**MANAGING THE ELECTRONIC TURN**

**ABSTRACT**

Information systems have become ubiquitous across social work, leading to an electronic turn. A key tension is that IT embedded procedures can be counterproductive, encouraging those involved to direct their behaviour to comply with specific measures, rather than address the real issue for which the measures are just a proxy. This is particularly an issue for local managers, who have direct contact with service users and who increasingly mediate the impact of systems of control, such as ISs. We interviewed 30 local managers in the field of Child Welfare and Protection (CWP) in Flanders, Belgium to grasp their position towards this electronic turn. The interviewees identified aspects of the IS as suitable and useful to manage their team, but also expressed their concerns regarding the impact of the inflexible implementation of IS for the development of responsive social work. Most of the managers also talked about how they used strategies of management discretion to bend, reshape or even ignore IS procedures. The result seems to be a mock bureaucracy where official rules and procedures are in place, but local managers develop a parallel system of work that better reflects the needs with which they have to work.

**Keywords:** Child Welfare and Protection, Discretion, Electronic Information Systems, Managers

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Garrett (2005), noting the developing relationship of information and communications technology (ICT) and professional practice, calls for greater critical scrutiny of the ‘electronic turn’. He refers to a form of practice that is ‘...steered and shaped not only by elected governments and various regulatory bodies, but also by corporate designers and suppliers of ICTs’ (Garret, 2005, p. 533). In the past decade, information technology systems have become ubiquitous across social services regimes worldwide (Gillingham, 2011; Munro, 2005; Parton, 2008). Electronic Information Systems (ISs), a form of ICT focusing on processing and managing data, have been developed to address a wide range of tasks within Child Welfare and Protection (CWP) such as decision-making and risk-assessment tools, data-recording systems, digital casework environments and many other variations (Carrilio, 2005; Cleaver et al., 2008; Garrett, 2005; Gillingham, 2011, 2015; Hill & Shaw, 2011; Keymolen & Broeders, 2013; Mitchell & Sloper, 2008; Munro, 2005; Parrot & Madoc-Jones, 2008; White, Hall, & Peckover, 2009; White, Wastell, Broadhurst, & Hall, 2010). ISs have also been deployed across many different welfare regimes such as: the Client Relationship Information System for Service Providers (CRISSP) in Australia (Gillingham, 2011); the ‘Barns Behov I Centrum’ (BBIC) or ‘Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and Their Families’ in Sweden (Carlstedt & Jacobsson, 2017); the National Reference Index for High-Risk Youngsters in the Netherlands (Lecluijze, 2015); the Integrated Children System (ICS) and the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) in England (Cleaver et al., 2008; Mitchell & Sloper, 2008; Munro, 2005; White et al., 2009); and the Information System for the Intersectoral Gateway (INSISTO) in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium (Vandeurzen, 2011).

Garrett (2005) warns that ICT is one, but perhaps the most effective, way of inculcating a logic of practice reflecting strategies of managerial control and a broader neoliberal attitude to the role of professionals and the management of social problems. In what follows, we will discuss the developing relationship between the electronic turn and managerialism, exploring the role of local managers in ISs, and their relationship to social work practice. As Evans notes (2011, p. 369), ‘managers’ power over and distance from frontline practitioners has increased while, in the past, frontline practitioners and managers worked co-operatively as fellow professionals’ (Evans, 2011, p. 369). Local managers are now key players in teams translating policy into practice (Authors Own, 2017; Evans, 2011; Tsui & Cheung, 2004). We will present and discuss the findings from a case study of thirty local managers in the field of CWP. The study examined local managers’ evaluation of the impact of ISs on the service they manage; whether or not they felt they had any discretion in the way ISs were implemented in their teams; and whether ISs supported or undermined the services.

**2. THE ARC OF THE ELECTRONIC TURN**

In assessing the impact of the ‘electronic turn’, Garrett (2005) reminds us that we should keep an open mind and recognize positive as well as negative consequences. Research at the frontline level demonstrates the potential positive contribution of ISs. It can, for instance, help social workers gain better insight into contemporary developments and areas of concern; share information between agencies, gain a better overview of clients’ concerns and strengths by using a more uniform terminology; and to challenge ‘tunnel vision’ by making them consider alternatives to their preferred line of thought (e.g., Authors Own, 2017; Scannapieco & Iannone, 2014). However, a substantial body of research indicates the ever-expanding potential of ICT to enhance top-down control of practice (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; Bradt, Roose, Bouverne-De Bie, & De Schryver, 2011; Garrett, 2005; Hall, Parton, Peckover, & White, 2010; Hill & Shaw, 2011; Keymolen & Broeders, 2013; Parrot & Madoc-Jones, 2008; Parton, 2006, 2009; White et al., 2010). A recurrent theme is the concern that computer-based systems for recording and processing information about professional activities are onerous and alien to CWP practice. Researchers also point to an enforced technical approach to social work practice (Authors Own, 2017, Aas, 2004; Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; Garrett, 2005). ISs tend to split a client’s life story into separate sets of data (Hall et al., 2010) to fit into preordained text fields and the system’s logic (Aas, 2004; Hill & Shaw, 2011; White et al., 2009). It also undermines responsiveness and flexibility in the delivery of social services to those who are most vulnerable (Author’s Own, 2017). Author’s name (2017) illustrates the way a responsive social work approach implies establishing a strong professional relationship between service-users and frontline practitioners, in which social work practice is made transparent and negotiable in a dialogue with the service-user, and social workers become accountable for their actions. He shows that the tools of ISs neither make visible what happens on the ground nor assist managers and practitioners in creating a reflexive approach to accountability.

Underlying this negative evaluation of the impact of ICT is a sense that the technology: ‘(…) is saturated in the drizzle of “the market” with “children in need”(...)’ (Garrett, 2005, p. 533). The development of ISs is an expensive and time-consuming process in which systems are commissioned by senior policy strategists from consultants, researchers and IT specialists at a distance from practice. It is no surprise that ISs often primarily reflect the concerns and priorities of the senior policy makers and managers who instigated these systems.

**3. MANAGERIALISM AND THE ELECTRONIC TURN**

The picture that emerges from research reflects the fact that the potential of ISs has been refracted through the prism of managerialism. Managerialism has reshaped public services, including social work and social care, over at least three decades (Baines, 2010; Harris, 1998; Tsui & Cheung, 2004). Klikauer (2013) describes managerialism combining:

(…) management’s generic tools and knowledge with ideology to establish itself systemically in organizations, public institutions, and society (...). Managerialism justifies the application of its one-dimensional managerial techniques to all areas of work, society, and capitalism on the grounds of superior ideology, expert training, and the exclusiveness of managerial knowledge necessary to run public institutions and society as corporations. (p. 1105).

In essence, managerialism implies making service delivery more business-like and economical, in a way that emphasises efficiency. At the same time, Garrett (2005) notes that CWP is increasingly ordered, devised and structured at a distance, and that this is facilitated by the ever-expanding possibilities of ICT. A key tension within the interaction of ICTs and practice is that IT-embedded policy and procedures can be counterproductive, encouraging practitioners to direct their behaviour to comply with specific measures, rather than address the real issue for which the measures are just a proxy. This is particularly an issue for local managers, who increasingly mediate the impact of systems of control developed by policy-makers and senior managers, and direct frontline social work practitioners (Authors Own; Clarke & Newman, 1997; Tsui & Cheung, 2004). It is our contention that an important but under-examined aspect of understanding the role of ICT lies in grasping how managers position themselves towards this electronic turn.

We should not assume that all managers are managerial (Evans 2009). A key tenet of managerialism is that managers should be in control, with freedom to make decisions about their team’s delivery of services (Clarke & Newman, 1997; Pollitt, 1993). It assumes that this control is achieved by an unbroken chain of command of like-minded managers. However, managerialism - a set of ideas and systems of control - is not the same as managers; individual managers do not necessarily subscribe to this culture. In social care, there is good reason to question the homogeneity of management and the idea of an unbroken chain of command. Historically, commentators have noted a ‘Berlin Wall’ running through management command systems, with local managers often identifying more with local teams that with the central management cadre (Harris, 1998). Local managers of professional staff tend to share the same professional background as their staff (Freidson, 1994). They tend to be recruited on the basis of their professional background rather than management training, and to identify with professional goals and commitments (Evans, 2015). It is likely that in CWP (and other professional services settings) the chain of management control is fractured between local and senior managers; and that a key dimension of this fracture is the degree of cultural divergence with local managers identifying in some important way with professional commitments and values.

**4. THE IMPORTANCE OF DISCRETION**

In considering the role of local managers in the role of ISs in managerialised CWP services, we need to consider the professional dimension of their dual identity as manager and as social worker — particularly the continuing influence of their professional perspective (as social worker) on how they undertake their organisational role (as manager) (see for instance, Wilson, 1989). We want to explore this professional identity, particularly their discretion, by considering its two key aspects - expertise and commitment, and freedom (Author’s Own 2019).

*4.1 Expertise and Commitment*

Not all procedures or regulations are artefacts of managerialism. Policies and procedures can be developed to capture ideas of good practice and embody the procedural rights of service-users (e.g. Robinson, 2003, Evans, 2011). Recognizing this alerts us to another dimension of the debate about ISs in social services: the role of professional judgement and discretion. What is appropriate professional expertise, what values should professionals espouse (Evans & Hardy, 2010)? Critics of ISs often distinguish between box-ticking, technical, means-ends CWP practice (which they characterise as bad social work) and a narrative, holistic, relationship-based CWP practice (which they argue is good social work). They point out that ISs undermine the importance of recording narratives in a responsive CWP practice (Aas, 2004; Hill & Shaw, 2011; Parton, 2008) and that information that ‘cannot be squeezed into the required format disappears or gets lost’ (Parton, 2006, p. 262). As a result, engaging meaningfully in a relationship with service-users and their contexts becomes more difficult, although this is an inherent part of social work practice that responds service-users’ needs (Authors Own, 2017a; 2017b; Parton, 2009; Parton & O'Bryne, 2000). Here, it is important not to assume that a form of practice with which one disagrees is necessarily a manifestation of managerialism, and not good social work. If we refer back to earlier debates about the right ways to do social work, we must recognize the problems of characterizing social work as one particular form of practice (Timms, 1972). Different forms of practice have benefits and problems. In the classic study of service-users’ experiences, ‘The Client Speaks’, Mayer and Timms (1970) interviewed clients of a social service that emphasized what we might today call a narrative and relationship-focused approach. Some clients found this approach useful, but many did not. Some valued an ongoing counselling relationship and the exploration of their feelings. Others found this oppressive and unhelpful, missing the point that they wanted practical help for particular needs.

*4.2 Freedom*

This argument suggests that professional CWP practice requires space and openness to respond flexibly to service-users’ needs — in other words, discretion. Carey (2008, p. 342) argues that the managerial state has had ‘an unprecedented impact upon social work’. Clearly, as noted by Garrett (2005) above, managerialism has created a wide-ranging system of control of practice — in which ISs are increasingly implicated —but we have to ask: have these systems eliminated social work judgement and freedom?

Bowker and Star (2000) point out that no system of classification can eliminate uncertainty and ambiguity and that classification systems are always subject to negotiation and change. Ciborra (2002, p. 51) then again argues that the operation of ISs often diverted from preprogrammed paths by local actors in response ‘...everyday experience and local knowledge.’ There is now an extensive empirical literature across social policy and social work examining the impact of managerial reforms on frontline discretion. In a recent review of this literature Nothdurfter and Hermans (2018, p. 7) note that researchers have found that: ‘managerial reforms, processes of standardisation and the introduction of new tools and technologies have profoundly changed professional practice. They have not, however, (completely) eliminated discretionary space and powers.’ The impact of the electronic turn has, at this stage, neither necessarily limits nor enhances discretion, as Shaw et al. (2009) note:

... ICT dimensions of policy innovation interact with professional practice. Given the character of social workers as knowledge workers, innovations may come to be seen as either a new mechanism for managing work [new procedures, processes, administrative aids, etc.] or as a source of new professional knowledge and skills. (Shaw et al, 2009, p. 388).

ISs, we have argued, have been refracted through a managerial lens to emphasise uniform provision and control of service. However, in themselves they are not inevitably or essentially managerial. They have the potential to enable flexible service delivery and support responsive — flexible, tailored and well-judged — practice and rights-respecting interventions. The picture of the managerial deployment of ISs assumes a managerial culture that runs through all levels of the management hierarchy. However, there are good reasons to believe that, in social care settings, such as CWP, local managers retain a strong commitment to professional goals in practice. Important questions raised by these observations relate to the role local managers now play in implementing ISs as policy and practice. How, for instance, do local managers evaluate the impact of ISs on the service they manage? Do they feel they have any discretion in the way ISs are implemented in their teams? Do they feel ISs support or undermine the services their team provides? To gain an insight into such questions and to develop this line of research we need to consider the views and experiences of local managers. In the next section, we present findings from a study of social work local managers and the position they adopt towards the daily use of ISs in their own and their team’s CWP practice.

**5. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK**

A case study is ‘... an in-depth study of a single unit (a relatively bounded phenomenon) where the scholar’s aim is to elucidate features of a larger class of similar phenomena’ (Gerring 2004, p. 341). The phenomenon in which we are interested is local managers’ experiences of the implementing of a new IS in a CWP service. The aim is to elucidate local managers’ perceptions of and responses implementing the new IS. A case study can gather rich data that examines the interaction between actors and context in-depth. It can also examine general claims — such as the assumption that managers comply with ISs —and develop a nuanced, tentative theory that can provide insights in an analogous situation (Flyvbjeerg, 2001).

*5.1 Research context*

The data collection took place in Flanders, where, in 2014, a new IS was introduced as part of a wider reform of Child Welfare and Protection (CWP). The 2014 reform distinguished directly and indirectly accessible CWP service. Services directly accessible to service-users included non-residential and short-term care. Indirect services were accessed through an ‘inter-sectoral gateway’. The Gateway established eligibility and directed service-users to long-term and specialised services such as out-of-home placements, psychiatric care and foster care. To access specialised care, the practitioner and service-user completed an electronic standardised form (the A-DOC). This document had then to be submitted through the ‘Information System for the Inter-sectoral Gateway’ (INSISTO). The A-DOC consists of information about: the child’s needs, living situation, strengths and weaknesses and environment, and diagnostic information about mental and physical disabilities (including test results). The completed A-DOC was received by the Needs Assessment Team (NAT, an independent team that reviewed the A-DOC and made a decision on eligibility (or ask for further information from the referrer). The service-user then received a Needs Assessment Report and eligibility decision. In the case of eligible service-users, a Youth Care Planning Team would then determine which services to provide and send the A-DOC to them to initiate provision.

*5.2 Selection of the interviewees*

Based on their central role in implementing the Integrated CWP system and the use of INSISTO, we contacted Pupil Guidance Centres and Special Youth Care in West Flanders. The initial response was weak but after a series of follow-ups we recruited 20 local managers from across the Flemish CWP services: 12 managing Pupil Guidance Centres and eight managing services for Special Youth Care. These local managers quickly came up with other managers in their organisation whom they considered relevant to the research. As such, through snowball sampling (Van Hove & Claes, 2011) several other local managers joined the research. This explains why we interviewed 30 managers spread across 20 teams. All of them were responsible for the general and/or professional (pedagogical) policy of their team, including the way the organisation handled INSISTO and the A-DOC. As a result, they were able to elaborate on both these managers’ perspectives on the IS and their experience in handling the system.

5.33 Data collection

The primary source of data for this study was interviews with thirty local managers. Interviews were semi-structured, enabling us to use open-ended questions (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). We developed an interview scheme with some key questions that provided ‘participants with some guidance on what to talk about’ (Gill, Stewart, Treasure & Chadwick; 2008, p. 291). Semi-structured interviews have the advantage of providing a lot of opportunity to explore a topic such as ours in depth by leaving sufficient room for the participants to express their view in a nuanced way (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008). Some of the interviews were organised with several participants at the same time for practical reasons. They all took place at participants’ workplace, to save their time. The interviews lasted between approximately 45 minutes and two hours. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Unfortunately, one interview was lost due to technical problems with the audio-recorder. As a result, 19 semi-structured interviews with 29 managers were used as data.

*5.4 Data analysis*

These interviews generated rich data, which were analysed thematically, using NVivo 10 to manage the coding process (Floersch, Longhofer, Kranke, & Townsend, 2010). An advantage of this approach is that, once the initial coding stage has been completed, recurrent themes based on the participants’ narratives can be considered alongside emergent and unexpected issues (Dicicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

This is an inductive way of working in which the data leads to certain codes or categories, rather than a pre-existing theoretical framework (Floersch et al., 2010). The codes that were used were ‘social work in relation to ISs’, ‘logics of ISs’, ‘consequences of ISs’, ‘opportunities of ISs’, ‘impact of ISs on organisational level’ and ‘strategies’. However, during this stage, codes or themes are often being renamed or reorganised into broader themes as ‘the researcher is convinced that the different categories mean the same thing’ (Van Hove & Claes, 2011, p. 192). To enhance the rigour of the analysis, 15% of the transcripts were independently reviewed by two other senior researchers.

**6. RESULTS**

Interviews focused on local managers’ role in implementing IS and their perspective of the IS as policy and practice in their team. They identified aspects of the IS as a suitable and useful instrument to manage their organisation; but they also expressed their concerns regarding the impact of the inflexible implementation of IS for the development of responsive CWP practice within their team. Most of the managers also discussed their use, as a result of these concerns, of strategies of management discretion to bend, reshape or even ignore IS procedures.

*6.1 Local managers’ evaluation of the new system*

Local managers focused on creating an organisational environment in which the services they provide could be delivered to the best of their ability. They characterised this in terms of two imperatives. Firstly, they were concerned with meeting performance targets and incorporating legislative guidelines such as the use of the IS. Secondly, in close contact with practitioners delivering CWP on a daily basis, they sought to ensure that services were responsive to service-users’ needs.

In meeting these needs, local managers saw clear benefits in using IS as a tool to structure decisions and, create a single and uniform language, as all practitioners used the same system to make ‘objective’ and ‘consistent’ assessments. A local manager expressed this in ways of ‘building in more standards’ (13[[1]](#footnote-2)). This local manager, followed by many colleagues, referred to the need for more equality and the hope that an IS would assist them in making sure ‘each service-user is treated in the same way’ (11). Another local manager encapsulated this:

*I really like the idea that the care a service-user receives is not assigned via lobbying, handshakes or like-knows-like. The idea of an objective list, clearly indicating who comes first is appealing to me.’ (4)*

Many local managers felt that the IS could assist them in meeting managerial demands. They felt that the IS could help make processes more transparent, showing what their team did as well as in creating accountability. However, this broad idea of accountability extended beyond a narrow management system to include all stakeholders ranging from service-users to broader society. When asked where in this process ISs assisted them, local managers described how the structure of the IS, in terms of prescribed text boxes with clear aims and a straightforward path to follow, significantly structured the thoughts of practitioners by encouraging them to ‘rethink possible alternatives for care’ (13) and ‘to keep an eye on the possibilities of the service-user and her/his family by looking at what goes well’ (1). One manager said:

*It is a good thing that we are held accountable in a way that forces us to think critically. For example, when a minor – and sometimes minors are admitted from the age of three or four years old – becomes eighteen, then (s)he has been here already for fifteen years, and you notice that the team has the habit of protecting the minor as long as possible. When that becomes an automatism, there is no possibility for dialogue. The A-DOC encourages our practitioners and our clients to think about the necessity [of the care provided]. For instance, what is the reason for staying in this residential unit? I consider that to be a good development. (11)*

However, local managers were not convinced that the IS was always the best tool for the job. They were particularly concerned about its potential impact on the development of a professional relationship in terms of dialogue and trust between all actors, e.g. practitioners, service-users and themselves. Many local managers were worried that the IS impeded these relationships. One saw ‘a tendency towards anonymization’ (17) in the implementation of ISs. Another commented:

*There is an endless attempt to objectify care. To say: if you have this problem, you should solve it like that and the results will be this. I am more and more convinced that helping people is a matter of subjectivity and that the success of the care we offer depends on many factors. (6)*

This view was echoed by many local managers, expressing their concern that the logic of the database contrasted strongly with a care logic responding to service-users’ needs. One illustrated this concern:

*To date, reality has to follow the logic of the database while we used to be able to decide some things in… wisdom. Wisdom in a way of thinking of how we can solve the issue that is at stake and how will we deal with it. (6).*

*6.2 Resisting the system*

This deep-rooted concern was reflected in many local managers’ resistance to aspects of procedures and regulations embedded within the system. One manager, for instance, said: ‘I think it would be good if the team is allowed to deviate from the standards embedded in the IS and also account for why they are doing that’ (13). However, the organisation expected these managers to follow the procedural guidelines without exception. Many said that, as a result, they felt forced to use their discretion to get around the system. Examples included: contacting other services before sending the A-DOC to the Intersectoral Gateway; exaggerating clients’ problems or withholding positive information about clients’ situation to ensure they were accepted for a service. One local manager explained:

*Sometimes you know where a client belongs and what services (s)he needs… But you need to get the story sold in a certain way. Translate what you see, what you observe. Because of the lack of available care supply, you need to emphasise when a client needs care […] You need to bring the client into the spotlight to make sure that (s)he receives the care that seems appropriate at that time. (17)*

This resulted in the creation of an organisational environment where most local managers allowed and even encouraged practitioners not only to share their concerns in using the IS, but also to circumvent procedures in order to assign help. These managers indicated that they preferred to provide practitioners with sufficient room to manoeuvre - within legal boundaries - and support them to be responsive professional practitioners. In the words of three local managers:

*LM 1: I have the feeling that we are expected to be responsive to the needs, concerns and questions of the individual service-user on the one hand while on the other hand, we are obliged to work within a pre-ordained framework stating that in case A, you need to do this and in case B, you need to do that. But when you feel that other options are better, then you are not allowed to pursue them. In the end, we do pursue them, but then we are forced to look for secret routes.*

*LM 2: Indeed, in those cases, we will find our own route*

*LM 3: That is creativity. (5)*

When trying to flesh out why local managers used these strategies and encouraged practitioners to do the same, they referred to their practice being professional rather managerial. In this context, one said:

*When you need to plead in order to receive certain care, then you need to plead in a good, correct and dutiful way. And yes, when the right way of formulating things increases the chance that the client will receive the help that is needed, why not? (10)*

For many, ‘the interest of the client justifies the means as you want to provide the help that is considered necessary’ (5). However, in their specific role as local managers, our participants also indicated that they allowed practitioners to use their discretion in deviating from regulations within legal boundaries, as they were still held responsible for the daily operations of their service.

*6.3 Complying with the system*

A minority of local managers took a different view. For them, IS provided a clear structure for the team’s work and decision-making. They saw the IS as a framework for delivering CWP services of high quality. They equated good practice with following these ground rules. Two local managers explained:

*LM1: The proceedings (folder outlining all procedures that have to be followed in detail) is the way the intersectoral gateway works. Therefore, it structures also the way we ought to work.*

*LM2: Yes, these are in fact the ground rules. (1)*

Problems of making the system work and following embedded policies and procedures were recast as problems of individual practice, IT skills and commitment. For these managers, most practitioners needed IS. They tended to rely on a minority of practitioners in their teams who were skilled and committed:

*We redirected the tasks concerning the IS to a smaller part of our team. In total, we employ twenty-five practitioners and, perhaps five of them are trained to work the system. […]. We are not going to force practitioners to use the IS when we know beforehand it is not going to work. (1)*

For local managers an advantage of the IS was that it forced practitioners to consider all options for directly including less expensive services. They felt that practitioners now had to follow a straightforward path that structured their thoughts by encouraging them to ‘rethink possible alternatives for care’ (13) and ‘to keep an eye on the possibilities of the client and its family by looking at what goes well’ (1).

**7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

In this study, we looked at local managers’ approach to the introduction of a new IS in CWP in Flanders. The system, initiated by senior managers, reflected the stance of a top-down system-level bureaucracy (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002). In line with research on IS and managerial systems (e.g. Shaw et al. 2009, Nothdurfter & Hermans, 2018) we found that the new system had not eliminated discretion. We were particularly interested in the role that local managers played in implementing this system and found that many did not identify with the managerial logic of the system, hereby reflecting Evans’ (2009) observation that we should not simply equate social services managers with managerial ideology.

We found widespread evidence of discretion in the way local managers in CPW bent, reshaped or even ignored IS procedures. This echoes similar findings in other areas of social work (e.g. Evans, 2013) and in welfare services generally (e.g. Tummers et al, 2015). Most managers in the study sought to evade or escape the worst excesses of what they saw as the unyielding managerial logic of the new IS. They used their discretion to make space for responsive social work and resist a form of service that is ‘...directed at the paperwork attached to the work, not at the intricacies of their actual practice with people’ Munro (2004, p. 1093). The strategies they used to adapt and flex the system reflected their commitment to professional practice and service-users.

However, a minority of local managers were more sympathetic to the IS and felt it reflected structured, routinized practice, and transparent, clearly delineated decision-making. Most local managers, though, sought to make space for flexibility while ‘pretending’ to follow the system. They encouraged practitioners to bend the rules to sustain responsive social work on the front line (Author’s Own, 2017). As noted earlier, many authors have seen these different approaches to general procedures - and now to ISs - as either good or bad practice (e.g. Parton, 2006); but procedures and ISs in themselves are neither necessarily good nor bad. They may reflect different commitments to justice in practice, as either rule consistency or flexibility and sensitivity (Evans, 2013). Consistency and transparency are also important aspects of public services - and they are demanded by service-users (Soss, 2000). Flexibility and freedom are also important in CWP to enable services to respond to different needs in a diverse society. The tension felt by most local managers was slightly different - they felt pulled between the demands of an inflexible system and responsiveness to service-users. This concern reflects growing criticism of services as total systems, focusing on their own need for assessment, measurement and recording, rather than building effective relationships with service-users (Cottam, 2018). These managers felt that they had to be seen to perform one form of practice (following procedures, using evidence-based language) to ‘dazzle’ senior managers and legislative bodies. Under the radar, they sought to create opportunities to engage with and relate to the circumstances of service-users’ lives.

The work environment described in the study looks very much like a mock bureaucracy (Gouldner, 1954), where official rules and procedures - externally imposed - lack legitimacy, and in their place covert processes develop that better reflect local conceptions of legitimacy. In this study, local managers and practitioners develop a parallel system of work that better reflects their understanding of the needs and circumstances of service-users with whom they work. In this 'looking-glass world' CWP is in danger of becoming a performance, with many hidden transcripts (Scott, 1990). The widening gap between reality on the ground and an official fiction of service risks that responsive practice being made invisible and distorted, equated with not rule-following. While fragmented covert resistance to inflexible systems has a role (Carey & Foster, 2011), there is also a need to make ‘resistance’ overt and bring forward the concerns underlying it. At issue in this case, we would argue, is the manner in which the electronic turn is managed. As a profession, social work needs to reclaim discretion as a positive contribution to service development. Resistance is not about rejecting ISs but rather a practical critique of top-down total systems. The discretion of local managers and practitioners in this study can be seen as ad hoc bottom-up strategy of adaptation of an information system. This is the sort of system development Ciborra (2002) refers to as ‘bricolage’, where ISs are continually adapted and augmented to reflect and respond to different local circumstance and needs. This is not a rejection of ISs as such but a challenge to the imposition of a ‘one size fits all’ system.

The question remains how initiation and development of information systems can be organised avoiding the situation we found through this research. A possible middle ground lies in what Hill & Shaw (2011) describe as a practice-led approach. Such an approach begins with questioning what social work needs to improve its practice and to deliver high quality services to service users. It does not force these systems into social work practice in ways that are inappropriate and changes the nature of social work itself. This strongly contrasts with the current technology-led approach that begins questioning ICT developers what features they can design, which are afterwards implemented in social work practice. By implementing a practice-led approach, common ground can be found on the proper use of IS, adjusted to the reality of day-to-day social work practice.

**8. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

Interpretation of the findings should consider the following study limitation. The study was designed to achieve an in-depth exploration of the local managers’ position towards the use of electronic information systems in their CWP practice. It is only through further studies that these tentative ideas can be developed into more robust theory. We therefore recommend that (i) similar studies be carried out in other countries and in other adjacent fields in social work; and that (ii) studies involve not only local but also senior managers.

**9. COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS**

*9.1 Funding information*

This research was funded by Special Research Fund from the first authors’ University.

*9.2 Conflict of interest*

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

*9.3 Ethical approval*

This study was reviewed and approved by the University’s Research Ethics Committee (ref. number 2014/36).

*9.4 Informed consent*

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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1. Numbers related to individual interviewees [↑](#footnote-ref-2)