

*Kirsi Juhila & Tarja Pösö*

## LOCAL CULTURES IN SOCIAL WORK

*Ethnographic understanding and discourse analysis of probation work*

### Introduction

“There are many ways to be ‘empirical’; that is, ways to develop knowledge from systematic analysis of observations”, Catherine Kohler Riessman (1994, xii) says, calling for diversity in qualitative research in social work. So much goes on in contemporary social work, she continues, that we need diverse modes of inquiry, diverse approaches and methods. It is important that the tools applied are sensitive enough to uncover not only general tendencies, but also contextual particularities; that they appreciate the researcher’s reflexivity and standpoint; and that they draw on empirical evidence (*ibid.*, xv).

It is easy to agree with these ideas, although simultaneously we must not forget that the researcher is by no means the only agent whose role and reflection we should reflect upon in studies of social work. Meanings are also accomplished by other agents, i.e. by social workers and clients, without whom there would be no social work in the first place (cf. Payne 1997, 1-25). Our research programme, therefore, should also include the social worker and the client, as well as their interactions and the outcomes of their actions.

*Our intention in this article is to do social work research which is based on empirical evidence about social work practices, and which reflects upon its own methods and methodology.* The article is grounded in social constructionism and ethnomethodology, which is the theoretical and methodological platform for our application of discourse analysis and ethnography in studying practices of social work. The accent is on the linguistic side of interaction, on the social construction of reality through language. The choices we have made are intended to highlight the importance of a research approach which reaches the everyday core of social work by concentrating on the interactive and interpretative nature of a face-to-face encounter between a social worker and client. Simultaneously, we attempt to uncover how we can turn the joint efforts of social workers and researchers to construct an interpretation of what goes on in social work encounters into a resource.<sup>1</sup>

The social work encounters at the centre of our analysis are interviews aimed at assessing offenders' suitability for community service. The interviews were conducted by social workers of the Finnish Probation and After-Care Association. This is a job which is framed by various factors: legislation concerning community service, the legal system for which the assessments are provided, the guidelines of the Probation and After-Care Association, the educational and occupational background and the commitments of the staff involved, and so on. The assessment always involves the same routine: clients are interviewed on the basis of a structured schedule, and a report is written to a certain format. One might be inclined to think that there is very little room for movement, as the contents of the job are so strictly defined by the law, guidelines and routines. It is precisely this assumption of the nature of social work that makes the subject in the context of this article so interesting. Does there really exist social work that always follows the same pattern from one situation to the next, regardless of the actors and their interaction?

The question is familiar from earlier discussions on social work. Social work involves numerous practices, tasks and stages, which are often described as externally determined routine paperwork. What this implies is that this kind of work cannot qualify as 'real' social work, because it is so highly repetitive and routine. 'Real' social work, the assumption goes, is done in a non-bureaucratic environment in which the social worker is not obliged to fill out forms, write reports or fol-

low strict norms imposed on the work itself, on helping the client or on the client relationship (Howe 1996; Egelund 1997). However, we will show in this article that *even in the presence of strict external norms, social work is shaped by the interaction between the social worker and the client, with different elements of social work creatively applied and introduced in different situations and at different stages. The variation is not random, but rather reflects the influence of strong professional cultures.*

In this paper we will be presenting our interpretations and conclusions in an order that follows our research process. This serves two main purposes. On the one hand, it highlights the active role played by the researcher in generating the research material and in formulating the results, and on the other, it emphasises the reader's role in evaluating the material and the analysis. We will also be following the methodological instruction of Catherine Kohler Riessman (1994), who says that the study of social work should aim at making the practices of social work visible. Words are often more helpful than statistics in this exercise of 'visualising'; it is extremely difficult to capture the diversity of everyday reality in statistics. We follow Riessman's advice by introducing both the basic data of our study (encounters between social workers and clients) and the joint analyses made by researchers and social workers on the basis of this material, in addition to our own analyses. First, however, it is necessary to provide some background on our object of study.

## The assessment of suitability for community service as a social and legal issue

A community service order is essentially a criminal policy measure. It is an alternative to an unconditional custodial sentence, in which the convicted party expiates the offence by performing unpaid work for good causes. The punishment has various social objectives as well: the closer integration of the offender into society, the development of his social competencies and the promotion of attitudes that are favourable to society. (Yhdyskuntapalvelun suunnitteluryhmän mietintö 1990, 4-6; see also Grönfors 1986).

National legislation on community service dates from 1997, follow-

ing on a pilot project initiated in 1991. It was stressed from very early on that all community service orders were to be based on the assumption that the offender was capable of completing the service. This meant that it was necessary to implement procedures for assessment purposes. (Yhdyskuntapalvelutoimikunnan mietintö 1989, 13-14). There was some concern that these procedures might lead to a situation in which recruitment into community service might be inclined towards social selection, and therefore various support functions were attached to community service. The purpose of these functions is to give the most underprivileged offenders a better chance of being able to carry out their punishment by performing community service (Yhdyskuntapalvelun suunnitteluryhmän mietintö 1990, 2-3; Yhdyskuntapalvelutoimikunnan mietintö 1989, 15). It was decided that the need for services for social support should be evaluated in conjunction with the suitability assessments.

Finland (unlike some other countries, see Takala 1993) has no explicit set of criteria for determining an offender's suitability for community service. Legislation offers very little support: "Assessments shall take into account the suspected offender's capability and willingness to complete the service and other conditions". The Probation and After-Care Association says in its guidelines that special attention should be paid to the candidate's personal characteristics, such as motivation, determination, social skills and ability to control substance use (Ohjeita yhdyskuntapalvelun toimeenpanosta ...1997, 7). The Association has also arranged training for staff with a view towards harmonising assessment procedures (e.g. Kriminaalihuoltoyhdistyksen toimintakertomus 1996, 10).

Suitability assessments are made on the basis of face-to-face interviews. The social worker who is to make the assessment meets with the suspected offender on one or two occasions, and prepares a written report on the basis of these meetings. The final assessment is written and signed by the Director of the Regional Office and filed with the District Court. According to Takala (1993), court orders follow the recommendations of these assessments with only very few exceptions. Clearly then, these assessments have had a very definite impact on court rulings.

There are certain standard items that are covered in all assessment interviews; these include the client's training and education, occupa-

tion, employment, social relations, housing conditions, health, substance use and need for support services. Clients are also asked to sign the interview form as a mark of consent. Their signature is taken to indicate the client's willingness and preparedness to serve the mandated punishment in the form of community service (client consent also ensures compliance with the ILO convention concerning forced or compulsory labour). Client consent adds a very distinctive flavour to the whole assessment procedure. The suspected offender is not merely a passive object under assessment, but is also invited to express his will and commitment, which are crucial conditions for the enforcement of punishment. In other words, the tasks that are constructed for the client and the social worker in the assessment procedure are quite different. The probation officer's job is to collect information, weigh that information in relation to the client's suitability for community service, and present the client's case to individuals who were not present during the assessment. The client's job is to provide information, and to get it across in a manner that he believes is in his best interests. On the other hand, the client and the social worker stand in a bargaining position vis-à-vis each other, in that the assessment requires the active contribution and commitment of both parties. The relationship of dependence is mutual, and is also very much a two-way street as far as wielding influence and power is concerned. It is for these reasons that assessment practices involve so many contradictory elements, such as diagnosis and participatory bargaining. This, according to Peter Raynor (1985, 142-161), seems increasingly to be the case in probation work, which is becoming more and more oriented towards the writing and preparation of reports and statements (see also Corden & Preston-Shoot 1987).

The Probation and After-Care Association has been assigned the responsibility of performing suitability assessment and enforcing community service orders for two main reasons. Firstly, it has extensive experience in social inquiry investigation (Yhdyskuntapalvelutoimikunnan mietintö 1989), and secondly, it has experience in working with criminal offenders, which means that it also possesses considerable knowledge on the provision of support services which may be necessary in connection with community service. (Yhdyskuntapalvelun suunnitteluryhmän mietintö 1990, 10, 25). However, neither committee reports nor the regulations concerning community service orders refer

explicitly to the Association's expertise in social work. It is interesting that there is also no mention of social work in the Association's own guidelines for the enforcement of community service orders (Ohjeet yhdyskuntapalvelun toimeenpanosta... 1997); probation officers are not instructed to perform social work, rather, their job description derives from legislation concerning community service and related administrative expectations. However, the social work aspect can be found in the socially-motivated mission statement of the Probation and After-Care Association, which says that the Association's object is to prevent recidivism and to reduce exclusion that leads to crime. In addition, most people engaged in the community service sector have received some kind of training in social work. The Association has attempted to incorporate the perspectives of social work into probation work through supplementary training schemes (Kostiainen 1994), and many people at the Association are of the opinion that the work they do can definitely be considered social work. On the other hand, there are also those who say that social work is beyond the responsibilities of probation work.

There has been quite widespread scepticism about the integration of community service and social work on grounds that this implies mixing support with supervision and that the involvement of social work only serves to tone down the elements of separation, selection, supervision and punishment that are supposed to be part and parcel of community service. Community service is not about helping and supporting, but about enforcing a punishment, which is a crucial distinction that some say should be retained. There are also those who say that the administrative and juridical supervision of community service is so close and so strict that there is no room for 'real', psychosocially oriented social work (Kangaspunta 1994a, 1994b; Santala, 1995), and that this is why all social work input should be confined to the offering of support services. Critical analysis of the relationship between 'pure' social work and punishment has largely dominated an otherwise meagre debate in the social sciences and in the field of criminal policy on the relationship between probation work, social work and community service (Karjalainen et al. 1988; Karjalainen 1989; Kääriäinen 1994). Plans for a more systematic incorporation of social work into community service or probation work have received far less attention (see e.g. Kaakinen & Vuolle 1992).

It is interesting then to look more closely at how, if at all, social

work is constructed as part of community service in a situation in which the content and role of social work are far from being unambiguous or assumed, despite the fact that its practice is governed by strict administrative and legal rules and norms. In light of these guidelines, the rules and regulations, public debate, the Association's recruitment decisions and staff training, suitability assessment may be regarded either as social work or as something else entirely. In the discussion below, we will be looking at how the staff themselves define the work they do, and how they go about their work at two of the Association's regional offices, both of which are very experienced in probation work as well as in suitability assessment.

## Methodology, data and analysis

The methodological roots of this study can be traced back to two traditions: social constructionism (specifically the line of inquiry which focuses on social problems) and ethnomethodology. The idea to approach human interaction as a linguistic process which produces social reality comes from the tradition of *social constructionism*. In the process of speaking and writing, we are not describing the world that lies beyond the language we use, but we are actively constructing different versions of that world (Burr 1995; Gergen 1994; Shotter 1993). Social constructionism provides a useful platform for an investigation of social work as an activity that in itself creates reality. The assumption is not that social work reflects social problems that are regarded as given facts, but rather the emphasis is on how these problems are defined both in and through activity. James Holstein and Gale Miller (1997; 1993) have written about the interpretation of social problems in the context of human service and social control organisations. According to them, the work that is done in these organisations is "interpretive activity that accomplishes reality. We accomplish social problems as we communicate about, categorise, organise, argue, and persuade one another that social problems really do exist. Thus, we produce the practical reality of social problems through social problems work" (Holstein & Miller 1997, ix). Face-to-face encounters are not the only arena in social work in which social problems are accomplished; there are numerous other arenas as well. For example, written statements on

clients, and political decisions regarding the allotment of economic resources in social work are also interpretive activity in this sense (Jokinen, Juhila & Pösö 1999).

*Ethnomethodology*, our second methodological root, is interested in how people describe and explain various states of affairs to one another within the context of their everyday life, while simultaneously maintaining 'what we all know'. (Garfinkel 1967; Heritage 1984; Pollner 1987; Potter 1996, 42-67.) Ethnomethodology provides a useful foundation for the study of social work when we are interested in practices, the construction of practices, and in states of affairs made possible by those practices. Our attention is drawn to the structures of everyday routines and activities, and we aim at making them visible and avoid taking them for granted as such. (Cicourel 1968; Pithouse 1987; Peräkylä 1990; Forsberg 1998.)

The choice of this kind of dual methodological foundation for our study of assessment procedures means that we must necessarily focus our attention on those everyday activities in which the participants (i.e. social workers and clients) accomplish the assessment in and through their mutual interaction. Suitability for community service is a construct accomplished jointly by social workers and clients (through their conversations.) in their talk. As such, suitability is not understood as a presupposed fact that is either successfully or unsuccessfully unearthed during the assessment process. Suitability and the practice of establishing suitability are inextricably interwoven. The everyday activities of social work, such as the practices applied to establishing suitability, are largely based on conversation and social interaction (Baldock & Prior 1981; Forsberg 1998; Hall 1997; Jaatinen 1996; Jokinen & Juhila 1996; Rostila 1997). This is why our two data sets are based primarily on the conversations between different participants:

1. Assessment interviews, in which social workers meet face to face with clients
  - 22 tape-recorded and transcribed interviews
  - 13 from the Probation and After-Care Association's regional office x and 9 from regional office y<sup>2</sup>.
2. Joint discussions between social workers and researchers
  - 3 discussions at regional office x and 3 at regional office y
  - 2 discussions involving social workers from both regional offices

Face-to-face discussions between social workers and clients, such as suitability assessment interviews, lie at the very heart of everyday social work. They are the situations in which the clients' problems are defined and accounts are given; in which the reasons and possible solutions for these problems are weighed and discussed, and in which joint interpretations of them are constructed. (Miller & Holstein 1997). It is important to examine these discussions in close detail, as doing so will allow us to highlight the 'skilful' consistency of everyday social work. The tool with which we analyse the assessment interviews is *discourse analysis*.<sup>3</sup> Discourse analysis approaches language as a social activity in which the words, sentences and turns of participants assume their meanings in relation to the words, sentences and turns of other participants (Edwards 1997; Potter 1996). In other words, the participants' accounts and descriptions are analysed in their own context. With regard to the analysis of the assessment interviews, this implies posing questions such as how the interpretation of suitability or non-suitability is constructed during the course of the interview, how the social worker and client orient their narration to one another, what kind of social worker and client positions are constructed during the conversation, etc.

Consisting of joint discussions between social workers and researchers, our second data set serves the purposes of *ethnographic research*. Ethnographic research is ultimately about entering a certain culture, gaining a basic knowledge and understanding of how the members of that culture interpret their world, and why they act the way they do; in a word, it is about exploring the socially shared. In order to gain access into a culture, the researcher must become involved in it, which most typically happens by way of participant observation (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995). In this article we will also attempt to visualise the socially shared. However, rather than using the traditional method of participant observation, we aim at attaining ethnographic understanding through joint discussions with social workers. These discussions are based both on recorded extracts from the social workers' meetings with their clients, and on our own analyses produced jointly with the social workers involved in assessment making. This is a rather self-made application of the principles of ethnography compared to the traditional emphasis on fieldwork. Following Gale Miller (1997a; 1997b), our approach could also be described as the ethnography of institu-

tional discourse, in which the accent is on the study of everyday practices, and in which specific attention is devoted to the analysis of language use. We are hoping to offer some contribution to the kind of 'new ethnography' (Gubrium & Holstein 1994), which contends that ethnography is about the construction of the social environment, and that researchers are closely involved in this process. The key thing is not how the material is collected, but what kind of position is taken towards it. We begin from the assumption that our joint discussions will reveal routines, commitments, endeavours and values of institutional significance. Ultimately, these discussions are about nothing more and nothing less than the social workers explication of the actions that occur in the discussions between them and their clients to us, researchers and outsiders.<sup>4</sup>

It would have been possible for us to use only one or the other data set or method.<sup>5</sup> However, we have opted to use both of them, and argue that doing so helps to uncover certain distinctive characteristics of social work (see also Juhila & Pösö 1999). The combination of the two data sets and the methods of discourse analysis and ethnography unfolded into a research process that proceeded through the following steps:

1. Reading through assessment interviews
2. Joint discussions between social workers and researchers
  - discussions based on extracts from interviews
  - discovery of comparative setting: two different cultures in regional offices
  - ethnographic understanding
3. Return to assessment interviews
  - elaboration of cultures
  - comparative setting de-emphasised: two different cultures, but not clearly tied to two regional offices
  - discourse analysis

We began by reading through the transcripts of the assessment interviews, making preliminary interpretations and selecting suitable extracts for our discussions with the social workers. We then arranged our joint discussions with the staff at two regional offices of the Probation After-Care Association, x and y. These discussions produced

a surprising twist in our study. In keeping with our ethnographic idea, we had expected to identify cultural interpretations related to the assessment of suitability for community service in these discussions. We had not prepared ourselves for performing any comparisons between the two regional offices. However, *comparison* was to become the third tool we applied in this study, because the ways in which the extracts were interpreted in the two offices suggested to us that they had two very different, essentially *local cultures*. By local cultures, we are referring to shared views and interpretations among social workers as to what suitability assessment is about, how the task should be approached, what its aims are and so on.<sup>6</sup> At the third stage of the research process we reverted back to the assessment interviews in order to examine them in closer detail using the tools of discourse analysis. We wanted to assess whether the participants in the interviews, the social workers and clients, talked the local cultures into existence in their interaction. The cultures had a definite presence in the interviews, but they were not as clearly tied to the two regional offices as the analysis of the joint discussions had led us to believe.

It is clear that in the course of this research process, and most directly as an outcome of our discussions with staff members, we have become privy to 'insider' information. Our knowledge and understanding of how the Probation and After-Care Association and its two regional offices work and operate has increased, as we simultaneously drifted further away from our positions as external analysts. Our competencies as analysts are entirely different now than what they were at the outset of the study. The interview material alone would not have led us to the interpretations we now suggest of two different local cultures. From this point of view, our choice of analytical tools is open to the criticism that the interpretations we suggest have been influenced by elements external to the interview material. On the other hand, we believe that a researcher always utilises some kind of interpretive frame, or at the very least conceptual tools offered by the method of analysis. We have tried to take special care to spell out our own perspective, which is grounded in ethnographic understanding.

As we move on now to reporting the results of the study, our intention is to retrace our steps throughout the research process, shifting back and forth between the various data sets. We begin by describing the temporal and local contexts of our joint discussions, in which we

first came across our concept of two distinct cultures of assessing suitability for community service, which we refer to as the cultures of appropriate and accurate knowing. We then continue by examining the interview material in greater detail.

### Ethnographic understanding and the element of surprise: local cultures in joint discussions

We had our first joint discussion with staff at regional office y of the Probation and After-Care Association in September of 1997, by which time we had already also held a number of joint discussions with staff from office x. We followed a set procedure in these discussions: we had picked certain extracts from the interview material, and on the basis of the transcriptions of those extracts we talked with the social workers about what had been occurring during these situations and why. We decided to begin the series of joint discussions with staff at regional office y with excerpts concerning substance use. We made this decision based on our experience that they would provide interesting points for discussion and were also crucial to the outcome of the assessment.<sup>7</sup>

After our first discussions at regional office y, we both felt very strongly that the contents of these discussions had been quite different from those we had had earlier at office x. We felt we had entered an entirely new cultural field. Discussing our surprising experience immediately after the meeting, we came to the conclusion that the difference was due to the fact that the staff at office y repeatedly stressed the importance of client advocacy and the relationship between the client and social worker. It was on this aspect that we subsequently decided to focus our attention; on what we argue represents office y's culturally predominant way of understanding and talking assessment work into existence. We decided to call this the *culture of appropriate knowing*. The 'discovery' of this culture can be attributed most particularly to the discussion in and around the following extract:

#### Extract 1: The culture of appropriate knowing

- 1 S: So what do you usually do with yourself?  
 2 C: I'm unemployed.  
 3 S: No, but I mean when you're doing something.  
 4 C: Something what. I don't normally do anything. I just hang  
 5 around and do nothing. 'Cos I've got no job.  
 6 S: But that leaves you with plenty of leisure time.  
 7 C: That's right. And then I drink because I have nothing else to do.  
 8 S: Well now that's really..  
 9 C: Well yeah.  
 10 S: ... a leisure activity. Do you drink a lot?  
 11 C: Well. Pretty heavily, yeah.  
 12 S: Every day.  
 13 C: Well it hasn't been every day for a couple of months now,  
 14 but it was like that for about a year or so.  
 15 S: Every day  
 (Telephone rings, social worker on the phone for about 20 seconds.)  
 16 S: Mmh (sounds of writing). The phone is a nice little gadget.  
 17 It usually rings off the hook, but I don't feel like talking  
 18 right now.  
 19 So, you've been drinking everyday all year long.  
 20 C: (Yeah.) Right.  
 21 S: It's hard to believe by looking at you. That you've been  
 22 drinking that heavily.  
 23 C: Well, I haven't for the past couple of months. Just on the  
 24 weekends.  
 25 S: I mean there's no signs on the outside, it usually does show  
 26 you know, when you really hit the bottle.  
 27 C: Yeah.  
 28 C: I guess I'm in really good shape  
 29 S: Mmm. And a good way of life otherwise. Ok, education.  
 (y 14a, 5-7)<sup>8</sup>

In this extract the treatment of the question of alcohol use remains very brief, and we were quite interested in how the social workers interpreted this. The following interpretation unfolded in our joint discussions. The client has obviously chosen a confessional way of

talking about his drinking habits, which the social worker does not favour. So, she wants to slow down the client's 'open' discussion of his drinking. The phone-call helps to cut short this excessive openness. Sometimes it is in the client's best interest that the social worker does not know too much about his past life and problems, i.e. that the social worker is not knowledgeable about matters that might compromise the writing of a favourable report. In other words, the social workers felt that without the interruption, the client may well have gone on to reveal details about his drinking that might have cast some doubt over his ability to cope with community service.

This interpretation led to a debate that captured the very essence of the culture of appropriate knowing. Namely, the role and purpose of social work in the process of suitability assessment. The social workers shared the view that the purpose of the interview is to obtain information that is supportive of a favourable report and ultimately a community service order. A favourable report and the possibility of a community service order are in the best interest of the client because they will provide him with an opportunity to change his life, control his substance abuse problems and to stay out of prison. The focus of the assessment is thus on the present and future prospects of the client's life. The social workers also defined the community service order and the assessment as opportunities for social work; they create the possibility for face-to-face encounters with the client, for working with the client to create a good relationship of interaction, which is the first and most basic condition for effecting change through social work. Thus, the client's interests were thought to be more or less in line with the interests of social work. These themes were raised several times during our joint discussions.

In office x, the main concern was not to gather information that supported a community service order or to build up a good relationship of interaction between clients and social workers, but rather to get as accurate and reliable information as possible. Primarily, accuracy has to do with what kind of information about the client's life is considered necessary; it should describe the client's current life situation and the level of control he has over his life with as much accuracy as possible. Secondly, accuracy has to do with making accurate, truthful assessments about whether or not the client is suitable for community service. This implies a constant search for new information with which

to fill in the unfolding picture and ultimately reach accurate conclusions, even if they are sometimes in contradiction with the client's views. These principles and requirements of accuracy emerged quite clearly in our joint discussion based on extract two, which we used in our initial discussions at office x. It was not until after our discussions in office y that we realised that there existed a clear cultural difference calling for comparison, which led to the identification of the culture in office x as the *culture of accurate knowing*.

*Extract 2: The culture of accurate knowing*

- 1 S: We then have this uhm (pause) question of substance use.  
 2 C: Well, as we've already seen it was excessive.  
 3 S: It was?  
 4 C: Yeah, it was over the top.  
 5 S: I mean was, when do you mean?  
 6 C: I mean the past years, I've only come to my senses in the  
 7 past few years.  
 8 S: Really?  
 9 C: (unclear) Well first of all it means many thanks to the hospital  
 10 staff.  
 11 S: Oh ok, so you used to be a pretty heavy user?  
 12 C: I mean, I drank all the time and for many days.  
 13 S: What about at work?  
 14 C: No, not a drop.  
 15 S: Right, so um, when did you start to cut down?  
 16 C: I'd say it was in 1990, but it wasn't really fast enough, it's  
 17 only now that it's become more or less reasonable.  
 18 S: I see, so what's reasonable today?  
 19 C: I try not to drink at all, but it looks like I'll never be able to  
 20 do that.  
 21 S: Mmm, so when was the last time you had a drink?  
 22 C: Yesterday.  
 23 S: Yes, when we said hello earlier I thought I spotted a whiff, I  
 24 thought about whether or not we should do this interview  
 25 at all, but since you're not really drunk, it was just this whiff.  
 26 C: That must be because I woke up around two o'clock in the  
 27 morning and had a bottle of beer just purely out of thirst.

- 28 S: Hard to believe it was just one bottle, didn't you drink any  
29 more?
- 30 C: Yeah a bit more yeah, of course it leaves its trace but I wasn't  
31 drunk when I came.
- 32 S: Yeah right a bit more, so uhm, how often do you drink nowa-  
33 days, and do you drink to get drunk?
- 34 C: No no, I don't think so, I mean I couldn't afford it.
- 35 S: Once a week, twice a week, every day?
- 36 C: Yeah I'd say once a week, definitely not every day, but I'd  
37 have to say in all honesty, once a week. I have to say.
- 38 S: Yeah, yeah (simultaneously), so what do you use then?
- 39 C: Vodka.
- 40 S: Vodka, you told me earlier that you drank for many days.
- 41 C: Yeah erm.
- 42 S: Right, so do you always get drunk?
- 43 C: No, I mean I don't, I don't get drunk, no well, except for  
44 earlier, not anymore though, well, there's always some of that.  
45 to some extent.
- 46 S: Lets just say
- 47 C: I certainly don't stagger or anything.
- 48 S: Do you have a few beers the next day?
- 49 C: No, I mean, I used to, but not anymore.
- 50 S: Yes, right, you mentioned that you've been caught driving  
51 under the influence before, and that means your blood alco-  
52 hol level was at least one per mille, so I mean, you have to  
53 drink some to get there?
- 54 C: Yeah, that last one, that last one was either during a morn-  
55 ing or evening hangover.
- 56 S: Yeah, so what about the alcohol level, how much was it?
- 57 C: I went over the limit of the police breathaliser, I guess maybe  
58 it was around four.
- 59 S: Yes, I see, um, and this was when?
- 60 C: December fourth.
- 61 S: So, its not that long ago that you drank yourself into that  
62 kind condition.
- 63 C: I can't say myself, I don't even notice if I have a bottle of  
64 vodka, it really doesn't affect me at all
- 65 S: (laughter) Yeah, these kinds of movements, so, have you

- 66 ever been to any of these substance abuse places,  
67 the A-Clinic?

The pattern of this interview is quite consistent throughout. The social worker picks up elements from the client's responses and uses them to construct further questions concerning the quantity, frequency and type of drinking that he engages in. In our preliminary analysis of this extract we had paid attention to two facts: the definition of the problem and the related turning-points in the interaction. The extract begins with the social worker asking the client about his substance abuse, and with the client answering by referring to his past. Drinking used to be a problem for him, however he now believes that he is "more or less reasonable", despite his doubts of ever attaining complete abstinence. However, the social worker's next question seriously undermines this interpretation of a past problem, as it leads to a series of questions and answers in which the "a bottle of beer" turns into a discussion of an immediately preceding period of heavier drinking, followed by a more general overview of the client's drinking habits. The client denies that he has a tendency to drink to inebriation, although there is one final turning-point in their discussion, as he admits his inability to assess how drunk he gets. Ultimately, the questioning technique leads to the redefinition of the client's past drinking problem as very much a current problem.

We presented these observations to the social workers during our joint discussions, also pointing out that there are several points in the extract at which it would have been possible to take the interpretation in a different direction (i.e. to accept the client's view that he has "come to his senses", to ignore the night-time bottle of beer, to focus on sleeping difficulties, etc.). The social worker who had conducted the interview said that this was in fact the only possible path to pursue. In the interview situation, the social worker had had a very strong feeling that with this particular client, a male in his fifties with three drunken-driving offences on his record, "alcohol could well prove to be the stumbling block". The intuition was based in no small part on the client's appearance and the smell of alcohol on his breath, which meant that it had to be followed up. This idea of 'following up' turns the social worker's interest to the client's drinking history up to and including the present. Thus, the focus of assessment is on both the past and

the present of the client's life.

The questions of the accuracy and reliability of interpretation were considered from two different perspectives in our joint discussions at office x. First of all, it was stressed that the interpretation as to whether or not the client would be suitable for community service had to be as truthful and accurate as possible from the point of view of justice; it was for the court of justice that social workers felt they were doing their job, and they considered it an important partner in their work. Partnership with clients was constructed as a possibility only later, through community service or some other arrangement that would bring them back into contact with the client. Another recurrent theme in our discussions was the accuracy of the assessment in relation to social work's own objectives, which include supporting the client as well as offering concrete social support in order to help the client cope. Accurate diagnoses of the client's condition were necessary in order to provide information on how to target support through social work in the future.

The discussions we had at the two regional probation offices produced *two fundamentally different institutional functions for social work and for the assessment procedure*: one having to do with appropriate knowing and the other with accurate knowing (see Figure 1). Importantly, *these functions were taken for granted*. They had a clear and immediate presence in the social workers' descriptions of the everyday practices of their work. In our joint discussions, these cultures were repeatedly represented as so shared that the only way it was possible to identify their existence was by way of comparison.<sup>9</sup>

## Discourse analysis: local cultures as interview practices

Our frame of interpretation, which made a distinction between the culture of appropriate knowing and the culture of accurate knowing in the suitability assessment procedure (see Figure 1), was thus a product of joint discussions and analyses in which we worked closely with the social workers of the two regional probation offices. These analyses were based on random extracts from the assessment interviews. For

Figure 1: Local cultures of social work in assessing suitability for community service

	Culture of accurate knowing	Culture of appropriate knowing
<b>Purpose of assessment interview</b>	To obtain accurate information and produce reliable assessment	To obtain information that supports a favourable report
<b>Compilation of report</b>	Assessment made by probation office and staff	Social workers negotiate with clients about report
<b>The focus in assessment</b>	The past and the present of clients	The present and the future of clients
<b>Direction of co-operation</b>	Justice now, clients later	Clients
<b>Purpose of social work</b>	Provision of social support	Good interaction

this reason, we decided that we should return to the interview material and re-examine it more systematically from the perspective of a discourse analysis. How exactly are these two cultures manifested in the interaction between social workers and clients? Do they appear as prevailing practices, or as small glimpses? Are these cultures as specific to the two regional offices as the joint analysis had led us to believe, or do the work practices of each office contain elements from both cultures? Or is it possible that these cultures are constructs accomplished within the joint discussions themselves, practices that live temporarily within these discussions, but which lack any real links to the actual interviews? Our second round of analysis involved reading the interview material against the frame of interpretation which already identified the two cultures; we would examine how the details of the material would relate and correspond to that frame. However, it is important to stress that we did not read the material against an idea or theory introduced from the outside. This framework was an interpretation that had evolved out of the empirical material throughout the course

of the research process, and we were now proceeding to both elaborate on it and reconsider it.<sup>10</sup>

### *Culture of appropriate knowing in the interviews*

#### *Obtaining information in support of favourable reports*

The most significant function of the assessment interview in the culture of appropriate knowing is the construction of information which supports a favourable report, and which ultimately leads to a community service order. In other words, the aim is to produce evidence which is consistent with this objective. There are five different ways of accomplishing this in the interview practices:

*Table 1: Obtaining information that supports a favourable report*

1. Making principle explicit (2)
  2. Picking out appropriate information (4)
  3. Slowing down inappropriate information (1)
  4. Constructing positive information (4)
  5. Reconstructing negative information as positive (4)
  6. Formal or selective use of information from outside sources (6)
- Total 21, y:19, x:2<sup>11</sup>

The most straightforward of these methods is to *make the principle explicit* in the interview situation. It is made perfectly clear to the client that the purpose of the interview is to acquire positive information:

#### *Extract 3: Making the principle explicit*

- 1 S: Nothing special there... this data we have on you... (pause,  
2 tapping). This is the paper that you'll be up against in court  
3 with the summary. We're supposed to fill in the basic information  
4 plus anything positive. I mean you don't really have  
5 any sins that should be listed here, but even if you did I  
6 wouldn't really emphasise them, because this is supposed to

- 7 paint a positive picture of you, so the facts are the facts, and  
8 we're not going to dig up any old...  
9 C: Hmm.  
10 S: ... ancient museum stuff since that has no real significance  
11 in the present situation... even if it did in the past.  
12 C: Yeah.  
(y 15b, 5)

The social worker is explaining to the client what goes into the assessment report: there is the basic background information and then positive information. The list of the client's past "sins" is the antithesis to this information. The social worker expresses uncertainty as to whether or not the client has actually committed any such sins. On the one hand, she says that there is nothing about the client that "really" must be listed, while on the other hand, she leaves open the question of whether or not there might be something in the client's past that might warrant inclusion. The important thing is that the social worker does not make an issue of inquiring into the past, but on the contrary says that there is no reason for such an inquiry at this juncture. What matters is the present situation, not "ancient museum stuff". Closely related to this, therefore, are the second and third methods of obtaining information that would support a favourable report, i.e. *picking out appropriate information and slowing down inappropriate information*. The former involves an interview method in which the client is asked routine questions about housing, family, substance use, etc., which are not intended to uncover adverse details that might jeopardise the objective of a favourable report. The strategy of slowing down is needed when the client begins to produce accounts of his problems or his failure to keep them in check without being specifically asked to do so. The only example in this material of this kind of slowing down appears in extract 1 (see page 177). It is interesting how the extreme formulation of this culture of appropriate knowing led us not only to the culture of appropriate knowing itself, but also to the culture of accurate knowing.

However, the effort to produce a favourable report involves more than just obtaining appropriate information which has been stripped of all potential problematic aspects. It may also involve the *construction of positive information* in the interview itself.

## Extract 4: Constructing positive information

- 1 S: Do you have anyone who, who could be there, who could  
2 help you get it done?  
3 C: Well I don't know really.  
4 S: Yeah.  
5 C: I mean, its really up to you.  
6 S: Right.  
7 C: Help...  
8 S: Yeah.  
9 C: ...no one can, manipulate.  
10 S: Yeah, its true that no one can really manipulate. That's  
11 why I'm asking you if...  
12 C: Hmm.  
13 S: ...'cause its up to you, so tell me about yourself, how you're  
14 going to do it (laughter).  
15 C: Hmm.  
16 S: But I mean on the other hand, there are, I mean the people  
17 around you all play a part, its like...  
18 C: Hmm.  
19 S: ...the effect can be either positive or negative.  
(discussion about friends)  
20 S: Is there anyone else we could find, like someone who  
21 could, who could have a positive effect on your  
22 community service working out, you know, like relation-  
23 ships of some kind?  
24 C: Well I'd say my mum's really the only one who could...  
25 S: Yes.  
26 C: ...help me actually go.  
27 S: Yes. So, does your mum know about this trial thing?  
28 C: Yeah she does.  
29 S: Hhm. And your mum lives in Marjola too, does she?  
30 C: Round behind the factory.  
31 S: Yeah hm. So in a sense she could be a person who, could  
32 be there to push you or encourage you or do both?  
33 C: Hhm. Both.  
34 S: Hmm. So, she could maybe...know, know what time you

- 35 have to be at work, although in the end it really comes  
36 down to you.  
(y 20, 18-19)

The social worker is asking the client whether he has anyone close to him who could help him cope with community service. The client is reluctant to mention anyone, arguing on the contrary that it is all down to oneself, to the individual. As far as the client is concerned, helping translates into manipulation; the connotations are quite negative. The social worker latches onto the argument of independence and asks the client to elaborate, but he does not respond. The social worker then attempts to dualise the client's interpretation by noting that the influence of other people can be either positive or negative. The conversation turns to the client's friends, who do not seem provide an answer. The social worker makes one final attempt to construct the necessary human relations resource, and succeeds: the client's mother can provide the necessary support. This completes the task. A positive item of information has been constructed for inclusion in the assessment report. The challenge is even greater if *negative information is reconstructed as positive*<sup>12</sup>:

## Extract 5: Reconstructing negative information as positive

- 1 S: In practice it's really like, I mean, if you have problems, if it  
2 ends or something, then we can write down that, even if we  
3 don't officially plan to do so here, I mean, in practice at  
4 least, if I have a client whose been in bad shape and hasn't  
5 been able to community service because of that, then he's  
6 gone to the A-Clinic, so at least there's treatment for the  
7 substance abuse, so...  
8 C: Yeah, so if that's what it looks like, then I'll go there.  
9 S: Hhm.  
10 C: Right.  
11 S: Ok, so I'll make a note that if possible CS. We use CS as an  
12 abbreviation for community service, so if during that time  
13 it seems necessary, then you're willing...  
12 C: Yes.  
13 ... to go.  
(y 25, 16)

This extract is preceded by a discussion concerning substance use, in which it has become evident that the client uses soft drugs and sometimes alcohol very heavily. Both of these findings are problematic with regard to writing a favourable report. However, it is less significant if the client indicates willingness to attend therapy sessions in connection with his community service. Prior to this episode, however, the client has said he would not agree to therapy. In the extract, the social worker acknowledges the client's reluctance, but gets him to agree to have the therapy sessions mentioned in the report. The most important thing at this point is to include this information in the report. The negative item, "possible problem with substance abuse that the client does not want to admit", is thus reconstructed in positive terms as "willing to attend therapy session if necessary".

*The formal or selective use of information from outside sources* means that the client is told that the report will be based on whatever information he reveals during the course of the interview, or, more precisely, on the information jointly constructed by the client and social worker. None of this information will be called into question by comparing it with information from outside sources. The only reason why the client is asked to give his consent for the use of outside information from other authorities is that it is a mandatory part of the interview form, although it is a mere formality. Sometimes the interviewer may ask the client whether he knows of any external sources that might be able to provide favourable information. In other words, the client is told by the social worker that information from external sources is used mainly in cases in which it supports the goal of a favourable report.

#### *Social worker negotiates with client about assessment report*

In the interviews, the culture of appropriate knowing is manifested not only in the construction of positive information, but also in the two negotiating parties striking a kind of bargaining relationship. Although it is always the social worker who is in charge of the interview, the client is involved in producing the assessment. This involvement finds expression in the following ways:

Table 2: *Social worker negotiates with client about assessment report*

1. Preparing report is a joint concern (5)
  2. Social worker reveals what the report will say (5)
  3. Social worker asks the client to approve the text (11)
  4. Social worker formulates text according to client's talk (7)
  5. Statement by Director is a formality (3)
- Total 31, y:21, x:10

*The joint preparation of the assessment report* means, for instance, that during the interview the social worker asks the client: "which of these support measures should we put in here?" (y28, 46). or while taking notes says: "let's put in some of these right here" (y15a, 15). These comments, which are made in the plural (the social worker does not say "which of these should I put in?" or "I'll put in some of these"), involve both parties in the preparation of the assessment. One very concrete example of this is illustrated by a situation in which, during their second meeting, the social worker hands the report to the client and asks whether or not he agrees with its content. In other words, the social worker has typed up the text of the report as part of her job, but the client takes part in the process of preparing the report by expressing his views on its content.

However, the client's role in the culture of appropriate knowing is not reduced simply to 'checking' the final outcome, but he is involved in preparing the report in various ways even during the course of the interview. Another form of client participation is when *the social worker reveals what the report will say*. At the very least, this provides the client the opportunity to comment on the report and voice his opinion about it. This is taken one step further when *the social worker asks the client to approve the text of the report*:

#### *Extracts 6 and 7: Social worker asks client to approve the text*

- 1 S: Do you recognise the man?
- 2 C: Well I suppose it's all there.
- 3 S: So some of it's pretty close?
- 4 C: Yeah.

5 S: Right good. It's supposed to. The purpose of this form is  
6 still that there's a positive side to our case in court.  
(y 14b, 41)

1 S: (Clatter from typewriter) Am I right if I say that drinking is  
2 confined to days off but is still pretty heavy? That..  
3 C: Uhm...  
4 S: ..you drink during days off but that's all?  
5 C: Uhm yeah. You can say that.  
(y 15a, 23)

The discussions preceding these extracts have covered the set items of the interview form (extract 6) and questions related to the client's alcohol use (extract 7). By asking "Do you recognise the man?" and "Am I right if I say?", the social worker is designating the client as the ultimate expert on these issues. The client himself is the most knowledgeable about these matters, and it is the social worker's responsibility to ensure that the text of the report reads as the client wants it to. In both cases the client accepts the social worker's interpretation. In extract six, the social worker concludes the episode by specifying the function of obtaining and reporting positive information.

Client involvement is strongest of all when *the social worker says that the text of the report will be formulated according to the client's talk*:

*Extracts 8 and 9: Social worker formulates text according to client's talk*

1 S: Yes. So, here I'll write exactly what you told me.  
(y 24, 12)

1 C: ...and the substance abuse situation is probably the best its  
2 been in five years.  
3 S: Yeah right.  
4 C: So I mean really okay.  
5 S: Yes okay. Yeah, I was thinking that we really should include  
that.  
(y 18b, 30-31)

In extract eight the social worker says that the report will repeat what the client says verbatim. The client has been discussing his family situation and arrangements for child care. In the ninth extract the client presents a positive assessment of his substance use, relative to his own standards. The social worker acknowledges that this improvement should be included in the text of the report.

When the client is involved in the assessment process in these different ways, the assessment becomes an issue of negotiation. Client involvement and co-operation in the assessment process loses its meaning if the outcome of the negotiation process is changed after the interview. Indeed, in the culture of appropriate knowing there is a possibility that the social worker informs the client that *the final statement by the Director is a mere formality*.

## *Culture of accurate knowing in the interviews*

### *Obtaining accurate information and producing a reliable assessment*

In the culture of accurate knowing priority is put on acquiring detailed and accurate information on clients in order to reach an accurate and truthful assessment of their suitability for community service. Although the information may never be one hundred per cent accurate and entirely reliable, what is important is to strive for perfection and maximum accuracy. The principle of obtaining accurate information finds expression in the interviews in different ways:

#### *Table 3: Obtaining accurate information and producing a reliable assessment*

1. Making principle explicit (7)
  2. Eliciting of detailed information (11)
  3. Use of multiple information sources (12)
  4. Knowing the client from the past (3)
  5. Finding grounds for overturning negative information (2)
- Total 36, x:33, y:3

In the interviews, the social workers often *make explicit the principle of accuracy*. Extract ten begins with a situation that has been preceded by a

detailed review of the client's previously held jobs. The social worker has been inquiring as to when the client held these jobs, their duration and what type of work they involved. The social worker reports to the client on her inquiries:

*Extract 10: Making principle explicit*

1 S: Yes right. Let's put these figures down so I can remember  
2 them. Yes because the reason I'm so curious about this is  
3 that it has to do with suitability, so I just want to see how  
4 you've handled jobs up until now. What you've agreed on  
5 and how they've gone.  
(x 5, 22)

The social worker explains to the client why she is "curious about this": she wants to establish the client's suitability. She is also implying that the only way for her to reach an assessment is to gather accurate information. One of the areas that will impact the final conclusion is the client's job history. The extract begins with the social worker writing down some numbers. This is no coincidence, in that the culture of accurate knowing emphasises the accurate knowledge of quantities (how much does the client drink, how many jobs has he held) and duration (how long has the client lasted in different jobs and relationships) as key indicators of stability. In general, the *eliciting of detailed information* is the most important interview strategy in the culture of accurate knowing. Extract 2, found earlier on in our article, provides an example of this.

In accurate knowing the interview situation is neither the only, nor even the primary source of information. During the course of the interview reference is often made to other sources as well; the social worker will make it clear to the client where necessary *multiple sources of information will be used for making the assessment*.

*Extracts 11 and 12: Use of multiple information sources*

1 S: And another thing is that without your permission I'm not  
2 allowed to ask, to ask anyone to give information about you.  
3 But lets come back to it at the end if it looks like I need to  
4 ask someone something.  
(x 13, 9)

1 S: Yes. I mean it depends of course on what sort of thing this  
2 is. Do you know whether the complainant's suffered any  
3 major damage?  
4 C: He chipped two teeth, but that was like all.  
5 S: Yes right, okay. (pause) It does say here in the medical report  
6 from the health centre that the kicks to the head were  
7 potentially fatal. So, I mean, there's something to it.  
8 C: Yeah, well they always say that.  
(x 12, 40)

In extract 11 the social worker explains to the client that she must have his consent in order to obtain information from other authorities. It is interesting that in this extract the social worker reserves the right to judge whether or not external sources of information will be necessary. If the interview does not produce the necessary information at the necessary level of accuracy, the social worker will indeed turn to other sources, provided that the client has consented. The client's portrayal of himself counts merely as one source of information among many. The same applies to extract 12, in which the social worker refers to outside information which directly challenges what the client has just said. What is the measure of accurate and reliable information if what the client says conflicts with an official document? These types of discrepancies must be resolved in the culture of accurate knowing, often by referring to additional material.

Social workers do not always meet their clients for the first time in the assessment interview. In many cases they have actually known their clients for quite some time, typically through probation supervision. However, some clients are also known to the social workers through other connections. Information on clients may also be available to social workers through various reports and documents that have been prepared by other probation workers, the police, the public prosecutor, etc. Indeed sometimes social workers justify their somewhat cursory interview technique by saying that they already *know the client well enough*. This suggests that accuracy – asking detailed questions and using multiple information sources – is the norm in the interview situation, and any deviation from that norm must be justified separately.

*Extract 13: Knowing the client from the past*

- 1 S: Yes, so that's basically that, what'll be included in the forms,  
 2 the information. So, we can write our report based on this  
 3 information, and then on the old supervision information  
 4 we have here, 'cause I know you, and 'cause the information  
 5 in these forms, which you signed before the start of this  
 6 interview, identifies two sources of information that we can  
 7 check, one is the welfare office and the other is the police  
 8 department, but in your case its more like things from your  
 9 youth since I know you...
- 10 C: (grunt)
- 11 S: I mean, obviously in the case of a totally new client we would  
 12 call all these places and check things out, but in your case its  
 13 probably not necessary, especially since this is an attempted  
 14 robbery, and according to criminal law you could get off  
 15 with a fine...I  
 (x 11/1, 13)

In this extract the social worker is explaining to the client that there is enough information in his file for an assessment, which is why the interview (before the extract) had been short and routine-like. With a new client this would not have been possible. In this case it would seem that the existing information will be supportive of a recommendation for community service. However, prior knowledge of the client may also enter the interview and have a negative impact:

*Extract 14: Finding grounds for overturning negative information*

- 1 S: I mean, like in the minutes of the preliminary investigation,  
 2 you can see the whole range of these things, I mean, we  
 3 could have a look at this big pile I have here...
- 4 C: Well, there really isn't much to look at when all is said and  
 5 done.
- 6 S: No, and I mean this isn't, like I said that this...
- 7 C: Mmm.
- 8 S: in a sense this doesn't really like have anything to do with  
 9 our assessment but I mean we could like....

- 10 C: This is just something I'm accused of doing, its never going  
 11 to even go, I never even got sentenced for it.
- 12 S: Yes yes.
- 13 (Unclear)
- 14 S: We don't even necessarily have to take any position on that  
 15 stuff, you know that.
- 16 But I mean, there's something to it, one has one and the  
 17 other has two.
- 18 C: Mmm.
- 19 S: But I mean I do believe that since you've assured me that  
 20 you're capable as far as this community service is concerned  
 21 that you can hold your own among friends, I mean that's  
 22 okay.  
 (x 7, 46-47)

This extract was preceded by a discussion led by the social worker as to whether the client is perhaps too closely involved with his circle of mates. The social worker's interpretation is that this circle may drag the client down and disrupt his way of life to such an extent that he would not be able to cope in community service. The social worker begins by referring to the minutes of the preliminary investigation, which show that the client has often been involved in crimes involving a number of accomplices. On the basis of this information the client's circle of mates is construed as a threat. *Can this negative information be overturned* by reference to just once source, i.e. the client's own assurance, as the social worker suggests at the end of the extract? In the culture of accurate knowing, this is not sufficient. The social worker once again reverts to the same issue at the end of the interview, and also uses outside information in writing her report.

*Assessment is made by probation service and its staff*

In the culture of accurate knowing, the assessment of suitability for community service is in the hands of the probation service and its staff. Clients and other sources are only consulted in order to collect information that is deemed necessary. The processing and analysis of this information in order to reach a decision is not a process in which the client is expected to participate, rather it is solely the job of the

social worker. The fact that the assessment is made by the probation service and its staff is talked into existence in the interviews in two different ways:

*Table 4: Assessment is made by probation service and its staff*

1. Social worker makes statement of exclusive expertise (10)

2. Hierarchic division of labour (9)

Total 19, x:16, y:3

In the interview situation, *the social workers make it clear in a variety of ways that they have exclusive expertise on the matter at hand:*

*Extracts 15, 16 and 17: Social worker makes statement of exclusive expertise*

1 S: So, now I'm just going to ask you these questions and we'll  
2 just check off these boxes. Don't pay any attention to me  
3 scribbling down my notes because afterwards I'll have to  
4 think this over as to what exactly I'm going to write here  
5 when I type it up on the basis of these questions, the  
6 questions in this form and then that eventually becomes the  
7 assessment.

(x 28, 14-15)

1 S: I'll be taking notes for us so it'll be easier, our conversation  
2 will be more fluent, and also 'cause I have to take notes on  
3 so many clients. We, I've always had this method that I write  
4 down important things right away and then write up the  
5 whole final version later.

(x 11b, 17)

1 S: This was all that I wanted to ask you so that uhm, this is, I  
2 mean, I'm going to be honest with you, I really have to give  
3 this careful thought.

(x 7, 65)

In these extracts, the social worker is defining the interview situation as a place for collecting information: "me scribbling down my notes",

"I'll be taking notes for us", "this was all that I wanted to ask you". The social worker's exclusive expertise is not only achieved because of the fact that she records the information, but because something happens to it after the interview as well: "I'll have to think this over" and then "write up the whole final version later"; "I really have to give this careful thought". After the interview, all of the gathered information will be subjected to intense and careful deliberation and processing. In other words, the assessment will not be completed in the interview process. The contents of the assessment are not dictated by the client, nor is he the ultimate expert on the question of suitability; the ultimate experts are the probation service and its staff. The client will not learn in the interview situation whether the report will ultimately be positive or negative, although the social worker may hint at it. For example, in extract 17 the (social worker alludes quite clearly to the report being negative "I really have to give this careful thought"). At the same time, however, the dropping of hints helps social workers retain their exclusive rights on expertise.

The processing of the information after the interview is not only in the hands of the social worker who conducted the interview; there is still one further level in the assessment hierarchy:

*Extract 18: Hierarchic division of labour*

1 S: Uhm I now have the information that...

2 C: Hmm.

3 S: ...I really need here. I'll write this report and...

4 C: Right.

5 S: ...and then uhm, then our Director or the Deputy he'll  
6 prepare a statement...

7 C: Statement

8 S: ...for the court of justice...

9 C: Yeah.

10 S: ...when he reads this report and that is then passed on to the  
11 court.

(x 4, 19)

In extract 18, the social worker explicates *the hierarchic division of labour in the assessment procedure*. The report will be written by the social worker,

and then the Director or the Deputy will study the report, on the basis of which he or she will prepare a statement for the court of justice. Thus the ultimate expertise drifts one step further away. The social worker who has performed the interview cannot know the outcome because the final decision is made elsewhere.

## Conclusions

The assessment of client suitability for community service is a demanding interpretive job. It involves eliciting and collecting information from the client, interpreting and assessing that information and condensing it into a report. The interactive situations in which this job is accomplished often vary quite significantly. In some cases the information obtained is defined as 'scarce', in other cases as 'wrong', and sometimes it is even argued that there is too much information. However, the social worker must always make an interpretation about each particular case and client. The professional core of social work is very strongly located in this interpretive work. That core can defy the boundaries of the job; break free from set forms and set formats of writing reports; escape the expectations of partners and reapply them in various ways. And what is most significant is that the professional core is jointly achieved through a process of negotiation. Social work is an important and powerful element of community service, despite the fact that its administrative role remains quite unambiguous.

Given the presence of bureaucratic rules and various other routines, all assessment interviews have basic structural characteristics in common. Suitability assessment situations also bear a definite resemblance to one another. A close reading of these encounters, however, will reveal tremendous diversity in the assessment practices. In this article we have identified two locally diverse cultures which are shared by a number of social workers in both their common understanding of their jobs as well as in their interview practices. Locality is an outstanding feature of these cultures. If we look at the figures in tables 1 to 4, we can see that the interview practices predominating in office x are representative of one culture, and those favoured in office y are representative of another culture. But we can also see from the same figures that there are 'exceptions' to this main paradigm. As such, it

follows that the practices of the two cultures are not totally bound to certain offices.

All in all, the existence of these local cultures can be considered to reflect the interpretive nature of social work and the opportunities it offers for diversity. The cultures exhibited not only an individual element that varied from one situation to the next, but also habits and customs that were shared among colleagues and collectives. On the basis of this empirical result, we would be inclined to argue that the *persistent tendency in literature of saying that a certain part of social work consists of outward-directed, routine bureaucracy and paperwork is in fact quite far removed from its everyday reality.*

The cultures of appropriate and accurate knowing which we identified in this study are based on different views of the purpose of assessment interview, the compilation of the report, the focus of assessment, the direction of co-operation and the purpose of social work (see Figure 1). In the former culture, the main priority is to reach a positive assessment. Conversely, in the latter culture, the main concept is to construct as accurate an interpretation as possible about the client's suitability for community service through a number of different stages. It is important to stress, however, that *the client's suitability for community service is a construction in both culture. It is only the type of information produced and used in the assessment that varies.* In the practices of the appropriate knowing, the relevant information is viewed as being derived from the present and the future of the client's life, whereas in the practices of accurate knowing, information concerning the client's past life is considered especially relevant.

When it comes to the direction of co-operation, one culture stresses loyalty to the profession and its clients, the other stresses the task at hand, which means that the most important partner is the court of law. In the culture of appropriate knowing, the most important tool of doing social work is interaction with the client 'here and now'. In the culture of accurate knowing, the social worker will be reaching in the other direction, away from the interaction situation. Social work is thought to be about providing concrete support for the client during his performance of community service. Both cultures regard themselves as justified, although they justify themselves on different grounds. There is no fixed way to evaluate the 'goodness' or 'badness' of either of these cultures. What we do have to remember is that any evaluation

will necessarily be based on a certain set of criteria, and that these criteria are always in themselves open to negotiation and interpretation.

The basic commitments of both of these cultures have certain consequences, most particularly from the client's point of view. The client occupies a different position in different local cultures, and the expectations attached to the client also differ. These differences have to do with skills of interaction. For instance, in one culture the social worker has 'the client's best interest' in mind, which means that the client does not have to form his narration with any great amount of care. In the other culture, however, whatever he says may lead the social worker to conduct further investigations, which in turn may lead to the uncovering of information that may harm his case. Multiple skills are required of the client, although as our analysis shows, it is impossible to know in advance exactly what those skills might be. One of the most important skills is to learn to listen to what the social worker is saying, in that the social worker's narration explicates a large part of the expectations of certain local cultures.

It is possible that the recommendations produced in these two cultures vary greatly from one another. In 1997, the majority of the assessments were favourable and recommended a community service order, although there might be some variety between different offices. However, on the basis of the two cultures of assessment reporting, we conclude that it is impossible for us to say, for example, whether one culture systematically leads to a higher dropout rate than the other. The question as to what follows from these assessments is by no means futile, although statistics alone cannot shed any light on what goes on in the enforcement of community service orders. The results should be monitored empirically and through different stages. How, for instance, is it reflected in the community service workplace that the assessment has considered this option to provide the client with an opportunity? Is there support available so that the client can make the best possible use of this opportunity, and if so, when and how? Is the careful assessment of the offender and his situation reflected in the type of support that is made available to him – is this support properly targeted so that help is available where it is most needed? Are the partners in co-operation always the same, or do they change? Our analysis contained in this work is not broad enough to provide a comprehen-

sive picture of the role of social work and assessments in the community service system. Indeed, no constructionist and ethnomethodological study can aim at such comprehensiveness. As we pointed out in the introduction, the main contribution of this kind of research lies in its uncovering contextual particularities (cf. Riessman 1994, xv). What is needed, therefore, is more empirical research on particularities (such as the different stages and processes of community service) in order to discover how, if at all, the cultures of appropriate and accurate knowing work in other contexts.

It is clear that the position of offenders is different in these two cultures. Similarly, the courts of law that issue community service orders on the basis of suitability assessments are closely dependent on the local cultures within which the assessments have been made. The type of culture in which these assessments are made is clearly a matter of ethical and political importance. In our analysis we have highlighted the significant influence of conversation, as well as the role of minor events in the everyday practice of social work. The local cultures of social work are constructed out of small conversational events, without which they would not exist. If we hope to alter social work in one direction or another, this aspect must be taken seriously. In the everyday practices of social work, old cultures are upheld and new ones are created within the same arenas.

## Notes

- 1 This paper was written as part of a research project on "Institutions of Helping as Everyday Practices", which is funded by the Academy of Finland.
- 2 We call the two regional offices involved *x* and *y* for reasons of anonymity. They operate in different cities, but have very similar responsibilities as defined in both legislation and the Probation and After-Care Association's own rules.
- 3 There are many different strands of discourse analysis. Here, we will base our analysis on the ethnomethodological tradition, which is sometimes referred to as discursive psychology (see Potter & Wetherell 1987; Edwards & Potter 1992; Potter 1996; Edwards 1997; Widdicombe 1995.)

- 4 Strictly speaking, our material comprises not only these joint discussions, but also all of the surrounding material which in one way or another has become significant (above all, various kinds of forms, brochures, reports, guidelines, etc., to which the social workers referred in our discussions).
- 5 In the context of our project on "Institutions of Helping as Everyday Practices", we have also carried out other discourse analyses that are based exclusively on the assessment interviews (Jokinen & Suoninen 1999; Suoninen 1999).
- 6 Among others, Hannele Forsberg (1998) and Jaber Gubrium (1992) have studied local cultures from the perspective of social constructionism and social work. Cultures are made up of the shared assumptions, ideas and vocabularies of members working in the same unit, and of the ways in which they interact with one another. They are shared and standardized frames that are used for purposes of anticipating, analysing and reflecting on activity (Forsberg 1998, 72).
- 7 The number of staff taking part in these discussions varied, but was usually between six and ten. Participation was voluntary, and the meetings involved both social workers who had tape-recorded their meetings with clients and those whose involvement was restricted to joint discussions. Social work students were present at some of these meetings.
- 8 The code at the end of each extract shows the material's origin. The first letter (x or y) refers to the corresponding regional office at which the interview was conducted. This is followed by the code number of the interview; this may have an a or b attached, indicating whether this was the first or second interview of the same assessment (sometimes the assessment involved one interview, sometimes two). The last digit in the code indicates the page number(s) on which the extract occurs in the transcription.
- 9 In December 1997, a joint seminar for probation staff from both regional offices was arranged, and this idea of two cultures was put to the participants. The response was quite unanimous; this was exactly how the staff themselves viewed the situation. They could easily identify their own units and, at least when they spoke to us, confirmed that this is how they felt the situation should be. In other words, they subscribed to their own local culture, their own distinctive understanding of the institutional function of social work and suitability assessments. The institutional interpretations of probation work recurred consistently from one conversation to the next, from one theme to the next; they were even evident as we were finishing our joint discussions and thanking the staff for their co-operation. At office x, there were comments made even after the meeting had ended regarding the fact that this was a question on which more information should be made available, on which the office itself should do more research. At

office y, the staff thanked us for our contribution and said they had enjoyed our joint conversations. In short, it seems that even the reception of our contribution and the research project as a whole was very different within these two different cultures.

- 10 The question of a third, and possibly a fourth local culture is important here. A third culture was ready to break through at any time. We even had a preliminary name for it: the culture of routine. We would have included in this label such interview practices in which suitability was assessed in very 'simple' terms, by questions concerning housing, employment, substance abuse, etc. In the end, however, this culture of routine never emerged as a separate independent culture, and we opted to allot the elements of this culture to the two other cultures. The element of routine is thus explained through the logic of these two cultures.
- 11 These simple tables (1-4) summarise the findings of our discourse analysis of the interview material. The analysis was based on the frame of interpretation about the distinctive features of the local cultures, which was constructed in the joint discussions we had with the probation offices' social workers (see Figure 1). Specifically, our aim in the analysis was to identify interview practices related to two features, viz. purpose of assessment interview and compilation of report. This exercise produced a somewhat more detailed analysis. The aforementioned features were expressed in the interviews in many different ways, which we have listed in the tables. These different ways of producing certain features of local cultures are variably shorter or longer lived in the interviews, however they are nonetheless clearly identifiable in the turns and extracts. For instance, 'making (the) principle explicit' (Table 1) is usually condensed in one particular turn of the social worker, whereas the 'construction of positive information' (also in Table 1) usually extends over several turns in the process of negotiation between the social worker and client. Specific manifestations of one or the other culture may appear numerous times in the same interview. However, the figures indicated in parentheses refer to the number of different interviews in which each method is expressed. For instance, 'picking out appropriate information' appears in four different interviews. The sum total is divided into two parts according to how often the method in question appears in regional office x, and how often it appears in regional office y.
- 12 The study by Arja Jokinen and Eero Suoninen, found elsewhere in this volume, looks in closer detail at the reconstruction of negative information into positive information in interview situations. They analyse one assessment interview (conducted in two phases) in which an assault offence by a young male client is initially constructed in the client's narrative as an

event that was not his fault, but rather 'caused by others'. However, after the social worker's conversational interventions the act is transformed into an event from which the client learns a great deal, in that it forced him to stop and re-assess his entire life. It is much easier to recommend a self-reflective client for community service than one who 'shies away from his responsibilities'.

## References

- Baldock, John and Prior, David (1981) *Social Workers Talking to Clients: A Study of Verbal Behaviour*. *British Journal of Social Work* 11, 19-38.
- Burr, Vivien (1995) *An Introduction to Social Constructionism*. London: Routledge.
- Cicourel, Aaron V. (1968) *The Social Organization of Juvenile Justice*. New York: Wiley.
- Corden, John & Preston-Shoot, Michael (1987) *Contracts in Social Work*. Aldershot: Gower.
- Edwards, Derek (1997) *Discourse and Cognition*. London: Sage Publications.
- Edwards, Derek & Potter, Jonathan (1992) *Discursive Psychology*. London: Sage Publications.
- Egelund, Tine (1996) Bureaucracy or Professionalism? The Work Tools of Child Protection Services. *Scandinavian Journal of Social Welfare* 5 (3), 165-174.
- Forsberg, Hannele (1998) Perheen ja lapsen tähden. Etnografia kahdesta lastensuojelun asiantuntijakulttuurista. Helsinki: Lastensuojelun Keskusliitto.
- Garfinkel, Harold (1967) *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gergen, Kenneth (1994) *Realities and Relationships: Soundings in Social Construction*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Grönfors, Martti (1986) Rangaistus, kuntoutus, korvaus; yhdyskuntapalvelu seuraamusvaihtoehtona. Julkaisuja 2. Helsinki: Oikeusministeriön vankeinhoito-osasto.
- Gubrium, Jaber F. (1992) *Out of Control. Family Therapy and Domestic Disorder*. Sage Library of Social Research 189. Newbury Park: Sage Publications.
- Gubrium, Jaber & Holstein James A. (1994) Uusi etnografia ja elämän sosiaalinen rakentuminen. *Janus* 2 (4), 352-361.
- Hall, Chris (1997) *Social Work as Narrative: Storytelling and Persuasion in Professional Texts*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Hammersley, Martyn & Atkinson, Paul (1995) *Ethnography. Principles in Practice*. London: Routledge.
- Heritage, John (1984) *Garfinkel and Ethnomethodology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Holstein, James & Miller, Gale (1997) Introduction: Social Problems as Work. In Gale Miller & James Holstein (eds.) *Social Problems in Everyday Life. Studies of Social Problems Work*. Greenwich: Jai Press, ix-xxi.
- Holstein, James & Miller, Gale (1993) Social Constructionism and Social Problems Work. In James Holstein & Gale Miller (eds.) *Reconsidering Social Constructionism*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 151-172.
- Howe, David (1996) Surface and Depth in Social-Work Practice. In Nigel Parton (ed.) *Social Theory, Social Change and Social Work*. London and New York: Routledge, 77-97.
- Jaatinen, Jaana (1996) *Terapeuttinen keskustelutodellisuus. Diskurssi-analyttinen tutkimus alkoholiongelmien sosiaaliterapeuttisesta hoidosta. Tutkimuksia 72*. Helsinki: Stakes.
- Jokinen, Arja & Juhila, Kirsi (1996) Merkitykset ja vuorovaikutus – poimintoja asunnottomuuspuheiden kulttuurisesta virrasta (Meanings and Interaction: Analysing Cultural Talk on Homelessness in Different Settings). *Acta Universitatis Tamperensis* 510. Tampere: Tampereen yliopisto.
- Jokinen, Arja & Juhila, Kirsi & Pösö, Tarja (forthcoming in 1999) Introduction: Constructionist Perspectives on Social Work Practices. In Arja Jokinen & Kirsi Juhila & Tarja Pösö (eds.) *Constructing Social Work Practices*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Jokinen, Arja & Suoninen, Eero (forthcoming in 1999) Rikoksesta resurssi. Narratiivien rakentuminen sosiaalityön kohtaamisissa. In Synnöve Karvonen & Tarja Pösö & Mirja Satka (eds.) *Finnish Reconstructions of Social Work Research*. Jyväskylä: SoPhi (Publications of Social and Political Sciences and Philosophy).
- Juhila, Kirsi & Pösö, Tarja (forthcoming in 1999) Negotiating Constructions. Rebridging the Gap between social work research and practice. In Arja Jokinen & Kirsi Juhila & Tarja Pösö (eds.) *Constructing Social Work Practices*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Kaakinen, Juha & Vuolle, Jukka (1992) Yhdyskuntapalvelun sosiaaliset ja taloudelliset vaikutukset. Yhdyskuntapalvelukokouksen arviointia. Hämeenlinna: Sosiaalikehitys Oy.
- Kangaspunta, Kari (1994) Sosiaalityö yhdyskuntapalvelussa. *Uusi Kriminaalihuolto* 2, 29-31.
- Karjalainen, Jouko & Kuure, Tapio & Virolainen, Harri (1988) Vankeusyhdistyksestä vankeusyhdistykseen? Kriminaalihuoltotyö – sosiaalityön täytäntöönpanona vai täytäntöönpano sosiaalisen työnä? *Uusi Kriminaalihuolto* 2, 8-17.

- Karjalainen, Jouko (1989) Jäähyväiset sosiaalityölle – lainrikkojan syrjäytyminen kriminaalihuoltotyön kotnektissa. Tutkimuksia Sarja B Nro 3. Tampere: Tampereen yliopisto. Sosiaalipolitiikan laitos.
- Kostiainen, Tuula (1994) Sosiaalityö kriminaalihuollossa? Kannattiko satsaus sosiaalityön täydennyskoulutukseen? *Uusi Kriminaalihuolto* 1, 30 -35.
- Kriminaalihuoltoyhdistys. Toimintakertomus (1996) (Probation and After-care Association Annual Report).
- Kääriäinen, Juha (1994) Seikkailijasta pummiksi. Tutkimus rikosurasta ja sosiaalisesta kontrollista. Julkaisuja 1. Helsinki: Vankeinhoidon koulutuskeskuksen julkaisuja.
- Miller, Gale (1997a) Building Bridges. The Possibility of Analytic Dialogue between Ethnography, Conversation Analysis and Foucault. In David Silverman (ed) *Qualitative Research: Theory, Method and Practice*. London: Sage Publications, 24-44.
- Miller, Gale (1997b) *Becoming Miracle Workers: Language and Meaning in Brief Therapy*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Ohjeet yhdyskuntapalvelun toimeenpanosta Kriminaalihuoltoyhdistyksessä. 13.6.1997. (Guidelines for the enforcement of community service orders at the Probation and After-care Association). Julkaisematon moniste. Kriminaalihuoltoyhdistys.
- Payne, Malcolm (1997) *Modern Social Work Theory*. Hampshire and London: Macmillan.
- Peräkylä, Anssi (1990) *Kuoleman monet kasvot*. Tampere: Vastapaino.
- Pithouse, Andrew (1987) *Social Work : The Social Organisation of an Invisible Trade*. Aldershot: Gover.
- Pollner, Melvin (1987) *Mundane Reason: Reality in Everyday and Sociological Discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Potter, Jonathan (1996) *Representing Reality: Discourse, Rhetoric and Social Construction*. London: Sage Publications.
- Potter, Jonathan & Wetherell, Margaret (1987) *Discourse and Social Psychology*. London: Sage Publications.
- Raynor, Peter (1985) *Social Work Justice and Control*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Riessman, Catherine Kohler (1994) Preface: Making Room for Diversity in Social Work Research. In Catherine Kohler Riesman (ed.) *Qualitative Studies in Social Work Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, vii-xx.
- Rostila, Ilmari (1997) Keskustelu sosiaaliluokalla (Talk at Work at the Social Welfare Office: Social Work as Work in Talk-in-Interaction). *Acta Universitatis Tamperensis* 547. Tampere: Tampereen yliopisto.
- Santala, Juha (1995) Yhdyskuntapalvelun yhteydessä tehtävä sosiaalityö – tuki ja kontrolli. *Uusi Kriminaalihuolto* 4, 17-19.

- Shotter, John (1993) *Conversational Realities. Constructing Life through Language*. London: Sage Publications.
- Suoninen, Eero (forthcoming in 1999) Doing Delicacy in Institutions of Helping. A Case of Probation Office Interaction. In Arja Jokinen & Kirsi Juhila & Tarja Pösö (eds.) *Constructing Social Work Practices*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Takala, J.P. (1993) Rangaistus ja siihen soveltuminen. Yhdyskuntapalvelukokeilun alkuvaiheita ja ongelmia (Punishment and Suitability for Punishment: Initial Phases and Problems of Finland's Community Service Experiment). *Tutkimuksia* 120. Helsinki: Oikeuspoliittinen tutkimuslaitos.
- Widdicombe, Sue (1995) Identity, Politics and Talk: A Case for the Mundane and the Everyday. In Sue Wilkinson. & Celia Kitzinger (eds) *Feminism and Discourse: Psychological Perspectives*. London: Sage Publications, 106-27.
- Yhdyskuntapalvelun suunnitteluryhmän mietintö (1990) (Report of community service planning group) Yhdyskuntapalvelu vankilan vaihtoehtona. Kokeilusuunnitelma. Helsinki.
- Yhdyskuntapalvelutoimikunnan mietintö (1989) (Report of community service committee) *Komiteamietintö 1989:41*. Helsinki: Oikeusministeriö.