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THE INTERPRETATION OF CHILD ABUSE: BUREAUCRATIC RELEVANCE IN
URBAN NEWFOUNDLAND¹

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ABSTRACT

The disposition of suspected instances of child abuse is accomplished by bureaucratic personnel through their interpretation of the relevancies of their organizational life-world. Three such instances are discussed: these resulted respectively in an unmodified interpretation, in a modified interpretation, and in an ambiguous interpretation. Among the bureaucratic relevancies which are discussed are, the elasticity itself of the rubric of "suspicion", the affluence of the suspected, and the nature of their support network. The reification of instances of suspected abuse is found to be related, in part, to bureaucratic contingencies which themselves are connected only tangentially to the behavioral phenomenon under investigation.

In their recent overview of research into child abuse, Parks and Collmer (1975) identify three models of analysis: the psychiatric, the sociological, and the social-situational. All three proceed as if child "abuse" does exist in instances which are labelled as such: then, each mode, in its own way, tries to account for those conditions which elicit abusive behavior on the part of caretakers. But, in general, studies which articulate with these models do not consider, in any detail, a problem which is at the heart of child abuse and neglect: its identification by officials who work within bureaucratic frameworks. Thus Parke and Collmer (1975:7) note only that the error rate in abuse-detection is particularly serious; and Light (1973:571) suggests that rates of error in the detection of "false positives", where children are considered abused when this is not the case, will be high.

I argue here that, where the investigation of suspected abuse and neglect is located within a bureaucratic organization, this everyday "life-world" (Schutz and Luckmann 1973) of child welfare is crucial to the comprehension of how instances of "suspicion" are translated into cases of "abuse" or of "neglect": for the rendering of such labels is a summation of interpretation within official contexts.

For this there are three reasons. First, as Blumer (1962: 180) and others have noted, human interaction is mediated by a process of interpretation, through which one establishes the apparent meaning of another's behavior (cf. Blum and McHugh 1971; Handelman 1977c). Such interpretations are negotiated properties of interpersonal conduct (Scheff 1968). Moreover, but in line with the reflexive continuity of a particular social reality (cf. Mehan and Wood 1975:8-14), interpretations are not settled unconditionally, once for all, but are subject to the on-going perceptual adjustments of retrospective interpretation (cf. Wilson 1970:701; McHugh 1968).

Second, plausible interpretations are guided by the referencing capacity of a particular social reality: therefore interpretations are indexical expressions (Garfinkel 1967) of this reality, and in turn they reify its phenomenal validity. Put differently, a "life-world" offers schema to its members, for the interpretation of particular instances (Bittner 1965) that are perceived as relevant to its concerns, such that the decision which governs the instance is rendered intelligible to, and compatible with, this life-world (cf. Silverman and Jones 1973). The meaning attributed to such interpretations is, in turn, a function of the relevancies of the life-world: these relevancies are thematic, motivational, and interpretational (Schutz and Luckmann 1973: 186-207). The bureaucratic task sets the problem to be explicated. That is, the theme of child abuse or neglect is perceived as relevant, legal statutes and official directives enunciate the relevance of this theme, and the child-worker is motivated to investigate instances of "suspected" abuse or neglect. But, with regard to interpretational relevance, the organizational life-world provides only ambiguous direction (Handelman 1976a, 1977a): thus, in this domain the interpretation of "suspicion" is especially problematic.²

Third, meaning and context are inseparable: the relevancy of an interpretation, which "makes sense" of an instance of suspicion, has this quality within the contexts of the organizational life-world. But, that meaning which is attributed to an

interpretation, within a bureaucratic context, must be summated as an "objective" rendition which any upright member of the wider society will comprehend, common-sensically. This, of course, is a prime function of official labels, of which "abuse" is an example. Thus it must be stressed that the context in which the meaning of abuse is formulated, is not that of the suspected household. Instead, this context is located at the intersection of bureaucratic and household life-worlds, where the power of definition of the former is more forceful than that of the latter. In phenomenological terms, the organization has the greater capability to impose its perception of reality on that of the household's, and so to render the reality of the latter as one which is intelligible to the former.³

Therefore, I argue that it is precisely this locus of intersection which is crucial to any understanding of how instances of "suspicion" become translated into cases of abuse or neglect. As Manning (1971:249) notes, in a different context, the most problematic qualities of organizational life are its commonsense grounds. Yet, with regard to the processing of child abuse and neglect, the official-client interface has received little analytic attention.

I will discuss three reports of suspected abuse-neglect made to the child-welfare division of the public-welfare Department of Social Services, which serves St. John's, Newfoundland. In each case, through the prism of the division, I will bring out those interpretational and contextual contingencies which affected the decisions of the child-workers. They rendered the first case as an unmodified interpretation of abuse. In the second, an initial interpretation of "severe neglect" later was watered down. The third was interpreted as "not really abuse", but it was treated, in part, as if abuse had occurred. All three cases were left in the active file; and the interpretation of each affected its disposition. In each case, I am concerned here only with its opening phase, until a disposition was reached, and not with later developments (cf. Handelman 1976a, 1977a).

An Unmodified Interpretation: the Yards

Mrs. Yard, a young mother, complained to the police that her husband beat their six-month old son. The police reported this to the child-welfare division.

Frequently the initial definition of "suspicion" is supplied by an agency other than the division; and its response is to assume the "investigative stance" (Zimmerman 1969). Then, for a case to be dropped speedily, those suspected must clear themselves completely of suspicion; given the ambiguous boundaries which demarcate abuse and neglect, caretakers are assumed more to be guilty than innocent. This creates a context in which the "facts" are interpreted differently than they would be according to the maxim: innocent until proven guilty.

The caseworker visited the Yard home. Bruising was readily visible on the boy's face and legs. Asked for an explanation, Mr. Yard stated that, some nights before, after drinking "a little too much", he had played with the child "a little too roughly." The child fell from his arms, and was bruised. But he denied ever striking his son. After this visit, Mrs. Yard stated that the child had to be removed, because Mr. Yard had been beating him for months, and because he had little control over his actions. Later he denied her accusations.

The following day, the caseworker, her supervisor, and two policemen, removed the child to the children's hospital.⁴ A medical examination found extensive bruising on the face and on the legs, a deep abrasion on one buttock, pneumonia in the left lobe, and a greenstick fracture of the shaft of the ulna. The examining doctor was prepared to write in his report that these injuries were compatible with a diagnosis of "child abuse."

This report was most relevant for the division, since the diagnosis of "compatibility" could be read as signifying cause-and-effect: someone made those injuries happen; they were not accidental (cf. McHugh 1970). Mrs. Yard had accused her husband, the only other person who was routinely present in the household. But, if her testimony was accurate, then by her own admission she had condoned his behavior for a lengthy period without reporting it. Thus she was negligent, while he was abusive. If her story was fabricated, then she was lying; and this would strengthen his denial. Still, by his own admission, he had treated the child roughly while drunk.

Thus, whether the caseworker accepted either story, both parents were to be considered unfit on some ground; and given the diagnosis, both stories could not be rejected completely. But, according to the relevancies of her life-world, the caseworker was not required to establish the identity of an "abuser."

During this first phase of the case, she had to decide whether to request the family court to remove the child from the household. This court's brief for abuse and neglect is phrased in the passive tense: if evidence exists that something routinely unexpected, and damaging, happened to the child, than a causal agent need not be identified. For the caseworker, such identification becomes more relevant after an official disposition is made. Then she switches roles, from that of a punitive agent, to that of rehabilitating the family. This latter task is eased if she thinks she knows the identity of the perpetrator. Thus, until further information became available, the caseworker abided by a major relevancy of the division: that its primary responsibility was to the welfare of the child. Since there was evidence of abuse, she petitioned the family court to grant temporary wardship of the child.⁵

In the meantime, the division passed on its evidence to the provincial Department of Justice. In addition to the medical diagnosis, the police report stated that Mr. Yard had admitted to beating his son, in the words: "Yeah, I beat the shit out of it." This admission was corroborated by Mrs. Yard. The Department of Justice brought criminal charges against Mr. Yard. Prior to the family court hearing on wardship, he was convicted of assault, fined \$500, and placed on probation for two years. One condition of his probation was an abstinence from alcoholic beverages. This lent credence to Mrs. Yard's portrayal of him as volatile and unpredictable. By the time of the wardship hearing, the caseworker held to the interpretation that Mr. Yard abused his son, while Mrs. Yard was negligent in permitting him to do so. At the hearing, the division was awarded temporary wardship for one year; and the child was placed in a foster home.

According to the child-workers, this was a clear-cut case: within their life-world it had much the status of a "normal crimes" construct (Sudnow 1965). Its routine processing was due to a conjunction of factors which were highly relevant to the official identification of abuse: an authoritative medical opinion, an eye-witness who incriminated either her husband, or both her husband and herself, and an official trial judgement. Thus the caseworker could develop a consistent and coherent line of interpretation which substantiated the organizational life-world, without qualification. And her interpretation was borne out by the favorable decision of the family court.

A Modified Interpretation: The Birds

Some months before, the Birds were referred to the Public Health Service: its nurse found the Bird home to be filthy, the children to have lice, and the parents to be heavy drinkers. During one visit, she found the nine-year-old daughter with a badly-bruised eye; and she reported the household to the child-welfare division.

The caseworker discovered that Mrs. Bird was in the hospital after the eldest son, Jack, aged seventeen, had kicked her in the stomach. Then pregnant, she had miscarried. Jack was an ex-probationer, with a reputation for violence, according to the corrections division.

The home was in a filthy state: Mr. Bird was drinking heavily; the children, and even a doll, had lice; and the house itself had no indoor water or sanitation facilities. Across the wall of the children's bedroom was smeared what appeared to be dried excrement. Mrs. Bird's mother was helping to run the household while her daughter was hospitalized. She organized a number of female relatives to clean out the house; over twenty garbage bags of filthy clothing were removed and laundered; dried feces were scraped off walls and floors; and in one bedroom they found a mound of feces, with sawdust thrown on top. While Mrs. Bird was still in hospital, the youngest child was run over and killed by a car near the family home. After Mrs. Bird's return, the case-worker found her, one day, with a badly bruised face: but she would not say who had beaten her. Shortly after this, Mr. Bird caught Jack stealing the battery from a neighbor's car, and remonstrated with him: in reply, Jack knocked him down, and gave him a severe stomping.

To the caseworker, the household was marked by severe neglect, and by violent behavior. These convinced her that the younger children, aged seven, nine, and twelve, had to be protected from this destructive environment. Together with two policemen, she apprehended these children, pending a hearing in family court, on the division's petition for temporary wardship.

A maxim in the division states that "dirt is not enough" to obtain temporary wardship. But in this instance the enormity of "neglect" and violence convinced the caseworker that an interpretation of "severe neglect" would get wardship. However, other contingencies led the division to alter its official interpretation, to keep this compatible with its life-world.

Most families in St. John's who are investigated for abuse and neglect are comparatively poor, and many receive welfare assistance.⁶ In comparison to their more affluent compatriots, and given their greater dependence for subsistence on official agencies, they are more vulnerable to official pressures. Therefore, in wardship hearings, it is not surprising that suspected parents are rarely represented by legal counsel, in order to protect their civil rights; and only infrequently are they informed by the division of their right to legal representation (cf. Handelman 1977a).

By Newfoundland standards, the Birds turned out to be affluent: they had earned many thousands of dollars from land sales. These monies were held in trust, and their lawyer allocated sums to them as needed. In the matter of temporary wardship, which the Birds opposed, their lawyer represented them. Ordinarily, at such hearings, the division dispensed with counsel, since it was better able to prepare an authoritative case than were the parents it routinely opposed. But, since the Birds had counsel, the division requested a postponement to obtain representation from the Department of Justice.

It became clear that, once the Birds had counsel, the likelihood of obtaining wardship was reduced. While he granted a postponement, the judge suggested that the children be returned home, and to be supervised, "if possible." The caseworker's response was: "Unless the neglect is apparent, there is not much that can be done, especially with regard to wardship." The division understood that, officially, it had to modify its interpretation of "severe neglect".

Meanwhile, with the help of Mrs. Bird's mother, the home was cleaned. On a subsequent visit, the caseworker found Mrs. Bird scrubbing a new stove. There was new linoleum on the floor; and the visible rooms were clean. When the caseworker asked to see another room, "She /Mrs. Bird/ was very defensive. She said it was a bedroom that wasn't used. We asked to see it, but she said it wasn't fixed up and didn't use it. I said we'd like to see it anyway. We went in and what a mess! There was feces spread across one wall. It was freezing cold. There were clothes everywhere." But the Birds said they missed their children terribly; and Mrs. Bird's mother claimed she was doing her best to get them to keep the home in better condition.

When the Department of Justice informed the division that there was little chance of obtaining wardship, since the Birds had counsel, and since they could claim to be making a sincere effort to improve, the supervisor and caseworker capitulated: they cancelled the hearing. A few days later, they decided to request a court order for the supervision of the Birds. When they were discouraged from doing so, they concluded that there was no real need for such an order, since the division did have the de facto right to supervise, where abuse or neglect were suspected. Two weeks after their apprehension, the children were returned. Reinterpreting her previous determination to deal firmly with the household, the caseworker said that the removal of the children had shocked the parents into "straightening up." There were two major factors in this reinterpretation.

Wardship is intended to serve three functions: to protect a child for a period, to punish the offending parents, and to press for changes in parental behavior and life-style, before permitting the return of the children.⁷ These aims are implemented more easily when a coherent and consistent interpretation is constructed, and when those suspected have few resources with which to oppose legal action. Such an interpretation was established; but given the practical contingency of counsel, the division had to modify its story-line: to explain to itself why wardship was not necessary, and why some form of de facto supervision would suffice. Although it could not modify the evidence of severe neglect, and of probable abuse, it could search for evidence of a change in behaviour, which then could be interpreted as a change in parental attitude. Some improvement in cleanliness, a new stove, new linoleum, and the supposed shock of apprehension, served as evidence of this kind. Moreover, the invocation of the maxim that "dirt is not enough", threw the onus of failure to obtain wardship onto the family court. In turn, this enabled division personnel to sidestep a conclusion which was threatening to the organizational life-world: that its methods worked best with the vulnerable poor, and less well with the more-buffered affluent.

Unlike that of affluence, the second factor actually enabled division personnel to argue that their disposition was correct. Bittner (1967a, 1976b) and Black (1970) found that policemen were more prepared not to process altercants or miscreants who were not suspected of serious crimes, and for whom some person or social unit in the community was prepared to accept responsibility. Such dispositions were compatible with the police

notion of "keeping the peace". In St. John's, child-workers related, in a parallel manner, to instances of suspected abuse and neglect: if the suspected parents had a "support network" outside of their own household, of persons (usually kinsmen) who were perceived to be concerned, and who were prepared to shoulder some responsibility for the household, then the division was prepared more to rely on supervision, without wardship.

Mrs. Bird's mother was perceived as such a person: she expressed her grave concern for the welfare of her grandchildren; she organized other kinswomen to clean the Bird home; and she was perceived as responsible, in part, for the physical improvements in the home. Therefore the division settled for a story-line in which she already had had a positive influence on the attitudes of the parents. Thus, the first glimpses of parental cooperation and rehabilitation were in sight. Although this interpretation was more ambiguous than its predecessor, its meaning was more compatible with those contextual contingencies which the case had illuminated within the organizational life-world.

An Ambiguous Interpretation: the Wills

One evening the police received a call from a landlord, that his tenants, a young couple named Wills who lived in the apartment above his, were assaulting their two-month old son. Two policemen and a welfare officer went to the home. The landlord's wife said that they had heard the Wills fighting. Some time later, they heard the baby let out two or three terrible screams, and since then all had been very quiet. The landlord added that, on several occasions, they had heard the Wills beating their baby. Upstairs, Mr. Wills was alone with the child. He denied striking it; but he added that the baby had been lying on its stomach in its stroller, and had fallen forward onto its head, eliciting the screams heard below. The baby was taken to the children's hospital.

The examining doctor reported that the child was convulsing, that he had suffered a linear fracture of the parietal bone, and that these injuries might have been caused by abuse. But he noted that there were no bruises or other marks on the child's body.

The following day, the landlord stated that, actually neither he nor his wife had ever seen the Wills strike their child. Furthermore, he denied that either of them had told the police

that the child was abused. But, added his wife, the Wills quarrelled often, and the baby cried a great deal: therefore, "something must be wrong somewhere." The previous evening the screams of the baby had frightened her terribly; and she thought that someone should investigate. On the other occasions she had called to Mrs. Wills to stop the crying of the baby.

The Wills denied ever striking their child. True, he did cry constantly, but their family doctor had said he was a "cross child", and that this behavior would pass. They admitted that the crying irritated them, particularly because the landlord's family often complained of it. Mr. Wills said that his wife often held their son for long hours during the night, to quieten him. He himself was unemployed, and the family subsisted on welfare payments.

The caseworker examined the stroller: she concluded that if it had been in the down position, and if the baby had been lying on it stomach, then he could have slid out, head first. She stated: "The way it appears, there is no substantial evidence that the child has ever been beaten or assaulted, or that whatever caused the accident was deliberate or the result of negligence." But, she noted, the Wills were "inexperienced", and "immature." Moreover, they were quite tense because of the complaints of the landlord's family.

Although she was reluctant to apprehend the child, she did think the Wills would feel greater pressure, since they now felt themselves under suspicion. Therefore they needed both strict supervision and much support, for their inexperience, and their tense relations with the landlord, could result in the future "neglect" of their child.

To what extent do bureaucratic agencies create those antecedent conditions which then provide a mandate for bureaucratic intervention? The caseworker was convinced that the injury was accidental. If the division strictly interpreted its own function, then this should have ended its scrutiny of the household. But the medical report had suggested the possibility of abuse; relations with the landlord were poor and the Wills could not move easily to another apartment, since decent low-income rental housing in St. John's is very scarce. Therefore this amorphous "tension" had to be watched. But this scrutiny itself had made the Wills feel suspect and tense. Therefore supervision was even more necessary: but, in turn, continued scrutiny would increase their tension. Still, the

Wills were inexperienced and immature: therefore strict supervision was necessary, for their own protection. But what evidence was there for this description?

While her son was in hospital, his mother visited regularly, and showed much tenderness and affection for him. There was residual neural damage from his fall: one arm and hand were quite spastic. But, later on, Mrs. Wills always kept medical appointments, and she exercised his arm regularly, as required. Her child was always spotless, and the apartment clean. Did the "immaturity" of the Wills stem from their inability to find another apartment? Or perhaps it derived from their inability to control their landlord, although they were clearly the weaker party?

According to the caseworker, their immaturity, the pressure they lived under, and their lack of a support network of older kinsmen, could lead to the child's neglect in the future. But this "pressure" was due in part to the actuality of intervention, while "immaturity" justified continued supervision, in anticipation of a future state for which there was little evidence in the present. In effect, having intervened, the division interpreted the "facts" to justify the creation of conditions which themselves constituted a mandate for continued intervention.

Within a few short weeks, a total of five agencies were involved in different aspects of the life of the household: since Mr. Wills was on welfare, his welfare officer took an interest; the public health nurse visited to check the baby; the hospital's social service department kept watch to make certain the "accident" was not repeated; the child was treated in the hospital's child development clinic for his spastic arm; and the division caseworker visited often. In addition, the Director of Child Welfare suggested that the landlord be asked to inform the division if the child's care again should be questionable.

Since the couple lacked a support network, they were encircled by bureaucratic and professional supports: and, although "suspicion" had provided an initial mandate for scrutiny, intervention itself had created a mandate for its own continuation and expansion. Some months later, the caseworker and her supervisor suggested to the Director of Child Welfare that this file be closed, since there was no evidence of anything amiss in the treatment of the child. He replied that, since this was a

case of "suspected abuse", the caseworker should continue to supervise. She understood this to be a self-protective response.⁸

Thus, even when those directly involved in the case agreed that there was no basis for continued intervention, the "suspicion" of abuse had lingered and had reified: suspicion, in the form of an initial complaint, had become translated into the potential, of the parents, to harm the child in the future. This product of the case-interpretation "made sense" only in the context of the life-world of bureaucratic imperatives.⁹

Conclusion

An interpretation which "makes sense", of an instance of "suspicion", is the negotiated product of the interplay of bureaucratic and professional relevancies, and of the resources of those suspected. Thus the foremost concern of the children's hospital is the condition of the child (the Yards and the Wills). The hospital prefers to err on the side of caution, to invoke "suspicion", and to press for an official investigation. Senior child welfare officials prefer to keep files active, and to request continued supervision, on the basis of "suspicion." So the opening of a file is often a mandate for its continuation, for the "protection" of the division (the Wills). Still, the family court is concerned often with the rights of those suspected, and it tends to prefer supervision to wardship (the Birds). Therefore the invocation of "suspicion" is understood differently by involved officials, whose perceptions influence its interpretation. On the other hand, the affluence of the suspected (and their hiring of counsel), lessens the probability of wardship (the Birds); and where those suspected have a support network, this reduces the likelihood that wardship will be requested (the Birds).

The caseworker's interpretation has to resolve these often contradictory interests: her solution affects the naming of the case, and its disposition. Where the suspected household lacks a support network, or if its network is perceived as irresponsible, then bureaucratic agencies fill this gap (the Wills). But the enclosure of a "suspected" household by officialdom, can amount, reputationally, to a de facto declaration of guilt. Such cases then acquire a form similar to those in which guilt has been established, but where wardship has not occurred.

The ambiguity of the rubric of suspected abuse and neglect eases the interpretative task of the case-worker, as she steers her way through bureaucratic and societal contingencies (the Birds). The elasticity of "suspicion" makes relevant to the case-interpretation a wide range and variety of attributes and behavior (the potential for neglect of the Wills, the income of the Birds) which become summated as "abuse" and/or "neglect". In practice, this permits the expansion of an interventionist mandate to other areas of the family life of those suspected, and opens a portal to a multiplicity of intervenors (the Wills). Thus the elasticity of "suspicion" generates the common-sense grounds for the interpretation of "what is suspected", and for its summation. This can result in the application of stigmata, for lengthy durations, on the basis of suspicion, for common-sense reasons which are related only tangentially to the actual welfare of the child itself. Therefore it is a grave error for social science to treat such summations as accurate reflections of the existence, and of the boundaries, of abuse and neglect in actual family situations.

It is instructive to note briefly the kinds of contributory factors which generally fall outside the boundaries of relevance, in instances of suspected abuse and neglect. St. John's has a severe shortage of housing, in part because land-developers, construction companies, politicians, and others, tend to work in concert to maintain a tight housing market. Low-income families often must make do with over-crowded, substandard, unsanitary, and unsafe housing in high-density living-areas where family arguments and quarrels are overheard more easily by neighbors and landlords.¹⁰ Within Canada, Newfoundland has a high rate of unemployment. Many households are driven onto welfare subsistence, which stigmatizes them, which creates official dossiers about them, and which prepares the ground for the rationale of bureaucratic intervention. Most fresh and nutritious food is not grown locally, but is transported from mainland Canada. So its price generally is prohibitive for low-income households. Factors like the above are economic and ecological: they contribute to the validation of a wider social system, of which child welfare is a bureaucratic component (if, at times, an unwilling partner), and from which child welfare receives its organizational form, and its legitimacy. To relate factors, like the above, to the maintenance of a system which weights both the reporting and the identification of abuse/neglect against low-income families, would be to question the phenomenal validity of the system itself, and hence also that of the life-world of child-welfare.¹¹

The interpretational approach to the attribution of meaning, taken in this paper, also questions the validity of the problem of "false positives" (see also Handelman 1976a, 1977a). For example, the case of the Yards was termed "abuse", and it resulted in wardship: this case could be counted as a true positive. That of the Birds was termed "neglect". But, should one count the initial interpretation, or the softened official version? This case then could be a true positive, but of uncertain degree. That of the Wills apparently is a true negative, which is treated like a de facto true positive: should it be counted as a false positive? Only in the case of the Yards is there a close fit between the name given to an instance and the phenomenon it denotes.

My closing point is directed to practitioners of child welfare. The "social construction" of reality, which is connoted by an interpretational approach, does not argue that the phenomenon of child abuse and neglect is simply fictitious. But, by elevating taken-for-granted features of organizational work to the level of conscious inspection and introspective evaluation, it does demand a degree of self-critical awareness which is often lacking, or which is down-graded, in routine work (see Handelman 1976b, 1977b; Scott 1970). Greater cognizance of interpretational processes, at least carries the hope that practitioners will question common-sense grounds, which permit the routine rationalization and reification of complex social phenomena. If, at times, this locates the practitioner in opposition to other bureaucratic, research, and psychologizing personnel, then this usually would be to the good: to succumb to the expeditious common-sense lineaments of a task, is inevitably to stultify, and to become less capable of recognizing in others the humanity which we accord to ourselves. Apparently there is no ultimate way to nullify Heisenberg's Principle of Uncertainty, but greater insight into the realities which we reinforce through routine usage may also lead to the questioning of their validity and applicability.

Notes

1. Data were collected during the tenure of an ISER postdoctoral fellowship in anthropology, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1973-1974. This paper was written during the tenure of a Mellon postdoctoral fellowship in anthropology, at the University of Pittsburgh, 1977-1978. Data were collected

through observation, discussion, and open-ended interviews. The names of all protagonists have been changed; and minor details have been altered to ensure anonymity. The child-welfare division discussed here employed nine caseworkers and a supervisor, all of whom were college-educated women with at least some training in social work. I am indebted to all of them for their helpfulness and cooperation.

2. For example, the idea of interpretational relevance clarifies a significant change in the conception of the battered-child syndrome, from that of "correlation" in the hands of medical personnel (cf. Silverman 1974) to that of cause-and-effect in the hands of members of the "helping" professions (cf. Davoren 1974; Steele and Pollock 1974; Morris and Gould 1963). This ideational transformation is discussed in Handelman (1976a, 1977a).
3. In part, this attitude has given social scientists a formidable mandate to treat the products of investigation into "suspicion" as objective renditions, and to concentrate instead on caretakers, as if these persons were accurately depicted as "abusers" by official uses of such labels. Since such labels are simplified summaries of complex processes, all they denote is that an official interpretation was arrived at.
4. The removal of a minor is termed "apprehension"; and a child may be apprehended for ten days without a court order. Policemen accompany a caseworker when resistance or violence are feared. Neither the Newfoundland Child Welfare Act, 1972, nor division directives, suggest how a caseworker is to identify an abused or neglected child.
5. There are four types of decisions in such hearings: disallowal of the petition, an order for the supervision of the household, temporary wardship, usually for a period of one year, or permanent wardship. In practice, a court order is not required for supervision, but this may be requested if the family is recalcitrant.
6. Of thirty-eight instances of suspected abuse/neglect which I examined, only two might be said to involve middle-class families: one in terms of salaried earnings, and the other in terms of capital resources.
7. Elsewhere (Handelman 1976a), I argue that only when child-workers perceive that they are obtaining the "cooperation" of offending caretakers, can they move from the punitive to

the rehabilitative phases of a case. The more strongly parents are pressed, the more likely is it that "cooperation" will begin to feature in their behavior. Temporary wardship is the strongest of available routine pressures.

8. In contrast to their own role of concern for the whole family unit, caseworkers often saw that of senior officials as self-protective, at times at the expense of clients. Speaking of one senior official, a caseworker exclaimed: "We write our reports and he always passes the buck back, because he never makes any fucking decisions." The Wills' caseworker added: "They always write, 'Continue to supervise, continue to supervise.' What does that mean, 'Has anyone been bashing you around lately, Johnny?' What it means is that we're covered in case anything happens. They can always say that our workers have been following the case." See, for example, Handelman (1976a).
9. Even the Wills' caseworker succumbed, at times, to the reification of "suspicion". Some months into the case, she stated: "She is coping very well with her son. In fact, she tries so hard and protests so much that she does not mind at all the work and trouble and never complains, that I feel sometimes that she has some guilt feelings about the past."
10. On occasion, landlords will report "suspicion" of abuse or neglect to control their tenants or boarders. In addition, relatives, neighbors, and acquaintances, will use such reports to settle scores. Childworkers admit to their awareness of such motivations; but since a report is treated as "objective", the intentions of reporters frequently are not considered relevant to the investigation, unless a series of reports from the same source are perceived as unfounded.
11. Child-workers state that they are only doing their job by responding to reports of suspicion. Although this aspect of their work is constituted in this way, it owes its validity to a wider system of unequal access to basic resources.

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