke a setting with widely challenging and diverse relationships.

A number of studies in the review pointed to an increasingly complicated and conditional payment system underpinned by inflexible service arrangements and policies which were developed by (the Coalition) government between 1996-2007, and largely continued by Labor governments between 2007-2012 (and with antecedents from previous Labor governments). These were seen, paradoxically, as requiring but also constricting relationships, as conditionality and customer service developed in an uneasy relationship. Connections between a reduction in payment rights and negative impacts on human rights drew on a critique of these increasingly individualised approaches in Australian social security away from collective responsibility and shared humanity (Alston, 2010; Cass, 2005). In this context, service relationships were viewed with concern as undermining or controlling rather than supporting.
people seeking assistance, albeit with some suggestions that, at times, moves towards customer service and social inclusion could result in positive experiences for people seeking help.

Howard (2003, 2006, 2012), one of the key investigators of street level customer service developments in Centrelink, was pessimistic about the capacity of Centrelink workers to support the interests of people accessing Centrelink offices. He concluded that machine-like processes and the strictures of conditional welfare policies effectively de-humanised individualised service. However, he has more recently stressed (Howard, 2012), as did Kennedy and Corliss (2008), how opportunities to relate did lead customer service workers to worry and question how they might respond more supportively. He found this questioning created personal tension and distress as staff felt powerless and unable to influence managers or alter work processes. In practice, customer service workers displayed ‘good intentions’ (Townsend, 1998) but struggled within a network of relations which surrounded and influenced service encounters. In this regard, the possibility of social workers (who do not feature in Howard’s study) relating with customer service staff and other network players to develop more supportive service experiences takes on a particular significance.

That social workers might influence service provision through relationships they build in complex network situations is central to a relational social work perspective (Folgheraiter, 2004, 2007; Pozzuto, Arnd-Caddigan & Averett, 2009) which emphasises a need to go beyond an individualizing ‘therapeutic’ relationship-based approach (Lymbery, 2013) and to develop dialogue and guide network relationships towards support rather than oppression. From this perspective, pursing relatedness in oppressive service settings (Dominelli, 2002; McCashen, 2005; Parton & O’Byrne, 2000) and disconnected service networks (Seed, 1990; Seikkula & Arnkil, 2006) is a cornerstone of social work, where social workers humanise and extend support through the guidance, relationships and social awareness developed with others, whether members of the public, other workers or managers.
Findings from the literature review, whilst providing some justification for supportive reforms to service provision, indicated formidable challenges. Accounts of entrenched intrusive and controlling relations and the deleterious impact of these were widely evident in the literature, particularly on people considered most in need. Experiences of distanced or detached service situations were also reported as limiting people’s ability to voice unique concerns and access assistance. Whether a ‘relational heart’ (Spratt et al., 2014) might be developed in service provision in Centrelink seems inherently challenging.

The review suggested that people who are the most marginalised from support elsewhere are highly vulnerable in interactions in Centrelink, which they may perceive as threatening any security, freedom or stability they retain. Interactions in Centrelink may be a catalyst for further experiences of oppression, particularly where these are perceived as unwanted and unnecessary. However, the review also suggested that attempts to engage can provide opportunities for revealing unmet needs and lead to more beneficial outcomes. Such supportive experiences were apparent in the review where people accessing assistance perceived that they were listened to and where conversations opened up opportunities to talk about a broader social situation and personal circumstances which could better inform organisational decisions. In contrast to the many dehumanising situations reported, these raised opportunities to challenge stigmatising cultural attitudes, encourage hidden strengths and improve access to social resources and Centrelink benefits.

Limitations of the review included the fact that studies overwhelmingly focused on Centrelink customers with compliance and activity requirements, and often with regular contact with Centrelink. In this sense the review was not a broad account of ‘customer satisfaction’, given it did not focus on many customers who have little contact with Centrelink, such as those receiving only age pension for example. However, in this respect the review
reflected the experiences of customers likely to encounter an offer of enhanced support through Centrelink (which were of most relevance to this thesis). A further limitation was the methodological tendency amongst the literature to report single perspectives on encounters. This is discussed at greater length in Chapter Seven, where the benefits of reporting of multiple perspectives of experiences is outlined in more detail.

**Conclusion**

The review illuminated the Centrelink setting as a complicated space where the nature of relationships plays a significant part in people’s experiences of accessing support, financial and otherwise. Moves to draw further on social workers to enhance supportive engagement represented an opportunity to extend on some promising relational developments in Centrelink. However, they also raised complications and the question of whether and how social workers can expand possibilities for alternative experiences against an historical trajectory favouring process, compliance and conditionality.

The review painted a picture of social workers, whilst (numerically) marginal within Centrelink, involved in a struggle to influence beyond the margins, particularly through developing and guiding relationships in and around the service setting. The notion of a ‘relational’ struggle in social work and human services more broadly is taken up in detail in the next Chapter.
Chapter Three

Twists and Turns: Framing Supportive Developments in Light of a Relational Struggle.

…relational social work, a form of practice that has disappeared from several Western nations that have accepted a competence-based techno-bureaucratic approach…

(Dominelli & Hackett, 2012, pp. 449-453)

The previous Chapter highlighted constrictive aspects of Centrelink as well as some developments which have drawn on social workers to build alternative service relationships and supportive aspects of service provision in spite of a constrictive milieu. This Chapter conceptualises such developments more extensively with reference to a struggle around relational social work in human services.

The Chapter outlines perspectives around relational social work internationally. Difficulties developing relationships and relational aspects of service provision are discussed with reference to historical directions which constrict social work and human service practice. Such directions include machine processes, conditionality and marketization. These have a particular relevance in the Centrelink context, and render the opportunity for social workers to guide and influence new practices as a source of likely organisational tension. The Chapter highlights the potential for actions by social workers to collude with oppressive arrangements, as well as the risks of inaction and retreat into therapeutic or professional isolation.

The Chapter concludes by framing recent relational developments in Centrelink as a twisting of Centrelink towards alternative and more supportive ways of working. The opportunity for social workers to influence Centrelink’s mainstream service provision through a widespread reform of relationships with individuals and their community context is introduced with reference to a more detailed review of small scale precursor initiatives in Chapter Four.
Tracing Relational Perspectives: Meaning and Historical Context

How people relate and what kinds of relationships are possible in social service settings, has been a source of rich discussion in social work literature for over a century. Over the last two decades, a discourse has developed around relational social work and attempts to put relationships at the ‘heart’ (Spratt et al., 2014) of social service provision despite (and perhaps in spite of) constrictive developments in such settings. Interest in social workers influencing and changing service provision has been contrasted against a perceived threat of dehumanisation in welfare services, and a vision of social work being reduced to a “truncated and technocratic version of what it once promised to be.” (Rogowski, 2010, p. 4).

Internationally, there have been different developments and different meanings accorded to relational social work. In the United States towards the end of the twentieth century, it has been particularly, and perhaps misleadingly (Pozzuto & Arnd-Caddigan, 2006) identified with a psychoanalytic tradition and with attempts to develop mutuality in clinical practice informed by relational psycho-analysis (Borden, 2000; Flasks, 1999; Ornstein & Ganzer, 2005). This relational tradition focuses on understanding the client, not as a driven and coherent self, but as a more fluid set of possibilities which coalesce and can be made sense of in light of different relationships. Within this framework, attention to mutuality in a therapeutic practice relationship is idealised as providing a more expansive knowledge of a client’s past and present ways of being in relationships (and the nuances and disjunctures around this).

Attention to mutuality has also been central to relationship based social work directions in the United Kingdom, where approaches drawing on psycho-analytic and attachment frameworks (Trevithick, 2003), constructivism (Ruch, Turney & Ward, 2010) and neuroscience (Trevithick, 2014) have focused on how professional social worker-client relationships improve practice in complex and difficult situations. These have particularly focused on child protection, where a major review (‘Munro’) emphasised the need for better relationships with clients (Broadhurst & Mason, 2014; Mason, 2012; O’Leary, Tsui & Ruch, 2013).
On both sides of the Atlantic, mutuality has been framed as a relationship where the social worker and client may engage more freely and reflect on feelings associated with their own ways of relating to each other. From the psycho-analytic perspective, concepts such as transference and countertransference are central and are framed as elements of this contingent, constructed relationship (Ganzer & Orstein 2002).

Research, particularly in the psycho-analytic tradition, largely involves practice case studies using vignettes and descriptions of case stories, reflecting a constructivist orientation, and the importance of detailing the development of the therapeutic relationship and the shared insights which emerge from this in practice (Ganzer & Orstein, 2002; Ornstein & Ganzer, 2005; Ringel, 2003; Shibusawa & Chung 2009; Shonfeld-Ringel, 2001; Silin & Stewart, 2003; Spira & Kenemore, 2002; Zindel, 2001). A weakness of this tradition, and of too narrow a focus on the social worker-client relationship, is the lack of a critical perspective on therapeutic aspects of engagement, particularly on how therapeutic engagements might obscure or distort clients’ experience in their network outside the therapeutic encounter (Furlong, 2008, 2013).

Debate Over Origins

There has been significant debate over the association of relational social work with the psychodynamic and psychoanalytic tradition in the United States. For example, whilst Ornstein and Ganzer (2006) stressed the centrality of transference concepts to relational social work, Pozzuto, Arnd-Caddigan and Averett (2006) suggested that this created an approach that might be better termed ‘relational psychoanalytically informed social work’, arguing that relationality was a central social work principle which could draw on a number of intellectual traditions rather than psychoanalysis. They highlight Mead’s symbolic interactionism as one alternative and suggest other possibilities such as Bakhtin’s approach to dialogue, something which has been discussed elsewhere by Irving and Young (2002).
and also taken up extensively in Arnkil’s work with social workers in Nordic countries (Seikkula & Arnkil, 2006; Seikkula, Arnkil & Eriksson, 2003).

Cornett (1999) drew attention to what he believed were the philosophical underpinnings of a relational social work approach. He saw the work of Martin Buber (1970) and Otto Rank (1978) as a key starting point for relational thinking. Cornett outlined Buber’s concept of the ‘Ich und Du’ (I - Thou) relationship as fundamental to repositioning practitioner and client towards a more democratic relation. Cornett summarised this relationship as an empathic contact between two beings (I and You) distinguishing this from an ‘I - it’ relationship, in which another person was objectified.

Cornett preferred the use of ‘I - You’ to ‘I - Thou’, asserting that Buber’s words were erroneously translated. However, this is not entirely accurate. The original translation maintained an interesting distinction present in the German language. That is, if one wants to indicate in German a sense of familiarity and informality with someone, the word ‘Du’ is used for ‘you’. If not, then the more formal ‘Sie’ is utilised for ‘you’. This was once mirrored in the English use of thou (familiar) and ye(you) (formal), hence Buber’s original ‘Ich und Du’ equates to ‘I and thou’. The import of this being that the ‘Ich und Du’ relationship must be one which reduces formality and emphasises mutuality in the same way as might be experienced in informal situations in everyday life amongst family, friends or people working closely together in an atmosphere of mutual engagement.

Cornett considered that Buber and Rank pioneered thinking around mutual or co-created practices with clients, noting their influence and that of Rankian social workers on Carl Rogers humanistic psychology. For Cornett, Rank represented the first steps away from traditional assumptions of practitioner superiority in which there was a belief that the practitioner could ‘induce’ change through clever techniques or insights drawn from expert analysis. Cornett, echoing Buber, criticised a focus on technique as artificial and manipulative. Cornett was concerned that a ‘technical’ orientation conflicted
with the philosophical basis of relational work. For Cornett a relational approach could indeed involve self-disclosure, but this should arise out of the developing and evolving relationship, and was not a staged technique to be deployed by the practitioner as a means to an end.

**Relational Perspectives as Rooted in Some Early Social Work Practices**

As with Cornett, Horowitz (1998) argued that a relational basis could be identified in early social work developments, but pointed beyond Buber to social work pioneers at the end of the nineteenth and start of the twentieth century. Reflecting upon her psycho-analytic training in the 1970s, Horowitz (1998) discussed how she had to reluctantly repudiate core elements of previous social work education. Taking the example of ‘use of self’, a core learning of her social work training in the 1950s, which she argued was unacceptable within psycho-analysis then, she explained how under ‘relational psycho-analysis’ this was now encouraged again. Horowitz in embracing these new developments in psychotherapeutic approaches argued that they drew her back towards key ideas and practices from her social work training.

Horowitz believed that pioneering social workers Mary Richmond and Jane Addams were intimately concerned with how people develop through relationships and that this ‘relational’ basis of early social work has been neglected. She described how core social work interests: situation; trust and hope, which re-surfaced within the relational psycho-analytic approach, were fundamentals of early social work. Horowitz also contended that Addams and Richmond were representative of a postmodern element in early social work because they embraced a fluid view of the person.

Horowitz’s reference to these early social workers as representing a unified US social work heritage does, however, gloss over the fact that there were significant differences between Richmond’s and Addams’ approaches to social work. In fact, their early differences and later experiences of being left
behind by a psychiatric trend in US social work (Specht & Courtney, 1994) may help further our understanding of the debate around the place of psycho-analysis and psychotherapeutic thinking within a relational social work direction.

Unpicking Addams from Richmond

Richmond’s initial experience of social work was based on her role as a worker and supervisor (she was eventually director) of the Charity Organisation Society (COS) in the United States (Murdach, 2007). The COS role was one of friendly visiting among the poor which Richmond gradually developed into a framework of social casework, described by Murdach (2007) as blending a concern with personality and character with an understanding of social situations, networks and family structures.

Richmond’s own work was focussed on an approach framed around diagnosis and treatment (Richmond, 1917) tending to catalogue and classify individual problems (Specht & Courtney, 1994) in the language of the “defective or diseased organism” (Rojek, Peacock & Collins, 1988, p. 20). Whilst this might now be viewed as individualising public issues as private troubles (Mills, 1959), Richmond saw herself as occupying a middle ground in turn of the century debates around the influence of personal versus social factors. She argued that there were both personal and social causes of poverty (Richmond, 1917). She may have appeared conservative when calling for social workers to frame experiences of poverty in terms of diagnosis but she was herself severely criticised by the new ‘psychiatric’ influence on social work in the 1920s as too focussed on social issues (Specht & Courtney, 1994).

Addams did not share Richmond’s diagnostic approach. From an early age, Addams took the view that modern urban poverty was a new and distinct social phenomenon paradoxically involving social isolation within an ever increasing population (Addams, 1912). Addams developed community and group based approaches within ‘settlement houses’ based on similar approaches in the UK, where people from different social
backgrounds might mix and develop opportunities for social and cultural enrichment (Addams, 1930, p. 380). These houses, were spaces to develop a kind of mutual aid (Kropotkin, 1955) and what might now be seen as opportunities for engaging in a local situation. Addams also wrote and lectured about egalitarian and pacifist concerns, seeing social work as intrinsically connected to a broader socially progressive movement (Seigfried, 2009).

Addams criticised the COS workers as not engaging with the strengths and complex social dynamics experienced by many people moving to the growing metropolitan areas. For Addams, relationships between clients and the COS worker were liable to be oppressive (Addams, 1902). She was at times acerbic on the role of Charity Organisation Society workers. She once quipped, referring to the views of clients about COS workers,

...their (the clients) ideas of right and wrong are quite honestly outraged by the methods of these agencies. When they see the delay and caution with which relief is given, it does not appear to them a conscientious scruple, but as the cold and calculating action of a selfish man....(like) the selfish and avaricious man who is frankly "on the make". If the charity visitor is such a person, why does she pretend to like the poor?

Why does she not go into business at once? (Addams, 1902, p. 22)

Addams words a century ago resonate with the concerns of later social workers confronted by burgeoning ‘social work business’ environments, and portend increasingly conditional and managed relationships (Harris, 2003; Specht & Courtney, 1994). Concern over the disappearance of mutuality can be framed in terms of the social worker seeking to provide support whilst simultaneously engaging in a potentially oppressive relationship. Addams’ philosophy of ‘practice as a form of democracy’ (Stivers, 2009) has particular relevance for understanding the limits of relationships which focus on the individualising encounter in the service system. For Addams, social work failed where it was detached from everyday life in the community (Seigfried, 2009), so grounding practice in a better understanding and experience of the client’s community network was seen as essential to helping people with everyday life situations.
Entering the Network: Looking at Relations Beyond a Therapeutic Relationship.

A tradition drawing on Addams’ community orientation can be traced which stresses the social worker’s direct engagement with a network of relations. Pozzuto, Arnd-Caddigan and Averett (2006) connected relational social work to community network oriented practices rather than the relational psychoanalytic tradition. “Social work in the network” (Whittington, 1983, p. 275) has developed both as a practical application of basic network analysis to identify options to help clients, as well as a way of reflecting on how the social service engagement itself exists within a community context (Bott, 2001; Seed, 1990). Whilst, network problem solving models were evident in early systems thinking in social work (Pincus & Minahan, 1974), attention to the complexity of the community context has encouraged more circumspect and strengths oriented approaches. These have focussed on how social workers can encourage creativity within dynamic networks rather than seek to manage or direct them (Smale, 1995; Trevillion, 1999, 2000).

Folgheraiter (2004, 2007, 2012) outlined this network dynamism in terms of how networks participate in how problems (or strengths) are defined and what possible solutions or directions can emerge. He argued that social work interventions, particularly in powerful social services, offer an opportunity to address suffering and distress, but that the practical intervention of a social worker in the social service context constantly threatens to reduce the client’s real life situation in meaning and complexity. To address this problem, Folgheraiter (2004) argued that social workers must develop their capacity to recognise and guide elements of a broader helping network towards greater mutual understanding and mutual aid, and avert or mitigate harmful aspects of network involvement. Folgheraiter used the image of a ‘margin of freedom’ to invoke the struggle for a space where organisations might be open to engagement with the broader lived experience of clients. However, he was critical of social workers becoming captured by therapeutic relationship-based
approaches which idealised the worker’s empathy with the client in a closed therapeutic space.

Freedberg (2007) has discussed similar concerns, framing empathy as a relational phenomenon, not a discrete attribute which the social worker can bring to bear in a therapeutic relationship, but as a property which emerges according to the connections between the practice relationship and lived experience. Some, therapeutic relational proponents have emphasised aspects of worker self-discovery through learning about the client’s network and lived experience, where discovering things through the client’s world is linked to progressing empathy and authentic insight (Ganzer, 2007). Vinjamuri, (2014) highlights this in terms of multicultural settings, outlining how relational empathy may arise from awareness of a lack of understanding and an openness to freeing oneself from expert assumptions and to learning from clients.

Furlong (2008, 2013) has discussed this issue in terms of the danger of therapeutic interventions ignoring clients’ networks (and everyday lives) and idealising the therapeutic encounter. Furlong argued for going beyond a ‘relationship based’ focus on the practitioner-client relationship.

the crucial site is understood to be the non-clinical world of everyday life.
What is central here is the day to day social world of the client, the place where there are better or worse interactions and social relations.

Furlong (2013, p 5)

A focus on orienting the social worker within a community network was evident in Brun and Rapp’s (2001) development of strengths based case management and in directions around strengths based case and service coordination (McCashen, 2005). Interest in facilitating better communication across services and informal helping networks has been linked to creative and anti-oppressive attempts at dialogue (Seikkula & Arnkil 2006) and to reframing social workers roles in terms of the guidance they might provide in constrictive and complicated organisational and network contexts (Folgheraiter, 2012).
However, interest in coordinating or managing engagement with multiple services has also been associated with a techno-managerial promise of rationalising service provision, where practice involves a ‘sell’ of available services to a consumer (Neugeboren, 1996) and is understood in terms of resource utilisation (Provan, Sebastian, & Brinton Milward, 1996). This direction has been criticised for oversimplifying network engagement and missing connections between individual needs and community deficits (Allen, 2012; Folgheraiter, 2004). The potential for intrusion by workers involved in regulating clients lives more extensively (Maron, 2014) has created particular tensions for social workers in potentially oppressive roles who question being drawn into monitoring and managing clients, but fear losing their relevance in increasingly managed organisational contexts (Hart, 2013, McDonald & Chenoweth, 2009).

Relational Tensions and Challenges for Relationships in Social Work and Human Services

I have painted a picture drawing on ‘practice experience’ of social work in trouble. By ‘trouble’ I mean that social work has to some degree lost its direction in inevitably being caught up with the bureaucratisation of its functions, roles and responsibilities. Also that its main role of working to effect change with individuals in their immediate and wider contexts has been waylaid to some degree. (Brown, 2008, p. 273)

Concerns around the whittling away of social work into task management (Lymbery, 2013) and the emergence of non social work roles focussed on motivating individuals within an uncritical framework of free choice and market mechanisms (Maron, 2014) can paint a picture of social workers left with little room to relate (Rogowski, 2010). A McDonaldisation of social work has been linked to increased task based and repetitive process oriented roles, and a focus on piecemeal interventions which fail to engage with complexity (Dustin, 2007). Tensions in late modern human and social service
contexts may even conspire to cast doubt over any attempts to work through relationships. Folgheraiter (2004) has argued that many social work roles no longer embrace social work as they have abandoned concern for the broader relational aspects which inform the service encounter. However, he has also suggested that developing awareness of the social service intervention as a social construct can help social workers understand and influence a reconstruction of the social service interaction. This may even be possible in constrictive contexts, particularly by drawing connections between the formal and informal network players who surround practice situations and by enhancing the voices and input of less powerful actors in the network (Strier & Binyamin, 2013).

Tensions around the possibility of relational work have led to a focus on how and whether social workers’ attempts to develop supportive relationships can be influential in organisational environments through challenging assumptions, imagining alternatives and providing opportunities for reflection on past practices (Lymbery, 2013; Ruch, Turney & Ward, 2010; Murphy, Duggan & Joseph, 2013). Despite the promise of improved dialogue in services where social workers develop connectedness to clients (O’Leary, Tsui & Ruch, 2013; Reimer, 2014), possibilities for collaboration may be hampered by entrenched network histories and organisational patterns which create tension for workers who seek to develop more supportive relationships (Coy, 2008).

Kristiansen (2007) has highlighted this difficulty around co-production approaches and emphasised the need for organisations to embrace a democratic philosophy in order to integrate knowledge derived from relationships. The possibility that organisational relationships are central to high performance has been suggested in studies of complex organisational contexts (Hoffer Gittell & Douglass, 2012; Hoffer Gittell, Seidner & Wimbush, 2010) and social work practice (Broadhurst & Mason, 2014). The notions of polyphony (multiple voices) and isomorphism (Seikkula & Arnikil, 2006) or a parallel shaping at different levels of organisational practice are helpful in conceptualising this and are evident in strengths based literature, where values and attitudes across
different organisational levels are seen as primary drivers of outcomes for human situations (McCashen, 2005 p.15). McCashen uses the metaphor of colonisation to describe the challenges faced in reforming relationships when workers in social service settings have experienced a sense of powerlessness. This suggests that research into reform of organisational practices should be particularly attentive to how policy changes are experienced across multiple layers: how clients experience new interactions; how workers in different roles are supported or hindered in new relationships; and how managers are involved in changes.

Revisiting Relationships in Centrelink

As detailed in the previous Chapter, the Australian government’s interest in reforming the social security environment has been a recurrent theme since it morphed the Department of Social Security into a ‘customer service’ agency (Centrelink) in the late 1990s. Relationships were initially highlighted as central to the success or failure of Centrelink, particularly through ‘one to one’ customer service (Vardon, 2000a, 2000b; Yeatman 2009). The early development of Centrelink, whilst initially trumpeting a new, customer service relationship, expanded the role of customer service workers outside of the customer paradigm to include situations where vulnerable people faced crises or overwhelming personal issues or equally confronting punitive organisational measures. This was found to be challenging for workers and customers, particularly through requirements for more intense interactions within welfare reform activation (Howard, 2006), and the provision of personal advice to targeted groups of customers (Blaxland, 2008).

Some historical characterisations of Centrelink have focused on how relationships in this environment have been particularly complicated, gone beyond the realms of ‘customer service’, and involved stigma and a silencing of the voices of people seeking support, particularly people whose broader support network is fragile, and who may struggle to make themselves heard and find room to relate (Hartman & Darab, 2006; Murphy et al., 2011). Relational complexity has led to proposals for social workers to be at the centre of relationships with people who may be vulnerable in their interactions with
Centrelink (Mendes, Waugh and Flynn, 2013). Recently, Mason and others (2014) have discussed how the delivery of social security itself effects recipients’ wellbeing, suggesting that confidence in the welfare system and personal experiences of service relationships and actions are central to capability development, and highlighting the need for social work and supportive interventions.

In the international context, Australia is unusual in that it offers access to social workers within the social security system itself, and as such, social workers are unusually placed (organisationally) to influence and guide the actions of fellow workers and managers as they deliver social security and associated services. Whilst some countries, such as the Netherlands, operate social workers in services on the boundary of social security, this does not provide a suitable comparison with the situation in Australia. However, it does provide an example of how social workers can influence aspects such as conditionality through humanising relationships at the frontline.

Tonkens and Verplanke (2013) described experiences at the boundary of the Dutch social security system where social workers in community based teams have helped recover and restore service provision to so called ‘multi-problem families’ after administrative social security failures. This operated through an assertive outreach approach whereby social workers engaged in community settings with people who had been failed by more formal organisational interactions. The role of social workers in improving the dialogue between the client and workers or systems they engaged with was found to fulfill an ‘anti-oppressive’ function, restoring benefits and encouraging better understanding of people’s needs as impacted by agency (mis)understandings.

In Finland, Seikkula and Arnkil (2006, p.27.) have described the benefits of multi-agency dialogue in terms of overcoming “multi-agency muddles”. Finnish researcher Tom Arnkil has focussed on how service approaches could create a more active role for clients in dialogue with the service network (Seikkula & Arnkil, 2006). An active client in the Australian social security context has been largely understood as obligations a client must do at the
request of the service agency. From Arnkil’s dialogical perspective, the active client idea is about allowing clients to be more independent and more vocal in helping services to relate better to them and understand what would work for them. Giving attention to voices obscured in standard service provision is conceptualized as a way of restoring connectedness through dialogue, even in highly regulating public human services (Seikkula & Arnkil, 2006). From this perspective, whilst human services may appear to desire tighter, more simplistic relationships, they can then suffer from a lack of connectedness. In this sense they can (simultaneously) desire more meaningful relationships which can (re)engage marginalised people.

Social workers within Centrelink have experienced their own challenges and possibilities for marginalisation (Hart, 2013; McDonald & Chenoweth, 2009) as well as opportunities to be at the centre of more supportive directions such as international family support work (Manning et al., 2006) and supporting people impacted by local and national disasters (Hall & Scheltens, 2005). Despite criticism discussed in the previous Chapter of customer service workers pursuing simplistic ‘personalised’ relationships which process and dehumanise clients or obscure a broader web of social relationships, a number of alternative examples were also apparent. In these initiatives, social workers had taken a lead or had been drawn upon in developing more complex relationships and enhancing relational aspects of service provision. For example, working more supportively with people struggling with an unemployment compliance framework oriented around punitive measures, and coaching customer service staff to be more aware of and sensitive to factors which might contribute to a perception of ‘failure’ (Diaz, 2008).

Relational Turns and Social (In)Security

Such directions place social workers in the middle of concerns discussed internationally around the individualizing of social security and the processing of income support/social security recipients in terms of failure and market uselessness (Bauman 1998; van Berkel & Valkenburg, 2007; Brodkin, 2013). These include concerns that frontline workers label and treat people according
to the individual returns they provide in the organisational context (Davidson, 2011; van Berkel, 2014; Rees, Whitworth & Carter, 2014) and that personalised service relationships can be a vehicle for prejudice, dehumanisation and administrative exclusion rather than support (Brodkin, 2013; Brodkin & Majmundar, 2010).

Valkenburg (2007, p. 37) framed the challenges of ‘making it personal’ in terms of the question, “who is in charge?” (and whose interests would be served in frontline relationships). This challenge speaks to the broader concern in social service agencies discussed in this Chapter, that people not be silenced and excluded or human situations and social relationships glossed over (Rogowski, 2010). Whilst research around administrative exclusion in social security settings has stressed the failures of relationships at the frontline (Brodkin, 2013; Howard, 2012; Fuertes & Lindsay, 2015), the possibility of social workers influencing alternative experiences has been less well considered.

Although social workers represent only a small segment of the Centrelink workforce, their existence within Centrelink invokes the promise of a dynamic professional role providing guidance around developing both formal and ‘informal’ relations (Parton & O’Byrne, 2000) and ‘lubricating’ organisational interactions (Folgheraiter, 2007 p. 270). The potential for improving organisational and community network cooperation and expanding opportunities for supportive service provision was central to recent directions in Centrelink to reform frontline service to recognise strengths (McCashen, 2005) and build relationships guided by social workers (Australian Department of Human Services, 2013b). The next Chapter considers in more detail some small scale programs which were direct precursors to widespread reforms, and help illuminate their development and possible complications.

Conclusion

This Chapter has explored a struggle around relational social work in human services, highlighting tension between oppressive experiences and expectations of situational, humanising support. A central point of concern for
social work, if it is to retain some connection to its historical identification as a humane societal practice, is the opportunity for social workers to influence and guide others in organisational settings even where, and perhaps especially where, these are constrictive.

Centrelink’s position, as a human service provider and social security service employing social workers provides an unusual but suggestive context for understanding struggles around developing relationships and the scope for social workers to guide and influence the human service context. Recent widespread reform attempts in Centrelink involved significant complications and opportunities in this regard. The following Chapters explore these opportunities and complications, initially in terms of small scale reforms and then in terms of a broader reform attempt.
Statement of contribution to co-authored published paper.

Chapter Four is a co-authored paper. The bibliographic details for the co-authored paper, including all authors, are:


My contribution to the paper involved: lead author responsible for conceptualisation, categorisation of the data into a usable format, analysis of data, and write up of paper.

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The following paper explores small scale relational developments which preceded the promise of enhanced service (rolled out in late 2011). It looks in detail at how social workers were involved with customer service workers and how attempts to engage supportively formed the basis of a new approach to service provision with people with significant issues, such as mental health, domestic violence and family breakdown in some local Centrelink sites and communities.

Possibilities for grounding frontline service in the realities of client and community experiences are highlighted, as is the contrast between distressing, dehumanising encounters and a more humanising, cooperative approach. The paper helps situate broader reforms which are the focus of this thesis, and leads into the central cases studied in subsequent Chapters.
Chapter Four
Mutual Benefits: Developing Relational Service Approaches
Within Centrelink

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Abstract
The machinery of income support can have considerable influence in people’s lives, creating opportunities for social work but also tensions: access to vulnerable people, but not always on their terms. This paper argues that the challenge to social work is about more than holding on to professional discretion. It considers how social workers can influence service delivery approaches to work more relationally, pursuing a more equal involvement of clients, and recognising the complex interactive context of social and community life. The authors trace the development of such an approach within the Australian Government human services delivery agency Centrelink in Logan, Queensland, and briefly consider a parallel innovation in Newcastle, New South Wales. The authors suggest that grounding a large institutional social service agency in the realities of client and community experiences has mutual benefits, creating a more humanising, cooperative space, and displacing inefficient and sometimes tragic cycles of misunderstanding, confrontation, and disconnection.

Keywords: Human Services; Social Inclusion; Strengths-based Approaches; Relational Social Work; Early Intervention

One of the securities of democracy, in the words of pioneering social worker Jane Addams (1902), is “the curious sense which comes to us from time to time, that we belong to the whole, that a certain basic wellbeing can never be taken away from us whatever the turn of fortune” (p. 276). In Australia, people who encounter misfortune or struggle on an ongoing basis to achieve basic wellbeing often seek some kind of security through Centrelink. Centrelink is on one level, a transactional, government institution dealing with thousands of
social security claims and enquiries on a daily basis. On another level, it is an interface to which people bring their vulnerabilities and sometimes tragedies in the process of looking for help. Centrelink staff encounter stories of people who are struggling with complex difficulties, such as long-term unemployment, incapacity, undervalued caring roles, histories of violence, abuse, homelessness, and mental health issues. In this environment, to paraphrase Mills (1959), “personal troubles” and “public issues” meet.

The nature of this meeting is critical to attune social welfare to peoples’ needs, particularly with marginalised or vulnerable people whose “natural helping networks” (Folgheraiter, 2004, p. 166) may be fragile. Centrelink deals with many people who may be disengaged from other services or connections (Grace, Batterham, & Cornell, 2008; Hall & Scheltens, 2005; Institute of Child Protection Studies, 2009; Australian Social Inclusion Unit, 2009). This creates possibilities for it to play a role in early intervention or reconnection, but it also carries the danger, common to all powerful institutions, of dominating clients (Coy, 2008; Dominelli, 2002) or replicating experiences of prior marginalisation (Pozzuto, Arnd-Caddigan, & Averett, 2009).

Centrelink has been criticised as punitive and directive in its involvement with vulnerable people, particularly in regard to jobseekers (Marston & McDonald, 2008), people with mental health problems (Commonwealth Ombudsman, 2010), and the recent Northern Territory Intervention (Atkinson, Taylor, & Walter, 2010; Hill & Thompson, 2009). McDonald and Chenoweth (2009) have argued that the shift of Centrelink, along with many other welfare institutions influenced by new public management, to a transactional business setting, has tended to limit the scope of engagements with vulnerable people. Within this setting, even social workers, who usually have more license for in-depth contacts than other staff, can fall into “informational” (Parton, 2008) processes oriented around cataloguing problems (Dearman, 2005) and be challenged in their exercise of professional discretion (McDonald & Marston, 2006).
For social workers, whose claims to legitimacy are intertwined with the actions of their agency, these criticisms indicate a broader concern than maintaining their professional discretion. If a key to engaging vulnerable people is for a service to be perceived as “humanising” (Institute of Child Protection Studies, 2009, p. 6), social workers may need to influence the service delivery experience as a whole to better accommodate and respect the reality of people’s lived experience. A more relationally-oriented service approach might deliver in Folgheraiter’s (2004) words, “a margin of freedom in the interaction between organisation and... the real problems of people in flesh and blood” (p. 144).

This paper utilises a case study method, exploring alternative service delivery within Centrelink, with a focus on the Centrelink SaiL (Shared Assessments in Logan) initiative and a subsequent discussion of the Newcastle Community Support Unit (CSU). The paper focuses on the development of SaiL as an alternate service approach over the last two years.

Method

Data Sources

The research draws on a mix of qualitative and quantitative data. Qualitative data were gathered through: participant observation; reflections from several small forums with 15 Centrelink clients and similar forums with local workers; individual and group discussions with SaiL workers; management and supervision discussions; and client case studies vignettes. A thematic analysis is provided, which draws on several client case study vignettes with reference to quantitative data around new connections for clients. Anonymised quantitative data around client outcomes were obtained from SaiL’s computer database. Ethics approval for this research was obtained through the Families Social Inclusion and New Policy (FSINP) branch of Centrelink.

A Polyphonic Narrative

In exploring how things are and how things could be different for marginalised
people dealing with Centrelink, the paper pursues a polyphonic narrative in which the multiple voices of practitioners, clients, and managers are considered against theoretical insights from recent literature. Attitudes, views, and experiences around “normal” service delivery are overlaid with descriptions of experiences from the altered service model. Insights into implications for practice are made, following consideration of the Newcastle CSU as a parallel program. Reflections on the CSU draw on participant observation, notes from supervision, and discussions with CSU workers, as well as a detailed client case study. All client case study vignettes were constructed in consultation with clients, who were given the opportunity to provide criticism and corrections. Names and identifying details have been changed.

The first named author, as a Centrelink “insider” involved with SaiL and the CSU, has attempted to mitigate any loss of critical distance (Padgett, 1998) and has enriched the polyphonic process through a process of reflection and supervision undertaken with two “outsider” academics over the past 12 months.

Setting SaiL

Social work practice approaches associated with a more democratic relationship with clients have attracted interest within Centrelink over recent years. Interest in strengths-based, solution-focused, and narrative approaches (Dalyell, 2008; Hall & Davie, 2009; Young, Lonne, Hall, & Scheltens, 2004) echoes Parton and O’Byrne’s (2000) call for innovation in institutional social work practice in the United Kingdom. There are also parallels in recent Australian Government human services directions that focus on inclusion (Australian Social Inclusion Unit, 2009) and democratic approaches (Advisory Group on Reform of Australian Government Administration, 2010)
A number of Centrelink “place-based” initiatives, aimed at marginalised communities, have taken shape over the last two years. These initiatives have taken different forms in a number of locations across Australia. The exact nature of each initiative was to be guided by local circumstances through consultations and service designs constructed on the ground in each location (Darcy & Gwyther, 2010). This approach is consistent with Australian Government directions on social inclusion (Australian Social Inclusion Unit, 2009).

In one of these locations, Logan in south east Queensland, social workers have worked closely with the FSINP branch of Centrelink as well as senior area and national executives to develop SaiL, a service approach influenced by a relational understanding of working with vulnerable people. Located between Brisbane and the Gold Coast, Logan was identified as an area of significant disadvantage through a range of data (Centrelink, 2009a). The first step towards developing an alternate way Centrelink might work in Logan involved discussions between the FSINP branch, Social Work Service, and Area Executive (responsible for Logan offices). There was a combined commitment to a local consultative process. Consultations with staff, clients, and agencies in Logan produced a number of ideas for change.

Talking With Clients and Staff

Discussion with Centrelink staff (a mix of customer service, social workers, team leaders, specialists, and managers) revealed a concern that they were regularly dealing with what they referred to as “challenging” or “difficult” people presenting at reception with ongoing complex life situations. These people were difficult to engage with or refer to other help in the community. This affected worker wellbeing, as staff were distressed when they were unable to help, or were worried about customer aggression. Most staff, including social workers, felt they had limited time to spend with some clients who would not be helped elsewhere. Staff reported seeing people repeatedly who, in the words
of one staff member, seemed to be in a “never-ending crisis”. The view that these clients’ lives seemed “chaotic” was commonly held and staff felt it was not easy to refer clients to other agencies as helping services did not always respond or clients did not pursue referrals. People with mental health issues were seen, in line with later research, as consistently “falling through the cracks” (Commonwealth Ombudsman, 2010). The social workers in the group noted that people experiencing or fleeing domestic violence (Centrelink Social Work Information Database, 2008) and young people leaving State care were over-represented in the region (Hall & Davie, 2009).

Clients disengaging from help but regularly appearing in Centrelink were a source of frustration for staff. People may have dropped out of their mental health treatment, counselling support, and relationships with family or friends, but they continued to visit Centrelink.

“Centrelink keeps secrets”

Frustration was a key theme in discussions within small groups of local Centrelink clients. These were run with the support of local nongovernment organisations (NGOs). Participants were drawn from the key marginal groups identified through the Logan staff consultation. All had experienced State care, domestic violence, or serious mental health issues. Discussions looked at what was, or was not, helpful in interactions with Centrelink and what changes they might recommend. These were informal sessions in which clients could share experiences with the knowledge that these might help inform service delivery but would be treated anonymously. Subsequent reflective discussion within the local social work team led to a collation of key themes, which were presented to the Centrelink Network Operational Executive (Hall & Davie, 2009).

Given that staff spoke of having insufficient time, it is perhaps not surprising that a key theme for clients was “more time to talk” when dealing with important issues. However, the focus of this desired time was somewhat different to what might have been underlying staff views. Staff tended to take
the view that more time would allow for a focus on problems and appropriate referrals. Clients, on the other hand, felt more time was linked to a sense of being shown respect and trust. Some clients wanted more time to have payment issues explained, but also to have their own circumstances listened to. This is consistent with Serr’s (2006) findings that Centrelink clients who experienced difficulties associated with homelessness, wanted more “responsive and caring” (p. 80) approaches from Centrelink.

Clients did not see themselves as “challenging” but felt their “payment problems” often unearthed sensitive issues. In this sense, a more positive engagement that acknowledged their strengths in coping with difficult circumstances was desired. Clients did not appear to be looking for dependent relationships with workers. In the words of one participant, they did not want “special treatment all the time”, but a recognition that they sometimes needed extra consideration. Centrelink was seen by clients as a point of contact when changes occurred because of the importance of stable income. It was seen as a place where one could “just turn up”. It was in the words of one participant, “neutral”, as it was not associated with, for example, mental illness.

A lack of trust was an underlying issue that was encapsulated by one young person (to significant head nodding around the room) in the statement “Centrelink keeps secrets”. For some clients, there was an underlying sense of mistrust and some fear that payments, which were essential, might be held up. Mistrust was also evident within staff attitudes: it is worth noting that the notion of the “difficult” and sometimes aggressive client was a theme that emerged with staff. To rephrase Thomas Jefferson’s famous words, there appeared to be elements of both a people’s fear of government and a government fear of the people.

Talking with other agencies

Carson and Kerr (2005) argued for the importance of “informal networks” (p. 172) in community collaboration. In talking with community
agencies in Logan, Centrelink had the benefit of having already established considerable informal relationships in Logan over the previous year through an area focus on improving community connections.

A broad range of NGOs and other government agencies were consulted. In some cases, this involved discussions around how Centrelink might work better across the sector through participating in more coordinated planning. In others, it involved bilateral discussions around how to better work together between agencies. Representation on the governance committee of a Logan based, State government social-inclusion pilot project created closer connections with a range of state government oriented agencies.

Agencies were hopeful that any new Centrelink approach would show more capacity to introduce flexibility on a case-by-case basis for vulnerable clients. Agency workers were keen to have clearer relationships with key Centrelink “fixers” for particularly challenging situations. One agency expressed a concern that Centrelink not provide “just another co-ordinator” but that it make some tangible addition to the actual service system in Logan.

**Initiating a New Service Approach: SaiL**

A small team of staff made up of social workers and senior customer service advisors (SCSAs) were brought together to offer help to disconnected people who attend two Centrelink sites in Logan. Having operated for almost two years, this team’s focus was on people without significant connections in the community who are experiencing ongoing difficulties due to domestic violence, mental health issues, or difficulties after transitioning from care. The intake process was voluntary and clients were often multiply disadvantaged (e.g., domestic violence and care history).

The focus of SCSAs is primarily on developing positive relationships with clients around payments but also to develop trust and in many cases connect clients immediately to services in the community where this is possible. In some instances, clients develop a connection with SCSAs but are not looking for more
intense support from the social worker. In such cases the social worker supports and advises the SCSAs. For some clients, getting help to access another service such as housing, transport, or counselling is a solution, but for many people in complex situations, options are not available or are not what a client needs or wants. A key finding of SaiL has been that many clients did not want help around what might appear the most obvious servicing option. In this sense, the notion of risk categories, such as mental health or domestic violence, while underlying aspects of interaction where there have been concerns around immediate harm, have also to be put aside at times so they do not obscure a more complex understanding of the client’s world.

SCSAs are coached by social workers and participate in reflective team discussions led by a senior social worker. The gradual and consistent development of SCSA skill through close proximity and open group conversations is a critical element of SaiL and would be a significant consideration in any mainstreaming or adoption of this approach elsewhere. It is also noteworthy that SCSAs in turn bring considerable life experience and other skills to team reflections and when given encouragement and scope to explore this, can enhance group learning as well.

**A relational framework**

The team operates within an overarching relational framework. It could be said that social work is an inherently relational activity, interested in relationships and connections between people. This was evident in some of social work’s modern historical origins assisting people where social relations were fragmented by massive industrial and demographic changes at the end of the 19th century, but it has been less evident with the emergence of more individualising paradigms (Horowitz, 1998; Jordan, 2007; Murdach, 2007; Specht & Courtney, 1994).

Over the last decade or so, the term “relational” has become associated with social work approaches that foster a more mutual engagement in therapeutic
(Freedberg, 2007; Zindel, 2001) and psychoanalytic settings (Ornstein & Ganzar, 2005), a more sophisticated approach to networking (Folgheraiter, 2004; Pozzuto et al., 2009), and complex cross-agency casework (Keene, 2001). Despite their disparate practice contexts, relational approaches share an interest in participatory, collaborative frameworks and emphasise the importance of understanding the client’s relationship to the helper(s): how does a client relate to anticipated assistance and how does the service approach to available help influence clients’ choices? This differs from traditional helping approaches that, as Folgheraiter (2004) argued, tend to obscure the lively ways in which problems are constructed and how priorities are determined according to how services interact with and view clients. In this sense, a relational framework for helping involves recognising the role that clients and workers (or networks) play in developing outcomes interactively. This entails workers and clients developing a shared picture of complex social reality. Within the SaiL framework this has been operationalised in terms of a shared understanding of goals, strengths, needs, and interests. Social workers within the team work with customers who choose to undertake a “shared assessment” aimed at identifying and developing a shared understanding of resources and strengths. The shared assessment involves a strengths-based conversation (McCashen, 2005) and incorporates narrative and visual tools developed at a local level (Dalyell, 2008).

A peculiarity of SaiL is that it pursues a relational approach within an individual practice and a networking framework. Guiding networks towards a greater sense of openness to clients needs is a “macro” task of relational social work in SaiL. Over time, via modelling, strengths work, and increased trust developed in the “micro” world of the shared assessment and in positive and secure relationships with SCSAs, clients also take charge of developing and negotiating their own connections. In this sense, SaiL might be described as an interim connection that facilitates change at micro and macro levels. Clients move on from their relationship with SaiL after three to six months.
(often earlier), at a stage when most have made two to three other sustained connections.

In responding to clients, SaiL workers continually reflect on their own role and impact on clients, particularly how the structures and expectations of their institutional setting impact on the client’s ability to relate. In the early stages of SaiL it was found that while clients often “fail” to attend appointments they do often “show up” at other times. Rather than interpret this as chaotic or dysfunctional behaviour, SaiL workers came to understand how clients were often managing well within complex circumstances, and that the agency needed to be more flexible around planning contacts that suit the circumstances of clients. Over time, SaiL workers have expressed the view that clients appreciate this consideration and reciprocate by being more respectful and understanding of the workers too.

**Mutual understanding as anti-oppressive**

This focus on mutual understanding involves elements of an anti-oppressive approach (Dominelli, 2002). Such mutuality is not simply a personal or professional quality. The SaiL approach structures regular critical reflection sessions (for SCSAs and social workers), as well as regular feedback from clients. Strier and Binyamin (2010) in articulating the nature of anti-oppressive services remarked that “forging of a relationship based on trust and intimacy... [diminishes] the social isolation of clients and the professional isolation of workers” (p. 1919). SaiL workers consistently report high levels of satisfaction in their work, despite dealing with many of the clients whom their colleagues have previously identified as “difficult” and “challenging”. In discussions with SaiL workers around this, they commonly relate experiences prior to SaiL where they experienced frustration with too rigid processes, yet were concerned that they not “rock the boat” in trying to help people outside of those tight limits. Somewhat like Pirandello’s hero Gori, struggling in frustration
to help, yet embarrassed at tearing the formal attire that restrains his compassion (Pirandello, 1961).

Extra time and an alternative focus has given workers the opportunity to create some mainstream service enhancements. For example, an official Centrelink booklet was coproduced with young care leavers to give advice to young people leaving care in Queensland to improve their understanding of options and pathways. The same client feedback process led to the creation of new avenues to prove identity to make dealing with Centrelink and other departments less complicated, as well as some new referral pathways with the Queensland State Government.

At a community level, SaiL has drawn together disparate strategic and operational players in forums that have mingled people from diverse agencies including the Prime Minister’s Social Inclusion Unit, State and Commonwealth government departments, and local NGOs.

Figure 1. New connections sustained by SaiL clients.

**Client Connections**

A total of 212 SaiL clients have been involved in shared assessments, with approximately 40 of these involved in SaiL at time of writing. Clients were all
multiply disadvantaged: reliant on income support, disconnected from other services in the community, and undergoing difficulties related to experiences of domestic violence, mental health issues, or histories of care. Workers reported that clients typically had little or no supportive network. Figure 1 represents new connections that clients made and fed back to SaiL workers as valuable. These data was collected as part of ongoing feedback and consultation that SaiL workers regularly undertake.

Figure 2. Work, education, and training outcomes by SaiL clients. Source: SaiL Database, October 2010, Centrelink, Woodridge.

Outcomes in Figure 2 reflect client self-reporting of achievement and encompass both market inclusion (such as some paid work) as well as more generic inclusion (such as voluntary work, education, and personal development activities).
Findings and Discussion

I can actually go out in society now and be not afraid to say what I think or how I feel...... I’m more positive and I’m more... trusting.

(SaiL client, Centrelink, 2009b)

Feeling connected to community and having someone to turn to when there are serious concerns in their lives are basic omissions for some people who deal with Centrelink (Grace et al., 2008). A failure of Centrelink to engage at a meaningful level is often not offset by care from another network player. Creating new connections can take time but helping develop a client’s trust and ability to participate can create benefits for the client and the community.

Vignette 1

Katy had a history of anxiety and had been isolated from family and friends through past abuse and ongoing domestic violence. She struggled to communicate her needs to service providers and had been living in a tin shed for about a year. She was referred to the social worker in SaiL after a discussion concerning her Centrelink payments. The social worker worked with Katy around her previous experiences of accessing help and her current options. The shared planning process explored Katy’s priorities, mapping strengths and resources, and encouraging her in areas where she could develop a sense of achievement. The social worker assisted Katy to access more suitable housing and Katy sought and accessed other personal support for herself and chose to participate in some community activities. Katy has since started significant volunteer work helping people experiencing serious illness.

Closer relationships between Centrelink staff and other agencies have enabled workers to constructively resolve problems that participants have experienced in sustaining connections (Centrelink, 2009a). This has also occurred directly through SaiL supporting and strengthening the skills and confidence of clients to clarify their needs and concerns.

Vignette 2

Dianne had been extremely isolated for a number of years and had significant physical and mental health issues. She rarely left her house,
used a wheelchair, and had disengaged from support services. She had only one social contact, an elderly lady who was quite frail herself. Dianneshowed an interest in meeting the SaiL social worker during a contact around the Disability Support Pension. Subsequent meetings with the social worker occurred at Centrelink and also at Dianne’s home. These focussed on increasing Dianne’s supportive network as well as developing her interest in community activities. Dianne reported that building her sense of clarity and confidence around what she could do well was particularly helpful. As Dianne developed confidence she began to advocate for and access support of her own accord. Dianne reengaged with mental health counselling and became involved with a consumer feedback group. She has since gone on to undertake administrative work for a local charity.

When an institution has expectations around limiting or speeding up transactions (Garrett, 2003), there is a tendency to focus on “risk”, dysfunction, and control (Webb, 2006). The challenge here is that vulnerable people can themselves be seen as “risky”, the bearers of individualised problems (Pollack, 2010), with limited capacity to determine their own directions. For example, Dianne was described within the Disability Support Pension framework as having “very limited capacity”. If services become geared to managing clients rather than looking at more flexible options or exploring the client’s own perceptions (Broadhurst, Hall, Wastell, White, & Pithouse, 2010; Harris, 2003) opportunities to activate a clients own potential are missed. When clients are given more appropriate opportunities, (which often involves some flexibility on behalf of service providers), their strengths appear more evident. Positive SaiL experiences with clients previously labelled as “challenging” suggest that even client histories of resistance, rebellion, or avoidance can indicate strengths, but that these are not recognised until a degree of organisational flexibility is exercised (Garcia & McDowell, 2010; Guo & Tsui, 2010).

Vignette 3

Wayne, a young man in receipt of Youth Allowance, had experienced mental health issues including depression. He reported very low self-esteem and had limited supportive networks. He was no longer in school, having left after experiencing trauma there. Wayne found it difficult not to think
negatively given his experiences. In thinking about accessing education courses and voluntary programs he tended to become stuck looking at barriers and what he was not able to do.

Wayne made a strong connection with the SaiL SCSA who initially assisted him by fixing problems concerning his payments, which would have resulted in significant hardship for Wayne. The SCSA helped Wayne construct an alternative plan that met his Centrelink requirements but acknowledged Wayne’s individual circumstances. Based on the trust established, Wayne kept in touch with the SCSA over several weeks. The social worker did not work directly with Wayne, but gave advice and support to the SCSA.

Utilising his connection to Wayne, the SCSA was able to pursue several conversations with Wayne about goals and interests and what might be useful in overcoming obstacles that Wayne encountered. In spite of past experiences, Wayne revealed a strong commitment to complete his final years of high school and was hopeful of doing work experience or voluntary work. After several contacts with the SCSA, Wayne did connect to an alternative education provider where he could complete school and to a local Youth Organisation for other support. Wayne also investigated one of the programs he had previously thought he was not eligible for and negotiated support from another agency so that he could participate in that program.

It is important to engage with clients around issues they value. These often include work and training interests but not exclusively. Including broader interests can help develop other networks and connections that sometimes (ironically) lead to work or training. SaiL is not oriented towards employment outcomes, and indications in Figure 2 should not be read in a “linear” sense (Poulter, 2006, p. 332), but as outcomes that have developed with the client. They show that connections to paid employment or education occurred for a significant set of SaiL clients “along the way”. Jones (2001) has argued that the UK focus on social exclusion was unbalanced by a “fixation with waged work” (p. 547). The idea of work as “one fundamental value” (Sawer, 2005) has tended to be influential in Australia as well. However, the social inclusion focus
in Australia, while giving central importance to paid employment, provides scope for other activities that ought to be encouraged (Australian Social Inclusion Unit, 2009). Many connections fostered through SaiL have been personal or family connections, (as Figure 1 shows), which have broad supportive value. Focussing on what works for the client has been the primary aim.

Centrelink’s access to vulnerable people underpinned the basis for improvements in service within SaiL. It is also the case that some vulnerable people struggle to access Centrelink. Some very marginalised people live with the wrong or insufficient payment and sometimes without assistance. This has been the impetus behind the Community Support Unit in Newcastle. The CSU aims to work more in the client’s world. Working within the milieu of the client is not only practical, in terms of accessing people who might not readily approach Centrelink, but it also helps break down stereotypes and norms for workers which leave “out large chunks of human reality” (Bauman, 1998, p. 84). It is, in the words of one worker, a “reality check”. Established as an out-servicing payment team around homelessness, this service has more recently included a greater involvement by social workers to assist people within their own milieu. As in Logan, customer service and social work staff work together, with the social work role more focussed on supporting the client to meet their needs within a broader helping network. This networking role can involve internal guidance within Centrelink where there are complexities around the client’s connection to payments, or interim support in the community until a client connects more adequately elsewhere. Usually it involves a mix of these two factors. The following case example demonstrates this overlap.

**Vignette 4**

Sally, who received a disability pension, was initially seen by CSU workers at a local shelter. They became aware that her payments were reducing due to a debt of several thousand dollars. The CSU customer service advisor was concerned about the correctness of this debt based on Sally’s circumstances.
He was also concerned at the impact it might have on her wellbeing. Given complexities around pursuing these issues with Sally, including past domestic violence, she was connected to the CSU social worker who arranged to meet with Sally at the shelter.

The social work involvement was undertaken as much as possible on Sally’s terms, with Sally inviting along a worker from the shelter. The trust established in this meeting facilitated the social worker maintaining contact with Sally over several weeks, even though Sally disengaged from the shelter. Throughout these contacts the social worker developed some understanding of Sally’s life-world. This was crucial in establishing a debt waiver and it also helped identify a number of areas Sally wanted to address besides the debt. She wanted to develop further living skills as in her previous relationship she was not allowed to cook or manage money and had felt isolated.

Over several weeks the social worker was able to link Sally with a service providing social activities and to a life skills program. Sally’s somewhat loose connection with a psychologist was recognised by Sally as something to be maintained more regularly. This connection also became useful as supporting evidence for a debt waiver. The social worker stepped back from involvement with Sally several weeks later after checking that Sally was happy with and sustaining her alternative connections.

In Sally’s case, the CSU assisted her with and beyond income support processes through adopting a relational approach, which helped her develop some aspects of her own helping network, oriented around her own goals. As with SaiL, there were elements of micro and macro practice. The social work contact around the debt helped Sally to explore her unique experience in a way which drew in other network players, explored other needs, and in turn helped resolve the more specific payment problem. In this way the process of more mutual engagement had clear mutual benefits, as Sally’s needs and Centrelink’s need for payment accuracy aligned.
Implications for Practice

The approaches discussed in this paper have demonstrated alternative organisational possibilities within the limits of local environments with strong management support. High levels of ongoing staff development, training, and coaching are crucial for the pursuit of such complex interactions. The use of social workers already within the organisation has supported this process and enhanced the likelihood of transferring learnings to other parts of Centrelink.

Workers have functioned without any special rules or delegations, using provisions available within mainstream policy and legislation. When something has simply not been possible for a client due to legislation or policy, there is no special discretion for workers to apply. Workers have no brokerage money or special funds, but are able to spend time with clients sharing information more clearly and sensitively. This leads to fewer misunderstandings on both sides as well as allowing for unanticipated solutions to emerge. Within the CSU this time commitment has been factored into local service funding arrangements, whereas SaiL has drawn on project funding to extend service within a highly disadvantaged area.

Allowing workers more time with clients is a key organisational challenge. Relational approaches require personal interactions and are not simplistically “efficient” in the push-button sense. On the other hand, a lack of insight into client perspectives creates unrecognised organisational costs. The story of clients becoming enmeshed in repetitive transactional processes and of their relationships with institutions becoming increasingly confrontational or ending in an abrupt disconnection is a story of costly inefficiency. Clients’ “cycling through”, disengaging from services, or not connecting at all creates negative outcomes including service recovery costs and impacts on worker well-being, which tend not to be measured. Additionally, the ripples of positive contributions that seemingly “challenging” clients can foster for themselves and their community are worthy of more attention.

Experiences from SaiL and the CSU undermine the traditional view of helping as a one-sided affair in which the costs are borne by the institution and
the benefits reaped by the client. They suggest that developing a shared, relationally-oriented framework with clients may be a mutually beneficial process that improves staff skills and knowledge and increases organisational capacity. The appeal of such increased capacity to organisational leaders and managers provides cause for optimism around developing relational approaches in the face of other managerial and punitive trends described earlier in this paper.

Conclusion

A concern for justice in a community should be, in critical part, a concern that its institutions enable and encourage us always to see, and in seeing to be responsive to the full humanity in each of our fellow human beings.

(Gaita, 1999, p. 84)

Dehumanising and alienating tendencies within welfare provision are a source of tension for social workers. This tension is sometimes understood in terms of social work needing to defend its professional capacity for discretion. Instead, the authors have considered how social workers can influence service approaches to value the needs, connections, and lived context of vulnerable people. In this space, the role of social work may be twofold: to mitigate the exclusionary tendencies that vulnerable people encounter in their lives, but also to influence their own institutional practices to account for the full humanity of people. The challenge in this is how social workers relate to, guide, and support non-social work staff, managers, and service leaders so that the institutional service experience is more closely grounded in the client's world. This paper has demonstrated how social workers have helped develop relational qualities in service provision with reference to two localised Centrelink environments. Within these environments a richer, more flexible process has emerged, which has allowed marginalised clients to overcome mistrust, develop unanticipated strengths and connections, and to represent their own needs as distinct from apparent risks.
Social work can participate more fully within future service delivery discourse through further research into relational approaches. This could consider the impact on the development of nonsocial work staff skill, knowledge, and attitudes, as well as a longitudinal understanding of the impact on clients and community of different service approaches. Understanding the complexity of social reality may help towards creating better, more inclusionary practices.

We realize, too, that social perspective and sanity of judgment come only from contact with social experience. (Addams, 1902, p. 7)

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Chapter Five
The Central Case(s) and Methodology

The Board sees promise in the model adopted in the Centrelink Place Based Services Program in Logan ...This empowering approach has been particularly successful in re engaging clients with appropriate services where they had given up seeking help due to past failures.

(Australian Social Inclusion Board, 2011, p. 42)

From Local to National Reform

Local alternative services discussed in Chapter Four progressed and received some recognition at a national level between 2009-11. In 2011, the Centrelink national policy team responsible for new service delivery projects developed an outline for more widespread reform of service delivery in line with government interest in improving service to make it more coordinated and better able to respond to the people’s needs. (Australian Department of Human Services, 2011a; Plibersek, 2010). This outline identified failings in the then standard Centrelink approach and a need to provide a more coordinated, supportive space for people to access assistance. Draft guidelines were produced which set out a trial of enhanced service and case coordination (Australian Department of Human Services, 2011a).

Three key areas of past failure identified in this document were that: standard service delivery was disconnected from local communities; Centrelink failed to engage with people who had additional needs; and Centrelink did not provide staff with flexibility and authority to deal with complex situations (Australian Department of Human Services, 2011a). A key feature of the new approach was the positioning of social workers to provide guidance and support to customer service workers, to coach and consult with them, conduct joint interviews and follow up where people accessing assistance needed more support (Australian Department of Human Services, 2011a, p.11).
This coordinated service reform was to be underpinned by new frontline interactions which recognised the strengths of customers and sought to engage in dialogue with them, in line with the place based service experiences at Logan, and referencing strengths based work by Australian social worker Wayne McCashen (2005). A draft of new processes offered a vision of a more open ended and supportive conversation between a customer service worker and person accessing Centrelink which would facilitate awareness of additional needs and options. These guidelines highlighted the voluntary nature of any additional assistance and shifted away from directive and compliance oriented interviewing (Australian Department of Human Services, 2011a).

The Central Case(s)

The current Chapter introduces the study of this more ambitious reform which lies at the centre of the thesis. This Chapter explores methodological issues and details the study design. Stake’s (2006) metaphor of the quintain, a common challenge which frames a multiplicity of cases, is used to connect this widespread reform to the thesis so far.

The quintain was defined in Chapter One in terms of attempts to engage supportively by drawing on guidance from social workers in Centrelink. In Chapter Two, a review of literature indicated a widespread challenge for engagement in Centrelink and highlighted struggles to develop more supportive alternative approaches. Chapter Three conceptualised supportive attempts with reference to a broader struggle within human services and social work. Chapter Four looked in more detail via a case review of some historical alternative service delivery approaches which were precursors to more widespread service and case coordination reform. In Chapter Five, and over the next four Chapters, that widespread reform takes centre stage.

This Chapter frames the research as developing robust knowledge through deep engagement in the case situation. As an in depth qualitative case study of implementation and progress of reform, the research was designed to
explore experiences for approximately one year with a focus on two of the earliest sites selected for reform. The Chapter outlines the case study methodology and interpretivist approach of the study, oriented to bringing together multiple perspectives. It describes methods for tracing experiences amongst different players in service encounters, referring to Howard’s (2003) landmark street level case study of Centrelink. It explains this thesis’s departure from street level bureaucracy’s focus on the individual street level worker, and its alternative focus on relationships developed in a frontline context.

The Chapter details the conduct of the study and actions to enhance both relevance and reliability of the research, feedback and reporting to participants and external audiences, including through publication. The process of multiple publications, whilst creating an unusual thesis structure was integral to developing the thesis as a living document engaged in a conversation around developments in social work and human services internationally.

**Developing Knowledge: Oppression, Dialogue and Uncertainty**

As Miles and Huberman (1994) pointed out, organisational changes do not progress like billiard balls. The gap between policy intent and actual experiences of marginalized citizens is complicated by the messy nature of real life situations (Bauman, 1998). Developing knowledge about how new relationships worked in practice and what differences emerged in the frontline context appeared central to understanding reform. In taking an approach to knowledge around this, several factors emerging from the the literature review and from reflection on historical cases were important.

First, there was a need to recognise the significance of oppression in the Centrelink context (as discussed extensively in Chapter Two). Centrelink was not a blank slate onto which new practices would be written. Reforms would be surrounded by history and other continuing and newly developing pressures. The conclusion of Chapter Two found that Centrelink offices were a potentially supportive but often oppressive setting
involving a significant power imbalance which was played out in the interaction between access to assistance and a sense of being heard. This way of thinking invoked elements of a critical perspective, given its recognition of oppression, but was grounded within a more situational critique focussed on valuing personal experience of organisational encounters. This reflected post-critical (Polanyi, 1974) and relational concerns with knowledge which is only obtainable through engagement in relationships (Arnkil, 2006; Arnkil & Seikkula, 2015; Thayer-Bacon, 2003). This perspective is particularly evident in social work interest in developing strengths in potentially oppressive organisations (Dominelli, 2002; McCashen, 2005; Strier & Binyamin, 2013) and with attempts to change organisational practices which “dehumanize and stigmatize” (Strier, 2007, pp. 861-2). With this in mind, research too needed to be open to less privileged voices (Strier & Binyamin, 2013) and engage sensitively with people as experts in their own lived experience (Bartova, 2014). In effect, it needed to link knowledge to an openness to the voices and perspectives of others and how these emerged in relationships (Ruch & Julkunen, 2016).

Second, interest in more open dialogue (in practice and research) is connected to a longstanding view that reality, rather than existing independently, is constructed within interactions in a situation (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). This frames interactions, particularly in institutional situations, as informed by group expectations and roles which constrict and also construct reality (Goffman, 1959). In conversations with the CSIRO team, we had discussions around how to conceptualise engagement in Centrelink. The view expressed by some CSIRO workers initially was to frame Centrelink interactions as providing some kind of treatment, identifying a quantifiable level of need and addressing that through an equally quantifiable dose of assistance. This approach appeared to risk oversimplifying the situation and obscuring how relations help to define need. Focusing on organisational relations has been common in critical studies of oppression in institutions (Smith,
2006), but it also lends itself to understanding reform and disruptions where new attempts at relationships are explored (DeFehr, 2008). In this regard, listening to participants is not about obtaining data which can be tested against pre-existing propositions, but about interpreting and exploring meaning making in a case situation.

Third, reforms appeared to be highly malleable, with little published documentation. Reforms were influenced by local alternative experiences described in Chapter Four, and individual workers from these even led national training sessions. However, these alternative programs were not packaged as a method or framework for reform. Instead, some limited draft guidelines were developed by an internal departmental policy team. These were to be adapted over time drawing on experiential learning and feedback from frontline workers through a progressive rollout of reform, initially across only a handful of sites. This was challenging for research as there was not a simple framework against which the study could be designed, however it also meant that research could explore first hand how training sessions and implementation emerged without overly rigid expectations. Accordingly, reforms would be best understood through an in depth engagement in the reform situation, listening to and interacting with people as they made sense of and influenced reform in practice.

Framing the Case Study

An interpretive case study

In this regard, a case study approach oriented to interpretivism (Stake, 2006) seemed relevant rather than Yin’s (2009) more formalised post positivist case study approach which would have been dependent on a measured and clearly prescribed framework (Hyett, Kenny & Dickson Swift, 2014). Adopting an in depth, interpretive, qualitative case study presented opportunities to critique but also to influence the organisational environment.

Boje (2009, 2010) argued for a critical research orientation which is alert to
possibilities for change to an established order. As such, research needs to maintain awareness of its own influence and audience(s). In terms of the Centrelink audience, there was a strong orientation towards positivist research, and the research alliance (under which this study was funded) was associated with the CSIRO, and a promise of bringing science into society (Mason et al., 2014). The challenges and benefits of that promise are discussed more extensively in Chapter Seven. (The existence of a multi disciplinary CSIRO approach, did however, recognise a need for accounts and interpretations which added to the depth of understanding of new practices).

In Centrelink, where knowledge of frontline experiences was at a distance from a centralised hierarchy based in Australia’s capital, Canberra, (Halligan & Wills, 2008) there was also a history of the use of practice case narratives to bridge the knowledge gap between the frontline and Canberra based hierarchy. From my past experience as a director in Centrelink, it was common to be asked for practical case examples pertinent to major issues, so that Canberra based managers, policy makers and ministers could develop their understanding of service experiences. Whilst maligned in more positivist approaches as lacking scientific rigour and objectivity, practice case studies focussed on particular issues were familiar to the organisation. What seemed important in the study design was to extend a traditional organisational use of practice case study and create accounts of practices which were both critical and, as Flyvbjerg (2006) argued, rich in detail. To assist with this, the notion of polyphony was developed in the study design beyond its typical association with case study.

Chapter Four mentioned the traditional use of polyphony in case study (Stake, 1995), whereby exposure to multiple informants in situ, creates an opportunity to hear different voices as they surround a particular theme. The notion of polyphony was developed in literary theory as a way of understanding multiple voices and perspectives in literature (Bakhtin, 1981). It was also taken up in social work (Irving & Young, 2002)
and in thinking concerned with developing dialogue in human service situations, where it is seen as important to create a multi dimensional picture of a complex human context (Seikkula & Arnekil, 2006).

Connelly (2010) has demonstrated how subjective accounts of experiences in Centrelink can inform research understanding of organisational interactions through a vicarious encounter with lived experience. Connelly achieved this through highlighting short descriptive passages which capture sentiment relations from the perspective of the client. This single perspective descriptive approach is open to criticism around excessive relativism and the tendency for recounts to be viewed as ‘stories’ not definitive of experience. This weakness was evident in the literature review where a reliance on single perspective accounts in most empirical studies failed to fully enlighten the nature of dialogical experiences.

Stake refers to the case study method as involving the researcher as ‘both interpreter and gatherer of interpretations’ (Stake, 1995, p. 99). In the current study, the idea was to enhance thematic analysis of interview data through a more extensive ‘polyphonic’ approach which would draw on both the traditional in depth engagement of case study and also on marrying multiple perspectives across specific individual incidents of practice. To facilitate this, a protocol for multiple participant consent was devised. This approach (discussed more extensively in Chapter Seven) allowed for a layering of multiple perspectives and accords with a core strength of case study in revealing multiple, potentially competing voices (Stake, 1995, 2006).

The provision of multiple accounts allowed for a kind of triangulation process “by seeing or hearing multiple instances...from different sources” (Miles and Huberman, 1984, p. 233). It also provided a transparency in analysis reporting by allowing for perspectives to be seen in tandem with a research account around those perspectives. A further element to the polyphonic nature of the approach was the reference throughout to voices in the literature, as advocated by Miles and Huberman (1994).
Social workers and the limitations of ‘street level bureaucracy’

A case study approach was used in a landmark study of early service delivery reform in Centrelink (Howard, 2003). Howard framed his case study (of personalised customer service) with reference to street level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 1980). Street level bureaucracy recognises frontline workers as constructing policy in practice, influenced by organisational demands at the frontline. Howard (2012) has more recently reflected on how experiences of humanising relations between workers and customers led workers to question organisational directions, but that they were unable to counter formalised processes and organisational pressures in their immediate frontline context.

Howard did not study social workers experiences in Centrelink, and the present study recognised a need to extend understanding of the frontline ‘street level’ environment with multi layered service situations involving more than one street level bureaucrat (Scourfield, 2013). Scourfield highlighted how diverse perspectives influence experiences in the service setting, particularly where networks of workers, teams or agencies are involved. The street level bureaucracy tradition has been criticised as overlooking complexity in bureaucratic settings involving professional social workers, and for neglecting the constructive (and focusing on controlling) aspects of the service context (Evans, 2011). The study was particularly interested in new relationships involving social workers and going beyond the typical street level bureaucracy concern with a worker exercising (and struggling to exercise) discretion. It was interested in understanding a complicated institutional environment where managers, social workers, customer service workers and clients co exist (if uneasily). Understanding the mix of perspectives and values and what Chomsky referred to as “the particular balance in which they coexist” (Chomsky & Foucault, 1971, 1:04:21) was central to the critical orientation of the research.
In seeking to understand reform in human service, this thesis was guided by principles which encouraged dialogue and respect for participants in the research process itself. These included: a concern with addressing the institutionalized use of unjust power and authority; methodological pluralism; encouraging a power balance in researcher participant relations; sharing knowledge; long term commitment to the research focus and producing knowledge which can lead to change (Strier, 2007).

**Study Question(s)**

The core objectives of the study were to develop a detailed understanding of how social workers were involved in the development of supportive interactions, how these were implemented in practice, and to contribute to understanding of supportive relational reforms in human services and social work. With this in mind, thesis questions were oriented to rich description and to identifying changes over time as well as differences across sites. The core question underlying the thesis was, *how did attempts to engage supportively by drawing on guidance from social workers in Centrelink work?*

Beneath this a series of sub questions expanded and clarified the research focus on new practices and changing relationships:

- How did attempts develop over time?;
- How were attempts experienced in practice?;
- How did attempts differ from past service provision?;
- What new relationships emerged? (particularly between social workers and customer service workers);
- What factors encouraged or inhibited attempts?;
- What do experiences of attempts and their development have to say about the scope for relational social work in this (and other) context(s)?

**Multi Case Study Rationale**

The contextual detail available through organisational case study is recognised
as essential to understanding how government policy is constituted and mediated by complex organisational practices (Carey, 2010; Flyvbjerg, 2006). Case study literature around organisational development has highlighted the value of investigating multiple cases (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Meyer (2001) argues for the potential value of multiple case sites in improving external validity and transfer of findings. Conversely, there may be a loss of depth through the pursuit of too many sites (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A balance was sought in this study by choosing two case sites.

A strategy to enhance validity was to engage with key stakeholders across other sites to inform learning from the two case study sites. Further to this, the focus on the quintain meant that case sites were studied instrumentally, according to an interest in attempts to engage supportively drawing on social worker guidance. Because of this, there was scope to drill down into practical examples within the case which were of themselves mini cases (Stake, 2006) and to make connections to historical cases discussed in Chapter Four.

**Conduct of the Study**

**Selecting sites**

The study sites were identified using Centrelink advice of offices scheduled to implement changed service delivery. Of nineteen Centrelink offices anticipated to rollout in the first year, only four offices were likely to be operational by the commencement of the research. Two of these offices (from hereon in referred to as sites A and B) had sufficient staff and customer numbers to support privacy, were prepared to take a researcher and were practically suitable given researcher location and research resources.

Site A was a large metropolitan office located on a main road adjacent to several unoccupied buildings, giving the impression of a faded commercial development. Local management and staff reported issues around homelessness and customer aggression as key pressures in the site. Inside the
office, the open plan environment which was developed during the customer service reforms initiated some fifteen years earlier (Vardon, 2000b) had given way to a hybrid layout. A large front of house area was only partially occupied, and a small ‘back office’ area was hidden from view and separated by security coded doors. In the latter space, several administrative staff and three social workers were located, who also provided some out servicing to neighbouring offices. In the front area there were between four to six customer service staff, a team leader and manager. For significant meetings, a visiting manager also attended the office who had responsibilities across several offices.

Site B was a large regional office of roughly similar size to site A, and serviced a regional centre which had historically been rural but now had large suburban areas and served as a satellite of a major metropolitan city. Local management and staff indicated a large number of low income families, particularly younger families as a key workload in the office. The front of house, though sightly smaller than site A, provided more privacy for staff through a screened reception area. The back office area was not blocked off from the front, but had open passageways connecting the two. Out the back were several administrative staff and three social workers who, similar to site A, provided service to neighbouring offices. In the front area there were (on any given day) between four to six customer service staff, as well as a team leader, manager and occasional visiting manager per site A.

Participants and Recruitment

The research recruited interview participants in equal numbers at the sampled sites. Recruitment was designed to allow a horizontal span of perspectives at the frontline: social workers, customer service workers and people seeking assistance. A vertical span across management layers was also pursued by incorporating the perspectives of local managers and more senior managers who provided oversight across other sites nationally. This vertical scope provided possibilities for checking local experiences against broader
developments, enhancing possibilities for transferring understanding from the two sites.

In total, the study involved purposive sampling of 10 people who accessed assistance, 14 workers (6 social workers and 8 customer service workers), 3 managers or team leaders and 4 senior managers who had oversight across other sites nationally. Workers and managers at both sites were provided with information about the study inviting them to participate, and approximately 75% participated. Participants made direct contact with the researcher by phone or in person, who then went over the written information and consent material with them in person (see Appendix B). Managers who had national oversight for sites were invited for the focus group, with 4 out of 6 participating. Participants are tabulated by site, role and gender in Table 2 (below).

Customer interview participants were recruited through flyers made available within the site and at community meetings. Flyers were freely available to participants and recruitment was not pursued through Centrelink databases. This self selection approach may have introduced bias by not including some vulnerable groups, however take up showed a range of ages, mix of genders and a mix of personal and social issues which appeared not dissimilar to larger studies of Centrelink customers (Murphy et al., 2011). The focus of interviews was not on evaluating customer satisfaction but on producing detailed human stories of service experiences which might illuminate the workings of new practices. As a check on the relevance of experiences, a broader range of case studies was collated from both customers and workers over the course of the study. Overall, thirty accounts of practice were accumulated and tabulated to analyse the nature of practices, as described further in Chapter Seven.

All participants were aged over 18 years and gave informed consent following a process which explained potential risks and benefits as well as the voluntary nature of involvement. Observations at and outside of sites (in the local community) also involved some more spontaneous and informal contacts with customers and workers where written consent was not practical.
Table 2. Participants, roles and locations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant pseudonym</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Site</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nicole</td>
<td>Social worker</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Social worker</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>Social worker</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>Social worker</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>Social worker</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christopher</td>
<td>Social worker</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>Customer</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kylie</td>
<td>Customer</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>Customer</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winona</td>
<td>Customer</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Customer</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sylvia</td>
<td>Customer</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon</td>
<td>Customer</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>Customer</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leon</td>
<td>Customer</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>Customer</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tracey</td>
<td>Senior manager</td>
<td>National</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megan</td>
<td>Senior manager</td>
<td>National</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>Senior manager</td>
<td>National</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>Senior manager</td>
<td>National</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roger</td>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Customer service worker</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke</td>
<td>Customer service worker</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ralph</td>
<td>Customer service worker</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elisabeth</td>
<td>Customer service worker</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenny</td>
<td>Customer service worker</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felicity</td>
<td>Customer service worker</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renee</td>
<td>Customer service worker</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbie</td>
<td>Customer service worker</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In these cases a statement was made identifying the research and researcher’s role and that people were under no obligation to discuss issues with the researcher. In one instance (discussed at length in Chapter Nine) a forum was pre-organised by Centrelink social workers and written consent was used for this.

Consent forms included: the research purpose; the research process; potential benefits and risks; the right to withdraw at any time; the intent to publish and disseminate findings. In instances where both worker and customer accounts were shared in direct relation to each other, further consent was sought. The consent request involved a clear and respectful discussion and demarcated participation in the research from organisational responsibilities the worker or service user may have had. Participants were given a pseudonym to protect privacy.

Data Collection

The study combined several methods to account for complexity in sites, as advocated by Strier (2007, p. 861). These included: semi structured interviews with workers, social workers, managers and persons accessing assistance; participant observation; a focus group with managers involved in overseeing other sites nationally; and an organisational document review.

- Semi structured qualitative interviews

Interviews with workers and managers were held near to their entry into new arrangements and again in the last months of the 12 month period. A key element of the research approach was to explore experiences, perceptions and understandings over time. Initial interviews also contained a reflection on past experiences, effectively creating three points of comparison: prior to changes, early on and later in the first year.
Interviews with customers were conducted towards the end of the year. This increased the likelihood of customers reflecting on multiple interactions, and opportunity to formulate their own perspectives. It also enhanced the possibility of accessing an historically difficult to access participant group with less risk of intruding into issues for which they sought help. Interviews ran for approximately one hour. In interviews where customers shared a story of a specific interaction and wished to share this with the worker a further consent was sought and the worker was re-contacted to provide input. The research included five cases where, with multiple informed signed consent, the perspectives of workers and customers were overlaid around the same interactions.

All interviews followed a semi structured framework (detailed in the Appendix). This focused on the participant’s personal experience and perspective on their relationships and interactions in Centrelink detailing subjective experience of service interactions and what influenced these. Prompts for the interviewer were used which allowed for variation depending on the interviewee group. Questions were framed across a timeline, considering experiences prior to new practices, during implementation and through changes over time. They looked at differences in new practices and examples of how they worked on the ground, what made them better or worse from the perspective of the participant and what support existed for workers.

Interviews also considered what relationships workers developed outside Centrelink. Relationships with external services were listed according to two factors. The first factor was whether a referral relationship existed with agencies. The second was whether a more personalised relationship existed (did a worker have a person to person relationship with someone there they could consult with if needed?) Records of changes over time were then converted into a concept map format drawing on the historical use of such maps in social work networking (Seed, 1990). These graphically illustrated how workers connected with services in the community and how this changed over time. This graphic representation was checked with participants. Observations in sites and community forums also allowed for some confirmation of such relationships as workers were observed interacting with community agencies.
Interview questioning also included a focus on the social worker - customer service worker relationship and the nature of changes around this. Participants were asked for their perspectives on organisational factors which influenced working and what they had learned from their involvement. Questions for customers focussed particularly on their outlining an experience of interaction and how this related to prior experiences. All interview participants were given the opportunity to ask the interviewer questions. As outlined in more detail in Chapter Seven, where customers and workers consented to share accounts of an experience with each other, further contact was pursued to construct accounts.

- **Participant observation**

Participant observation was pursued of meetings(10), forums(4) and site training(4) over a twelve month period including attendance at associated events in the community organised through sites. To facilitate a longitudinal involvement in participant observation, I was based in sites for several days during one week each month over a twelve month period. The regularity of site visits over the year led to me being expected and included in meetings and forums as a matter of course. My background in Centrelink appeared to encourage rapport with organisational participants without the need for a defining incident of group belonging (DeWalt, DeWalt and Wayland, 1998).

Field notes and research journal entries were kept from participant observations. These documented significant events and reflected on features evident in day to day practices and the organisational factors encountered by workers and customers which interacted with these practices (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995). Recordings of observations included immediate observational notes and subsequent theoretical notes (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995; Schatzmann & Strauss 1973). This distinction allowed for observing and listening to occur more naturally whilst also supporting later analysis.

For reporting purposes, comments drawn from observations are noted as such in the findings chapters according to: site (A) or (B); Meeting(M), Forum (F) or Training session (T); and the relevant session note. For example (A.M.3.) references the third meeting observed in Site A. Otherwise participant comments are from interviews, and are referenced to the relevant participant's pseudonym.
• **A focus group discussion with senior managers involved in overseeing multiple sites**

A focus group was pursued with senior managers at the end of the twelve months. These managers were responsible for overseeing multiple sites nationally. This was used to incorporate feedback and observations which might inform limitations to external validity as well as possible insights into the study sites.

The focus group involved a one hour facilitated discussion drawing on the questions from the interview schedule. Participants were asked to follow a similar timeline, reflecting on past experiences (all had recent operational experience in Centrelink) and describing their perspectives on changes and new interactions and relationships. Participants were also asked to describe organisational factors of significance and reflect on their understanding of reform and its impact.

From an operational and resource perspective, access to all senior managers simultaneously was possible on one occasion. The benefit of conducting the focus group near the end of the study was that participants had experience of the progress of developments across multiple sites and had also had opportunity to reflect and formulate their own perspectives. All of these managers had been recruited from the social work service and had well developed views on how changes drew on social workers. With the benefit of the focus group they also had the opportunity to hear from each other and develop a dialogue which they reported as valuable and which some suggested would itself be a worthwhile feature of service development.

• **An organisational document review**

The research accessed guidelines, training handouts and Centrelink media releases on the introduction of reforms in sites. Access was also provided to monthly reports on progress from both sites. These were reviewed with reference to ongoing progress over the year.

Reports were also observed which provided data on actual referrals to other community services made by customer service workers. Forums around
community mapping also gave an opportunity to witness group discussions of engagement with community services in both sites. This provided the opportunity to cross check customer service worker’s interview accounts of their learning about community services and who they were referring people accessing assistance to.

More extensive organisational documentation was made available by social workers at one site involved in a community forum (discussed in Chapter Nine). This detailed their reports of experiences with a specific group of service users, and included their own reflections on interactions with them. In addition to this, an organisational video featuring community developments in that site was viewed.

**Data Analysis**

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Electronic data was password protected and hardcopy files stored securely. Field notes and journal entries were kept of observations and input from meetings and forums. Data was analysed from separate research activities through an ongoing thematic analysis influenced by a critical approach which, in accord with the literature review findings, recognised underlying tensions in organisational directions.

Analysis used tactics outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 187). The development of codes was not static but allowed for flexibility and inductive development from emergent data in the case (Miles & Huberman 1984, p. 64). Data from interviews, observations and a review of documents were used to identify a sequence of events and an initial table of themes assisted by the use of qualitative analysis software (TAMS & NVivo 10).

A small random sample of interviews was shared with the research supervisor who independently created a separate table of themes. These theme tables were then compared and a refined working table of themes was fashioned to assist in further analysis. Interviews with workers and with citizens and ongoing observations in the practice environment were then reread and listened to in order to refine understanding of themes and flesh out practical experiences of interactions. Researcher reflections were compared with
official organisational reflections in monthly written reports made by
sites which recorded staff and management progress. Observations of
refresher training sessions, which occurred towards the end of the first year in
sites, were also useful, as participants themselves reflected on past
experiences. A basic narrative of site developments was then created and
forms the basis of Chapter Six.

A close reading of how new practices involved referrals or the broader use
of connections in the community was pursued through the detailing of practice
case studies. Drawing on Miles and Huberman’s (1994) use of case
matrices, themes were linked in a matrix to events and outcomes across
the thirty practice cases reported in interviews and observations. This case
matrix set out for each account the pathway into Centrelink, factors which
arose through engagement, actions and outcomes from the case. This
allowed for some pathway mapping within case accounts which suggested
how relationships influenced different outcomes. It also allowed for the
matrix to be reviewed vertically through different accounts to inform a
broader narrative of new practices. A drilling down into a specific practice
case which contained some significant elements common across cases
was then pursued (using a polyphonic approach detailed at length in
Chapter Seven).

A detailed interpretation of how practices were supported or
not supported was written up and illustrated using matrices and concept
maps which provided a quick reference point for summarising data visually
(Miles and Huberman, 1994). This included a mapping of referrals and
person to person contacts developed by customer service workers
drawing on basic network mapping concepts (Trevillion, 1999; Seed, 1990).

Understanding of new relationships was enhanced through a re-analysis
of interviews involving customer service workers and social workers focussed
on the nature of their relationships with each other and a conceptualisation of
new relationships in terms of influence and guidance was developed (in
Chapter Eight). Observations from the one site which successfully developed a
service user forum were collated and a separate analysis of these conducted using Text Analysis Markup Software (TAMS). This helped develop an interpretation of one site’s activities where a more extensive involvement of social workers in influencing frontline service reform was evident. A detailed reporting around this is pursued in Chapter Nine.

**Ethics**

The research dealt with services which were used by people with little access to independent resources. It also dealt with workers who were involved in work which could place them in positions of authority and also in positions of vulnerability. The research focused on an aspect of Centrelink work which was intended to provide more equal and supportive relationships and this appeared to lessen impacts and negative experiences typically associated with Centrelink. Despite this, the research in some instances involved discussion around personal issues which raised questions of unmet needs, and advice around support for participants was provided in this regard. Research was conducted in accordance with ethics approval from Griffith University (Protocol no: HSV/30/11/HREC) as well as approval from the Centrelink Families, Social Inclusion and New Policy Branch.

**Ethics and Power**

Given the researcher’s insider background in Centrelink, the researcher ensured through flyers, consent processes and statements prior to interviews that participation was understood as voluntary with no connection to current or future opportunities. The excitement of Centrelink staff and customers about participating in the research raised an ethical issue around dealing with expectations that I might have special access to address participant concerns or right apparent wrongs. I communicated the limitations of the research as well as the forums in which the research would be reported so as to not encourage unrealistic expectations.

Whilst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were not targeted by this research, some participants identified in this way. The provision of respectful service (Baldry, Green & Thorpe, 2006) has increasingly been acknowledged as central to research and practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the research was oriented to this both in design
and in subject interest. Participatory engagement aims to “bring subjugated knowledge to the forefront” (Briskman 2007, p. 159) and the research focussed on participants' stories as detailing their own perspectives and recognising their role and strengths in interactions (Wingard & Lester, 2001) rather than positioning them as objects of study.

**Trustworthiness and Rigour**

The research focussed on a small number of cases in detail, and was necessarily limited in resources and access within a large organisational context. This raises limitations to generalisability. However, criticism of case study approaches in terms of limited generalisability has in turn been critiqued by Flyvbjerg (2006). Flyvbjerg argued that expectations of scale and repeatability misrepresent the case study approach, particularly in social, ethically important contexts, as concerned with objectified, controlled and repeatable factors, when in fact it is concerned with detailing lived situations which mix commonalities and unique experiences in ways which are not reducible to objectification.

Schwandt, Lincoln and Guba (2007) have used the notion of transferability in terms of how case study narratives can resonate with experiences in other contexts, suggesting that the transparency and richness of case study narratives increases their relevance. Richness in reporting offers opportunity for vicarious and emotional involvement of readers who are outside the case context, and are looking to integrate learning into their own organisational setting (Stake, 1995). The “closeness of the case study to real-life situations and its multiple wealth of details” is methodologically central to case study (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Closeness and credibility was enhanced through extensive and focused involvement in the case. Commitment in research tends to be bounded by research cultures which drop in and out of the research area, whereas a longer term commitment to the field of study adds both knowledge value and opportunities for research to influence social change (Strier, 2007). The thesis provided an opportunity to consider reform in Centrelink over an extended period, both in terms of the focal study, spanning just over a year, and the connection to cases beyond this through the quintain.
Peer Checking and Respondent Validation

The researcher included regular checking and collaborative feedback mechanisms for the study through checking back with interviewees, ongoing dialogue with supervisors around research progress, sharing of analysis and data with advisors and ongoing discussion with other researchers in CSIRO and Griffith University. Data interpretation was facilitated through feedback loops, with regular research updates integrated into research supervision, and this helped identify patterns and maintain a shared input into the research. The regular update process helped avoid a major challenge in case study method identified by Stake (1995): the tendency to pursue general qualitative investigation and depart from the relevance to the case.

Several presentations were provided during the research which were attended by participants, and where they provided feedback to the researcher. The inclusion of a final question in the interview schedule allowing the interviewee to ask questions of the researcher also created opportunities for participants to feedback directly. The research pursued a pluralism or allowance for other interpretations by encouraging alternative stories of experience and rich narratives from participants whose voices were rarely listened to. The detailed reporting and recording of participants perspectives was also important in creating a dependable and transparent research account. In order to further check the relevance of case experiences to emerging experiences across Centrelink, senior managers' reflections on their experiences across multiple sites were considered via the focus group.

Triangulation

Data from both case sites was supplemented by reports of experiences in a range of other sites nationally from more senior managers. In the concluding Chapter Ten, reflections on the quintain more broadly are pursued, relating developments in Chapters Two and Four to those in the central cases, and outlining a history of attempts to develop supportive frontline engagement in Centrelink and the complicated invitation to social
work within this. Chapter Seven describes in detail how a multi-perspectival rendering of practice cases effectively triangulated accounts around practice experience.

Confidentiality and Management of Impact on Participants

Participants were not identified through Centrelink databases. Participants names and identifying details which emerged in interviews have been altered to preserve anonymity and mitigate any negative impacts from participation. Materials such as flyers clearly indicated the confidential nature of participation, and the involvement of CSIRO and Griffith University.

The collaborative nature of elements of the study meant that the researcher interacted with workers and service users in ways which provided other confidential information not relevant to the research such as intimate personal stories not connected to the research. The researcher treated these interactions as confidential. No situations of imminent risk of harm or criminal activity were encountered in the research.

Contact details were given to interview participants to access a social worker for advice or further support. Participants were also given the direct contact details of the researcher and encouraged to make contact if they had any questions or concerns regarding the research. Information about the research project given to participants also included contact details for an independent person apart from the researcher so that any complaints or concerns in regard to the research could be raised.

Benefits and Risks of the Research

The research was concerned with understanding changes in the Centrelink context and providing insights which could influence further developments in that context and in other situations which experience similar issues. The benefits to the research included a furthering of knowledge around the development of approaches which aim to assist the most marginalized in Australian society. Benefits accrued to government, the organisation, and the general public by contributing to the development of understandings and
approaches to service delivery. The research method and approach modeled the inclusion of participants at key stages and in key roles with the researcher. This modeling of itself was a contribution to learning within the CSIRO and Centrelink. Whilst the research was attentive to potential risks and measures were in place to provide support, subjection to psychological or emotional stress was not evident as a result of the research.

Participants benefited directly from increased input into service direction. They also contributed themselves through their participation creating a mutually beneficial aspect to the research. Social workers in Centrelink, as outlined in the literature review, have faced considerable challenges. Learning and experiences from this research contributed to a broader insight into social work in Centrelink, its history and capabilities.

Conclusion

This Chapter has detailed the case study method taken in studying reforms oriented towards support in what is often viewed as an oppressive context. The following Chapter introduces experiences from implementation of reforms in sites and traces developments as they rolled out. Subsequent Chapters drill down into case examples, considering practices with individuals, relationships between customer service workers and social workers, and involvement with a marginalised group. They also explore how how developments created tensions but also supportive alternatives which challenged more directive welfare reforms.
Chapter Six
Implementation and Change

...transitioning the workforce from one that manually processes transactions on a large scale to one that is focused on developing relationships with clients and within the community and using those relationships to make connections and achieve outcomes for people

Kathryn Campbell, Secretary,

This Chapter describes how a more wide ranging attempt to enhance how Centrelink workers related with people seeking assistance was both an opportunity and a source of tension. The Chapter illustrates the implementation and development of coordinated service reforms in two Centrelink sites and how these drew on social workers who were previously peripheral to frontline service encounters.

Findings are reported in this Chapter via a sequential narrative commonly used in case study (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Stake, 2006), commencing with a discussion of training and progressing through implementation to development and changes over the year. The Chapter highlights early confusion around reforms, particularly grey areas around the limits of worker roles, as well as enthusiasm and tension in implementation. The Chapter details evidence of a more open and responsive engagement at the frontline and, where customer service workers were given the freedom to engage with other services, an increase in contact and interaction with other agencies in the local service network.

The Chapter takes a closer look at how engagement was developed and experienced and how this created possibilities for support within and outside Centrelink. It shows changes in interpersonal engagement and illustrates these through case accounts from both workers and customers. It also provides some conceptual maps which show changes in customer service workers referrals and person to person relationships with a community network over time.
Findings show how pathways emerged where people seeking assistance would previously have encountered a ‘dead end’. The Chapter also places site findings in the context of the broader rollout of sites across the country by comparing experiences with themes and issues raised in a focus group with senior managers who had national responsibility for sites where reforms were occurring.

Organisational difficulties around engagement are discussed which reflected a history of directive processes. Tensions were more evident as work practices were connected to performance targets, and where staff and management had different perspectives on the nature of new practices. The Chapter concludes by identifying three key areas of interest: changing practices with individuals seeking assistance; changing relationships between social workers and customer service workers; and changes to dealing with a particular marginalised group (young parents). These three areas are progressively explored in the ensuing Chapters which drill down into mini case examples and further consider how learning from the sites can inform understanding of the Centrelink context and its invitation to social work.

**Training and Early Confusion**

A conversation rather than a checklist or structured tool ... a positive method for achieving customer involvement and self direction ...

(Australian Department of Human Services, 2011b, p. 8)

Training and familiarisation sessions were run along similar lines in both sites over one week and covered five main areas. Centrelink technical trainers led sessions on new recording processes, use of technology and on government service delivery reform more broadly. Sessions led by or co-facilitated by social workers focussed on service and case coordination. These sessions helped staff learn more about the challenges faced by people living in the local community and the services which could help, as well as challenging the directive interviewing style that staff were familiar with and practise a more open ended, conversational interviewing,
Drawing on terminology commonly used in education and research contexts, the term ‘guided conversations’ (Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Gauthier, 1996) was used along with ‘strengths based’ interviewing (McCashen, 2005). These terms were used to describe more open interviews which aimed to allow a participant to contribute in ways which might not have been anticipated by a structured question and answer format and therefore allow for more spontaneous conversation and unanticipated responses. Training handouts gave examples of practical scenarios where people seeking assistance would feel encouraged to talk openly on their own terms at an early stage and reveal their situation to a customer service worker in a Centrelink office.

Handouts included items for group discussion such as “Think about how you would explore strengths when helping a customer”, as well as challenging each worker to “reassess your current approach to assisting customers” (Australian Department of Human Services, 2011c, pp. 7-8). Despite a focus on dialogue and more open engagement, which suggested a sense of reflection and flexibility, participants raised concerns that elements of the training were overly simplistic. For example, presentations portrayed a linear process whereby additional assistance would be identified and provided according to simplistic categories. Handouts described how many customers might fit into different levels of need, neatly grouping customers with statements such as “85% of customers will require 35 minutes of service, 10% will require 60 minutes of service, 4% will require 240 minutes of service, and 1% will require 1200 minutes of service” (Australian Department of Human Services, 2011a, p.17). This categorisation of interactions linked resources to each category of customer and allowed for performance to be tracked and resources adjusted via information technology, reflecting connections between neoliberal and mechanistic management thinking (Lawler & Bilson, 2010).

The use of new terminology, both in terms of new interviewing practices and expected categorising of customers, was particularly confusing for some customer service workers in the training who expressed concern that they not
be perceived as case managers because of one week’s training. More intensive case management had in fact been recommended by some external advisory groups such as the Australian Social Inclusion Board (2011, p.42). In contrast to this, trainers and managers stressed repeatedly during training that customer service worker roles were limited and they would not not be viewed as case managers or undertake work beyond their capacity. Despite this advice, a level of anxiety was evident from observations, as managers, social workers and customer service workers expressed their concerns.

to extract that information from a customer while they are there is an acquired skill that I don’t think we’ve had the training [for]. Nor do we have the expertise to do that ... It’s a bit more of a skill that’s required, that’s almost a social work type role whereas we’re not social workers.

(Ralph, Customer Service Worker)

To counter this concern, the term ‘enhanced servicing’ was used by some managers and trainers, and all trainers stressed that highly intensive situations would be handled by social workers. However, the allocation of resources for social workers was limited, with some support for professional development, but no new positions. This suggested room for confusion, as did a lack of clarity around how intensiveness would be gauged.

In discussing intensiveness and limits, emphasis was put on customer service workers seeking guidance and on the job training from social workers and working collaboratively to develop their limits. This practical approach did mirror practices in the Logan SaiL project discussed in Chapter Four, where social workers worked side by side with customer service workers on a daily basis and could mentor them and monitor developments as they unfolded. Of course, in that scenario social workers were resourced specifically for that role, something which was not established in this instance. The significance of this early confusion is that it indicated a tension around process, roles and resourcing which threatened to overshadow the use of social workers and how
Implementation in Site A: Struggling to Move Forward

Site A was considered by staff to be a busy office dealing with many customers who experienced problems in everyday living and were, in the opinion of staff, often aggressive. My observations during site visits were that aggression occurred on a daily basis, with incidents commonly involving abusive language and threats to staff. Discussions of the site's key issues indicated a significant transient customer population and management concerns around aggression, which had led to an on site security guard presence. Queues in the office were consistently long, sometimes stretching out the door and this impacted customer experiences.

I always have problems in this office...I’ve got warnings for getting a bit angry...They don’t realise what it’s like to wait around out there, and then you don’t even get any help! Sometimes I lose control.

(Simon, Customer)

Observations made during training indicated a mixture of excitement and concern amongst staff. There were expectations that more resources would help with managing what was viewed by all participants as an historically difficult office, although there was some concern from social workers that the additional resources were focussed on customer service staff. Social workers expressed some concerns around spending more time in the front of house area, whether there would be sufficient privacy for conversations with customers and how much time they might be expected to support customer service staff (A.M.1; A.T.1). In practice, social workers in site A were only irregularly ‘out the front’.

Discussions observed during training between managers and social workers revealed some level of confusion around responsibilities, leadership and direction. Social workers emphasised a need for workers to have more flexibility, including time out of the office to visit services in the community,
whereas managers appeared keen to maintain a focus on timeliness, quick transactions and ‘business as usual’ (A.T.1). Business as usual (or BAU) was a phrase often heard in Centrelink, and was employed in research interviews by Centrelink participants fifty six times. It was often used in ways which appeared to juxtapose the relational and humanising aspect of reform with accepted, normal, ‘business’ practices, which were identified with quick transactions.

I think its completely different to how it is in the BAU side of things. BAU to me is just so money driven ...

(Mary, Customer Service Worker)

Through BAU you used to spend time sometimes...but you might miss it [an opportunity to provide help] because there is that drive to get the new customer.

(Luke, Customer Service Worker)

Management in site A was focused strongly on monitoring queues and wait times, and felt unable to allow workers to be out of the office visiting community services.

There were often days when somebody is sick or on leave and often no replacement .... So that’s frustrating as well.

(Elisabeth, Customer Service Worker)

The queue is out the door so you tend to focus on business as usual. So, organisationally, I think we’re under resourced ... under pressure ... lots of people waiting so [you] don’t tend to focus on the conversations.

(Ralph, Customer Service Worker)

It appeared that the additional resourcing to the office had little impact, with customer service workers regularly being caught up in ‘surges’ or situations where queues or staff absences led to them being unable to spend as much time with customers.

Resources are strapped across the board. If we had more people to do things, but we are always managing in the immediate. We are always putting out fires.

(Roger, Manager)
We knew how many [customer service] staff we had to have but because of other things going on, there was always a need for those people to do something else. (Nicole, Social Worker)

Over the first few months, workers interactions with people seeking assistance largely involved basic referrals. These appeared to involve a more humanising experience involving practical help.

I got out [of gaol] in December and moved back with my mother, but it didn’t work out. I was being chased by [a cash lending agency] and [the customer service worker] here helped me to get some money from [a community agency] to get them off my back.

(Leon, Customer)

Leon reported a range of other concerns in his life which he had discussed in his Centrelink contact but continued to trouble him, including a need for more stable housing and a large debt with another government department. He was grateful for assistance from Centrelink, but struggled to follow up on the advice given him.

She [the customer service worker] told me to talk to [the other department] about doing a debt agreement, and gave me some information on housing...

but I couldn’t get past first base you know. But, I was really grateful for her help. (Leon, Customer)

Customer service workers were not able to visit services and relied on paper or electronic referral databases. Later changes in management would encourage some shifts around this, but early on this was experienced by customer service workers as a significant constriction on their understanding of how to help people accessing assistance.

If you are looking for a missing link in the chain as to why it’s not working in our site, that’s the missing link, we’ve had no community engagement in the team, we haven’t visited and built those relationships. We haven’t done that foundation work in the community to have the confidence dealing with the services. (Ralph, Customer Service Worker)

Social workers too, expressed concerns around poor communication and commitment.
We could notice when we didn’t have communication, we didn’t know what was happening. Things just couldn’t work very well and then I guess my feeling was that very often there wasn’t enough interest or commitment from other players on a higher level to ask ‘What’s happening here? How is it going? Do you need any help?... ... they [customer service workers] were really passionate and enthusiastic when they started this work and I think some of the things that we talked about and happened in the meantime affected that enthusiasm. It was constant struggle because they really had no control.

(Nicole, Social Worker)

These early experiences led staff to express anxiety around new roles, and potential risks in new practices. The involvement of customer service workers with people with complex needs and without consultation with social workers was particularly evident in site A.

I had a few problems, and I was really just looking for some money. [The customer service worker] tried to refer me into a rehab. I didn’t really want to do that. She was really nice and helped me get some clothes and stuff. I just let her make it [that referral]. Then I did my own thing.

(Robert, Customer)

Customer service workers expressed that they lacked the detailed knowledge around complex issues and helping services to know how and when to link customers to services. In several meetings social workers expressed differences with management around how workers should operate in the team, arguing that customer service workers should have more learning opportunities in their day to day schedule, and should also have more oversight from social workers. Managers expressed concerns that customer service workers should be always available to see customers and criticised their spending too much time consulting with social workers (A.M.5). In one meeting a manager argued that customer service workers ‘chatting’ was ‘a bad look’, and created a poor impression for customers waiting in the queue who could clearly see workers. The lack of agreement around basic principles at site A was a significant difference to implementation in site B. Table 3 lays out factors in implementation across the different sites.
Table 3. Factors in implementation: Early experiences from different sites.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors in implementation</th>
<th>Early experiences in site A</th>
<th>Early experiences in site B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Office environment</td>
<td>High levels of traffic and long queues continue. Lack of privacy.</td>
<td>Lower levels of traffic. Better laid out for privacy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management involvement</td>
<td>Local management sceptical of ‘special’ roles and critical of workers taking time out for reflection sessions etc. New team driven by management directive and tightly monitored.</td>
<td>Local management excited and encouraged workers to be largely self managing, take time out of office for community visits and coaching.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social worker involvement</td>
<td>Scepticism and struggles to be involved after initial training sessions. Changes to social work staff and differences with management around roles limited influence.</td>
<td>Some scepticism but high levels of social worker support and involvement. Social workers organised additional community forums to address policy changes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer service worker involvement</td>
<td>Enthusiasm and concern around new roles. Tension over access to coaching and reflection meetings. Lack of opportunity to engage with community.</td>
<td>Enthusiasm around new roles. Concerns around limits largely alleviated through coaching and close cooperation with social workers. Regular opportunities for community engagement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement and learning around community services</td>
<td>No significant community engagement. No visits to services. Struggles with management around time outside the office.</td>
<td>Workers encouraged to develop knowledge base. Strong involvement of social workers with management in discussions around the community.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Early Experiences in site B were quite different with a greater focus on community engagement and an easier access with social workers than in site A.

I would describe it [implementation in site A] as being chaotic, there were people who really insisted on having something to do with this new work, it introduces a lot of excitement... staff were really passionate and very
excited to do this and generally wanting to help … What concerned me was that we started off and provided education for the staff but they didn’t come a long way from that several months down the track.

(Rachel, Social Worker)

**Implementation in Site B: Enthusiasm and Collaboration**

Implementation in site B appeared more relaxed and cooperative. There were similar concerns raised around limits to roles, but a more positive focus on collaboration with social workers and freedom to develop in the community. Similar to site A, staff appeared excited about the possibility of reform, though less around the issue of resources and more at the opportunities this provided in two respects: firstly to learn more about their community environment, and secondly to be able to spend more time with people seeking assistance.

I’ve slowed down, it’s about them [the customers] and not about me fixing them which is a BAU response to everything. My communication style is different [now].

(Jenny, Customer Service Worker)

Our interviewing style is different to business as usual... You gotta pull right back with the help of the social workers.

(Abbie, Customer Service Worker)

Customer service workers in site B quickly formed close relationships with social workers, who, whilst sceptical of change, located a social worker with the team. Social workers in site B encouraged customer service workers to pursue community engagement activities from the outset, and managers at the site agreed that workers could get out into the community and visit services. The impact of this freedom was evident in early interviews with workers, as they talked extensively about new referral options they were using and how this was different to their previous attempts to make referrals, where they may have been viewed as lacking knowledge and referring people inappropriately.

We are building great relationships with them [community agencies]. More importantly they know we are not going to ring them with inappropriate referrals, the conversations we have with them are sincere. So the results
from them are unbelievable. They know we are ringing because we have a customer who will benefit from this service. So when they arrive, one, they are being introduced already, two, they have some understanding of who is going to present to them, and three, go above their call of duty. (Jenny, Customer Service Worker)

Despite this progress, interviews with customers suggested that customer service workers enthusiasm could involve some over confidence, with some referrals not resulting in the outcomes anticipated by workers.

She [the customer service worker] referred us [to a community service], so my husband and I went down there and as soon as we got there they said ‘No, I can’t [help]’. It wasn’t [the customer service worker’s] fault at all cos she’d actually asked them, it was like miscommunication, but we’d wasted half our day getting to [the community service] for nothing pretty much. (Rebecca, Customer)

There were, however, examples of workers having an ongoing connection with customers and following up referrals and altering outcomes where things went wrong.

She [the customer service worker] kind of goes out of her way to find out what she can do for us. She is more helpful than most other people because they will be like ‘you can’t do this or you can’t do that’ and send you off kind a thing...she makes more of an effort and makes you feel like she cares for you. [With one community service] we were kind of bit lost because she had said everything would be good but then they were kind of saying ‘I am not going to be able to help you’ and then we were kind of ‘Oh what are we going to do now?’ So we went back to see [the customer service worker] and just explained to her, and she rang [the community service] back up and kind of got it going again. It was kind of complicated. But we got the two weeks [rental assistance] out of the [community service]. (Winona, Customer)

This follow up work was also emergent in relationships with the social worker, where customer service workers began to assist social workers in ways which may in turn have encouraged social workers to give more time supporting them.
[the social worker] might have dealings with a homeless youth, having the conversations etcetera, but then often I will do the phone calls to get them to a refuge that day, then the social worker will follow up to see how it went. (Abbie, Customer Service Worker)

Where people accessing assistance were made to feel more at ease in frontline encounters they expressed a remarkable shift in their experience of Centrelink and their capacity to share serious concerns. In Kylie’s case below, she was worried about how she would survive after the removal of her child by the Department of Community Services (DOCS) and the resulting termination of parenting payments.

I get anxiety and think they [Centrelink staff] will think I am skanky trailer trash kind of person and they will think ‘Oh my god, she doesn’t have custody of her child, she’s got DOCS [Department of Community Services] on her back and she’s got children’s court’ and kind of not give me the time of day and judge me, but she [the customer service worker] was completely understanding and didn’t judge me ... and then I told them my circumstances and they recommended I see a social worker here ... it was a guy actually and he was really nice. He was really nice and understanding. I said ‘Look, my daughter is not in my care at the moment. I am going through this horrendous state’. So I was like ‘Can Centrelink still help me or will I go off total benefits?’ (Kylie, Customer)

The social worker interviewed Kylie to help her maintain social security benefits. He also helped her understand processes with DOCS, which Kylie had found confusing, as well as ongoing social security requirements and what Kylie would need to do over the ensuing months. As Kylie adapted to new requirements from Centrelink she would regularly drop in to the office and see the customer service worker to raise any questions or provide information to Centrelink.

It was good because when I’d come into Centrelink I would ask [the customer service worker] a question. Like, I had a rapport with her, and I didn’t have to sit down with another person and go through all my circumstances, like, ‘I’m here, this is what happened to my daughter, and
The sense of ease when dealing with Centrelink was also evident for Rebecca, the customer mentioned previously who experienced an unsuccessful referral. Despite that experience she was highly positive about her engagement with the customer service worker.

There’s a lot of words I guess. Less frustrating. I mean it’s more than less frustrating. I found it quite nice to go and visit Centrelink when I had a person that I knew I could go and speak to and who knew what was going on with me. I think Centrelink for most people it’s not for choice. I felt quite emotional and I think its good not to have to explain it every time.  

(Rebecca, Customer)

Rebecca compared this with her experience of phone access in Centrelink,

I remember when I first rang up... they told me to ring somewhere else and so when I rang the other place I thought I’d speak to someone straight away but they said to me you have to make an appointment and someone will ring you back, and so I did that and then ... I never got a call. Anyway so I think I waited half an hour after the allotted time and they said, “oh no, its a whole hour”, like the call could come through anytime in that hour, but I was told eight a.m., and she said it could have been anytime between eight and nine a.m. and I thought, “Okay, no one ever told me that”. Anyway after nine, I called back and said no one ever called me and I ’d specifically used a different phone when I’d rang so my mobile was free, and she said there’s notes that someone rang and you didn’t answer, and I said, no, on my phone it shows if there is a missed call, and I said so what’s going to happen now, and she said “well you have to make another appointment, and it’s not until another ten days later”, and I was just like, I couldn’t believe it. I said, “you can’t be serious”.  

(Rebecca, Customer)

Rebecca’s negative experiences can be juxtaposed with her positivity around a more supportive approach. This contrast reflected the anticipations of reform as expressed by customer service workers at commencement.
I think they [customers] will be allowed to feel like an actual individual, you know... Not just to feel like just “Next!”...I think that the customer, they’ll feel like they’ve actually been heard.

(Mary, Customer Service Worker)

Changes and Later Experiences

Developments over the first few months in site B reflected significant changes as customer service workers worked closely with social workers and engaged more supportively with people accessing assistance and with services which could assist them. However, as the year progressed, two key factors began to impact on the site which slowed and in some cases reversed these changes.

The first factor was a growing focus on performance indicators driven at a national level, which was poorly received by workers as a focus on ‘stats’. Second, changes in key people led to a loss of experience and a drop off in enthusiasm. Despite these reverses, progress around out servicing and the involvement of workers in assisting a marginalised group in the community were significant developments. Conversely, in site A, changes in people appeared to have a different impact with some freeing up of workers to engage more with community services and social workers. However, the growing focus on ‘stats’ was received as problematic by workers there too, as were ongoing struggles around the office environment, particularly around privacy of customers and staff. Later experiences and factors across the two sites are highlighted in Table Four and discussed in more detail by site.

Site B: Struggles and Collaboration

The Centrelink environment, whilst creating access and opportunity for engagement, also created a tension in which longer, more open conversations were seen as foreign to the ‘business’ of payment transactions and claims. As reforms progressed increasing pressures were experienced to constrain reforms.
Table 4. Factors in implementation (including other factors which emerged after early implementation): Later experiences in sites A and B.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors in implementation and development</th>
<th>Later experiences in site A</th>
<th>Later experiences in site B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Office environment and out servicing</strong></td>
<td>Privacy issues unresolved. Ongoing demands from busy front office. Increased push around digital and self service impacts site traffic and views on engagement.</td>
<td>Opportunities for mobile and out servicing. Increased push around digital and self service impacts views on engagement to a lesser extent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Management involvement and management changes</strong></td>
<td>Shifts in management ease some tensions. Encourage some limited opportunities for community engagement.</td>
<td>Local management changes result in some dilution of team freedom. Focus on Key Performance Indicators (KPIs).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social worker involvement and social worker changes</strong></td>
<td>Better relationships with management and more regular coaching. Concerns over risks continue.</td>
<td>Collaborative work emerges. Changes to social work team impact coaching regularity and availability of ongoing training.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Customer service worker involvement and worker changes</strong></td>
<td>Concern around KPIs and long term direction.</td>
<td>Regular opportunities for community engagement continue. Concern around KPIs and longer term direction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Engagement, learning and partnership with community services</strong></td>
<td>Some opportunities to engage with community arise, but still limits around this.</td>
<td>Regular visiting to services. Workers come to know community service workers personally and develop insight into service user experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>New interviews/direct engagement with customers. Follow up and longer term engagement with customers</strong></td>
<td>Development of skills but still basic challenges around customers self identifying for assistance. Problems undertaking follow up given KPIs.</td>
<td>More collaborative work with social workers, but new challenges around follow up work with customers, as KPIs value one off interventions.</td>
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</table>
This was exemplified in the implementation of Key Performance Indicators (KPI) towards the end of the year, including a headline KPI around the number of new customers being referred out to assistance. The valuing of new one off contacts diminished the value of a second or third contact (as these made no contribution to the KPI) and encouraged sites to pursue simple referrals and quicker interactions. Another KPI around number of referrals also encouraged multiple referrals, which led one worker to quip that it was a “would you like fries with that?” approach. These changes were particularly challenging in site B, where customer service workers were regularly having multiple contacts with customers and led to workers expressing concerns around diluting engagement and overly focusing on statistics or ‘stats’.

It’s all about the stats now... I thought we were supposed to be about outcomes. (Jenny, Customer Service Worker)

The development of closer community connections continued with regular opportunities for face to face association with local services which workers universally acclaimed as desirable. This valuing of face to face relationships diverged from an increasing management discourse around self service and digital servicing, which became more evident in meetings as the year progressed (A.M.8-10; B.M.7,9,10; A.T.2).

A range of self service technology was introduced into front offices mid year and an organisational campaign later in the year encouraged customers to go ‘online not in line’. This led some workers to question the future of face to face service in offices. An interesting separate development in this respect, was that customer service workers and social workers had also begun work outside the site with a move to out servicing as part of attempts to be more flexible when assisting a particular group of customers targeted by further welfare reforms (discussed in more detail in Chapter Nine).

Further impacting site B midway through the year were changes to management and social work staff, which led to some ‘starting over’ around team dynamics and less regular coaching and support. Social workers led a
further formal one day training towards the end of the year focussed on developing strengths and building relationships (Australian Department of Human Services, 2013b), but the departure of a social worker from site B mid year created periods of irregular access to coaching. Despite this, collaboration continued to develop.

We were staying in a motel and we were desperate to get into something stable and affordable and [the customer service worker] helped us with that. I’ve got a child who is in foster care, we’ve been trying to fight for him but DOCS don’t give us that chance and it’s kind of really complicated thing and frustrating because you can’t get anywhere. So we also spoke to [the customer service worker] about that. She said something about [the social worker] would be a good person to talk to about stuff like that.

So we spoke to her [the social worker]. [The social worker] actually organised for DOCS to come to our home. It was one thing we were asking for which DOCS wouldn’t do. It was good they come out and we were happy with it ... we also wanted to get [child contact] visits in our home and things like that, and they said that wasn’t going to happen, but [the social worker] made the meeting happen.

Most of the time you wouldn’t get as much information, you wouldn’t feel as good coming here [Centrelink]. It used to be like “I don’t wanna go there .” [Now] it’s like ... contact where you feel comfortable. They are not going to look down on you. She [the customer service worker] has the contacts. I could go and see her now about things.

(Andrew, Customer)

Customer service workers and social workers reported that a more supportive initial engagement led to better understanding and trust, as well as a willingness to accept further assistance. In site B customer service workers were increasingly valued by social workers and collaborations revealed a crossover between customer service work and more serious personal and social issues. This was particularly evident in interactions with customers dealing with, and struggling to deal with other agencies such as child protection.
Site A: Some Steps Forward ... and Backwards

Pressures from a busy front office environment where workers reported feeling under surveillance from queuing customers became particularly challenging as the year progressed. Digital and self service directions increased numbers of customers entering the office with questions around new processes and difficulties dealing with online systems.

It’s worse than ever because the queues are longer than ever. People just look over and see us as nobody. (Elisabeth, Customer Service Worker)

Whilst managers appeared confident that this would be a short term phenomenon, customer service workers experienced increased frustration as their attempts to follow up or complete work were interrupted or misunderstood.

Customers are always looking at you from the queue. Yesterday one guy got out of the queue and came up really aggressively to Luke [a colleague] when he was on the phone and yelled “Do you guys actually do any work here?” (Mary, Customer Service Worker)

Changes in management led to some shifts around customer service workers engaging in dialogue with community agencies, and support for social workers coaching and consulting more regularly. This led to a sense of learning but also brought out limitations.

You learn a lot of stuff from one on one with the social worker. I think it can be easy just to sort of think that if you are framing everything positively it’s strengths based. Realising that strength based is a bit more than that. I don’t know. I’m still a novice and have a lot more to learn about it.

(Luke, Customer Service Worker)

Management encouragement for community engagement offered some opportunities for worker learning, as well as the possibility of identifying and developing partnerships and service improvements. Towards the end of the study social workers, customers service workers and the manager at site A agreed that there was a need to develop closer partnership with a number of housing services because housing was a central issue encountered in day to day
work (A.M.8). Workers initiated conversations with some services to improve service relationships and a meeting was held at the site to progress this.

There’s been a little bit of visiting ... we had a sit down meeting with [housing service A] and that works quite easily now because we have that relationship. That happened through Mary [Customer Service Worker], through a conversation on the phone originally with this lady and they both figured out it would be good to have a relationship with each other. She talked to management and so Mary was the driving force behind that.

(Luke, Customer Service Worker)

... the [housing] person that Mary made contact with is extremely knowledgeable in their field and all the different things that are happening ... you know housing is the big one for us, as it is with most people I guess. (Roger, Manager)

Better relationships were evident in customer experience,

I was worried cos I had to go to court with the eviction. [The customer service worker] was really great. She got a hold of [the worker at the housing service evicting the customer]. She talked to him for ages and we agreed to a plan [where] I could pay some money in deductions. He said I could stay, so it was all good. (Sylvia, Customer)

Developing external engagement further was a key goal emerging in the site but this was challenging for workers given the new focus on KPIs.

What I anticipated around providing the kind of support that people desperately need, that’s been the side of things that’s been good. But with the kind of the processing side, like getting the stats and all that sort of stuff, that’s still not been what I’ve expected. There’s a lot of pressure on stuff, that we don’t think there should be. (Mary, Customer Service Worker)

By the end of the study, community engagement in site A was still limited, but workers were hopeful of progressing this further.

Comparing Sites A and B with National Experiences of Reform

A focus group with senior managers who had national responsibility for sites where reforms were rolling out was used to consider experiences of reform
nationally. This involved a group discussion of senior managers perspectives on changes and their experiences of how reforms were working. A thematic analysis of this discussion highlighted factors in implementation and development, and experiences discussed in the focus group. This allowed for some checking of the relevance of factors and experiences in sites A and B. Due to the progressive nature of the rollout, with nineteen sites all at different stages of implementation, a categorisation of early or later experiences was not pursued. However, the focus group allowed for a general consideration of broader experiences nationally.

Table Five outlines findings from the focus group in comparison to sites A and B. It includes an additional factor around implementation in small rural offices (as a subfactor to ‘office environment’).

Table 5: Factors and experiences in sites A and B compared with feedback about other sites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors in implementation &amp; development</th>
<th>Experiences in site A</th>
<th>Experiences in site B</th>
<th>Experiences from other sites (Focus group)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Office environment and out servicing</td>
<td>High levels of traffic and long queues continue. Lack of privacy. Privacy issues unresolved over time. Ongoing demands from busy front office. Increased push around digital and self service impacts site traffic and views on engagement.</td>
<td>Lower levels of traffic. Better laid out for privacy. Opportunities for mobile and out servicing. Increased push around digital and self service impacts views on engagement to a lesser extent.</td>
<td>Concerns around local managers having other priorities and not supporting reforms. Concerns around insufficient training. Small rural sites may have advantages in community engagement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementation in small rural sites.</td>
<td>Local management sceptical of ‘special’ roles and critical of workers taking time out for reflection sessions etc. New team driven by management directive and tightly monitored. Shifts in management ease some tensions. Encourage some limited opportunities for community engagement.</td>
<td>Local management excited and encouraged workers to be largely self managing, take time out of office for community visits and coaching. Local management changes result in some dilution of team freedom. Focus on KPIs.</td>
<td>Local manager complaints around resources as insufficient. Local manager expectations of customer service workers too high. Problems with manager (and social worker) turnover impacting overall leadership.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management involvement and management changes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>


Factors in implementation & development

Experiences in site A
Scepticism and struggles to be involved after initial training sessions. Changes to social work staff and differences with management around roles limited influence. Better relationships with management and more regular coaching. Concerns over risks continue.

Experiences in site B
Some scepticism but high levels of social worker support and involvement. Social workers organised additional community forums to address policy changes. Collaborative work emerges. Changes to social work team impact coaching regularity and availability of ongoing training.

Experiences from other sites (Focus group)
Range of involvement from close to negligible. Impacted by local availability of social workers (resources) and by social workers interest and ability to relate with workers. Concern about risks where not involved.

Experiences in site B

Experiences from other sites (Focus group)

Social worker involvement and social worker changes

Customer service worker involvement and worker changes

Engagement, learning and partnership with community services

New interviews/direct engagement with customers. Follow up and longer term engagement with customers

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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer service worker involvement and worker changes</td>
<td>Enthusiasm and concern around new roles. Tension over access to coaching and reflection meetings. Lack of opportunity to engage with community. Concern around KPIs and long term direction.</td>
<td>Enthusiasm around new roles. Concerns around limits largely alleviated through coaching and close cooperation with social workers. Regular opportunities for community engagement. Regular opportunities for community engagement continue. Concern around KPIs and longer term direction.</td>
<td>High levels of enthusiasm in sites early on. Drops in this over time attributed to lack of leadership commitment and competing demands in offices. Challenges measuring progress, and concerns about over-recording and reporting (KPIs).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement, learning and partnership with community services</td>
<td>No significant community engagement and no visits to services initially. Struggles with management around time outside the office. Some opportunities to engage with community arise, but still limits around this.</td>
<td>Workers encouraged to develop knowledge base. Strong involvement of social workers with management in discussions around the community. Regular visiting to services. Workers come to know community workers personally and develop insight into service user experiences.</td>
<td>Excitement around some stronger community partnerships developing in small rural sites. Perceptions of ‘a long way to go’ in developing sustainable community relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New interviews/direct engagement with customers. Follow up and longer term engagement with customers</td>
<td>Levels of confusion and anxiety heightened. Feelings of not really knowing how to assist people. Struggles around basic changes in approach. Concerns around risks in new practices. Development of skills but still basic challenges around customers self identifying for assistance. Problems undertaking follow up given KPIs.</td>
<td>Feeling of confidence in new roles and perception of marked changes for individual customers. Some concerns around overconfidence and risk from new practices. More collaborative work with social workers, but new challenges around follow up work with customers, as KPIs value one off interventions.</td>
<td>Concern about overzealous practices, particularly in sites without strong social worker involvement. Concern about risks and staff wellbeing. Excitement around some isolated partnerships developing. Concern around suitability of performance indicators.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Overall, the national focus group raised similar factors and experiences to those raised in sites A and B but with a range of experiences which were more extreme. For example, in discussing social worker involvement they indicated a wider variation between sites, with two sites failing to establish any coaching or involvement from social workers in their first few months and having to rely on customer service trainers to complete initial training (which elsewhere was completed with assistance from social workers). Senior managers reflected on the level of social worker engagement in terms of individual attributes of particular social workers, and also in terms of resourcing deficits.

Jane (Senior Manager): The fact that social workers were not available, were not there or there was a new P2 [senior social worker] every month meant that that relationship, that growing of the model didn’t happen. So, often the newer social worker was either locked out, kept out or didn’t participate in the development of that model, and so they’ve kind of grown in isolation in some ways...And the flip-side being that there are some social workers who’ve grabbed it with two hands ...

Anna (Senior Manager): Yes. A lot have.

Jane: ... and run with it and thrived in the environment and liked the consultation and liked the empowerment of staff.

They highlighted instances where social workers had less involvement as a risk to the organisation and to customers.

Megan (Senior Manager): And a huge risk that we have ... because we are venturing out to do this fantastic work, and the opportunity that we have in doing this ... However if we aren’t always thinking about ... risk management as well, in terms of looking out for our staff wellbeing, the boundary stuff, our customers, it will all come crashing down really quickly. So that is the thing, it probably worries me the most. It’s the thing I think about the most.

One issue which was not immediately available for study in sites A and B, but was evident in the discussion amongst senior managers, was a perceived advantage in small rural offices in their attempts to develop engagement with community, something which would benefit from further research. Senior
managers had mixed views around the development of community engagement more broadly.

Tracey (Senior Manager): I think [staff are] being exposed to the opportunity within this organisation in terms of the capability to actually work with the community in a different way... And I do think we do have a place within that space and I think this program is a step towards making that work quite well. Its been interesting watching that unfold, and I think we’re still in the infancy.

Attempts to pursue community engagement in sites appeared to have widely variable levels of success nationally. This was mirrored in disparities between Sites A and B, as shown by a closer look at differences between these sites.

A Closer Look at Differences in Community Engagement in Sites A and B

We have customers who don’t have a clue where to go in the community and rely on us to be able to direct them...In the past we probably haven’t done that very well. (Jenny, Customer Service Worker)

The development of community engagement by customer service workers led to more confidence from social workers in customer service workers referral skills and knowledge. The development of this engagement varied greatly between sites, as a closer look at the progress of individual workers shows (below).

In both sites, customer service workers' had limited experience of referring to services, and during initial training some workers felt trepidation around even basic referrals. Over time, and across both sites in this study, workers built up substantial experience of referral to services, particularly in site B, which was encouraged through regular visiting of services. As one social worker stated at a meeting in site B, “They know so much about services that
we’ll often go to them”.

Workers reported that visits out were particularly important as they helped build their knowledge of the lived experience of service use. For example,

People would often ask about the hostel, ‘but what’s it like?... and I felt like a bit of a fraud because I didn’t really know much about it. But after I’d visited it I was able to talk about the living arrangements, who the workers were and all of that...and the customer could tell I knew what I was talking about. (Renee, Customer Service Worker)

The concept maps below are graphic representations of changes in the community engagement reported by customer service workers across the two sites. These are based on interviews near the commencement and then near the end of the year.

Worker reports at commencement all indicated a low base in both sites, with no workers having more than fifteen connections in the community for referral or consultation. Workers progressed substantially and consistently as a group in site B and less substantially but equally consistently as a group in site A. Concept maps are provided of one worker in each site to illustrate progress over time (Figures 3. and 4.).

The maps highlight two factors and changes over time. The first factor is the customer service worker’s experience in making referrals to a particular service. (Did a customer service worker make referrals to a service?) The second is whether a more personalised relationship with a service existed. (Did the worker have a person to person relationship with someone in the service who could help if needed?). This second factor is important in social work understandings of networking progressing towards mutual practices such as negotiation and shared planning (Trevillion, 1999).
A lack of opportunity for engagement outside the office, particularly in the first half of the year, led to customer service workers in site A relying heavily on community reference materials and locally developed databases. Databases were seen by workers as helpful in a limited way, though not providing any real depth of understanding of services and were sometimes misleading or not up to date. Having to search through resources in frontline situations with people expecting clear advice or guidance was challenging, and often led them to seek out the social worker for basic advice. Customer service workers talked about limitations to learning on the job like this, sometimes with vexation that ‘if only’ they had known more about a particular service a few weeks before, when they had someone who needed that help. (A.M.1-4). The development of closer...
Person to person relationships were more evident in site B, as Figure 4 shows.

Figure 4. A concept map of a customer service worker’s progress around referrals and person to person relationships with community services in site B.

Person to person relationships were highly valued by customer service workers, not just to ensure more informed, ‘sticky’ referrals, but also because they seemed to alter the nature of some referrals. Workers reported that services with which they had a person to person relationship with were more likely to respond in ‘grey’ situations where a referral didn’t quite fit, rather than simply dismissing the referral. In some cases workers were also able to draw together options from multiple services to fill an apparent gap which no one service could meet (B.T.2).
At both sites social workers engaged with workers in coaching around the development of community relationships. In site B, a shared approach developed, where customer service workers effectively took responsibility for relationships with some agencies such as charity aid and housing services but consulted with social workers around referrals and liaison with more specialised services such as mental health and sexual abuse agencies.

Developments in sites A and B demonstrated that Centrelink could provide pathways to a variety of support, with staff playing a role in helping people distinguish where to go and how to identify what was useful from different options. There was also evidence of over confidence, where customer service workers expectations of having assisted customers did not match with the customer's experience. Despite this over confidence, customer reports of altered service experiences appeared starkly different compared to their previous Centrelink contacts and to expectations which might be gleaned from the literature.

**Conclusion**

Changes discussed in this Chapter involved a development of more humanising encounters in Centrelink, particularly where workers began to collaborate and work closely with social workers, or where they accessed regular guidance and advice. Involvement in community engagement appeared to present more options and broadened the capacity of Centrelink to respond in frontline service engagements. Challenges to this included time and freedom to interact outside the office environment. Such engagement was also construed by managers in a more technical way which has been associated with managerial, informational approaches to knowledge (Parton, 2008). The trust and knowledge which emerged out of closer relationships were difficult for Centrelink to integrate into tool based thinking. Parton has pointed out the difficulties organisations can have accounting for knowledge which can only be sourced through relationships, arguing that this has led to a favouring of knowledge and engagement without contextual depth.
The challenges of valuing engagement were evident in both sites. A deeper knowledge of referral options, understanding of how other services operated, and connection to workers in those services provided opportunities to assist people accessing Centrelink. These opportunities were approached at times naively by customer service workers, but instances of collaboration with social workers showed how a more sophisticated engagement could develop.

Reports of altered service experiences contrasted with previous Centrelink contacts and with expectations which might be gleaned from the literature. The following Chapter goes into more detail in examining customer experiences and also considers a specific case in detail through different perspectives. It illustrates further the challenges and opportunities around reform and a dramatic, if fragile, shift in engagement.
Statement of contribution to co-authored published paper.

Chapter Seven is a co-authored paper. The bibliographic details for the co-authored paper, including all authors, are:

My contribution to the paper involved: lead author responsible for conceptualisation, data collection, categorisation of the data into a usable format, analysis of data, and write up of paper.

(Signed)  
Gregory Hall  
(Date) 20/5/2016

(Countersigned)  
Supervisor and corresponding author: Jennifer Boddy  
(Date) 20/5/2016

(Countersigned)  
Supervisor and corresponding author: Lesley Chenoweth  
(Date) 18:05:16

The Chapter is presented in the relevant journal style.
The following paper considers a range of case examples of practical engagement from Sites A and B, and looks in detail at a specific case example of engagement from Site B. It details an approach to unpacking the multiple voices and perspectives which surround interaction with Centrelink and explores methodological issues pertinent to understanding experiences of engagement in a dynamic context. It illuminates case experiences through narrative and pictorial representations of interaction.

This paper illustrates how attempts to engage worked at a granular level. It reveals areas of confusion and risk, but also a more humanising experience which helped clarify needs and prevent distress and potentially significant harm. It highlights concerns about inconsistent involvement between social workers and customer service workers at the frontline, but also reveals significant impacts from 'behind the scenes' guidance and support from social workers, which are discussed more extensively in Chapters Eight and Nine.
Chapter Seven

In the Shadow of Rashomon: Pursuing Polyphony in Practice

Case Studies within the Australian Social Security Environment

Greg Hall, Jennifer Boddy and Lesley Chenoweth

An evidence based turn in social welfare environments has meant that traditional case accounts and narratives of welfare practice experiences are liable to be disparaged as unscientific and anecdotal. From a critical perspective, such narratives also risk decontextualising power and organisational dynamics and providing a snapshot of a ‘case’ rather than unearthing broader lived experience. Research which focuses on the voices of service users, or narrates the background struggles of street level workers has contributed to a more complex understanding of practice. However, even these approaches are vulnerable to accusations that they neglect other voices, particularly of managers and supervisors whose ‘hidden hand’ in development, training and support helps frame practice.

Conceptual developments around dialogue and network practices which have emerged over the last two decades, particularly in the Nordic context, have stressed the role of multiple perspectives and ‘polyphony’ to understanding the complexity of social work and welfare practice. This paper describes an approach to building polyphonic research accounts of practice in an Australian setting, bringing together diverse perspectives and situating these in a local historical context. Developed for a study of reforms to interview and referral practices in the Australian social security environment, the approach traced the initial training of welfare staff, ongoing support from managers and social workers, and day to day encounters with clients. A case example is provided from the study which demonstrates the re framing of case study ‘story’ into a complex multi layered account of practice.

Keywords: methods in social work; social administration; social welfare
Introduction

In late 2011, the Australian government department responsible for social security delivery introduced reforms to interview and referral practices with people seeking help beyond financial assistance. Informed by a small trial of place based servicing (Darcy and Gwyther 2010), the department proposed a widespread reform programme across 44 offices. This appeared to depart from directive and punitive trends reported around Australian social security interactions in the literature (Blaxland 2008; Grahame and Marston 2012; Schooneveldt 2004), focusing instead on enhancing relationships and strengths.

Reforms involved drawing on training and practice support from the small contingent of internal departmental social workers and overhauling office interactions so that a team of departmental workers in each programme location might be able to interact more supportively with people who appeared to have broader needs beyond payment, referring and connecting them to help in the community. However, the kinds of engaging interpersonal practices, local knowledge and relationships which might facilitate such work have not typically been associated with the large government service provider, which is better known in the literature for high volume payment administration and compulsory, transactional type processes (Murphy et al. 2011). Given this, the possibility of being embedded within the practice environment to conduct research over an extended period offered a chance to explore how new practices developed when applied in the departmental setting, particularly in relation to the input and influence of social workers.

Science into society?

For several years now the authors have been involved in investigating or working with aspects of ‘personalisation’ and ‘activation’ in social security
services in Australia (Hall et al. 2012). Recently this has occurred alongside a research alliance with the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) and the Australian Department of Human Services (the federal department responsible for social security delivery in Australia).

The CSIRO (perhaps best known for the development of WiFi), is a broad based research organisation which, within this particular alliance, focused on what it terms bringing ‘science into society’. The CSIRO alliance began from a premise of better targeting welfare resources by working with practitioners and managers to develop profiling, assessment and engagement practices based on clear ‘scientific’ evidence (Hajkowicz, Mason, and Spinks 2013).

The pursuit of such evidence is however not without its tensions, particularly in the social welfare or human service context where human experiences and meaning is framed by conversations and stories which emerge within and out of a practice environment. In the social welfare context, Webb (2001) has outlined connections between evidence based approaches and new managerialist logics which restrict understanding of the kinds of uncertain and unexpected experiences central to social work. Evidence based approaches in organisations may favour routinised and standardised practices which are proposed as enhancing organisational efficiency and effectiveness (Aarons, Sommerfeld, and Walrath Greene 2012). For ourselves, as social workers and researchers with a particular interest in human accounts of experience and practice research, conversations with the CSIRO team (whose backgrounds included mathematics, economics, neuroscience and psychology) became an opportunity to work at the ‘pointy end’ of tensions with ‘scientific’, evidence based trends.

**Pursuing practice case studies**

Within the departmental environment, there is a history of workers providing senior management with case studies of practice experiences with social security clients. This meant that there was some familiarity and interest in a
research approach utilising practice case studies. The attraction appeared to be their capacity to detail human experiences in service environments in a way which tells a coherent relatable story. The condensed narrative characteristic of such case studies allows workers and researchers to highlight novel or salient features as they appear within the plot of the worker–client interaction. Ideally, this allows readers to appreciate issues and outcomes in relation to a human context. However, in the context of the CSIRO alliance, it also raised questions of bias and low evidentiary value.

Such concerns reflected in part epistemological differences, given the generally positivist approach of CSIRO as opposed to our more interpretive and critical position. However, it also raised a valid critical concern which has been addressed tangentially in a range of narrative researches which challenge the validity of detached, expert oriented perspectives on social experience (Blaxland 2008; Coy 2008; London and Halfpenny 2006). This has led to an increased focus on service user narratives which can challenge and enhance traditional practice case studies by depicting experiences more closely and even viscerally from a service user perspective (Connelly 2010).

In the social security/employment services context, a number of studies have highlighted the active role of clients in practice. For example, Olesen and Eskelinen’s (2011) narratives of employment service users demonstrated how an understanding of practice needs to incorporate the actions and input of people experiencing unemployment rather than view them as objects to be moved towards fixed outcomes. In Australia, there is an extensive literature detailing rich accounts of client experiences with social security, and these have tended to highlight instances of oppression and the lack of opportunity for client voices to be heard (Blaxland 2008; Serr 2006; Ziguras, Dufty, and Considine 2003).

Allowing diverse voices to emerge in research and practice is a long held tenet of critical social work (Dominelli 2002) and may play a role in uncovering service scenarios which dehumanise and stigmatise (Strier 2007).
However, a limitation to this tradition is that accounts can lack corroboration of experiences from the organisational perspective. This issue has been addressed to an extent through street level bureaucrat type organisational case studies which allow client perspectives to be studied but also detail workers’ experiences in a more critical manner by providing insight into the day to day struggles surrounding practice (Howard 2003). Typically, within an organisational case study approach, a focus on revealing multiple voices is significant (Stake, 1995). Despite this possibly more rounded view, two issues of concern remain. Firstly that the experiences of service users and workers are generalised across different interactions rather than the same shared instance of practice, leaving conclusions open to a level of abstraction. Secondly, a focus on the struggles of street level bureaucrats may underplay the broader impacts of professional frameworks and possibilities of management support for professional practice (Evans 2011).

**Polyphony and perspectival diversity: from Bakhtin to Rashomon**

Appreciation for how diverse voices might be understood when brought together around an experience of practice can be framed in respect of the concept of ‘polyphony’. A number of researchers have suggested the value of this concept to social work, with reference to the critical theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (Irving and Young 2002; Seikkula and Arnkil 2006). Bakhtin saw the use of multiple perspectives or voices in the development of the genre of the novel as changing social understandings of reality by destabilising the privileged monologue typical of earlier epic and dramatic forms of storytelling (Irving and Young 2002).

The destabilising of monologue within social work, health and human service encounters has been a focus of dialogical and relational social work and mental health directions (Folgheraiter 2004; Pozzuto, Arnd Caddigan, and Averett 2009; Seikkula and Arnkil 2006). Interest in polyphony has been particularly evident in some Nordic health and welfare settings, where
appreciation of ‘the polyphonic nature of clients’ reality’ (Seikkula, Arnkil, and Eriksson 2003, p. 185) has been linked to resolving multi agency ‘muddles’ and enhancing therapeutic directions (Seikkula and Arnkil 2006).

In therapeutic practice research, the emergence of practice case studies which involve intense collaboration between practitioners and clients (Zindel 2001) or which analyse recorded practice dialogues (Seikkula, Laitila, and Rober 2012) has appeared as a different way of drawing out diverse perspectives in therapeutic contexts. In a service delivery context, Chandler (1992) cited Akutagawa’s take on polyphony, where multiple divergent accounts are reported around the same event, to reconstruct an individual case study of one service user’s experiences. Akutugawa’s (1959) short story ‘In a Grove’ (more famously converted by Kurosawa into the film Rashomon) focused on varying perspectives and perceptions around a shared experience. Chandler recreated the various perspectives of services and actors involved in a case of social work practice in order to build a more diverse understanding of how practice played out and might have occurred differently had diverse perspectives been more clearly brought together. The practical challenges of accounting for multiple perspectives around an individual case were resolved by Chandler through reference to public record and a level of informed assumption of what client and worker perspectives might have been. For the current study, we have attempted to go a step further, maintaining Chandler’s critical approach but building this around actual accounts and information from observations and interviews in the organisational case context.

**Study method**

A key goal for CSIRO was the pursuit of a ‘gold standard’ randomised controlled trial. This appeared quite remote from our approach, as did their team’s interest in the development of a rating scale to objectively quantify the ‘vulnerability’ of individuals seeking assistance. However, a shared interest in
contextualising knowledge (Nowotny, Scott, and Gibbons 2001) encouraged
dialogue around the complexity of the practice environment. Hence, CSIRO
supported the first named author to pursue a case study approach examining
perspectives on practice in context.

A level of embeddedness in the departmental environment was achieved
through a research relationship in which the primary researcher and first
author with a background in the department was allowed access to two trial
sites on an ongoing basis as well as invited to participate and observe
training, development and management activities in a variety of locations as
well as community meetings over the course of one year. This was taken as
an opportunity to witness the development of practice first hand, but also to
be ‘present’ as a participant observer in training or reflection forums,
occasionally contributing to discussions in training or management meetings
on the basis of a social work background and professional practice
knowledge.

In a formal sense, two waves of semi structured interviews were
undertaken with eight workers (one was unavailable for a later and one
unavailable for an early interview), six social workers (one was unavailable for
an early and one unavailable for a later interview), and three managers, all of
whom voluntarily agreed to participate. Four senior managers, who oversaw
other trial sites nationally, attended a later focus group interview which
allowed for some checking of experiences from the two sites studied against those
in other sites. Initial interviews were pursued in the first few months of the research,
as participants were experiencing implementation of reforms. Follow up
interviews and the focus group interview were conducted in the final months of
the research. These were recorded and transcribed and focused on perceptions of
practice and factors which impacted this. Ethical approval was obtained through
the Griffith University ethics committee and was also passed through the
departmental research branch. Observation of direct practice was not pursued
directly due to ethical constraints, however involvement in the practice
setting seated with workers and spending time with them informally, meant
that practice experiences were sometimes shared or made visible in an open plan environment. For workers engaged in direct practice, interviews involved opportunities to relate case studies of practice, and a series of narratives were collated over the course of the year which, from their perspective, were typical of practice or raised key issues of significance. One set of interviews was also undertaken with clients during the second half of the year in which they were asked to provide their perspective on the practice interaction. Ten self selected clients were recruited through advertising within departmental settings. In five cases, clients expressed an interest in sharing their account with the departmental worker as a means of developing practice, and in these cases, through a written dual consent arrangement, it was possible to set the foundations for bringing together a client and a worker account of the same practice experience.

**Data and initial analysis**

For the purposes of this paper, we focus primarily on a detailed analysis of one practice experience where a social security recipient was offered additional help and support when exhibiting some distress in a local office. In detailing one particular case, our primary intent was to illustrate the method of reconstructing a case experience with the benefit of different (at times inconsistent) perspectives. However, we also discuss how ‘close up’ insights from the single case might be valuable in exploring concerns identified across multiple cases.

To begin this, we briefly consider how we initially reviewed a large set of worker narratives and delineated some themes which were arising in practice with the aid of a case matrix (Miles and Huberman 1994). Cases were applied to a matrix outlining 30 practice experiences which emerged during interviews and observations undertaken during the study. This case matrix set out for each account the pathway into service, factors which arose through conversation, actions and connections of the worker or client, and outcomes from the case. A snapshot of a small section of the case matrix is provided below (Figure 1).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Referral reason</th>
<th>Factors which emerged in planning</th>
<th>Actions</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Case 17 - Site A Referred by access worker Frustrated and angry as departmental debt prevented an advance payment</td>
<td>Medication, recent psychotic episode Separated from partner - moved to live with his parents but violence led to them taking out a violence order Large state debt, Cash lender debts, at risk of homelessness</td>
<td>Discussed work and development orders to address state debt Discussed Court recommendations around doctor and counselling service and exemption from jobseeker activities Referral to material aid service</td>
<td>Material aid service assisted with some debts Decided to attend counsellor and doctor: provided medical certificate - jobseeker activity exemption granted Change of payment dates to match rent dates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case 18 - Site B Referred by reception Requested income statement for housing, looked unkempt/ dishevelled</td>
<td>Had been living in his car for months His main priority recorded was a shower. In intensive support job assistance</td>
<td>Already established collaborative relationship between worker and Job Search Provider (JSP) drawn on to negotiate assistance Referral to neighbourhood centre</td>
<td>Assisted with petrol by JSP Accessed shower at neighbourhood centre - who assisted with accommodation Later took up a course through JSP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case 19 - Site B Referred by access worker Distressed, children removed into foster care</td>
<td>Distress as children driven past his house to school every day Client and partner recently moved to the area - no support Needed stable accommodation to move towards return of children</td>
<td>Substantial discussion around impacts and goals Referral to Housing Department Referral to counselling service Consultation with internal DHS social worker (no referral)</td>
<td>Later obtained housing through Housing NSW Chose not to pursue counselling Clients continue to struggle in dealings with child protection agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case 20 - Site A Referred by manager Payment claim (Had gone off payments due to not attending appointments)</td>
<td>Had difficulties attending appointments because of mental health issues Departmental debt around non compliance Facing court action from social housing provider</td>
<td>Negotiation with Social Housing provider Processed new claim - Arranged Job Capacity Assessment - Discussed Direct Debit Negotiation with departmental debt recovery staff</td>
<td>Housing provider waived most rental arrears Payment granted Direct Debit in place Departmental debt waived</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. A snapshot of the case matrix.
The matrix was used to consider practice in individual cases and was also reviewed vertically through different accounts to build up a cumulative sense of practices. This brought out a range of issues, particularly the limited involvement of departmental social workers despite the presentation of serious issues, the limited focus on strengths in many interactions, and the fact that many cases appeared concerned with immediate crises and with internal departmental assistance. Twenty three cases showed the worker played a role in advocating or addressing payment or service issues internally involving social security administration. In seven of these cases, significant instances of hardship were addressed or averted. Some brief examples follow which illustrate this.

**Example A**

A man was facing court action around a large debt to his social housing provider. The worker established that the debt had arisen after the man had ceased receiving social security payments and that this occurred because he had experienced health issues and repeatedly missed appointments, also incurring a substantial debt to the department. The worker assisted with the new claim process and facilitated a Job Capacity assessment around his health issues, providing advice around the man’s situation gained from their lengthy conversation. The worker negotiated with the social housing provider, and the man chose to use a direct debit service following which the provider waived the bulk of his rental arrears. The worker also negotiated with the departmental debt team around the possibility of waiving the man’s departmental debt. On clarification of his circumstances this team chose to waive the debt. Further follow up confirmed the man was in receipt of payment and in a more stable situation.
**Example B**

A woman with young children was facing potential eviction. The initial response from the departmental worker involved a housing service referral, however the worker also realized that the woman was not receiving more than minimal Family Tax Benefit (FTB), and informed her that this was because she had not submitted a child support application after separating from her partner and needed to pursue this. Follow up with the woman revealed that the housing service had not assisted her, and she was to be evicted in the coming days. A further, more personalized, referral was made with another housing service. At the same time the worker ensured through consultation with the child support program worker that the woman’s FTB was increased, helping assist her with the necessary administrative issues around child support. Further follow up confirmed her receipt of payments and that she had attained secure affordable housing.

**Example C**

A woman was distressed and in financial difficulties, facing eviction and homelessness of herself and her daughter. The worker spent time engaging with and listening to the woman’s story and acknowledged her strength in coping for several years since her separation from her partner, although always juggling money, she was only now in arrears with anyone. On checking the departmental record the worker discovered the woman had not been receiving the correct rent assistance. On further investigation she found that the woman had not received correct rent assistance for several years despite many contacts with department over that time, where she assumed this was the case. The worker pursued the issue policy wise and with the woman’s landlord to confirm tenancy details. After higher level advice was provided, a substantial payment was made and eviction and significant trauma averted for the family.

That workers focused on payment outcomes and the resolution of an immediate crisis raised questions about the nature of new practices. A focus on social security entitlements was not anticipated in reform documentation or in training sessions observed by the primary researcher. Reforms were intended to
engage people with external options in the community and develop strengths and capacities. In fact, there was an expectation in these that social security administration was ‘business as usual’ and would be undertaken through standard processes. Yet, workers appeared to be spending considerable time on engagements within social security itself.

**Digging deeper: building a polyphonic case study**

The five cases where both workers and clients’ accounts were available were then considered. Of these, three contained an element of involvement in internal payment activity, and given our interest in this phenomenon, the first of these (chronologically) was chosen for in depth analysis (case J). Worker and client accounts of this case were reviewed using a comparative approach, looking for similarities and differences within the worker and client perspectives and tracing the pathway of resources and supports engaged with (in line with a model expectation that the service would look to building capabilities and resources). The accounts were then supplemented through looking at other perspectives of persons who appeared in or around the case. In Chandler’s (1992) study, these perspectives were created through assumptions based on professional experience and public record. In our case, we also pursued some interpretation of perspectives but were able to draw more directly on views expressed during interviews or observed during meetings or forums. This led to a practice case study approach as outlined (Figure 2).

Whilst technical approaches exist for reporting multiple narratives simultaneously (Boje 2007), our reporting draws on a summary researcher account (following Chandler (1992)) based initially on what appeared to be coherent elements, and gradually supplementing and unfolding this by presenting perspectives revealed in interviews and, increasingly surrounding this with verbatim comments from participants. To complement this unfolding, a progressive illustration of a ‘practice network’ (Trevillion 1999, 2000) is provided. (This approach appears to have resonated when presented back in
the research environment). To address the possibility that our own researcher perspective reiterated a clientisation process and uncritically rendered participants in practice roles, we drew attention throughout the case study to the artificial nature of the service/practice environment, and offered reflections on and about practices which occur there.

Case J: findings and analysis

Case J traces the experiences which developed around John (not his real name), a young man in receipt of unemployment benefit who had recently been looking for stable accommodation. John had just obtained some housing, but had outlaid his entire benefit to meet the rental and this led him to approach the department for assistance.

When John walked into a departmental office he was diverted to a phone to discuss an ‘urgent payment’ request with a worker at a call centre. John was asked to describe why his request was unforeseen and was ultimately advised that payment for ordinary household items were the kinds of things which were not unforeseen or special and therefore his urgent payment request was rejected.

Figure 2. Developing a polyphonic case study.
From the initial call centre worker’s perspective John’s request was interpreted as an urgent payment request which did not meet the criteria. Leaving aside for the moment a critique around the criteria themselves, which appear highly discretionary, John’s approach for assistance was largely understood within a payment framework. John felt he more or less had to argue his case around a concept of what was foreseen or not foreseen, which he found difficult. John at no time felt that the worker was interested in what John had experienced, and a last minute offer by the call centre worker to look up emergency relief agencies for him was dismissed by John, who by this stage was feeling disappointed and embarrassed.

From the departmental call centre worker’s perspective, John’s request for assistance could be simply described as per (Figure 3.1).

On his way out of the office however, the site worker who had initially diverted him to the phone, expressed some concern to John that he appeared distressed and suggested he have a chat with someone who could spend some more time with him.

John at first thought this conversation was about talking about his history of problems (which included incarceration, family breakdown and unemployment). He later expressed to me that he was surprised that the worker appeared interested in discussing how things were going more broadly for him, including what was working well.

John talked with the worker about how he had recently made some steps to establish some stability: he had just obtained some more stable housing. His housing change had left him needing both food and material assistance, and short on money. As the conversation progressed, the worker talked more about what could be done about John’s immediate needs. After going over a few emergency relief options with the worker (something he had previously rejected), John felt positive about accessing two services. John remarked to me in our interview that the worker explained about these services in detail and even knew the people there who would help him. She also spoke to them on his behalf before he went around which made him feel more comfortable going.
Worker perspective

Whilst the worker didn’t agree to what John wanted urgent payment wise, she agreed that what she’d learnt did justify the office relooking at his urgent payment request. After some consultation with the social worker (which John was not involved in) it was decided that a smaller payment was warranted and would in this case help the situation (given the limits of emergency relief agencies), and not place John in further hardship.

From the worker’s perspective, urgent payments were difficult for her to address in the departmental context.

Figure 3.1. Initial perspectives around case J.

Whilst the departmental guidelines appeared to separate her role from that of deciding on these payments by requiring claimants to address these through a telephone based service, she felt that her attempts to be supportive around a person’s needs could not be separated from the person’s financial situation. As she put it,

Money is life, do you know what I mean? So if they’re anxious about the money side of things, we’ve gotta get that stuff sorted or they can’t hear.

They can’t get beyond that.

In this respect, she drew on support from the office social worker to effectively alter the standard payment process. The confluence of voices around this is illustrated (Figure 3.2). This demonstrates how different perspectives combined around a course of action as workers who were trained and supported to look for needs and pursue a more supportive interaction which would facilitate external assistance carried over that approach to addressing internal issues.
This was expressed by the worker more generally,

What I’m learning more and more is to listen ... to allow them time so they
are not pressured and they can communicate what they need. Being heard
I think is a wonderful thing.

Or as another worker interviewed put it,

Most of the time it’s the customer leading the conversation, the interaction
is more about where the customer wants to go.

Evidence from the case matrix suggested that practices were highly labile and in many instances helpful engagements were undertaken without a particular use of techniques associated with a strengths based approach. This was framed in the social worker’s voice in these terms,
I don’t think it’s what I would call ‘strengths based practice’, but I think they are having more meaningful conversations, and there are elements of strengths in there.

**John’s reflections and reflecting on John’s pathway**

A month after his interaction with the department John described feeling settled into his housing, still struggling with money but ‘managing’. John had reflected considerably on his experience and framed this in our interview in terms of what he saw as the importance of being ‘believed’ and ‘listened to’. He found the experience to be unlike any previous experience with the department. John remarked to me that it made him feel more positive and more ‘human’ and that it turned around his mood from feeling quite down and wanting to ‘chuck in’ his housing and ‘go on the road’.

In talking about his interaction, he continually blended his experience with the department with other recent positive experiences of being helped (and helping), describing these collectively as a positive turn for him rather than seeing the departmental contact as an isolated intervention.

Yeah she actually sat down and opened up and said you can go down this way or you can go down this way and in the end she could say well ‘yep we can help you, this is what you’ve gotta do’.

The provision of an interaction which contextualised John’s difficult circumstances and allowed the worker to draw on internal and external options provided an opportunity for a significantly different response to John’s situation. This response addressed John’s immediate needs and perhaps redressed an element of potential administrative exclusion (given the change in decision around payment). There was, from John’s perspective, an element of direction, ‘this is what you’ve gotta do’, but this appeared to be experienced by him as helpful and was intermingled with more open conversation. Beyond material outcomes, John felt this contact respected and valued his basic humanity and he contrasted this with his previous experiences in the departmental environment.
A couple of years ago I’d walk into [office name], or even this year, you’d walk in and basically they’d see you and send you out the door. If you had problems they didn’t really care. If you had problems they’d say ‘Oh yes, we can help you’ or ‘oh no we can’t’ and send you out the door. But the other week there I had a few problems in life and I spoke to [worker’s name] and instead of in and out the door she basically done everything humanly possible.

Figure 3.2 illustrates a significant change in perspective, as the worker reframed John’s ‘demand’ into a need which could be given context by some better understanding of his lived experience. John understood this as focused on his problem, but valued the worker taking time to listen and to assist with solutions.

She actually took the time to hear what was actually wrong with me. Instead of just saying yes we can help you or no we can’t … offering to help and saying that’s the help we can give, do you want it or don’t you want it. Instead of just saying yes or no.

Other network perspectives

Despite beneficial aspects of the interaction, there were limits in respect of the focus on strengths and awareness of John’s broader network. The particular clientisation of John within the social security setting appeared to position him in terms of having ‘problems’, despite some attempts to look at positive steps taken. Figure 3.2 shows attempts to shift perspective, as the worker reframed John’s ‘demand’ into a need which could be given context by some better understanding of his lived experience. However, (as Figure 3.3 shows), engagement with the perspectives of other players in John’s network was limited, (although this might ideally be anticipated in social work practice pursuing strengths and capabilities (McCashen 2005)). John’s informal network contained other figures such as a friend, whose network presence contributes to a different way of viewing John, and his strengths and capabilities.

Several weeks earlier his friend had helped him out with some furniture and John had in turn (without any expectation) offered to help his friend’s
elderly relative with some work around the house, (his friend was unaware that he had worked for several years previously in such a job and had a variety of skills). John explained that it was something the mother could not afford to pay for properly, but she had purchased some tools for him which he could use for other work opportunities. He had since done a number of jobs over the last couple of weeks and talked very positively about this in terms of helping someone and using his skills.

Figure 3.3. Different perspectives around case J.
His friend (mate), for example, can be represented as perceiving John as a ‘skilled’ and charitable helper, pursuing work and social opportunities with an eye to the needs of others (drawing on John’s narrative below).

Well I haven’t gotten myself a job but … a mate’s mum just bought a house … and she’s an elderly lady and can’t really afford much and I’m a painter … so I’ve just painted, in the last week, painted four rooms of her house. Three bedrooms and the bathroom and kitchen I done. Haven’t done the lounge room yet … Just basically a love job, being nice to the lady … just keeping myself busy.

Similarly, John’s contact with an employment support worker in a community agency offered opportunities for communication which might have been helpful. In community meetings observed during the study, employment agencies raised concerns around the need to be better coordinated with workers assisting shared clients in the social security setting. John advised that he was struggling with transport costs, given his key friend lived some distance away, and was hoping to get casual work to boost his income. John reported that he was being supported in this by an employment agency which he described as very positive and had helped resolve some issues with his job search contract. That worker was attempting to help John along an employment pathway and adapt John’s activity requirements to allow for challenges John experienced.

**Social worker perspective**

Underlying the limited social worker involvement in John’s case were challenges to availability of social workers influenced by the fact that departmental reforms did not include, beyond training, any resources for ongoing social worker coaching and monitoring. Despite this, the professional social worker in this site attempted to make themselves available for consultation and also assisted with coaching workers on a regular basis.

Social workers relied on workers to consult with them, but had no control over this in a supervisory sense. The absence of direct social worker involvement (John in fact never met the social worker) in potentially difficult
situations was a concern raised by social workers in the research interviews. As one social worker put it, ‘I worry that they [workers] are doing too much, or maybe not enough’. This suggests a concern about risk, and from John’s perspective he had a history of dealing with issues such as incarceration, family breakdown and personal trauma which might invoke a risk orientation in professionals. John framed his need for help in the research interview with reference to concerns around survival, and made reference to having had thoughts of self harm at the time of his interaction.

   Researcher: Do you want to say what the outcome was you were looking for?
   John: I actually just wanted to keep my head on my shoulders instead of having a nasty whack of horse tranquillizer or battery acid.

From the perspective of the social worker then, the lack of further social work involvement was a significant worry and represented a disconnect with frontline workers. Despite this, the social workers also held a very positive view that workers were moving away from a closed and unhelpful interaction style with clients and allying with social workers around internal decisions, such as that which occurred in John’s case. This coming together appeared particularly important given previous research has identified a history of pressures on social workers themselves to work more transactionally (Hall et al. 2012).

Manager perspective

In John’s case, the worker had been strongly supported by the manager and social worker in meeting with community agencies and getting out of the office to build connections. In this respect, the good worker relationship developed with services (which John acknowledged as influencing his choice to accept a referral) bore a direct relationship to cooperative support from the manager and social worker.

Managers expressed support for workers spending more time with clients and criticised a traditional transactional approach in the social security setting.
Because traditionally it’s like ‘get em in, get em out,’ you know. ‘Service them … don’t over service them!’

So its ‘in, serve, out … in, serve, out’ . ‘Fix it!’ … There’s a lot of pressure to get the customer in and get them out … Don’t engage I guess. Whereas … we’re engaging.

The manager was also supportive of looking at strengths, but felt there were limits to what was possible in the social security environment, encouraging staff to limit contacts with clients and not enter into a case management type scenario.

Valuing ‘engaging’ appeared challenging organisationally, and was a major concern for managers. As one manager described it,

We come from a very KPI [Key Performance Indicator] driven environment, where I think its about how many things we get done in a day … So I think organisationally we were struggling to say, ‘how do we measure this, how do we say its an effective use of resources?’

At the site level, managers occasionally became involved in diffusing incidents of potential aggression but otherwise had little engagement in direct work with clients or in consultation with teams. Managers anticipated that social workers would provide a level of quality control around worker engagements. This perspective indicated a lack of clarity in organisational arrangements and in light of experiences in John’s case, a crucial area of divergence with managers anticipating a level of professional oversight, whilst social workers felt that their capacity and authority to oversee worker practices was limited. Managerial support for workers to engage with social workers in coaching or reflection beyond immediate case support was mixed, with some seeing it as some thing that might cease after an initial training period.

**Implications for research and practice**

Identifying, listening and reflecting on situated knowledge points us to areas where policy, organisation or disciplinary schemes both fail and succeed. (Floersch 2000, 188)

Divergence between organisational expectations and practice experiences
(which were identified in the case matrix analysis) appear more understandable in light of the detailed case study. John did not ‘arrive’ at his interview with the frontline worker prepared to discuss strengths and community interests, but ‘rebounded’ there through a process where he was referred to someone to ‘talk to’ after a payment enquiry with a call centre worker. The interview and referral worker’s subsequent response to John’s ‘crisis’ was not incommensurate with her learning from training. She saw the strengths based approach as underpinned by a humanising and collaborative framework. That perspective also led her to consider social security payment assistance as a central part of her response to John, even though that was not anticipated in the referral oriented role.

Attention to the voice of the social worker and to submerged elements in John’s story (which referenced self harm) suggested worry around workers being drawn into crisis work without a more robust professional background. From the manager’s perspective, such worry ought not to have arisen because she perceived there was strong support for social work involvement and consultation from the outset. However, ongoing support (from the social worker’s perspective) was hard to provide in the continued busy practice environment. In this environment the social worker’s worry about having limited input into the ongoing practice of frontline workers might be contrasted with an apparent influence in the initial training of staff, (particularly around encouraging a more humanising interaction which appeared to have had a substantial impact.)

Attending to John’s voice further revealed that his experience was for him a remarkable, positive change from previous encounters in the social security environment. It was framed by him as a humane and highly personal experience in which he appreciated some discussion of his strengths and capabilities even if these were not extensively progressed.

*Consequences of appreciating polyphony*
Consequent to the first named author’s presentations around ‘Case J’ at a departmental management forum, the department’s Social Work Branch made changes which aimed at enhancing relationships between social workers and frontline staff. These changes involved the development and distribution of a booklet to structure and encourage reflective conversations between social workers and staff (Australian Department of Human Services 2013b), and advice to managers around providing resources and time for informal ‘in practice’ consultation to occur.

Similarly, as a consequence of another presentation to middle managers, the first named author was invited to present at a range of regional management and practice forums across the country during 2012–2013 and to discuss the use of community networks in departmental practice. Our interest in polyphony was also appropriated at an early stage in a departmental publication which published a set of stories from workers and clients as a way of raising awareness around experiences of ‘homelessness’, (though without the kind of multi layered analysis or commentary we have pursued to establish a case study) (Australian Department of Human Services, 2011).

Conclusion

Practice case studies are a common method used to unpack the complex human context of social work and human service practice but are vulnerable to criticism, particularly from some scientific or evidence based approaches. In the research environment which occupied this study, there was strong interest in stories which might provide human context, but also scepticism that such stories were anecdotal and unreliable. A mixture of interest and scepticism shown by CSIRO around practice case studies encouraged us to go beyond a typical account of ‘intervention’ and pursue a way of unfolding ‘network knowledge’, exploring ‘the position of the individual not in isolation but in relation to others’ (Trevillion 2000, 515).

Over the course of our relationship with CSIRO, practice examples which
demonstrated limitations to framing social welfare interventions as a form of ‘treatment’ with ‘linear’ outcomes were discussed, and the CSIRO team’s interest in alternative perspectival or subjective measures led to their developing a broad set of ‘favourable outcomes’ (such as reduction in criminal ideation) for use in a randomised controlled trial (Bradford 2012). The CSIRO psychologist also led work considering practice outcomes in the social security environment in terms of capabilities (Mason et al. 2014). The first named author enhanced the CSIRO team’s engagement with practitioners (facilitating CSIRO participation at a departmental national social work practice conference), and the authors encouraged CSIRO’s work with a group of social work practitioners to develop some provisional assumptions around economic outcomes which might arise from departmental interventions. Such developments suggest how a predilection for a ‘gold standard’, was complemented by the team’s focus on contextual factors, subjectivity and pursuing what Nowotny, Scott, and Gibbons (2001) have described as ‘robust’ knowledge.

Our own manner of addressing this was to pursue a more transparent approach whilst still maintaining a critical stance by considering both a large set of case accounts of practice, and a detailed analysis of practice experiences incorporating differing perspectives. Attention to polyphony revealed that practices diverged from organisational expectations and highlighted areas of new practice which were cause for professional concern. However, it also revealed that professional training and support, particularly from social workers, had addressed some real needs for clients dealing with a challenging organisational environment by encouraging workers to adopt a more supportive approach to engagement.

The current study approach might be further developed through a broader and more direct exploration of network perspectives, particularly in cases involving substantial cross agency practice. Attempts within the organisation to ‘utilise’ (Gray and Schubert 2012) research knowledge confirmed Chandler’s (1992) presumption that building awareness of different perspectives through a
polyphonic account might resonate in the organisational environment. Further research, particularly around how social worker influence develops or wanes in this context over the long term is also warranted, as is further research into how far payment access, and stability is made possible through the pursuit of humanising conversations with people in need in the social security environment.

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Statement of contribution to co-authored unpublished paper.

Chapter Eight is a co-authored paper currently under peer review.

My contribution to the paper involved: lead author responsible for conceptualisation, data collection, categorisation of the data into a usable format, analysis of data, and write up of paper.

(Signed)  

(Date) 20/5/2016

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(Date) 2015/2016

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(Countersigned)  

(Date) 16-05-16

Supervisor and corresponding author: Lesley Chenoweth

The Chapter is presented in the relevant journal style.
The following paper considers the relationships which developed between customer service workers and social workers in sites A and B in detail. It extensively compares experiences of both groups of workers and describes the scepticism, excitement, joys and worries which emerged over time.

This paper provides insight into how social workers supported customer service workers and the difficulties around this. The opportunity for social workers to guide customer service workers in difficult situations is explored in terms of an alternative understanding of heroism. This frames social workers building of relationships as expanding their scope for influence in a daunting organisational context, whilst also exposing them to new challenges and greater awareness of issues and difficulties at the frontline.
Chapter Eight

Greg Hall, Jennifer Boddy and Lesley Chenoweth

Abstract
This paper explores the notion of heroism with reference to a study of worker relationships at the frontline of the Australian social security and government service provider (Centrelink). This study traced an innovation involving social workers and customer service workers working closely together to improve interactions with vulnerable people. Customer service workers initially reported both anxiety and excitement, expressing admiration of social workers’ skills and knowledge. Over time they emphasized the inspiration and interpersonal support social workers provided them, how this helped them deal with difficult situations and was missed when not available. Social workers’ initial scepticism around demands on their time and challenges to their professionalism gave way (in part) to a sense of influencing and guiding workers towards more humanising interactions, although concerns around risk and organisational tensions remained. Implications are discussed in light of an alternative view of heroism as an adventurous journey involving leadership, (self) discovery and risk.

Keywords: Relational social work, income support, customer service, professional identity

Challenges in late modern human service settings such as increased managerialism, machine-like processing and shallow ‘customer’ orientations can make the idea of social workers as heroic change agents appear unrealistic (Marston and McDonald, 2012; Rogowski, 2010). In a massive organisation like the Australian social security and government service provider (Centrelink), with large volumes of people seeking assistance and a dominant (and much criticised) customer service ideology, daunting obstacles exist for social work.
Human issues can become lost in ‘traffic control’, and market outcomes overshadow humanistic support. For a social worker in this situation, naive anticipations of heroic agency may not match the realities of limited influence, hostility, confusion and helplessness. Rather than heroic, workers in this environment may feel closer to Kafka’s (anti)hero in The Castle,

A lot of things here seem designed to put one off, and when a person first arrives the obstacles look insuperable... ...circumstances, the vast amount of work, the way officials are employed in the castle, the difficulty of getting hold of them... ...Who, on his own, however great a worker, could gather all the strands of even the most minor incident together on his desk at one time.  (Kafka, 1997, pp. 232-7)

Whilst the organisational setting can constrict and complicate social work practice in Kafkaesque ways, conversely, social workers also operate on the organisation they work in (Hughes & Wearing, 2013). The appeal of developing a ‘relational heart’ in service provision has grown in strength in recent years (Spratt et al., 2014), even in, and perhaps in response to, increasingly constrictive and conflictual settings (Robertson & Haight, 2012; Ruch, Turney & Ward, 2010). Encouraging organisational and network responsiveness through developing supportive and anti-oppressive relationships has been a focus of a range of relationally oriented theory influencing social work such as strengths (McCashen, 2005), network (Trevillion, 1999), dialogical (Seikkula & Arnkil, 2006) and relational social work (Folgheraiter, 2004). Recent examples of innovative relational practice have seen social workers challenge dehumanising approaches in social security settings (Tonkens & Verplanke, 2013) and expose the development there of a ‘welfare dead zone’ where people needing help are increasingly voiceless, alienated from services and caught in a dangerous cocktail of isolation and disaffection (Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development, 2014).

As cautious as we are around innovations which, as Garrett (2014) warns, may promise more than they deliver, we are interested in emerging relational directions involving social workers in human service organisations.
In this regard, we are particularly interested in how social workers are involved in and influence change attempts and changing relationships in Centrelink, an organisation accessed by marginalised Australians on a daily basis.

**Background: Change Attempts Involving Social Workers in Centrelink**

Social workers have operated in the Australian social security context for over seventy years, with over six hundred currently employed as ‘professional officers’. Whilst this is a small proportion (2-3% of overall staff), social workers occupy relatively senior operational levels, working in small detached teams in local offices, processing and call centres.

Centrelink is predominantly staffed by customer service workers who deal with enquiries and requests around payments and claims. Customer service workers interview people in severe financial hardship experiencing difficulties in everyday living, and often in crisis. Difficulties and crises are revealed (and obscured) in ‘customer service’ interactions, and there is significant research literature which has highlighted the complicated nature of such interactions in Centrelink (Eardley et al., 2005; Howard, 2003, 2012). There is also longstanding criticism that Centrelink’s service framework simplistically frames people in need of complex support as ‘customers’ (Murphy et al., 2011).

Some interactions between people accessing Centrelink and customer service workers may touch on clear ‘triggers’ which result in a hand-off or referral to a social work team (for example, around payments related to escaping domestic violence). However, customer service workers also encounter many situations which are unclear and where referrals are dependent on how an interaction unfolds at the frontline. Ambiguity may arise where the service interaction itself invites confusion or distress, particularly given increasingly semi-automated activation and social security policy conditions which can lead to mistrust as ‘customers’ present confused or angry following cancelled or suspended payments, and where they perceive that their needs are not being responded to (Murphy et al., 2011).
In this complicated and potentially volatile setting, an innovation was introduced in 2011/12 whereby customer service workers in a number of Centrelink sites began to work more closely with social workers (Australian Department of Human Services, 2013). Reforms expanded on some previous local projects which involved social workers working with customer service staff to assist particular groups of clients in need (Hall, Boddy, Chenowth & Davie, 2012). Reforms posed possibilities for improving organisational responses to difficult and distressing human situations through improving the network of relationships surrounding frontline customer service. In practice this meant social workers would work directly with customer service staff, providing guidance and leadership around difficult interactions, coaching, running team meetings and working collaboratively on complex cases at an early stage rather than through a detached referral process.

New arrangements involved substantial resourcing for customer service workers so that they might have more time with people seeking assistance, and time to consult and engage with social workers regularly and offer people better access to social workers for more comprehensive support. For social workers, new arrangements positioned them as the key support for customer service workers (but involved only limited resourcing, with expectations that they could draw on additional support from customer service workers to lessen some of their overall workload). In effect, changes drew social workers into challenges at the frontline, and this paper traces these developments drawing on a case study of two sites undertaken for around one year as changes unfolded.

**Method**

A case study approach was used, in keeping with our conceptualization of relationships as constructed “in a situation” (Folgheraiter, 2004, p.130) and to allow for a tracing of developments over time. The case study included interviews with social workers and customer service workers in two Centrelink
sites, as well as observations during site visits. We also pursued consideration of other perspectives (including managers and people accessing assistance) (Hall, Boddy & Chenoweth, 2014, Hall, Hadson, Boddy & Chenoweth, 2014), but focus in this paper on worker perspectives and relationships.

Twenty four worker interviews were undertaken involving fourteen workers in total. Semi structured interviews were conducted during site visits after workers had been involved in arrangements for some months (typically no more than three months) and again after they had been involved for around 9-12 months. Eight customer service staff and six social workers participated (from a possible pool of ten and eight respectively). All interviews and site visits were undertaken by the first named author, who subsequently participated in reflective discussions with the remaining authors to help unpack and cross-check high level themes prior to a more detailed analysis.

Analysis of interview recordings and notes, with assistance from NVivo10, focused on comparing and contrasting perspectives and highlighting themes over time in a matrix (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Analysis focused on three overarching stages: reflections on prior history of service provision in the sites; views on early experiences over the first few months of change, and perspectives on later experiences (approaching the end of the first year). A narrative of findings was developed for reporting based on this timeline of changes. This narrative references participants extensively in their own words (reflecting an attention to polyphony and to minimising researcher bias by including multiple voices directly in reporting - a process discussed at length elsewhere (Hall, Boddy & Chenoweth, 2014). Some identifying details not relevant to findings have been altered to preserve anonymity. Research was approved through Griffith University ethics committee.

Some limitations arose around accessibility, meaning that one research participant from each group was unavailable for a later interview and one from each group unavailable for an early stage interview. The two sites involved were chosen because they undertook early implementation of new
arrangements (which were planned to ‘roll out’ across 44 sites by 2014/15). These may not have been representative, however later interviews with senior managers who covered multiple sites indicated that findings were relevant to experiences in other offices. Analysis was framed around how social workers and customer service staff perceived their involvement with each other and attempts to engage with people seeking assistance.

Findings

Reflections on Previous Service Arrangements

It’s always about the queue...about pumping them through, excuse the expression, I know it’s horrible...but that’s what it’s about.

        (Renee, Customer Service Worker)

It’s an environment that’s run by numbers and figures and I.T. [Information Technology].

        (Lisa, Social Worker)

That the social security environment could be oppressively process oriented, machine-like and dominated by information technology was a view shared by workers in early interviews when reflecting on their past work. This is not unexpected, given previous research literature has detailed the anxieties of customer service workers (Howard, 2012; Kennedy & Corliss, 2008) and challenges for social workers in this environment (Dearman, 2005; McDonald & Chenoweth, 2009). What was perhaps of more significance was the apology and the clear desire amongst customer service workers to provide a more balanced service which did not favour a ‘business’ of quick transactions over human factors. Customer service workers reflected that ‘processing people’ quickly was about organisational drivers rather than meeting the needs of people.

My personal experiences from working for DHS is we’re very transaction based...so ‘get them in get them out...don’t let them talk too much’... For every transaction we do in [the computer system] we get so many funding dollars.

        (Mary, Customer Service Worker).

Some customer service workers appeared highly concerned about this and were also conscious of having limited knowledge and capacity to help.
I’ve always had customers telling me their issues...and before, I never knew what to do. To say have you thought about this or that, to have those resources...a stepping stone to where they want to go.

(Felicity, Customer Service Worker)

They also drew connections between customer experiences and their own sense of pressure working in that environment.

‘Don’t let them talk too much’...I personally have been stopped...have been told I have to stop customers from talking...[The] manager said to me I need to be more {pause, appears upset}...computer based.

(Ralph, Customer Service Worker)

In Ralph’s case, he elaborated a scenario before recent changes where he had attempted to engage with a customer who wanted to share a positive experience and been advised (electronically) not to.

[Ralph]: One situation, I had this man, he was on DSP [Disability Support Pension] and had been for years... I don’t know exactly what was wrong but he couldn’t work. He got a job and so he’s come in to tell us about his earnings...and I’m like, ‘fantastic’, you know, ‘this is great ...what type of work are you doing?’ ... and he was telling me about it... so I was coding his stuff but also discussing with him...and I got a couple of messages from my manager saying ‘you need to move on...you need to get rid of him, there’s more people waiting’.

[Researcher]: How did you get that message?

[Ralph]: Sametime [an instant messaging service]. It popped up on my screen. My manager sat directly behind me...a couple of desks directly behind me and ummm...yeah so getting these messages, and I didn’t want to cut him [the customer] off, cos he was so excited he’d got this job and I was excited for him...But it was kind of like an invasion almost, to think, ‘OK you’re listening to me, but you’re not actually paying attention to what’s going on.’

**Excitement and scepticism**

It is perhaps not surprising then, that customer service workers expressed excitement at the prospect of being able to listen
to people and work more closely with social workers. Customer service workers perceived social workers as highly skilled and knowledgeable, particularly around the use of community resources.

Having them [social workers] there is going to be massive, just for their knowledge...

(Mary, Customer Service Worker)

However, social workers expressed an initial reticence around new arrangements, and stressed the pressures they already experienced to manage workloads and not fall into a processing approach themselves. Although they shared a concern about service provision in the ‘front office’ and the potential for people to ‘fall through the cracks’, they were also concerned that customer service staff might be viewed as ‘pseudo-social workers’, engage in risky practices or potentially take over their roles. These concerns were heightened by the fact that additional resourcing was largely provided organisationally for customer service staff.

We didn’t get resources...and this is a very big pressure on the social work service. That [it] is not recognised in the funding...if you want to do a good job, to respond to what needs to be at the front...

(Nicole, Social Worker)

As a social worker probably the biggest thing for me is that without that ongoing support... staff will take the conversations too far and not know how to bring it back and not know what to do.

(Lisa, Social Worker)

My biggest concern was whether social workers were being replaced.

(Christopher, Social Worker)

Social workers’ scepticism was also inspired by experiences of a longstanding organisational push towards phone-based work and online, which they felt represented a move away from the development of local relationships.

Experiences of Change

Learning and sharing
They [the social workers] were always very remote before...you knew them and you’d say ‘Hi’, but that was about the extent of it. It’s a lot more personalised now, a lot more give and take. It’s a much better relationship.

(Felicity, Customer Service Worker)

Both groups described a significant change as new arrangements were implemented. Social workers were involved in the delivery of initial training sessions over the course of one week. The sessions covered issues and services in the local community, paying attention to people’s strengths, and relating to people in a more open and supportive conversational manner. Over the first few months social workers assisted (variably) with visits to and from community agencies, and provided weekly one hour coaching sessions with customer service workers, although this also varied over time due to organisational pressures. They also provided informal guidance which was facilitated by locating themselves in closer proximity to where customer service workers were seated. Learning from social workers was described by customer service workers as central to pursuing more helpful conversations with people seeking assistance.

We had the opportunity then to research, because you don’t know what’s out there...time to research, build relationships with community providers, and obviously social work. Right from the start we had regular one on ones, reflective, and we used those sessions as educational.

(Jenny, Customer Service Worker)

Coaching from social workers took the form of one hour weekly sessions which were focussed on allowing customer service workers to reflect on their conversations with customers and how they had pursued supportive referrals where customers expressed additional needs. These sessions appeared to be highly prized by customer service workers,

...We would sit down and pull to pieces my interviews, we would role play...so there’s real learning, because until your critiqued you haven’t got a clue, your just winging it I reckon. (Jenny, Customer Service Worker)
...we bring in a couple [of examples] and talk about how the conversation went, a question we might have used, what was useful and what might have been better... Trying to identify ways of helping the customer...I’d never experienced that before, here [in Centrelink].

(Luke, Customer Service Worker)

For social workers, coaching sessions and observations from working together began to reveal a change in the way customer service workers assisted people seeking assistance.

I think one of the things I notice about the conversations they are having now compared to what they were having before is that they are more genuine...There is something about it that is not as transactional...

(Christopher, Social Worker)

Pursuing such conversations invoked some anxieties for customer service workers which were reduced through close contact with a social worker.

I was really anxious when I first started. I was so worried [laughs]. I didn’t know whether I should come in on the first Monday... It helped to spend time with the social worker. (Renee, Customer Service Worker)

Consultations, coaching and training from social workers were viewed as a source of security and support, particularly where these helped build knowledge about other services which they could refer to.

Referrals? I was almost fearful of them...it was like who do I call? It was like a minefield... Whereas now, obviously not fearful of it and I generally have a basic understanding of what they offer, so I’m more confident.

(Jenny, Customer Service Worker)

The growing relationship was also significant for allaying customer service worker’s discomfort around challenging or distressing experiences arising in their work.

Pretty much anything that would make me feel uncomfortable, personally uncomfortable, I would be straight to a social worker... ...if I just have any worry about a customer’s wellbeing or others.

(Mary, Customer Service Worker)
Everybody has their own comfort levels, what they are comfortable talking about....If I have a difficult customer and it’s affecting me, certainly we’ve got the social workers...

(Ralph, Customer Service Worker)

‘Risks’ and challenges

Despite positive experiences, there were challenges around maintaining regular support, and how support was perceived. This was particularly evident in one site (A) where local management was seen as limiting opportunities for customer service workers to spend time reflecting with social workers or visiting services with them after the initial training period. Whilst there were perceptions of stronger management support in the other site (B), in both sites, session regularity fluctuated over time with shifts in managers and social worker availability. In site A, restrictions on time with social workers impacted opportunities to develop a better sense of community assistance options, something which customer service workers found particularly difficult as it limited their ability to make informed, quick referrals.

The social workers have been really good, they’ve got a greater awareness, and are handy to at least have a case consultation with.... ... [but there is a] difference between the talk of what it should look like and how it’s turning out. It’s hopefully something that will change a bit more... at least knowing the [community] services and what they provide... But I think it’s a work in progress because it is a fairly large shift.

(Luke, Customer Service Worker)

More involvement with social workers led customer service workers to value the social worker role more highly than before, but it also resulted in them ‘missing’ this when it was less available, and commenting about times where no social worker had sat ‘out the front’ or where a new staff member started with the team without the same level of training or social work involvement.

Social workers still provide a lot of support. They don’t often sit out the front. They are available a lot to consult with cases and good to talk to
around extra services and what’s going well or what a customer might need or might be good for them.  

(Luke, Customer Service Worker)

As customer service workers were able to spend more time with customers, the extent of customers accessing additional support became apparent. Coupled with limited availability of social workers (who found their workloads increased rather than alleviated through working closely with customer service workers), this resulted in many lengthy interactions involving only limited or no consultation with social workers. This was viewed with concern by social workers as exposing customers (and workers) to risk, although it was also acknowledged that such customers may have otherwise have been overlooked or ignored. Where coaching and regular working together failed to occur, social workers’ concerns increased around potential risk situations developing.

At one stage people requesting to see a social worker were being sent to [customer service workers]. Now that doesn’t happen, but there is still a tendency... At times it has been a little bit frustrating in terms of people not understanding why a social worker might do some things.  

(Michael, Social Worker)

In the site where customer service workers were concerned about connecting with community services, social workers did attempt to support visits by services into the office and advocated for consistent, regular coaching time. This brought them into conversations with managers which involved some conflict but also confusion around who was ‘responsible’ for customer service workers’ development.

….We put in place meetings for major players to get together, but that didn’t occur...There wasn’t enough interest or commitment... It was really difficult for us because we had different managers …and every week it was a struggle to have reflective sessions. They [customer service workers] were really passionate and enthusiastic when they began…but there were constant struggles [with management]. I’ve really had to push to get the one on ones happening.  

(Nicole, Social Worker)
Caught up in this struggle, customer service workers reflected on the critical importance of their connection to the social worker, as well as concerns at an ongoing struggle to give new staff entering the team the same opportunity they had.

They [social workers] are our greatest resource, our backbone ... we work together... [but] the new staff coming in... haven’t had the involvement and training in the early days that we had...the support of social workers.  (Jenny, Customer Service Worker)

In both sites, social workers dealt with multiple turnovers of managers and had mixed success ensuring coaching and consultation occurred, although this was more successful in site B, where they had a longstanding positive relationship with a key manager and with another senior leader involved in other community initiatives reported elsewhere (Hall, Hadson, Boddy & Chenoweth, 2014). Where coaching and consultation flourished, social workers concerns around risk diminished and with it some reduction in their workload was reported. Social workers also reflected on their own growth through new relationships with customer service workers.

It has been really interesting for me working in a different way...working with the CSAs [Customer Service Advisors], helping them. You learn more about them personally and how they approach the work....Yourself, you are more exposed, because if you give feedback you invite feedback....that was interesting to learn how I could handle this...to feel comfortable in the middle of the action.  (Nicole, Social Worker)

**Working ‘alongside’**

My biggest concern was whether social workers were being replaced. My greatest learning has been... that’s it’s not just about responding to everything... but them [customer service workers] working alongside us. There’s an exchange ...we work together ...it’s a joy.

(Christopher, Social Worker)

Over time, less concerns about a threat to professional status were evident, particularly for those social workers who spoke about customer service workers
as an additional ‘pair of hands’, and emphasised a shared approach developing.

I think where this is different is in terms of us really working in partnership, so that we are working in ways which are productive...so the client gets something out of it, to empower them.  (Nadine, Social Worker)

In later interviews, customer service workers talked about working collaboratively with social workers, with customer service workers handling simpler referrals and social workers dealing with more complex issues.

[A family] were looking to rent privately somewhere better but they couldn’t afford the bond...I contacted [the worker] at [community] housing assistance to help with that but referred them to the social worker as they [also] had issues around trying to get one of their children back into their care...and that was affecting them.  (Felicity, Customer Service Worker)

and a more humanising customer service response was reported by social workers.

For the customers it was amazing to see what level of support they got. There were Centrelink issues and other assistance through services...seeing the difference they were making for people was really encouraging.

(Nicole, Social Worker)

Towards the end of the study, there was still scepticism around changes amongst social workers, particularly around resources, with a strong view that any gains from an additional pair of hands were offset by consultation and coaching demands. Despite this, there was also a strong belief in the benefits of working together and that collaboration had helped clarify the different roles and also improve the efficacy of social workers from an ‘add on’ to part of the frontline service.

Sitting out the front with them has helped us in supporting staff rather than just being an ‘add on’ service. It’s just been really useful, seeing what goes on out the front rather than just being behind the scenes. Through that process they have also been able to learn from us and understand the differences between what we do and what they do.

(Christopher, Social Worker)
Discussion

Changes revealed that a thin veneer of customer service obscured the frequent situations of hardship and distress ‘customers’ of Centrelink dealt with. Increased attempts to respond more supportively to frontline situations led customer service workers to value social workers for their knowledge, guidance and inspiration. Customer service workers’ initial anxiety and excitement around what they saw as enhancing their knowledge and ‘making a difference’ gave way over time to a more mature recognition of challenges in the service environment and talk of the inspiration and interpersonal support social workers provided. ‘Getting to know’ the social worker was described as essential, and the capacity to consult with or hand situations over immediately to a social worker reduced worries around complex situations.

Whilst social workers were sceptical of change (particularly early on) a sense of broader influence and awareness of what was going on at the frontline developed which was both worrying and rewarding. For social workers, the mixture of hope and worry reflected a growing awareness of problems at the frontline. Social workers’ deeper scepticism around challenges to their professionalism is understandable, particularly in light of the paucity of resources and expectations they would make do. However, over time customer service workers were equally unhappy about limitations around their access to social workers, and the failure to adequately resource social workers became a shared concern at intensified risks when social workers were unavailable. (Towards the end of the study concerns around these risks were evident in our interviews with senior managers, and influenced an alternative program which resourced additional social workers to work with customer service outreach staff.)

In spite of struggles (and confusion) at an organisational level, reforms led to widespread learning and development and further innovation, such as community forums and involvement of service users in providing feedback to
staff. This occurred particularly where social workers managed to develop close relationships with customer service staff. Availability and closer relationships were more evident during an initial training and settling in period and where social workers were successful in ensuring shared learning activities such as regular coaching and visits with community services. Where such opportunities developed, positivity and even ‘joy’ around collaboration signified a remarkable (if fragile) shift in organisational practice.

Implications

Here was a puzzle. It had never occurred to me that I did not know my way...and right before me the road divided into many roads, which went on far, far over the highest mountains, as though to the very end of the world, - so that I actually grew giddy as I looked along them.

(Eichendorff, 1906, p.36)

The metaphor of the heroic social worker has been deservedly critiqued by Marston and McDonald (2012) as potentially dangerous for promising triumph in the face of overwhelming challenges. However, if heroism lies not in triumph, but in guiding others through adversity and learning from them too, then encouragement towards heroism may not be so problematic. Osborne and Brown (2013, p.6) have argued that innovation in public service organisations, though once associated with a kind of neoliberal ‘hero innovator’, is increasingly recognised as developed by leaders who engage with networks and value collaborative relationships. Folgheraiter (2004, p.132-134), in describing social work as an “adventurous journey”, highlighted its strength in exploring new relationships in a changing environment (Hughes & Wearing, 2013, pp.197-8). In doing so he invoked a different metaphor of heroism associated with the Romantic tradition of the uncertain hero(ine) developing incrementally through new experiences and relationships (Eichendorff, 1906) rather than the more modern perspective of the hero(ine) as triumphant individualist.
Social workers are in an unusual position as potential hero(ines). Firstly, because they are continuously involved in the journeys of other people (Folgheraiter, 2004, p.134) who also might be construed as heroic (Dybcz, 2012), and also because they can recognise the troubles of people they encounter as public issues. Because of this, guidance which involves an alliance of mutual respect and dialogue with others is most relevant to social work (Maidment, 2006). However, pursuing this in an organisational context, particularly in constrictive welfare organisations is not straightforward. To rephrase Marx’s famous dictum, social workers make their own history, but not just as they please or under circumstances chosen by themselves.

In the Centrelink case, new relationships threw into relief historical arrangements in the office environment where social workers and customer service workers had previously had limited possibilities for dialogue. In this sense, changes were a significant innovation, moving social workers into the problematic customer service frontline. This put social workers ‘in the middle of the action’ experiencing both worry and joy as they engaged with workers who sought support and guidance. Findings support the view that social workers’ influence occurs and needs to be understood within a network of dynamic relationships (Scourfield, 2013). Social workers’ own ‘room to move’ (McDonald & Marston, 2006) was connected to their ‘room to relate’ in the organisation, as workers around them oriented their decisions and actions in response to new relationships. This suggests a space beyond professional discretion, where social workers influence may be more diffuse and linked to the perceptions and development of other workers.

**Conclusion**

New relationships traced in this paper engaged social workers more closely with customer service workers who had been closely aligned to a pseudo-business agenda with its preference for the electronic rather than ‘flesh and blood’ (Folgheraiter, 2004), where challenging situations arose way beyond the scope of the customer service framework. For social workers, changes led to
a sense of risk (for themselves, workers and ‘customers’) but changes were also encouraging and increased the influence of social workers, albeit without sufficient resources for change to be consistent and sustained.

There is a temptation to view late modern human service environments as straitjacketing social work. This frames social workers as increasingly surrounded by constrictions, with less ‘room to move’, less discretion and little capacity to influence organisational surroundings. This paints a grim picture for ‘heroic’ social work. This paper suggests a more nuanced picture, in line with the view of social work as “a perpetually changing and unfinished project” (Adams, Dominelli and Payne, 1998, p. xvi). In this picture, (new) relationships, guidance and elements of heroism can develop which humanise service provision alongside the difficulties of an adventurous journey involving adversity, (self) discovery and risk.

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The Chapter is presented in the relevant journal style.
The following paper considers experiences from site B, where a more intensive involvement with a particular group of people accessing Centrelink assistance (young parents) developed. This involvement had ramifications for customer service workers and managers, and the paper traces how guidance from social workers influenced service design and development, including educational assistance outside the Centrelink context.

This paper provides insights into young parents’ experiences more broadly, and these are important in the context of this thesis. They background and deepen understanding of a struggle to relate with Centrelink and other human services. They also detail learning from the social workers’ engagement exercise which was shared with managers and staff. Impacts from this are then discussed in terms of the subsequent redesign of a potentially oppressive welfare reform engagement, as local arrangements were adapted to respond more supportively to young families.
Chapter Nine
Talking With Teen Parents, Hearing Young Families: (In)forming Welfare Reform Through Local Relations
Greg Hall, Daniel Hadson, Jennifer Boddy & Lesley Chenoweth

This article explores an engagement process undertaken by Australian government social workers in one disadvantaged locality prior to the introduction of federal “teenage parent” welfare reforms. The focus of engagement was to learn about young parents’ experiences and aspirations, and to draw on this to inform policy implementation. Findings from engagement, and how engagement between social workers and young parents impacted local policy implementation are discussed, including the subsequent development of family friendly school options. The authors suggest that problematizing early parenting may itself be “risky,” and may obscure opportunities for building on the parental role as a source of inspiration.

Keywords: social work, strengths, teen parents, welfare

Teenage parents have emerged over the last few decades as a ”target” group of government interventions across many western nations. This targeting has tended to focus on possible deficits associated with early parenting and concerns about welfare dependence and intergenerational disadvantage (Hoffman & Maynard, 2008). In this respect, governments, particularly in English speaking countries, have sought to reform welfare payments received by teenage parents, proposing or prescribing interventions which impose additional activities, conditions and limits to welfare or social security entitlements (Daguerre & Nativel, 2006).

Reforms reflect assumptions that teenage parenthood is a problem (Sarantaki & Koutelekos, 2007). However, an increasing critique has emerged which suggests that early parenting may not of itself be problematic and can have positive aspects (Arai, 2010; Duncan 2007; Furstenberg, 2007). The targeting
of teenage parents has itself been “problematised” as a construction of deviancy which potentially silences the voices of young parents beneath an expert oriented discourse about them (Breheny & Stephens, 2010; Wilson & Huntington, 2006). In this respect, it is important to engage with young parents themselves to ascertain how their perspectives and experiences relate to the interventions which target them (Arai, 2010), particularly at times when apparently expert driven policies such as welfare reform (re)emerge.

For such research to be “critical,” in Boje’s (2009, 2010) sense of imagining possibilities for change, we may need to supplement the consideration of young parents’ voices with an interest in how these voices can influence policy. To pursue this we examine a case from the Australian social security context. This environment has been recognised as a street level bureaucrat type environment (Lipsky, 1980), where policy is mediated and produced by the actions and interactions which occur in everyday service delivery (Howard, 2012). We move beyond a typical street level focus on individual worker-client relations to consider a group dialogue with young parents and how this influenced service delivery and policy implementation.

The Australian Context

In the Australian context, welfare payments to parents have increasingly been linked to “activation” policies (Grahame & Marston, 2012), with expectations that parents undertake some kind of labour market or education activities after the youngest child reaches a certain age (currently six years old). Young parents had not been specifically targeted outside of this general approach until recently. In 2012, welfare reforms which focussed on teenage parents in ten localities identified by government as areas of high unemployment, high welfare receipt and low educational attainment were slated for introduction into the federal department responsible for social security in Australia, the Australian Department of Human Services. These reforms required teenagers receiving parenting payments who had not completed secondary school or a designated technical college certificate to attend
interviews at Centrelink (the social security service arm of the department) after their youngest child turned six months of age, in order to develop a “participation plan” based around undertaking education or learning and development activities. Reforms were interpreted in Australian media as getting “tough on teenage mums” (Karvelas, 2011). However, policy rhetoric and departmental discussions locally seemed to be potentially ambiguous, indicating a potential for welfare payments to be suspended if young people did not attend interviews, but emphasizing additional assistance which local community groups could access to develop education, training and employment related programs for young parents (Australian Department of Human Services, 2012a, 2012b).

From late 2011 to early 2013, the first author, who has a background as a social work manager in the Department, was involved in a research project studying engagement between government social security workers and people receiving income support. This involved observations at departmental and some community settings and interviewing administrative (customer service) workers, managers, and social workers (as well as people seeking assistance) over the course of a year. During this time, social workers at one site being studied (including the second named author) became aware that welfare reforms would impact young parents in their region, and that local customer service staff would be expected to pursue conversations with young parents. Departmental social workers at this site expressed a need to understand more about the experiences of young parents locally and to share this information with departmental staff prior to new developments.

Methodology

This article uses a case study approach to consider an experience of engagement between social workers and young parents as well as findings from field observations and interviews which were conducted over time in that locality. It makes links between a specific “in case” experience and other case
observations and interviews. This process was facilitated by the development of a time ordered case matrix (Miles & Huberman, 1994) which detailed events, comments or issues prior and subsequent to the engagement with young parents. Ethics approval was obtained through Griffith University and the Australian Department of Human Services. Participant consent for dissemination of findings was obtained and participants were also invited to participate at a presentation/discussion of findings.

The Specific Case Experience: Engagement and Dialogue

Using connections with local youth and neighborhood services, the local social work team developed an engagement session inviting young parents to share their perspectives and inform service delivery. Recruitment of participants was pursued through the local neighborhood center (which provided child care) and also through young parents who were known to social workers from previous contacts with the department. Overall the consultations included the views of 15 young parents who had their first child at age 14–18 years, lived in the local area and were in receipt of social security benefits. A mix of ages and relationship status was apparent (as well as two male parents).

Consultations were informed by an “anticipation” type format drawing in part on the work of Finnish researcher Tom Arnkil (Seikkula & Arnkil, 2006) and on the social work team’s familiarity with strengths based dialogue (McCashen, 2005). This emphasized the possibility of a future “good life” where the dreams and aspirations of participants might be unearthed without immediately falling back into a problem orientation. The social work team and a local youth worker led an open group conversation based around participants’ experiences of living as a parent in the local area; their dreams and aspirations for themselves and their children; and what could be done for them to get to where they wanted to be.
Several phone consultations with parents who did not attend in person but expressed a desire to participate were also conducted by members of the social work team.

Extensive notes were taken to capture issues raised and how these were discussed, with a focus on recording verbatim comments. These notes were supplemented by reflective journal accounts provided by social workers who facilitated engagement. All notes and journal reflections were collated by the first named author and analyzed thematically using Text Analysis Mark-up Software (TAMS). A second, smaller forum where the first named author discussed findings from the analysis was held several months later. This included the local youth worker, the social work team, and a young parent from the first forum who had expressed an interest in attending a research discussion. Feedback from this forum was incorporated into a final analysis undertaken by the first named author.

**Accounts and Observations Around the Broader Case**

The first named author’s broader case study research around engagement within the site and its local community entailed both interviews with social workers and observations of departmental and community activities. These were drawn upon to consider organisational factors surrounding the engagement with young parents and trace subsequent events in and around the site: how young parents’ welfare reform implementation was “rolled out” and what (if any) consequences or links flowed from the initial engagement with young parents. Attendance at management meetings and community forums gave an opportunity to observe organisational discussions around young parents, as well as instances where young parents themselves “spoke back,” (at a community event where two young parents who had accessed assistance talked about their experiences and achievements, and in the making of a short film about young parents). Some comments from one of these young persons are used to conclude this article, and, along with the general focus throughout the article on including the words of young people, complements a sense-making
of the research narrative with a “sensenoticing” (Boje, 2009, p.89), whereby the voices of young people themselves are allowed to resonate. A further organisational development is discussed where the authors collaborated to produce an interactive training slideshow based on findings from the engagement with young parents to support departmental social workers in welfare reform sites. Some reflections on this are provided in terms of its dissemination and feedback, and the lively ways in which organisational experiences were relayed by others unassociated with the initial local process.

**Limitations and Usefulness**

Methodological limitations exist around the representativeness of participants, particularly since the engagement process was designed and conducted by the social work team as a practical community engagement activity in the context of their everyday work rather than a discrete research project. The social work team was highly connected with community networks (beyond what was typically evident within the bureaucracy) (Hadson & Peck, 2011). The inclusion of only two young men was also limiting but did lead to some group dialogue around men’s roles in parenting, which, for the purposes of this article, was enriching but might only be suggestive.

Participants’ reliance on social security and long-term residence in the locality was indicative of a highly disadvantaged cohort, but other demographic characteristics of participants were not detailed by the social work team. Whether participants “storied” responses selectively or were influenced by expectations of others (Arai, 2010) is always possible in qualitative research, but seemed unlikely given the open ended, dialogic format of the engagement, where discussion was lively, fast moving and spontaneous. It was also evident that participants were not reticent in discussing challenges or difficulties they encountered which reflected experiences of shame or embarrassment (suggesting a level of openness and self disclosure).

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Although there was diversity among the participants (no typical “young parent”), shared experiences and common themes were evident. Key issues from the thematic analysis are discussed, framed by indicative quotes from participants reflecting a sense of polyphony which has been a feature of the broader study (Hall, Boddy, Chenoweth, & Davie, 2012). Encountering polyphony also entails dissonance (which undermines but enriches any coherent narrative). Where appropriate, we have acknowledged even a sole voice where this disputed the voices of others in discussion.

**Findings from Engagement with Young Parents**

**Part 1: What It’s Like Being Young and a Parent Living Here**

"Overwhelming, scary . . . exciting though"

Participants spoke of a sense of satisfaction and joy in their relationship with their children and in developing competence as parents, although this was not without struggles and anxiety. Participants who now had toddlers were particularly mindful of their learning, but it was evident across the board that developing parenting knowledge and ability was central to all participants’ sense of achievement and worth. For example, hard work and routine was accepted by participants as a “given” in their caring for their child. As one parent put it, “The best bits are seeing the achievements and the challenges. . . having to stick to a routine.” Personal rewards in bonding and witnessing the child’s development were paramount (“I love being a mum”; “When they first call you ‘dad,’ that’s the best moment ever!”), and this was contrasted by some participants with the value of low paid employment which did not offer hope of long term security or connect with their own interests. They were also critical of education or employment options which caused lengthy separations from their child and from the learning which occurred there, either with family support: “I learnt so much from my mum, but I also had to listen”; or without: “I had no one to learn from . . . learnt as it came along.”
Personal satisfaction in developing their parenting skills and identity was a major source of motivation and this may be a significant factor for workers to understand when engaging with young parents. For some participants the parenting experience had increased their respect for and ties with their own families, particularly where parents were nonjudgmental.

"Your social life disappears"

Participants discussed a reduction in social networks and an increase in financial stressors when they became parents. Their practical connections and choices were severely hampered by the interaction between financial hardship, lack of transport and paucity of schooling and employment options in their region. They also made choices around networks which were positive for their child (“I got rid of a lot of friends who drink and stuff”), and withdrew from network opportunities which they felt were judgmental (“I did attend a community playgroup but found that I was judged by older parents”). Participants discussed a lack of leisure or recreational activities compared to prior to being a parent and difficulty experiencing any regular activities outside of the parenting role (“I have no time anymore”). This was particularly the case for those who had limited support.

Stressed or fractured family relationships with extended family were evident for many participants, and participants tended to prefer relationships with nonjudgmental relatives. As one participant put it, there was sometimes a sense that if she asked for help she would encounter an attitude of “you’ve got yourself into this mess and you have to manage it.”

Participants found public transport inadequate and in some instances nonexistent (“The transport limits access to so many things”). In this respect, attendance at activities which were not accessibly located meant extended time travelling and even more time away from the child. Participants raised concerns that transport interacted with childcare, in that when childcare was not closely
located to their activity or home, they would be entangled in a network of back
and forth between difficult to access locations.

"It's difficult to cope financially"

Participants discussed financial pressure as constant and attempts to
ensure they bought quality things for the children despite having little money
to do so. They disputed what they felt was a myth that young people have lots
of money and have children to have access to welfare support, suggesting
instead that the costs associated with looking after a child outweighed the
assistance provided ("The money goes on the baby").

Participants discussed spending time trying to find quality clothes,
food, and other goods for their child at reasonable prices, and were concerned
that they not rely on charity, which they felt was sometimes of poor quality.
Financial hardship was particularly evident for participants not living with
their extended family ("You can’t get a loan because you don’t have security...
There’s no money for emergencies"). Most participants had a history of casual
work and reported embarrassment and humiliation in relation to receiving
social security payments. One participant felt that parents should receive
support as a right to assist them raising children and not have to work, but
other participants expressed views that they would rather be in paid work.

Participants had mixed experiences regarding childcare in terms of
affordability and receiving quality services ("The quality of childcare is the
thing [that worries me]"). One participant described having attempted child
care with her young child for a day and returned to find her son covered in
mucous and his belongings missing. When attempting to find alternate child
care she felt that she could not locate a high quality service in her area. This was
also expressed by another participant. One participant had accessed child care
and although she was not entirely happy with it continued to use their service.
A significant source of dissatisfaction was around workers who appeared to be
judgmental. Participants were not always familiar with the different child care
options such as long day care, family day care and so on and there appeared to be scope to better inform and connect young parents, so long as options were accessible and acceptable.

"People have asked a couple of times 'Did you have her for the money?'"

The impact of stigma and prejudice was a central theme amongst participant experiences. Participants were highly impacted by common media and public stereotypes and anticipated that people they encountered would hold such opinions (“People think because I have a baby I won’t be able to pay the rent, already got their mind [made] up”). Further to the stigma theme was a more nuanced experience of feeling undervalued or not recognised for their capacity by others (“You get no respect”). This was a particular barrier to pursuing education and employment where participants felt they could be treated as immature and irresponsible.

The two male parents discussed feeling left out of important aspects of parenting but that becoming a father was a “turning point” for them (“You learn to rely on yourself”). This may be different for less involved fathers and the female participants did complain of males not taking more responsibility. But it is worth noting that the male participants also expressed that it was sometimes hard to assume responsibility when they were regularly undermined by patronizing, isolating and stigmatizing behavior of peers and others who were not young parents (“I don’t think anything can prepare you for the responsibility you have to take”). Female participants discussed the challenges in engaging fathers to have more parental involvement or concern for them and the child’s future. Male participants felt that they were sometimes stereotyped as insensitive or even violent. For example,

I was asked to go along to one or two midwife appointments at the hospital. You have to wait for hours. She [the midwife] didn’t really look at me or ask me any questions, didn’t direct it at me. Then she told me to leave the room. She talked to [child’s mother] about domestic violence and
asked if I was bashing her up. [Child’s mother] just laughed and said “he’s not like that.” I didn’t want to go back after that.

### Part 2: Dreams for Yourself and Your Child

“**What dreams do I have for my child? . . . Everything better than what we had**”

Participants often struggled to talk about dreams for themselves but were expansive in relation to their children. Educational and career objectives were frequently discussed, but equally, participants were concerned that their children have good values, be respectful of others and have a good family relationship. Aspirations for themselves tended to relate to what made their child have a more secure and independent future and consistently reflected the participant wanting their child to experience a better life than they had experienced (“My child will have a better life than I have had”).

Many participants expressed that they had “done things the hard way,” and whilst they were positive about having a child, they would not want their own child to have those same experiences. Participants talked at length about what had been missing from their own lives and drew on this to describe a desire for the security and long term stability for their child which they themselves had not experienced (“I want things to be safer in the future”).

Participants wanted their children not to have to rely on welfare and to have the freedom associated with independent income and absence of financial hardship (“Have the opportunities I didn’t”). They were hopeful that they would also achieve independence in this way but felt that they needed support to do this and imagined that their child at their age would have greater stability to draw on. Several participants linked the ideas of independence and choice back to making respectful choices which made for a better family and community. Participants occasionally discussed material goods when considering aspirations or goals, and when they did so they tended to connect
material goods with beliefs about security and safety for their child. The most common possession desired was a home.

"A good job to support my kids . . . A rewarding career"

Having a good education was discussed in two ways: completing key qualifications which led to an occupation, and studying an area which was of real interest. Although participants wanted their child to have freedom to study anything the child wanted, for themselves they were focused on how to balance their interests with an occupation. Participants overwhelmingly linked educational qualifications to their dream of stable and rewarding employment (“I really want a qualification so that my child will never be without”).

Most participants had some work or voluntary work history and mentioned ways they had tried to improve their financial position by applying for employment or exploring study. One participant who was interested in a specialized course had travelled by public transport to a city several hours away to visit the institution and to get more information. One was already undertaking an external study program. One participant expressed ambivalence about seeking employment, expressing the view that her parenting role should be valued as a career. Aspirations consistently involved discussion of parent child time and reflections on missed opportunities in each participant’s relationship with their own parent (“I want to be there when my child needs me”). A number of comments were also made about remaining “in the here and now” because of uncertainty about the future, both on a personal and a societal level.

Part 3: How to Get There

"I want to show my child how"

There are a lot of people who look down at young parents; I have even had people “tsk” at me as they walk past. We don’t need to feel
less a person because we have a baby at a young age. We should be encouraged to be the best we can.

Participants found it hard to engage with services which they felt might be judgmental or did not actively support them to raise their worries or concerns. For example, whilst universal services such as free health care were praised, most participants did not access support for breastfeeding and did not continue to breastfeed despite wanting to and incurring extra financial hardship from switching to formula (“I don’t like going to ask for help”). Services which focused on risks and problems were viewed by participants as giving reason to withdraw from engagement, as opposed to services which were more positive (“It feels great when you get a compliment about what you are doing”). The personal mastery and positive identity associated with being a “good” parent appeared to be a powerful motivator for participants (“I want to show my child how”; “I want to be able to pass on what I know . . . teach what I know . . . share things”).

“The bond with my child is important”

Participants were critical of undertaking activities which significantly reduced their relationship with their child. It is important to recognise that this was not because participants did not want to work (leaving aside the obvious informal caring work they were undertaking), but because this “employment” work took time away from parenting, making it harder to engage with their children and effectively increasing their overall workload. One of the biggest challenges to pursuing education or employment was the idea of leaving their child and missing developmental milestones (“Spending too much time away from my child . . . that time with them is precious”). Lupton (2008) has argued that there are increasing socio-cultural pressures on Australian parents around monitoring, managing, and being responsible for child development, which can foster feelings of guilt and anxiety at being viewed as a “bad” parent. Given the vilification and discouragement reported by our participants, it is reasonable to
assume that they had heightened concerns around perceptions of their parenting.

It was unusual for participants to talk about a job without qualifying it as the kind of work which interested them and was connected to longer term security. Participants did occasionally talk about wanting “a job” in terms of any job to alleviate financial hardship, but also connected this to negative experiences of not being respected or achieving any stability in the long term in those kind of jobs (“I’d like to get a job . . . a decent job”). Participants were also skeptical of the labor market and felt that there were not enough jobs available and that they experienced discrimination and a lack of concern for their parenting situation.

"I struggle with wanting to go to work or school and feeling guilty about not being there for my child"

Participants discussed a variety of practical and stigma related barriers in maintaining schooling. Even in cases where schools made an effort to encourage participants to stay in education they struggled to balance school demands with parenting roles. Participants appeared stuck at times between getting an education and being there for their child. Some participants had heard of schools which offered child care arrangements and a more flexible approach to education that destigmatized their parenting roles. They felt that alternative approaches to schooling and tertiary education would be ideal if they could be located to avoid transport issues which plagued the region.

"Mum shows me how but doesn't judge me"

For many participants there were few supports. Relationships with family were particularly significant where they existed and were supportive, indicating that referring to or at least understanding the family situation is important for workers, given that the family context will impact plans for the individual and may create resources or strengths as well as risks.
Participants’ concerns around being judged were central to mixed experiences with social security, ranging from highly negative through to mildly positive feelings that if Centrelink (the social security provider) was not around then they would not be able to provide for their children or themselves. The participants were critical of getting pushed through multiple channels and not having a consistent human contact. They were also critical of delays, particularly when they had their children with them. The need for respect and overcoming stigma and prejudice was a central theme in their discussion of social security and there was considerable scepticism about welfare reform interventions, especially given the prevalence of penalties which many had experienced either directly or through family members. Participants were hopeful that workers would show more appreciation of the importance of their parenting role in the future.

I had to sit on the phone [in the Centrelink office] for an hour and a half with the baby in the car . . . and I told them the baby was in the car and they freaked out and told me I shouldn’t have the baby in the car . . . The baby was with my girlfriend in the car . . . They just assume things cos you’re young . . . I rescheduled but they sent the letter out too late . . . Then they cut you off, and it’s like . . . that’s not just your money anymore, that’s everyone’s money. That’s the baby’s money . . . I could go without money . . . but it’s different when you’ve got a kid.

Underlying social security relationships was also a sense that financial provision was not enough to meet needs or provide security (an issue stressed recently by Sara, 2013). No participants received substantial child support and all expressed that Parenting and Family Payments were not sufficient to provide stability and security for their child. In this regard participants felt that departmental workers needed to understand the challenges in pursuing activities that cost money while already being financially in hardship.
Discussion

Young parents’ consideration of future pathways appeared to be both encouraged and limited by a commitment to create a good family environment, something which mirrors a tension faced by many families in Australian society. However, for these young parents tensions were heightened by financial hardship, limited labor market prospects and by widespread vilification targeting their parental status.

Participants were significantly demotivated by prejudice and stigma around being a “young parent” or “teen parent.” Experiences were recounted by participants of offensive and distressing vilification, in some instances leading them to not access the help they needed or to fail to pursue activities. Such experiences raised a general anxiety and mistrust so that participants were concerned that services who labeled them as “young parents” were already judging them as immature and inadequate. Ironically they were most exposed to vilification when they attempted to participate in society and engage in education or other activities which might improve their situation. In this respect the receipt of welfare benefits provided some freedom or respite for participants, albeit of a highly limited form and one which carried its own stigma.

The findings from the consultation question stereotypes which typically locate young parents as materially oriented and lacking responsibility or a good work ethic. Although participants spoke at length about financial hardship, their dreams and aspirations were less focused on material goods and more on providing security for their child, giving them choices and opportunities free from dependence. Participants appeared to forego leisure and friendship activities for the sake of the child on a regular basis. Participants frequently referred to instances where they had placed their child’s needs over their own. They drew motivation around this from their own negative experiences of hardship and hoped that their child might have a better experience than they had.
Participants were motivated to pursue what might be termed “career oriented” education and employment, but were skeptical of employment options which did not offer longer term prospects, choices and the kind of security and stability they desired for their child. There was also criticism of options where they would be separated from their child excessively. Excessive separation was particularly a barrier for the group due to deficits in public transport.

Subsequent Impacts

Voices or Pathways, or Voices and Pathways

At a local level, a précis of findings put together by the first named author was shared with middle and senior departmental managers. This was then relayed in messaging to managers and staff by a senior manager (responsible for around five hundred staff). Within the broader case study, the first named author observed senior managers presenting to staff around the importance of respecting and working with young parents. Senior managers were also observed having conversations with staff about the personal impact of learning from the young parents’ engagement process, particularly the value of “focusing on strengths rather than problems.”

The manager responsible for the implementation of welfare reforms for young parents in the region met with the local social work team to canvas suggestions for implementing reform on the ground. This particular manager expressed excitement and appeared personally enthused. She developed an alternative schedule for upcoming mandatory welfare reform interviews for young parents, bringing departmental workers out into local community settings rather than requiring young parents to travel to attend an interview at the social security office. She also drew on administrative workers with additional training in “soft skills” to assist with interviews and stressed that a focus on educational and employment “pathways” be complemented by broader options and pathways to social work assistance if needed. Subsequent management data discussed in site
meetings indicated that the locality had the highest rate of attendance at young parent welfare reform interviews nationally, and avoided punitive measures from noncompliance.

Over the ensuing months the same manager worked together with community agencies around educational options which were tailored for young parents and provided a family friendly environment (this involved drawing on federal funding for community development which had been linked to welfare reforms). Two new education options were developed which allowed young parents to study in close proximity to their children and in common with other young parents. Internal departmental discussions early in 2013 reported thirty young parents who were previously out of school having taken up secondary education because of this.

A focus on listening to the voices of young people was observed continuing after the initial community engagement process. A short film was made with the assistance of local technical college students around young parents’ experiences and several young parents spoke at a community event (witnessed by the first named author near the end of the broader study), where they discussed their experiences of returning to study in front of high profile business and welfare leaders from the Australian Social Inclusion Board.

Findings from the initial engagement process were also used to develop a self paced interactive training tool which was shared with twenty social workers involved in welfare reform work across Australia at an internal conference. While the authors initially assumed that the impact of this would be limited to social workers at the conference, there was feedback and inadvertent (and amusing) evidence to the contrary. For example, the second named author was contacted several months later by a social worker from another state about an unrelated casework matter. In passing, this social worker mentioned they had just used a training tool that raised awareness of young parents’ issues and was based on a departmental engagement with a group of young parents, even offering to send a copy.
Implications for Research and Practice

In light of the family-oriented values evident in participants’ discourse, government efforts to encourage self direction and independence among young parents might benefit from acknowledging and promoting factors in educational, labor market, or service provision that respect and encourage this family mindedness. Clearly, in this location, the need for “young family friendly” educational opportunities was significant, and the response of government workers in conjunction with community players to subsequently establish family-friendly schooling options (with the aid of community development funding) was a significant reflection of young parents’ expressed hopes.

The sense of purpose tied to parenting identity indicates a significant resource for a strengths approach with young parents. Rather than focussing on young parenthood as a deficit or risk factor, workers may get more out of exploring the skills and resilience young parents have developed along their informal pathways and building on motivations that are clearly already very strong in this regard. The strength of parenting identity motivation may, if not valued, lead to resistance and disengagement. Some recent research has identified a vicious cycle in which services effectively marginalized parents by focusing on deficits and risk (Winkworth, McArthur, Layton, Thomson, & Wilson, 2010). Indications from consultations were that this fosters a level of anxiety and scepticism among young parents, which is a further barrier to engagement.

The group of social workers had well-developed relations in the community which had been built up over a period of years through an outreach relationship (Hadson & Peck, 2011). Their interest in the experiences of young people extended beyond programmatic interests in pathways and outcomes, but program development was enhanced by their attempts at authentic engagement with young parents. Birnbaum (1999) raised the question around
whether “third way” type welfare reforms are “authentic,” describing such welfare reform policies as “simulating” social reform. We suggest that authenticity may not reside in policy directions per se, but may emerge out of relations which develop and inform policy implementation. Put in relational terms, implementing welfare reform policies involves a potentially controlling clientizing process (Gubrium & Jarvinen, 2014) in which people are identified and treated as objects of policy implementation. However, the boundaries of new policies may, in practice, be influenced through more open, dialogic encounters that expand subjective understanding of clients and influence how clients, workers, and managers develop practice possibilities (Seikkula & Arnkil, 2006).

In the current example, engagement with young parents appeared to contribute to a concerted attention to their interests and concerns at street level. Managers and workers in a bureaucracy that is often associated with regulation and compliance (Murphy, Murray, Chalmers, Martin, & Marston, 2011) expressed interest in and genuine concern for young parents (and how best to fit welfare reform processes around their needs). Whether this is sustained over the longer term is a subject for further research. Previous research around the relational capacity of workers in the Australian social security environment has stressed challenges in sustaining flexible policy implementation (Howard, 2003; Kennedy & Corliss, 2008). However, a year after the initial engagement with young parents, the practice of departmental workers listening to the voices of one group and sharing learning to improve service delivery was repeated in the same community with people experiencing long term unemployment, suggesting some ongoing interest in developing service through local engagement.

**Conclusion**

Listening and responding to the voices of marginalized clients is something which governments increasingly recognise as important to ethical service
delivery, yet this is often difficult to do in the context of busy and increasingly austere environments. Relational perspectives on service delivery suggest that ethical justifications should be important to government, but that the primary justification for listening to the voices of marginalized people is because it supports a relatedness in human service practice (Folgheraiter, 2004) where policies might take on a better “fit” to the everyday lived experience and social situations of the people they touch upon (Hall et al., 2012).

The current article has explored how a group of young parents’ insights about their own local life experiences and aspirations were integrated into an organisational setting and contributed to changes in policy implementation at a local level as well as some broader impacts. The article provided an analysis of young parents’ insights which give cause for concern around the problematization of early parenting. The impact of stigmatization suggests a potential for interventions to undermine rather than support, unless relational capacities in service delivery settings are well developed. To conclude, we relate the words of one young parent, who had returned to schooling through a program developed subsequent to our study, and was involved in a short film to promote awareness of young parent experiences (Australian Department of Human Services, 2013).

Not a lot of people do look at young mums and say they can do well in the community or they need help . . . [but when this happens] it really makes us feel like . . . accepted and loved . . . and valued and supported . . . and that all comes from this school. I see so many teens that could have a good education, that could be really great value to the community . . . but don’t have that help there.

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Chapter Ten

The Ghost in the Welfare Machine

This Chapter reviews learning from cases and concludes the thesis. It reflects on the glimpses offered of an alternative relational direction significant for Centrelink and other human services. Central to this alternative direction was how social workers helped other organisational players, particularly customer service workers and managers to connect with the experiences of people seeking assistance and with networks in their communities. This building of networks within and outside Centrelink appeared to change interactions with individuals seeking assistance in two ways. First, it expanded dialogue at the frontline, making interactions richer and more relevant. Second, it led to alternative frontline service strategies, particularly the pursuit of interactions in community settings, which can be conceptualised as bending service delivery itself and engaging workers closer to the milieu and lived experience of people seeking assistance.

The Chapter also considers strains within and across cases, particularly how ongoing policy and business initiatives appeared to harden Centrelink environments just as attempts to engage sought to soften these. The Chapter argues that coercive directions heightened tension at the frontline but were better received where policies retained local level decision making. A local dimension was also evident in struggles to define the ‘business’ of Centrelink and a conflict between ‘business as usual’ talk and interest in engagement. These struggles partly reflected pressures reported in previous studies, where workers experienced stress around constrictions on their time and ability to respond to the needs of people seeking assistance. However, they also demonstrated alternative, hitherto little recognised experiences, where freedoms were more significant and a shared enthusiasm was expressed by workers and managers.

Further research would be important to consider developments which shifted the Centrelink frontline into community spaces. A funding expansion to
create additional community engagement officers and community focussed social workers to work with them was an example of this which occurred at the end of the study, and indicated an evolution of attempts to engage supportively drawing on social workers. Research is also needed round the intersection between engagement and digital reforms, which were a newly emerging ‘business’ pressure at the end of the study.

**A Haunting Vision**

“But you were always a good man of business, Jacob,” faltered Scrooge, who now began to apply this to himself.

“Business!” cried the Ghost, wringing its hands again. “Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business ...”


The vision of an engaging organisation has followed Centrelink since its inception. Vardon’s (2000a, 2000b) promise that a customer service approach could reverse the dehumanisation of people seeking assistance linked the prior marginalisation of benefit recipients to a bureaucratic machine-like welfare system. Despite the introduction of customer service, the review of literature in Chapter Two painted a grim picture of relationships at the Centrelink frontline. The tendency to pursue controlling interactions rather than more open, supportive engagement suggested that customer service directions were themselves hampered by a marketisation process. This devalued marginalised people in terms of a market uselessess exemplified in the widespread assignation of the word ‘failure’ where people did not meet activity requirements. That these developments went hand in hand with ongoing bureaucratic, machine tendencies appeared to repudiate the promise of customer service in Centrelink.

Some aspects of the literature did, however, indicate areas of supportive engagement. This was most evident around the involvement of social workers in alternative service approaches which focussed on engaging with people on their own terms and particularly where Centrelink workers worked closely
with local communities. Struggles of social workers to develop relationships within Centrelink were linked in Chapter Three to broader struggles around relational social work in increasingly marketised and control oriented human service contexts internationally. The thesis then looked in more detail at the possibility of social workers providing guidance to attempts to engage supportively in Centrelink. Chapter Four looked back at cases of local alternative service in Centrelink which drew on social workers, and detailed examples of local collaboration and flexible organisational practices. These cases showed dramatically different engagements in and around the Centrelink environment. The possibility of a more expansive move in this direction was recognised in Centrelink’s attempts to develop coordinated service commencing in 2011/12. Early site examples of this move were identified and followed for just over a year.

These sites demonstrated that Centrelink was a context in which supportive and even transformational interactions could be pursued on a more widespread basis, but they also showed the challenges around this more clearly. Furthermore, the case study method of exploring multiple perspectives illustrated how relationships operated within frontline practice to move people towards or away from support. The case studies provided access inside the ‘black box’ of frontline operations, showing how engagement was perceived and attempted from different perspectives and how impacts filtered across networks and across service delivery decisions.

How Attempts Worked

A strength of this thesis has been its illustration of the practical development of struggle across and ultimately beyond the frontline. In this regard, the question of how attempts worked, was beyond a simple evaluation of function, but an exploration of how the work of supportive engagement unfolded in a constrictive context. From a practical perspective, the focus on how attempts worked involved drawing out multiple perspectives in order to
describe and come to understand attempts. This resulted in a rich and detailed illustration of the actions, experiences, feelings and thoughts of those involved.

**Attempts were Dramatic and Rewarding**

Chalk and cheese, it is completely different.

(Renee, Customer Service Worker, site B)

Case experiences revealed supportive interpersonal interactions contrasting with experiences from the literature and the reflections of workers and customers on past histories of engagement. Case experiences showed a marked humanisation of service and a sense of having related as a person rather than a number. This was starkly different to expectations of stigmatisation and to the workers’ expressed histories of being tightly controlled. Benefits of closer interpersonal engagement included avoiding further stresses for clients disclosing highly personal matters, something which was described in the literature review as a central cause of distress. This made a significant difference to people who might otherwise have been fearful or angry towards Centrelink.

New networking practices relied on workers developing knowledge and connections in the community from what was a low base. Most reported little knowledge of the community initially, and few or no personalized connections with services. During initial training many workers felt trepidation around even basic referrals. Even in site A, where developments were less well progressed, workers reported an ability to spend more time with people who wanted to engage in conversation and to build some engagement with community networks over time. In site B, community engagement worked at both an individual and service delivery level, as substantial changes to servicing developed, particularly for young parents impacted by potentially punitive policies.
The expression ‘chalk and cheese’, when first heard during the study, suggested optimism and a dramatic relational improvement. Whilst this was apparent, the words also conveyed a deeper undercurrent. If changes were so dramatic they were also likely to invoke a challenge to the status quo and a resultant tension as well as frustration where challenges arose. That attempts were challenging and frustrating was quickly experienced by workers.

**Attempts were Challenging and Frustrating**

Centrelink’s historical orientation towards processes and payment transactions, whilst creating access and opportunity for engagement, simultaneously provided a hard environment where engagement was seen as unusual business. Changes to engagement in the various cases explored in the thesis, can be characterised as a ‘softening’ (Cortis, Katz & Patulny, 2009) of a ‘hard to reach’ organisation. Softening a hard context was made more difficult where further hardening developments occurred simultaneously. Increases in site busy-ness led customer service workers to express feelings of guilt and discomfort around spending time with someone seeking assistance. This experience appeared to lessen where workers received acknowledgement of the variety of tasks in their role. Tensions were most evident where workers were physically exposed to the gaze from queues and when talk around ‘business as usual’ was juxtaposed with reforms focused on engagement.

A key challenge in this talk was an expectation of immediate outcomes from every interaction. This expectation seemed to be driven by conceptual parallels with quick processing and simple outputs which were equated with success. This was particularly evident in site A, and inhibited the learning and development process which was evident in site B (and most evident in the SaiL program).

In the latter part of the study, pressures became more accentuated as a focus was placed on ‘Key Performance Indicators’ (KPIs). One of the challenges in applying the ‘KPI’ approach was the way in which it interacted with and
drove worker behaviour. In transactional work, this was seen as helpful, because KPIs were viewed as motivating workers and managers to achieve a certain number of transactions, and measure their success by this achievement. However, the use of KPIs applied to attempts to engage was fraught with difficulties. Engagement, conversations and relationship development took time and did not always get an immediate or tangible outcome. Nearing the end of the study there was increasing talk about achieving certain numbers of referrals and the need to ‘up’ referrals, suggesting perverse effects from KPIs as workers sought to find more referrals to meet organisational expectations.

**Attempts were Diverse**

Sites A and B involved attempts to change a work style amongst customer service workers employed at Australian Public Service level four (APS 4), leading to some resistance and questioning of the boundaries of that role. These issues were less evident in SaiL and the CSU cases which used workers at a more senior customer service level (APS 5). This issue of role and grade may also have been of importance in terms of the possibility for workers to self manage and negotiate with managers.

Social workers’ concerns around workloads, role confusion and competition reflected a shift in resourcing arrangements away from the SaiL model, where project resourcing included 50% of funding for social workers and 50% for customer service staff. Social workers in sites A and B were expected to contribute without any further allocated resources based on an organisational expectation of savings from a reduction in simple referral workloads. Experiences from sites were that this was unrealistic, that additional workloads from coaching and consultation were at times overwhelming for social workers, and that this contributed to risks in the program.

Social workers appeared sometimes to be heavily involved in leading change, even joyful, whilst at other times they were sidelined, sceptical or struggling themselves to understand and influence organisational reforms.
Managers with oversight across multiple sites reported this pattern of inconsistent social work involvement emerging on a wider basis, and efforts were being made to develop clearer guidelines around social work involvement as the study ended (Australian Department of Human Services, 2013b).

The issue of resourcing was more clearly defined in project work in SaiL and in the ongoing CSU team described in Chapter Four. A separate new program being developed at the end of the study which involved resourcing additional community engagement officers and community-focussed social work positions in a different set of sites appeared to have taken this into account.

**Implications and Wider Relevance**

**Re-Evaluating Social Worker Guidance in Constrictive Settings**

The expertise of social workers was valued not only for case discussion, but also for training and coaching on how to engage with customers who experienced complex issues. Collaborative service, particularly in site B and SaiL, had benefits for people seeking assistance and also provided practical mentoring opportunities where boundaries could be more clearly discussed. In this mentoring role, social workers played a key part in bringing new ideas and values based discussions into meetings with staff looking at the service they delivered to marginalised people. Experiences from SaiL suggested that this ongoing development and close working together was effective in motivating staff and reducing risks of staff over-stretching themselves. The importance of this lesson was experienced in its absence, when customer service workers in site A and to a lesser extent site B complained of a lack of access to social workers and irregular coaching or consultation.

Social workers too, were challenged by experiences where their role was not clearly integrated, and raised concerns about how to influence practice and whether workers were either ‘doing too much’ or failing ‘to do enough’.
Helping to develop a balance seemed a central function for which support was variable. Availability of social workers were highly contingent on local arrangements, with customer service workers more likely to consult with social workers if they had close physical access and prior experiences of consultation.

Social workers were not alone in concerns around historical failures to engage with people seeking assistance. They were also not alone in experiencing mixed emotions as changes unfolded. The unfolding of a shared struggle illustrated how alliances could develop with customer service workers and also, to a lesser but still important extent, with managers. Despite the challenges inherent in transition and reinvention, involvement with managers revealed positive attempts to make service delivery more responsive to people accessing assistance. In SaiL and in site B, managers were drawn into richer discussions of the experiences of people accessing Centrelink, and the development of empathic responses was an important aspect of service changes.

Learning from community engagement, particularly in site B, was shared in forums so that staff and managers could develop their understanding of how office business reflected the nature of community issues. In these sites, and later in site A, managers took an interest in the skills and connections developed by workers over time, although they struggled to align this with a dominant business as usual narrative. A potential emerging narrative in site B framed Centrelink’s business as situated within and impacted by the community. This was reinforced by separate welfare reform funding and young parent initiatives described in Chapter Nine.

**Opportunities were Impacted by Local Office Environments**

Pressures around engagement were most evident where sites were impacted heavily by a high volume of ‘traffic’ and where this impacted on privacy. In both sites, customer service workers reported concern at failures to maintain consistent involvement with social workers in the front office.
environment, as social workers, particularly in site A, struggled to maintain their involvement out the front. In site B and in the case of SaiL there was a greater attention to the privacy and comfort of workers and people accessing assistance. Providing the physical space appropriate to engagement was an ongoing problem in site A, and this undermined expectations around engagement. It also inhibited workers sharing learning or ideas with each other informally in the team, as conversations were difficult to pursue in an environment where workers were observed from the waiting queue and assumed to be ‘chatting’ with no-one in front of them.

Whilst more suitable arrangements in offices were certainly possible, experiences from the Community Support Unit and developments in community-based servicing, which were discussed in Chapters Four and Nine, suggested a further alternative through finding more appropriate sites for engagement in the community context. This approach reflected developments in the Netherlands which have sought to restore emotional security in people’s dealings with social security by going beyond organisational settings and re-engaging people in the community (Tonkens & Verplanke, 2013).

McDonaldisation or Administrative Inclusion?

Fear of McDonaldisation (Dustin, 2007), through equating social work with increased task based and repetitive process oriented work, was a concern underlying social workers scepticism of change, particularly given the process and customer service orientation of the Centrelink environment. Case experiences showed that as social workers helped customer service workers to develop skills and knowledge, social workers reflected on and developed clarity around their own roles, and how they could contribute in an environment where simpler referral tasks were undertaken by others. Their involvement in more sensitive cases in sites A and B was not as consistent or clear as in SaiL and the CSU, although collaboration in site B showed signs of developing in this way.
Where collaboration developed, social workers became more conscious of inclusive possibilities through better administration. Mistaken assumptions, miscommunication, stigmatisation or simply the challenges citizens face making their situation clear to government workers mean that administration of social security payments is not straightforward. The concept of administrative exclusion refers to concerns that service workers and service design reduce or inhibit access to assistance for which citizens are in fact eligible, thereby impacting broader inclusion opportunities. Research into administrative exclusion has highlighted the negative impacts of administrative interactions in social security settings, particularly dehumanizing or discriminatory interactions which deny access to payments and thereby impact health and wellbeing (Brodkin & Majmundar, 2010). Case experiences outlined in Chapter Seven pointed to a kind of administrative inclusion developing, where workers prevented or addressed potential exclusion through better engagement and response to individual circumstances.

Research by members of the CSIRO team which investigated customer experiences from SaiL, identified positive relationships with Centrelink as important in providing the kind of stability for citizens which supports them activating other capabilities and resources (Mason, Spinks, Hajkowicz & Hobman, 2014). This departs from discourse which has tended to encourage directive and punitive actions in social welfare administration and conceptualised wellbeing as an escape from welfare dependency (Saunders, 2008). The possibility that supportive relationships in welfare administration can foster people’s wellbeing suggests a need to frame welfare provision more positively.

**Machine Metaphors and the Promise of Digital Business**

Cases also revealed the limitations of the machine metaphor in its application to Centrelink. Rather than the workings of a machine, pathways to financial and social support were fluid and highly dependent on knowledge
and practices arising out of relationships. Evidence of workers uncovering or preventing errors and oversights in administration showed improved access to social security payments and curtailed significant instances of hardship, providing a basis for further inclusionary activity. In a small number of cases, highly significant instances of severe hardship were addressed or averted. In these cases, it was the fact of engaging with the person more supportively and responding to their situation which changed decisions.

Elements of the machine metaphor reappeared in sites with the promise of digital business. This was largely in the form of a promise that online claims and self-service would reduce pressures in frontline service and free up staff to engage with people who needed more time. This invoked scepticism amongst workers towards the end of the research. Workers found themselves increasingly busy during its introduction due to increased enquiries, complaints and difficulties from people directed to use online services. Workers expressed helplessness around telling people to go online as they were not confident that the online system was reliable, and anticipated customers returning to the office. The possibility of churn, or repetitive enquiries dealing with the same issue due to a ‘harder’ entry environment, was explored in the SaiL context in Chapter Four and in ‘John’s case’ in Chapter Seven. The issue of workers facing the same issue multiple times, or failure to relate resulting in distress or even aggression is itself a rationale for a more engaging approach, and one which would benefit from more extensive research.

Digital directions appeared to be closely tied to a ‘business’ narrative emphasising processing and traffic control rather than engagement. Digital business initiatives were emerging rapidly in Centrelink at the end of the research. They were also apparent in increased discussion in Centrelink about ‘virtual social work’ and the use of social workers in queued telephone based teams and centralised claim centres. As the study ended, office based social workers were under pressure to assist with telephone queue based work and surrender some face to face and community based hours. Whilst this phone
based work may have provided new ways of accessing and assisting marginalised people, there was a need for further research into this direction.

(Mis)Understandings of A Professional Framework

Implementation and training in sites A and B framed a broad goal of achieving more coordination across the service system utilising a strengths-based approach and case coordination. It quickly became apparent that these terms were being applied idiosyncratically and only basic elements of professional frameworks around the strengths approach and case coordination were applied. There was concern organisationally that developments not be associated with customer service workers taking on ‘cases’ to manage and coordinate, as might be anticipated in social work. This was reflected in training sessions and in site developments where other terms such as ‘enhanced servicing’ or sometimes just ‘someone to talk to’ were used. It became evident in the study that workers and managers were sometimes confused about the nature of their roles. This may have been an artifact of a teething stage in the initiative, but it also demonstrated a disconnect between organisational use of terminology and professional usage.

The absence of a defined role for social workers within the governance and leadership framework of practice directions in sites A and B was also a significant departure from experiences in SaiL. In some cases social workers undertook such roles de facto, and some described joy or excitement in becoming more closely involved, however, there was an ongoing challenge where their role was not clearly integrated. The failure to clearly structure raised concerns about how to influence practices and whether workers were either ‘doing too much’ or failing ‘to do enough’. Helping customer service workers to develop boundaries seemed a central function for which support was highly variable across cases, from the high levels of mentoring and support evident in side by side working in SaiL, through to experiences of detachment evident in site A. As this study concluded, social workers in two sites nationally
took on formal roles managing customer service workers, and a program resourcing community engagement officers and social workers in joint teams was commencing. Research comparing these new arrangements would be of value.

Altering Narratives

Centrelink has a history of projects and trials running beside ‘business as usual’, and this can create both enthusiasm for new developments as well as challenges embedding these, particularly where they clash with longstanding narratives in the organisation. Providing a convincing narrative of the shift from a transactional to holistic approach was challenging for workers and managers on the ground. Talk about reforms often focused on the value of more efficient processing and portrayed a shift from transactions to relations as contingent on savings and largely about ‘complex customers’, rather than an essential part of reforming mainstream service delivery to deal with the varying complexity of ‘service situations’.

Despite the challenges inherent in transition and reinvention, a number of positive management trends emerged during the study, including managers encouraging staff to develop close relationships in the community. For example, in site A, where engagement was less well progressed, there was a growing acknowledgment of the impact of homelessness and the benefits of working better with community agencies which specialised in housing support.

At the end of this study, a number of managers outside of the studied sites expressed interest in building a more complex narrative of how their offices and communities interacted. As a result of this interest, I led several workshops with managers and workers sharing ideas on mapping service engagement in community and creating a shared understanding of how a site was engaged in their community and what else was needed. Further dialogues to bring together the intelligence of workers from various programs, and in some instances citizens or community players, were being pursued in some locations as this
research was concluding. A challenge will be moving beyond information sharing to building practical relationships so that such forums create a clear pathway for service development.

The Value of Local Networks and Local Knowledge

The thesis illustrated understanding and connection to community developing substantially over the first year of reforms in sites, providing pathways where citizens would previously have encountered a ‘dead end’. A change in interactions was particularly apparent as collaboration evolved between social workers and customer service workers. Cases showed a more complex interaction across external and internal networks as a customer’s needs and circumstances were better understood.

A central difficulty historically has been how the national social security provider values and develops local knowledge and connections. The current study suggests that difficulties are not insurmountable, particularly if partnerships within the local welfare system construct a space where departmental business is understood as impacted by ground level experiences in the community.

The risks in a more distant, top-down approach have been articulated in critical and relational social work and human services literature (Folgheraiter, 2004; Strier & Binyamin, 2010). Perhaps foremost amongst these risks is a tendency for government services to silence voices and constrict dialogue (Seikkula & Arnkil, 2006), with government defining the needs and directions and then struggling to monitor and force compliance. Approaches which, on the other hand, develop government workers connections with community networks and improve the quality of practice engagements in a local welfare system may offer hope for an alternative paradigm of early cooperation, where people’s needs are constructed and addressed more supportively.
Implications for Social Work Theory and Practice
and for other Organisational Environments

This thesis has developed some key ideas which can inform social work theory and practice. These can help frame future thinking about relational social work and its possibilities more broadly in other organisations beyond Centrelink.

First, the thesis encourages a shift in thinking about social workers. This is a shift away from picturing social workers as isolated professionals defending their discretionary power, and towards valuing social workers’ strengths in relating across complicated networks. This shift recognises that human services are increasingly multi-disciplinary, multi-sectorial and involve shifting boundaries where professional, lay and service user perspectives conflict and coalesce (Arnkil & Seikkula, 2015). The thesis invites further consideration of the metaphor of social workers as guides, helping others towards a greater awareness of social complexity and awareness in complicated multi-perspectival situations (Folgheraiter, 2004). It frames social worker guidance in terms of a relational heroism, where steps forward emerge from a process of both leading and learning from and about others.

This framework supports a shift in thinking about social work and the nature of relational social work. In illustrating how social workers worked to create new forums and dialogue, this thesis departs from the focus on therapeutic relationships with a client, often associated with relationship based practice (Ornstein & Ganzer, 2005; Ruch et al, 2010; Trevithick, 2003). Instead, it furthers an alternative relational focus drawing on the network tradition (Whittington 1983; Seed, 1990; Trevillion, 1999; Folgheraiter, 2004, 2012) to illustrate how the work of relational social work unfolds through multiple perspectives and the emergence of dialogue.
and cooperation across parts of the service network. This can unleash unanticipated (and often unseen) practices and solutions, particularly where dialogue draws deep connections across diverse parts of a network. This may, in turn, lead to new therapeutic spaces or, alternatively, to softer and more welcoming places for ordinary life activities such as learning, and raising children (as evidenced in Chapter Nine).

This thesis suggests that interest in the social worker-client relationship is only part of a picture of relational social work’s future, and that social workers need to exercise caution about being captured (Furlong, 2008, 2013) by a vision of a privileged professional relationship, as this can easily obscure the value of other, more everyday relationships. The thesis supports recent interest in how social workers’ professional expertise can be grounded in their connection making in everyday relationships (Broadhurst & Mason, 2014; Reimer, 2014). Social workers’ capacity to relate and (in effect) translate across diverse contexts reflects their creative use of a professional boundary which is inclusive rather than defensive (O’Leary, Tsui & Ruch, 2013).

Operational mechanisms evident in the thesis which enhance work at the boundary are freedom to converse with other workers in frontline situations as well as room for more structured reflective dialogue through workplace coaching, training and meetings. Visits and meetings with community players and service users, rather than time away from core work in the office, can save time through establishing better knowledge and seamless connections. They can also act as a springboard for service innovations, and an early warning sign of service problems. In contrast, an emphasis on simplistic targets, reducing time to engage, and curtailing worker freedoms can shrink the front-line environment and limit the scope for problem-solving. Further research exploring work at the boundary with clients and with other workers could draw on the network tradition of tracing and illustrating changing relationships. Such research
would benefit from the methodological tools described in this thesis which provide a multi-perspectival depth to accounts, which would further enhance the literature.

Findings from this thesis illustrate how social workers can encourage alternative organisational directions, particularly through sharing tools, knowledge and visceral experiences about how the human service 'business' is situated in a community and interpersonal context. This furthers an argument developed by Lawler and Bilson (2010) and Osborne and Brown (2013), that creative collaboration is central to inspiring organisational change in human services. The thesis shows the importance of social workers garnering the support and understanding of non-social workers in order to cement a space for relational social work in the organisation.

The thesis suggests that garnering support is not unattainable, because social workers are not alone in their concerns about dehumanising spaces in human services. However, struggles to make sense within organizational machinery and to value people who are accessing services, are not always a common struggle. Troubled managerial schemas, inadequate resourcing and ongoing failures to engage supportively can leave workers isolated and dispirited.

Extending on thinking around relational empathy (Freedberg, 2007), this thesis suggests two scenarios where overcoming such problems may be particularly likely. First when non-social workers and managers are strongly confronted by situations which emerge from an absence of support. Second, when social workers expose others, particularly managers, who are often isolated from service experiences and outcomes, to the positive human stories emerging when organisational support is provided. Indications from the thesis are that this can build commitment and lead to changes in current or subsequent programs.
For organisational settings in the field of income support, and for other contexts dealing with service users who are liable to vilification and dehumanising narratives, this thesis shows the importance of social workers fashioning alternative images and narratives which (re)humanise people accessing services. Again, central to this is the capacity to connect people in different parts and levels of the service network so that opportunities for clearer understanding and recognition can develop. This may also help restore an emotional aspect to organisational and management considerations which can otherwise become decontextualised and distanced from the realities of service provision (Trevithick, 2014). Greater recognition of realities beyond the front door (Tonkens and Verplanke, 2013) go hand in hand with more flexible service provision styles (Reimer, 2014) including mobile service, and with forging better connections with other agencies in local contexts.

Conclusion

Delivering payments and services to thousands of Australians experiencing difficult life situations creates a unique opportunity for Centrelink. It offers a platform for closer interactions between people and government which open up a network of possibilities in the community and better support from administrative welfare pathways. However, interpersonal and network engagement has historically challenged and even overwhelmed those at the frontline. In this environment, the possibility of drawing on guidance from social workers to develop engagement was an emerging area of interest explored in this thesis.

This thesis illustrated cases of softer entry into assistance, and more supportive engagement. The relaxation of rigid organisational expectations appeared to allow the fluid, lived experience of real life situations to be better responded to. This was not through a powerful exercise of worker discretion, as street level bureaucracy describes, but because more robust relationships were more relevant and flexible.

Developing consistent relationships between customer service workers and social workers seemed highly rewarding but appeared challenging to
maintain in practice, particularly where resourcing mechanisms were not in place and where local conditions were not supportive of change. Developing a cohesive identity in new roles was difficult for customer service workers, who could, in the words of one worker, feel like the ‘meat in the sandwich’, caught in between customer and organisational expectations. Workers described their new roles as pushing up against the process directions of Centrelink which were seen as all about getting people in and out quickly. Spending more time with people led to unexpected learning for staff, and a sense of obligation towards people they were helping as workers developed insights into their lived experiences. This led them to reflect on the inefficiency of some departmental interventions where it was evident that these glossed over or obscured real needs, or made people’s situation worse. In accordance with the notion of relational empathy (Freedberg, 2007), developing closer proximity encouraged more humanising and committed worker behaviour.

Relationships with social workers and opportunities for consistent support were important in helping develop frontline engagement but this was complicated by a lack of resourcing and in some instances this raised concerns about risks in new arrangements. Cases in this thesis suggest that drawing on guidance from social workers needed to be clearly resourced to lessen organisational and people risks, and contribute to a clearer change narrative.

Producing a convincing narrative of a shift from a transactional to a more holistic approach was an ongoing challenge for Centrelink. Talk about relational reforms contested with talk around efficient processing and ‘business as usual’. How Centrelink marries the use of mechanisms such as KPIs with an agenda of engagement was an issue which, at the end of this study, was still emerging. Evidence of KPIs and digital business driving unnecessary practices suggested some real challenges. Despite these pressures, shifts in interpersonal engagement and the bending of frontline services into community spaces indicated a way forward and possibilities for a more humanising and responsive approach in Centrelink.
Appendix A

Interview Guide

For Customer Service Workers

1. Can you tell me about your conversations and interactions that happen now in Centrelink? Are they (How are they) different from your past experiences?

2. Tell me how they work(ed)? Can you give me any examples? What happened?

3. How do people find that conversation/interaction? How did you find it?

4. What made conversations go well? What made them more difficult?

5. What support do you get?

6. Can you tell me about your experience referring to community agencies prior to commencing this work? To whom did you refer exactly? Did you have you have a person to person relationship with someone there you could consult with if you needed to? What is the situation now? What has changed?

7. Can you tell me about your relationships with social workers? What assistance do they provide? What has changed [if anything]?

8. How does doing this work make you think about the organisation? What organisational factors do you think have been significant in this work?
9. What have you learned from your experience [doing this work]?

10. Is there anyone in particular you would not like your account to be shared with? (or are there any elements in it you would not like shared?)

11. Is there anyone in particular you would like your account (or any elements in it) to be shared with? If you are interested in sharing any particulars in more detail with another person can I contact you again?

12. Would you like to ask me anything?
For Social Workers

1. Can you tell me about conversations and interactions that happen now in Centrelink? Are they (How are they) different from your past experiences?

2. Tell me how they work(ed)? Can you give me any examples? What happened?

3. How do people find that conversation/interaction?

4. What made conversations go well? What made them more difficult?

5. What support do you get? and what support do you give?

6. Can you tell me about your relationships with customer service workers? What has changed [if anything]?

7. How does supporting this work make you think about the organisation? What organisational factors do you think have been significant in this work?

9. What have you learned from your experience supporting this work?

10. Is there anyone in particular you would not like your account to be shared with? (or are there any elements in it you would not like shared?)

11. Is there anyone in particular you would like your account (or any elements in it) to be shared with? If you are interested in sharing any particulars in more detail with another person can I contact you again?

12. Would you like to ask me anything?
For Managers

1. Can you tell me about conversations and interactions that happen now in Centrelink? Are they (How are they) different from your past experiences?

2. Tell me how they work(ed)? Can you give me any examples? What happened?

3. How do people find that conversation/interaction?

4. What made conversations go well? What made them more difficult?

5. What support do you get? and what support do you give?

6. Can you tell me about your relationships with customer service workers and social workers? What has changed [if anything]?

7. How does supporting this work make you think about the organisation? What organisational factors do you think have been significant in this work?

9. What have you learned from your experience supporting this work?

10. Is there anyone in particular you would not like your account to be shared with? (or are there any elements in it you would not like shared?)

11. Is there anyone in particular you would like your account (or any elements in it) to be shared with? If you are interested in sharing any particulars in more detail with another person can I contact you again?

12. Would you like to ask me anything?
For Customers

1. Can you tell me about conversations and interactions you have experienced in Centrelink? Are they (How are they) different from your past experiences?

2. Tell me how they work(ed)? Can you give me any examples? What happened?

3. How did you find that conversation/interaction?

4. What made conversation go well? What made it more difficult?

5. What support did you get?

6. Can you tell me about your relationship with Centrelink? What has changed [if anything]?

7. How does your experience make you think about Centrelink?

8. What have you learned from your experience?

9. Is there anyone in particular you would not like your account to be shared with? (or are there any elements in it you would not like shared?)

10. Is there anyone in particular you would like your account (or any elements in it) to be shared with? If you are interested in sharing any particulars in more detail with another person can I contact you again?

11. Would you like to ask me anything?
Appendix B

Information sheets and consent forms for

i) customers;

ii) customer service workers/social workers; and

iii) managers.
TITLE OF PROJECT

The practice of guided conversations in the Australian government department of Human Services (DHS)

INFORMATION SHEET

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chief Investigator</th>
<th>Doctoral Candidate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dr Jennifer Boddy</td>
<td>Gregory Hall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School of Human Services and Social Work</td>
<td>School of Human Services and Social Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone: 07 55527706</td>
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<td></td>
<td><a href="mailto:greg.hall@griffithuni.edu.au">greg.hall@griffithuni.edu.au</a></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Why is the research being conducted?

DHS (Centrelink) offices have been identified by previous research as a place people go when their needs are not being met by services or supports in the community. This has led to DHS being suggested as a place for early support and intervention which could assist people to avoid marginalization and exclusion.

The current research will focus on how DHS staff pursue supportive conversations with people who appear to have unmet needs.

The research will consider the experiences and perspectives of workers and customers and will examine how these interactions are situated and supported by the organisation.

The research is part of a doctoral study being undertaken through Griffith University with support from the CSIRO and DHS.

What you will be asked to do

You will be invited to participate in an interview with the researcher (who is the doctoral candidate) lasting between a half and one hour.
This interview will focus on your experience of your contact with DHS. The interview will ask about your previous experience of interactions in DHS (Centrelink), about what happened this time and what has happened afterwards as a result of that interaction.

You will also be invited to participate in a brief follow up contact to share and help edit the researcher’s account while adding any further developments which may have occurred for you.

If you wish for comments from your DHS worker to be included in the research, you will need to indicate your consent for this below, as the researcher does not access DHS data about you and will only discuss your involvement with a DHS worker if you expressly consent to this.

**The basis by which participants will be selected or screened**

You are invited to participate in this research on the basis that you have had experience with a ‘guided conversation’ interaction with a DHS (Centrelink) staff member at the DHS site.

The research relies on self selection and has not identified you through DHS Centrelink data.

**The expected benefits of the research**

The expected benefits to the research include a contribution to knowledge of how DHS services work with people who need other help. The research report will be shared with DHS executives and, in this respect, the perspectives and experiences of participants will be transmitted to high levels of government.

**Risks to you**

The interview does not directly ask any questions around distressing or personal matters. However, should you feel uncomfortable discussing any experiences which are raised when talking about your contact with DHS you are under no obligation to discuss these and can also cease involvement in the interview at any time. The interviewer is an experienced social worker and will provide you with options for support or assistance relevant to the issue raised.

**Your confidentiality**

You will not be identified in the collection and publication of data. Should you wish to share your participation with your DHS worker, you will need to specifically consent to this below where indicated. To preserve anonymity in the reporting of accounts or verbatim quotes, all possible effort will be taken to de-identify these so that they do not incorporate personal, idiosyncratic features which might be recognizable to close others.
such as workers or friends.

Information relevant to this project will be stored securely by the researcher. Access to this information is restricted to the researchers and the University supervisor. Reports will be provided and publications pursued where your involvement or statements may be reproduced in anonymous form.

**Your participation is voluntary**

Participation in the project is voluntary. Your decision to participate will in no way impact upon your relationship with DHS. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

**Questions / further information**

If you have questions or would like further information about the project please contact Greg on 0421918773.

**The ethical conduct of this research**

Griffith University conducts research in accordance with the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research*. If potential participants have any concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of the research project they should contact the Manager, Research Ethics on 07 3735 5585 or research-ethics@griffith.edu.au.

**Feedback to you**

At the end of the project a brief report on the projects findings will be made available to participants.

**Privacy Statement**

The conduct of this research involves the collection, access and/or use of your identified personal information. The information collected is confidential and will not be disclosed to third parties without your consent, except to meet government, legal or other regulatory authority requirements. A de-identified copy of this data may be used for other research purposes. However, your anonymity will at all times be safeguarded. For further information consult the University’s Privacy Plan at [http://www.griffith.edu.au/about-griffith/plans-publications/griffith-university-privacy-plan](http://www.griffith.edu.au/about-griffith/plans-publications/griffith-university-privacy-plan) or telephone (07) 3735 5585.
The practice of guided conversations in the Australian government department of Human Services (DHS)

CONSENT FORM

Research Team

Name
Dr Jennifer Boddy
Mr Greg Hall
School of Human Services and Social Work
Contact Phone 0421918773
Contact Email greg.hall@griffithuni.edu.au

By signing below, I confirm that I have read and understood the information package and in particular have noted that:

- I understand that my involvement in this research will include participation in an interview and follow up contact.
- I have had any questions answered to my satisfaction;
- I understand the risks involved;
- I understand that there will be no direct benefit to me from my participation in this research;
- I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary;
- I understand that the research forms a part of the doctoral candidate’s academic program;
- I understand that if I have any additional questions I can contact the research team;
- I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time, without comment or penalty;
- I understand that I can contact the Manager, Research Ethics, at Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee on 07 3735 5585 (or research-ethics@griffith.edu.au) if I have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the project; and
- I agree to participate in the project.

Name

Signature

Date

- I wish for you to share my account of contact with my DHS worker ______(insert name)
- I agree for this DHS worker to share their account of the contact with the researcher

Name

Signature

Date
TITLE OF PROJECT

The practice of guided conversations in the Australian government department of Human Services (DHS)

INFORMATION SHEET

Chief Investigator
Dr Jennifer Boddy
School of Human Services and Social Work
Phone: 07 55527706
j.boddy@griffith.edu.au

Doctoral Candidate
Gregory Hall
School of Human Services and Social Work
Course of study: PhD
Phone: 0421918773
greg.hall@griffithuni.edu.au

Why is the research being conducted?

DHS (Centrelink) offices have been identified by previous research as a place people go when their needs are not being met by services or supports in the community. This has led to DHS being suggested as a place for early support and intervention which could assist people to avoid marginalization and exclusion.

The current research will focus on how DHS staff pursue supportive conversations with people who appear to have unmet needs.

The research will consider the experiences and perspectives of workers and customers and will examine how these interactions are situated and supported by the organisation.

The research is part of a doctoral study being undertaken through Griffith University with support from the CSIRO and DHS.

What you will be asked to do

You will be invited to participate in an interview with the researcher (who is the doctoral candidate) lasting around one hour.

This interview will focus on your involvement in service delivery with reference to
supporting or undertaking guided conversations. The interview will ask about your own perspective and experiences.

You will also be invited to participate in a follow up interview after several months as well as a final interview at the end of the data collection period (at around six months).

In instances where customers have agreed to have their accounts of a guided conversation shared with their DHS worker you may be asked to reflect on these accounts in the subsequent interviews.

**The basis by which participants will be selected or screened**

You are invited to participate in this research on the basis that you have had experience providing or supporting a ‘guided conversation’ interaction within DHS (Centrelink) at the DHS site.

**The expected benefits of the research**

The expected benefits to the research include a contribution to knowledge of how DHS services work with people who need other help. The research report will be shared with DHS executives and, in this respect, the perspectives and experiences of participants will be transmitted to high levels of government.

**Risks to you**

The interview does not directly ask any questions around distressing or personal matters. However, should you feel uncomfortable discussing any experiences which are raised when talking about your involvement in your work you are under no obligation to discuss these and can also cease involvement in the interview at any time. The interviewer is an experienced social worker and will provide you with options for support or assistance relevant to the issue raised.

**Your confidentiality**

You will not be identified in the collection and publication of data. To preserve anonymity in the reporting of accounts or verbatim quotes, all possible effort will be taken to de-identify these so that they do not incorporate personal, idiosyncratic features which might be recognizable to close others such as workers or friends.

Information relevant to this project will be stored securely by the researcher. Access to this information is restricted to the researchers and the University supervisor. Reports will be provided and publications pursued where your involvement or statements may be reproduced in anonymous form.

**Your participation is voluntary**
Participation in the project is voluntary. Your decision to participate will in no way impact upon your relationship with DHS. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

Questions / further information

If you have questions or would like further information about the project please contact Greg on 0421918773.

The ethical conduct of this research

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Feedback to you

At the end of the project a brief report on the projects findings will be made available to participants.

Privacy Statement

The conduct of this research involves the collection, access and/or use of your identified personal information. The information collected is confidential and will not be disclosed to third parties without your consent, except to meet government, legal or other regulatory authority requirements. A de-identified copy of this data may be used for other research purposes. However, your anonymity will at all times be safeguarded. For further information consult the University’s Privacy Plan at http://www.griffith.edu.au/about-griffith/plans-publications/griffith-university-privacy-plan or telephone (07) 3735 5585.
The practice of guided conversations in the Australian government department of Human Services (DHS)

CONSENT FORM

Research Team

Name
Dr Jennifer Boddy
Mr Greg Hall
School of Human Services and Social Work
Contact Phone 0421918773
Contact Email greg.hall@griffithuni.edu.au

By signing below, I confirm that I have read and understood the information package and in particular have noted that:

1. I understand that my involvement in this research will include participation in interviews around my experience of guided conversation practices.
2. I have had any questions answered to my satisfaction;
3. I understand the risks involved;
4. I understand that there will be no direct benefit to me from my participation in this research;
5. I understand that the research forms a part of the doctoral candidate’s academic program;
6. I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary;
7. I understand that if I have any additional questions I can contact the research team;
8. I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time, without comment or penalty;
9. I understand that I can contact the Manager, Research Ethics, at Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee on 07 3735 5585 (or research-ethics@griffith.edu.au) if I have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the project; and
10. I agree to participate in the project.

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The current research will focus on how DHS staff pursue supportive conversations with people who appear to have unmet needs.

The research will consider the experiences and perspectives of workers and customers and will examine how these interactions are situated and supported by the organisation.

The research is part of a doctoral study being undertaken through Griffith University with support from the CSIRO and DHS.

What you will be asked to do
You will be invited to participate in an interview with the researcher (who is the doctoral candidate) lasting around one hour.

This interview will focus on your involvement in service delivery with reference to supporting guided conversations. The interview will ask about your own perspective and experiences.

You will also be invited to participate in a follow up interview after several months as well as a final interview at the end of the data collection period (at around six months).

**The basis by which participants will be selected or screened**

You are invited to participate in this research on the basis that you have had experience supporting service delivery around ‘guided conversation’ interactions within DHS (Centrelink).

**The expected benefits of the research**

The expected benefits to the research include a contribution to knowledge of how DHS services work with people who need other help. The research report will be shared with DHS executives and, in this respect, the perspectives and experiences of participants will be transmitted to high levels of government.

**Risks to you**

The interview does not directly ask any questions around distressing or personal matters. However, should you feel uncomfortable discussing any experiences which are raised when talking about your involvement in your work you are under no obligation to discuss these and can also cease involvement in the interview at any time. The interviewer is an experienced social worker and will provide you with options for support or assistance relevant to the issue raised.

**Your confidentiality**

You will not be identified in the collection and publication of data. To preserve anonymity in the reporting of accounts or verbatim quotes, all possible effort will be taken to de-identify these so that they do not incorporate personal, idiosyncratic features which might be recognizable to close others such as workers or friends.

Information relevant to this project will be stored securely by the researcher. Access to this information is restricted to the researchers and the University supervisor. Reports will be provided and publications pursued where your involvement or statements may be reproduced in anonymous form.

**Your participation is voluntary**
Participation in the project is voluntary. Your decision to participate will in no way impact upon your relationship with DHS. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

Questions / further information

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The practice of guided conversations in the Australian government department of Human Services (DHS)

CONSENT FORM

Research Team

Name
Dr Jennifer Boddy
Mr Greg Hall
School of Human Services and Social Work
Contact Phone 0421918773
Contact Email greg.hall@griffithuni.edu.au

By signing below, I confirm that I have read and understood the information package and in particular have noted that:

- I understand that my involvement in this research will include participation in interviews around my experience of coordinating organizational support for guided conversation practices.
- I have had any questions answered to my satisfaction;
- I understand the risks involved;
- I understand that there will be no direct benefit to me from my participation in this research;
- I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary;
- I understand that the research forms a part of the doctoral candidate’s academic program;
- I understand that if I have any additional questions I can contact the research team;
- I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time, without comment or penalty;
- I understand that I can contact the Manager, Research Ethics, at Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee on 07 3735 5585 (or research-ethics@griffith.edu.au) if I have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the project; and
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