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Thinking boxes, behavioural boys and the politics of love: 'Doing' post-qualitative social work research

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Abstract:	<p>Post-humanist theories and feminist new materialism are a growing feature of social work scholarship. It is timely to explore how these theories inform qualitative social work research approaches. Drawing on post-qualitative methodology and Barad's concept and method of diffraction, in this article we engage in a performative re-analysis of an account of school social work practice with a group of boys with behavioural concerns. We illuminate the interplay of neurological and behaviourist ways of knowing boys and social workers' expertise and their linkages with the materiality of the place and space of the school-based group programme. Moving beyond merely representing these material-discursive happenings, this paper affirms new social worker identities and behavioural boys' subjectivities which emerge within the entangled relations with nonhuman, material objects and things in schools. Doing post-qualitative inquiry, co-configures us as researchers actively involved in knowledge generation as we seek to make differences that matter in social work practice. Diffraction not only offers methods to engage with the material-discursive interface of social work knowledge practices, but also an ethical methodology for researchers to do justice in our engagement with research data.</p>

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Introduction

Social work scholarship is increasingly engaging with concepts from posthumanism and feminist new materialism. Posthumanist theories of the subject are a departure from the unified, conscious and rational subject found in humanism to a relational ontology where humans are understood as co-constituted in entangled relations with one another and a whole range of subject and objects. For feminist new materialism, life is decentred from humanity and nature is configured as an active force – “an agent in its own terms, a realm of multiple inter- and intra-active cultures” (Alaimo and Hekman, 2008:12). This scholarly work shares a common interest in extending the ontological basis of social work (Bell, 2012), addressing the limitations of humanism (Bozalek and Pease, 2020) and constituting social work as relational, entangled and indeterminate enactments within human and non-human processes (Webb, 2020). Bozalek (2016) articulates a framework of social work ethics positioning ethical agency not as an individual moral act undertaken by practitioners but as an interaction between human and nonhuman entities that only come into being through these relationships. Most recently in the text, “Post-anthropogenic Social Work”, Bozalek and Pease (2020) outline critical posthumanism as bringing together epistemology (theories of knowing), ontology (being and becoming) and ethics, emphasising these entangled relations are imperative in reimagining the kind of social work needed in contemporary times. We take up these ethico-onto-epistemological considerations to demonstrate what post-humanism and feminist new materialism offers to social work research.

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3 The configuration of critical posthumanism and feminist new materialism in qualitative research
4 attends to the meaning and materiality of data and its 'not-yet' (becoming). This alternate
5 methodological approach, referred to as post-qualitative inquiry (St. Pierre, 2014) or "thinking with
6 theory" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012), or "minor inquiry" (Mazzei, 2014), critiques the conventional
7 qualitative methodology for being "entrenched in liberal humanist identity-work of centering and
8 stabilising the subject" (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012: 19). St. Pierre (2018) argues post-humanism and
9 feminist new materialism are incompatible with conventional qualitative methodology "because of
10 their very different descriptions of human beings, language, discourse, power, agency, resistance,
11 freedom, and so on" (603). She contends given conventional qualitative research's focus on lived
12 experience and giving voice to human beings, it is grounded in humanistic, Cartesian concepts,
13 favouring the hierarchical binaries of mind/body, human/nature, and knower/known. Post-qualitative
14 approaches question the self-evidence of conventional humanistic qualitative methodology
15 knowledge creation practices (both interpretivist and critical traditions) that seek to represent reality
16 through formal and systematic processes. As Mol (2002) argues, there are multiple modes of
17 existence, shaped by a range of non-intentional elements including people, words, systems and things
18 such as paperwork, rooms, buildings but in research analysis these heterogeneous elements can either
19 be highlighted or left in the background (25- 26). From this vantage, research methods are active
20 interferences and researchers' practices are political - they shape the conditions of possibility (Bacchi,
21 2012). The researcher is not outside the research but rather entangled in the process from which new
22 knowledge is produced (Barraclough, 2018). Post-qualitative inquiry focuses on ontological
23 knowledge-making processes, engaging with the texture, contradictions, tensions, entangled
24 relations of data which includes bodies, objects, non-human entities, spaces and places (Bozalek and
25 Zembylas, 2017).

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57 In this paper, we undertake a post-qualitative re-analysis of research data from an inquiry into school
58 social work practice in Canterbury, New Zealand (see Tudor, 2018, 2019) to see what new insights,
59 relations and practices we can bring about. We deploy Barad's (2014) concept and method of
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3 diffraction, which attends to difference as an affirmative, ethical practice in which patterns of meaning
4 and materiality are re-worked to make new patterns of understanding (187). As we discuss diffraction
5 enables an affirmative means to return to the material-discursive complexity of the data, offering a
6 responsive and responsible methodology to produce difference in social work research.
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15 **Diffraction as concept and method**

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19 Concepts, such as diffraction, are understood in a philosophical sense as acts of thought (Deleuze and
20 Guattari, 1994) or as “practices that reorient thinking, undo the theory/practice binary, and open
21 inquiry to new possibilities” (Lenz Taguchi and St. Pierre, 2017: 643). Concepts are active, experimental
22 and creative with research inquiry centred around what a concept can *do* rather than what it
23 represents or means. Diffraction, as we take it up here, emerged from the work of Haraway (1994), a
24 feminist science studies scholar, who argues that while critical theory has been influential in the
25 unmasking of the structures that constitute the world (e.g. patriarchy, capitalism, racism, classism), it
26 does not go far enough toward making a difference and affirming that the world can be otherwise.
27 Within the critical tradition, reflexivity has been fruitfully employed in questioning how knowledge is
28 produced, how power relations influence the formation of knowledge and how subjugated
29 standpoints constitute accurate accounts of knowledge (Bozalek and Zembylas, 2017, 119). Haraway
30 (2000), however, eschews reflexivity for its emphasis on replication and sameness which she regards
31 as a reductionist way of thinking. She proposes diffraction as different kind of critical consciousness;
32 an alternate methodological concept to enable new patterns of difference and heterogeneity to
33 emerge through interference rather than as separation and lack (Haraway, 1997).
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54 Furthering Haraway’s project of engaging in diffractive research practices of interference, Barad
55 (2007) develops the concept of diffraction as method in her framework of agential realism. Drawing
56 on classical and quantum physics, along with critical theory and philosophy, the concept of diffraction
57 can be described as a pattern produced through the effects of difference and interference, such as
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3 waves created by a large rock emerging in the sea or the rainbow pattern of light observed on a
4 compact disc. Patterns of difference are created through multiple interacting and interfering objects.
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7 Turning to diffraction as a research method enables us to map these diffraction patterns, or
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10 entanglements, in order to “highlight, exhibit, and make evident the entangled structure of the
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12 changing and contingent ontology of the world (Barad, 2007: 73). That is, researchers are not separate
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14 from the knowledge they participate in creating. Such a process of knowledge creation in our research
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16 practices emerges through “a direct material engagement, a practice of intra-acting with the world
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18 as part of the world in its dynamic material reconfiguring” (Barad, 2007: 379).
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23 This concept of intra-action among components is central to engaging in a diffractive methodology
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25 and derives from the very onto-epistemology Barad puts forward about the world. Intra-action stands
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27 in contrast to the usual ‘interaction’, which occurs when elements in contact with each other have
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29 pre-existing boundaries and maintain a level of independence. With/in intra-action elements are
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31 inseparable and only emerge as ‘things’ through their connections. Thinking in terms of intra-action
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33 means giving up on cause-and-effect explanations, human – non-human dichotomies and notions of
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35 agency as fixed and belonging to individuals. “All designated “things” are constantly changing,
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37 exchanging, and diffracting, blending, mutating, influencing, and working inseparably” in an ongoing,
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39 dynamic, material reconfiguring of the world (Hickey-Moody, 2020: 725). Mapping these intra-acting
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41 forces, as well as the entangled patterns they produce, becomes the focus of a diffractive
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43 methodology. In this paper, we take up intra-action to re-analyse a moment that emerged from a
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45 children’s’ group programme. Working with interview data, theoretical concepts, and our researcher
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47 selves we seek to affirm some vital moments of relationality within the complex entanglement of
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49 social workers, children, school furniture and places.
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57 Taking up diffraction requires attention to fine detail in order to make often invisible structures and
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59 forces intelligible in new ways and to imagine, disturb and intervene in order that other possible
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realities can be made to matter (Lenz Taguchi, 2012). Diffraction as method is a boundary-drawing

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3 practice, inviting us to attend to what may have been excluded, but what may come to matter in
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5 different ways in an ongoing production of new knowing in social work practice and research. In this
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7 way, we take up the diffractive idea of working along affirmative rather than, primarily, critical lines.
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12 For both Haraway and Barad, ethics and justice are central to both the concept and method of
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14 diffraction. Barad states “(t)he yearning for justice, a yearning larger than any individual or set of
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16 individuals, is the driving force behind this work...” (2007: xi). Haraway talks about having an ethico-
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18 political commitment to making a difference, having a desire to go beyond deconstruction and
19
20 criticality toward a reconfiguring in the research stories that we tell, in ways that might make different,
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22 and particular, kinds of worlds and knowledges come alive, ones that are power sensitive, not
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24 pluralistic. For Barad, this means rethinking how and what differences comes to matter, in order that
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26 we might responsibly and responsively engage in the ongoing work of the re-opening, unsettling and
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28 re-configuring “*of what might yet be, of what was, and what comes to be*” (italics in the original, Barad,
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30 2010: 264). This is an ethics of responsibility for the cuts we make, and stories we tell, in our research
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32 practices. Choosing to enact a diffractive analysis in research, thus, does not merely involve exposing
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34 hierarchical power relations, dominant truth claims and subjectifying practices but attending closely
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36 to moments of difference in the data to affirm new social and material relations that would otherwise
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38 be unimaginable.
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48 **Re-turning to the data**

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51 We return to a particular piece of data from qualitative research, which sought to gain insight into
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53 school social work practice following two major earthquakes in Canterbury New Zealand (see Tudor,
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55 2019; 2018). School social work emerged in New Zealand in the 1990s as a government-funded
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57 initiative to assist children and families in schools situated in low socioeconomic areas (Ministry of
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59 Social Development, 2015). In the aftermath of the earthquakes, the provision of school social work
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was extended in earthquake-affected schools as support for children and their families “considered

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3 high need, high risk and high priority” (New Zealand Red Cross, 2014: 14). These needs were defined
4
5 in terms of social and economic disadvantage as well as the psychological and emotional impacts of
6
7 the earthquakes. The assemblage of this research is constituted by an entanglement of material and
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9 discursive components including (but not limited to) school social work, children’s subjectivities,
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11 notions of vulnerability, schools, poverty conditions and the earthquakes.
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17 Twelve school social workers were interviewed in the larger study and all of these participants had
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19 been working in Christchurch schools for a minimum of six months following the earthquakes.
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21 Recruitment occurred through the first author (Tudor) providing a number of presentations about the
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23 research in Christchurch agencies that employed school-based social workers. Those school social
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25 workers who were interested became research participants when they signed and returned the
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27 consent form by mail.
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33 In selecting a moment in the data to focus on, we took heed from MacLure’s (2010) advice to choose
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35 a moment that seems to glow – an example that has intensity, which holds our attention. We
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37 choose an account from one participant, Vivienne (pseudonym), a school social worker working in a
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39 school situated in a low socio-economic area characterised by a high proportion of low income
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41 households and poor quality housing. In the interview with Vivienne she expresses she sees herself
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43 as a different kind of school professional to teachers, focussing on the holistic dimensions of
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45 children’s development rather than just their academic achievement (Tudor 2018). To illustrate
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47 this, she makes reference to a group that she implemented with another social worker. The group
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49 came about in response to a request school staff had made of Vivienne to work with a group of boys
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51 who had been misbehaving. The aim of the group was for the boys to reflect on their own decision-
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53 making and manage their relationships with others. In our analysis we focus on a moment where
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55 Vivienne affectionately describes an interaction with a boy participant, she refers to as ‘little man’
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57 who discusses his use of his brain to respond to managing his emotions. We selected this moment
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59 because of its affective intensity but also its ‘incompleteness’- the openness of meanings and
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3 subjectivities for the 'little man', his peers and Vivienne of becoming different from boys with
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5 behavioural problems and social workers with professional authority.
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10 In the initial analysis of the moment (see Tudor 2018, 2019), Foucault's concept of biopolitics was
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12 critically deployed. Biopolitics is a productive and positive form of power that takes life as its object,
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14 seeking to extend, optimise and maximise it (Foucault, 1978). The initial analysis focussed on how the
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16 boy and his peers were encouraged, guided and educated to improve their ability to identify and
17
18 appropriately manage their feelings. However, in putting Barad's (2007) concept of diffraction to work
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20 in this (re)analysis we seek to go beyond critique - to explore the affirmative potential of the practice
21
22 moment. Specifically we consider: What new knowledge might be produced in re-turning to this
23
24 moment? Are there other ways of understanding the production of knowledge in this moment? How
25
26 can the changing flow of the power relations in the encounter disrupt identity-forming binaries
27
28 between child and adult, client and social worker, learner and educator, novice and expert, the
29
30 behavioural and the good? What can an appreciation of materiality bring to this analysis? How might
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32 boys and school social workers become different(ly) with attention to matter and discourse? How do
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34 we as researchers co-constitute these emergent possibilities?
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44 **Experimenting with diffraction**

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47 The moment:

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49 *Okay. Group work. Six boys. Chaos, just like, ohhh, this is not working, but it*
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51 *was kind of, this is with (name of other social worker). And the other social*
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53 *worker and I were like, "okay, this is not looking too good." But anyway, so*
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55 *we're struggling along, we were talking - I don't know, I think we were talking*
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57 *a little bit about - I don't know what we were talking about. And this little man*
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59 *that I was talking to you about before, said to me, "you know, what about your*
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mingle?" Cos we were talking about managing our emotions. He said, "you
<http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/QSW>

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3 *know, what about your mingle?" What's 'do you mean your amygdala?' "Yeah,*
4 *that's right! That's the word." He said, "you know, it's in here somewhere." And*
5 *I said, "yes and I actually think mingle's a great way to describe it." And he said,*
6 *"yeah, well what you do is you put your emotions in your mingle and then you*
7 *use your thinking box to process it." And I think I might have actually said to*
8 *him, "I love you" or something. And that's again a bit of a key where - and he*
9 *said, "yeah I learnt that in another school I went to." So I thought right, so this*
10 *kid gets the concept, he just can't do it. And I must go back to him and say to*
11 *him you've actually learnt how to do it. You're actually doing it now. And it was*
12 *this wonderful moment of that key into that group dynamic. You know, little*
13 *boys climbing over the furniture and just you know.*
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30 In what follows we diffractively engage with 'knots' of entangled meaning, affect and matter
31 produced in this moment. Carpentier (2017) theorizes the concept of the knot as entangled
32 interactions between the material-discursive in a non-hierarchical ontology. We present three knots,
33 analysed on the basis that they enabled us to disrupt the discursive expressions of subjectivities and
34 power relations represented in the moment. We sought to break open the identities of boys as
35 (mis)behavioural and social workers as therapeutic experts through attending to their differences
36 and making new connections. With the first knot, we map the concepts of the "mingle" and
37 "thinking box" to explore how they have become extracted from neuro-science and connected to
38 other concepts to address the problem of boys' misbehaviour in post-earthquake schools. In taking
39 up diffraction, we seek to go beyond the limits of critique to affirm alternate subjectivities within the
40 category of behavioural boys. We explore the data as material-discursive intra-actions, attending to
41 the little man's practices of emotional knowing as a relational process with his brain functioning, and
42 find new insights from neuroscience that affirm different becomings. In the second knot, we
43 engage with the materiality of the space - the room and furniture in intra-action with the other boys
44 in the encounter and their processes of becoming. Finally, with the third knot, we attend to
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3 Vivienne's expression of love as a power relation produced in the research moment. We explore the
4 conditions of possibility this force opens up as a process of becoming social worker. In presenting
5 the results of our diffractive analysis we have intentionally repeated aspects of the research moment
6 among the different knots to enable a re-reading of the data that encourages a "proliferation of
7 thought" (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012: 24).
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17 We were drawn to the moment of data in multiple ways - as educators and as a social worker
18 (Tudor) and educational psychologist and counsellor (Barraclough) with histories of working with
19 'misbehaving boys' and as mothers of boys who think, learn and move differently. However, we do
20 not attempt in this paper to reflexively reveal more and more about ourselves as researchers. Just
21 as the research participants are always immersed in a process of becoming, our subjectivities are
22 indeterminate. We are intra-actively produced in tandem with the boys and Vivienne in a process in
23 which we seek to displace and re-inscribe power. Through diffraction, we sought to 're-install'
24 ourselves in an analytic process with an ethico-political commitment to think anew about social
25 work practice and tell different stories, stories which might make a difference.
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40 Knot 1: Re-thinking boys' agency with the mingle-thinking box

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42 The "*little man*" articulates knowledge of his emotions, which originate in his "*mingle*", identifying
43 how they are processed and managed through his "*thinking box*". This understanding of brain
44 functioning originates in neuro-biological studies, which traditionally describe cognition and emotion
45 as separate processes enacted by two different parts of the brain: the amygdala for emotion and the
46 prefrontal cortex for cognition (Salzman and Fusi, 2010). Interactions between the amygdala and
47 prefrontal cortex are understood as hierarchical in that the prefrontal cortex mediates emotional
48 influences on cognitive processes such as decision-making, as well as regulates emotion. Emotion,
49 which originates from the amygdala, colloquially referred to as the 'lizard brain', within this framework
50 is excluded from higher-level cognitive information-processing (Phelps, 2006). What becomes clear
51 when tracing this differentiation of human brain functioning is a binary with emotions facilitated by
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3 the amygdala at one pole, and thinking, led by the prefrontal cortex at the other. The latter is
4 privileged, constituting a Cartesian model of the rational, thinking subject where all “stimuli
5 emanating from the material world through bodily sight, taste, touch, etc., could always mislead the
6 mind” (Hamilton and Hamilton, 2015: 1178).
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14 The intra-action of the little man and his mingle-thinking box is entangled with his subjectivity as a boy
15 with behaviour concerns. As discussed, the concept of the amygdala-prefrontal cortex is assumed as
16 an internal process of the brain or intra-cranial function, which extends to the social context only in
17 terms of how the brain is affected by external relations (Lenz Taguchi, 2016: 218). This neuro-
18 knowledge has been taken up in schools, where children’s abilities to self-regulate their emotions is
19 considered to aid their academic competencies (Liew, 2012). Children’s misbehaviour is understood
20 as “impairments in self-regulation, or the ability to implement control over ones thoughts, emotions
21 and behaviours” (Gillespie et al., 2018: 243). For boys, this understanding is overlaid with
22 constructions of masculine identity, which positions emotion either as something that they repress or
23 as something that bursts out (McAllister et al., 2019: 258). The effects of this neuro-framework is that
24 it locates the source and treatment of emotional-behavioural problems within children. It aligns with
25 developmental knowledge, which assumes children are incomplete humans, in need of positive
26 guidance and instruction (Tudor, 2019). These concerns were intensified following the earthquakes
27 when there was an over-arching concern for children not being able to cope with the traumatic effects
28 of the earthquakes and a range of interventions, programmes and services (including school social
29 work) were introduced to protect their wellbeing.
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52 Through Barad’s (2007) theorising, we are aware that these kinds of normalising practices are not
53 manifest within the event of boys’ emotions, bodies and brains themselves but are only evident
54 through the practices of knowledge production. She also emphasises what comes to matter is never
55 completely settled, highlighting indeterminacy as a “dynamic of what has been constitutively
56 excluded re-turns” (Barad, 2014: 178). With this in mind, we re-turn to neuroscience and find that
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3 the amygdala plays a more significant role in mediating the role of emotion with cognitive processes.
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5 Of interest for this analysis is recent evidence that demonstrates the amygdala facilitates attention
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7 with emotion particularly in situations where there are limited attentional resources (Okon-Singer et
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9 al., 2015). Further, the amygdala has been shown to have a broad role in initial perception not just in
10
11 terms of emotional signals but also with cues that are more complex. It perceives facial expressions
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13 and body language as well as non-social stimuli, in which there is the tendency to attribute human
14
15 social motives and emotional reactions to inanimate objects (Okon-Singer et al., 2015). With these
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17 newer insights, we find less basis in neuroscience for emotion as interference or a barrier to thinking
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19 and learning than previously thought. Whilst cognition plays an important role in mediating
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21 emotional responses, a more nuanced, complex interactional model of the internal neuro-processes
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23 emerges, giving credence to the notion of emotion-as-learning.
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30 Adding emotion and the materialist function of the amygdala to the analysis enables us to re-attend
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32 to the moment when the little man spoke up. Within a new materialist framework, children's
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34 feelings and thinking are embodied actions - "an effect of connections and relations within and
35
36 between different bodies, affecting other bodies and being affected by them" (Bozalek and
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38 Zembylas, 2017: 118). This understanding disrupts the human-centred view that emotion is a
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40 response solely mediated by regions of the brain, or an achievement an individual makes consciously
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42 and for which they are responsible. It makes it possible to re-read the moment as an entangled mode
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44 of materialist becoming within which the little man and his mingle experience the emotional
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46 intensity in the space. There is "*chaos, just like, ohhh, this is not working*" and Vivienne is thinking
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48 "*okay, this is not looking too good.*" The facial expressions and bodily cues from Vivienne and the
49
50 other social worker may display their disappointment and apprehension. They had brought the boys
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52 to the room where they had set up the furniture and gone to lengths to develop the programme so
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54 that it was participatory. The boys are not attending to the learning, they are "*climbing over the*
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56 *furniture*". Vivienne and the other social worker keep "*struggling along*" and "*talking about*
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58 *managing our emotions*". The little man has a memory of having "*learnt that in another school*" and
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3 says “*what about your mingle?*” Vivienne and the other social worker are aided by the little man
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5 when he says the right thing at the right time. Vivienne experiences the little man as
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7 knowledgeable, saying: “*yes and I actually think mingle’s a great way to describe it.*” The little man’s
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9 agency is constituted within the material-discursive dynamic of the encounter such that the mingle
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11 produces an emotional learning response not just in him but also in Vivienne, who responds to him
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13 differently. The little man becomes, not someone to be managed, but, someone to be learned from
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15 – “a site of difference and becoming” (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012: 130) as child educator.
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21 Knot 2: The non/classroom as place of in/exclusion

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24 Further installing ourselves as researchers into this research moment, our own multiple subjectivities
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26 are called forth, we’re invited to consider how the boys’ bodies in movement opens up the capacity
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28 for thought, rather than equating it with misbehaviour and non-attentiveness. Vivienne describes
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30 “*group work. Six boys. Chaos, just like, ohhh, this is not working... You know, little boys climbing over*
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32 *the furniture and just you know*”, and it is in relation with this that she experiences “*this wonderful*
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34 *moment*” with the “*little man*”. We tune into this moment not in order to ask what it means, but rather
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36 what gets produced. Manning (2009) highlights the realization that bodies in movement tell different
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38 stories than a more linear, stable, still body. “Thought is never opposed to movement”, writes
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40 Manning (2009), and is certainly not contained in minds, rather thought is the body-becoming in
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42 motion, “thought moves a body” (6). Little boys’ bodies moving/climbing with furniture are ways of
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44 thinking and knowing, moving produces thought, is, in fact, thought in motion. In a non-linear, eternal
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46 returning of movement-becoming-thought and thought-becoming-movement, we are called to listen,
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48 value and attend to such differences.
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56 Thinking with diffraction invites a focus not only on human agency, but on non-human matter, such
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58 as objects and physical spaces, and their vibrancy in entanglements. The materiality of the room
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60 and the furniture co-constitute this moment of emergent difference. The school space in which the
group occurs is separate to the boys’ usual classroom where they spend most of their time. This non-

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3 classroom (intra-)acts as a peripheral place in the school that includes the 'behavioural boys' and
4 enables activities such as "*climbing over the furniture*" and saying what you think. Being immersed
5 in "*chaos*", the social workers are nevertheless "*struggling along...talking*", and seemingly remaining
6 open to what might yet, and indeed does, emerge. Not only a place in which the boys are separated
7 from their peers and grouped together on the basis of their misbehaviour, the non-classroom allows
8 for collective disorderly movement. The furniture too is significant in this emergent moment,
9 becoming co-extensive with the boys' thinking-learning-knowing-bodies, entangled with and
10 productive of becoming recognised as acceptable in this space. We consider this process in contrast
11 to the typical classroom, where *order* reigns and from which the boys have experienced exclusion
12 due to their *unruly* or *chaotic* behaviour, their ways of knowing-being in the world which have been
13 deemed inappropriate or problematic in the classroom. Knowing, learning and succeeding - being
14 recognised as successful - are equated with the order produced in relation with the traditional
15 classroom. Although in this encounter, the non-classroom, a site of exclusion for boys who cannot
16 conform to order, also produces inclusivity. The location, space and materiality of the non-
17 classroom, creates a place that welcomes the unruliness of bodies climbing on the furniture and
18 produces a moment of refuge for the boys who are known as problematic at the school. Classrooms
19 and furniture are not inert objects/spaces which humans act upon, rather, in an agential-realist
20 ontology, they are active material-discursive forces shaping and co-constituting the possibilities for
21 the boys' (and social workers') becoming, knowing and learning.
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48 One of the tasks of diffraction as a concept-method is to undo binaries. Thinking further with this
49 order/chaos binary, Manning (2015), in the context of classroom pedagogy, asks what happens when
50 we refuse the call to order. She suggests that instead we might "(l)earn to listen from the middle of
51 the many conversations. Connect in the rhythm. Think of it as a soundscape" (203). A process that
52 starts in the middle, she says, has much more difficulty identifying who is doing the learning or
53 teaching. It blurs such distinctions, including, in this context, those between climbing and listening,
54 knowledge and chatter, and chaos and learning. If we were to think of the entanglement of the boys'
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3 body-minds, climbing, furniture, social workers and the inclusive non-classroom as a soundscape and
4 connect in to the rhythm, refusing as they did, the call to order, different possibilities for knowing-
5 becoming different emerge. Manning (2015) invites us to “value what is in excess... the unknowable
6 as heard in the interstices of the uneasy soundscape” (204) and to resist the call to value what is given
7 only when we are called to order. Here, behaviour-boys’ body-minds, knowing and being, are given
8 value and new knowing emerges for boys and social workers with/in the uneasy, chaotic
9 land/soundscape of the non-classroom.
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21 Knot 3: Love, mutual recognition and politics

22 We now turn to examine Vivienne’s performative enactment within the encounter: “*And I think I*
23 *might have actually said to him, “I love you or something”*. In the initial analysis (see Tudor 2018;
24 2019), the focus was on Vivienne’s expression of love with the boy as part of a discursive practice
25 enacted within a caring mode of therapeutic governance. The emphasis was on the confessional,
26 truth-telling techniques imbued in the group processes and the caring social work response that
27 shaped the desires and actions of the little man to know himself as an autonomous, thinking subject.
28 Diffraction, however, shifts from recognition of the binaries of child/adult, client/social worker and
29 learner/teacher; it seeks to ‘unfix’ identities, opening them up “to the unknown and not knowing”
30 (Murriss and Bozalek, 2019: 1508). As Barad (2007) makes clear, “practices of knowing are specific
31 material engagements that participate in (re)configuring the world” (91).
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49 Watkins (2010) disputes the notion of teacher-student dialectic (which has relevance here given the
50 educational focus of the therapeutic group programme) as one of subjugation. She emphasises the
51 desire for recognition as a fundamental dynamic within the pedagogic relation, outlining it as mutual
52 process for student and teacher, realised as “affective transactions that at one and the same time
53 can cultivate the desire to learn and the desire to teach” (Watkins, 2010: 271). Adding the actual
54 content of the learning matters less than the “relationship between teacher and student (which
55 may not be an equal one but its success depends on mutuality, recognition by both parties that their
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3 intersubjective relation is integral to their sense of self" (Watkins, 2010: 273). Returning to the
4 moment of love, it is possible to re-think the affective transaction of recognition between the little
5 man and Vivienne. For whilst Vivienne is positioned in the room as a 'knowing expert', there is little
6 sense of her authority in the moment that preceded the expression of love: "*chaos, oohh just like*
7 *this isn't working*" and "*little boys climbing over the furniture*". As educators we insert ourselves
8 alongside Vivienne and attend to our own desire to engage students in learning, to facilitate
9 moments when they understand something we consider important. We sit in the room, the space
10 echoes with noise, we notice things are not going as planned and we "*keep struggling along*". We
11 encounter this little man in a way that indicates to ourselves and the others present that we are
12 guiding the process and can recognise his way of knowing his feelings and thoughts.
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27 We also begin to see how Vivienne may have talked to the boy with a sense of her perceived
28 position of difference in the school. Although Vivienne was co-facilitating the group with another
29 social worker, this practitioner was not based in the school. She was sole social worker in the
30 school. In schools, the expectation is that the social worker's role is to address problems adversely
31 affecting children's learning and academic achievement. These institutional demands interface with
32 neoliberal imperatives, which as Barraclough (2017) proposes, are recognisable affectively in the
33 bodies of professionals such as social workers as pressure - an "overwhelming sense of individual
34 responsibility" (295) for fixing children's problems. Vivienne locates the desire to educate the little
35 man as within herself: "*I must go back to him and say to him you've actually learnt how to do it*".
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37 Whilst absolving the school from responsibility, Vivienne also emphasises a loving desire to
38 recognise the child as a whole-being rather than solely through an academic or behavioural lens
39 (Tudor, 2018). According to hooks (2000) choosing to love is invoked by a "choice to connect-to find
40 ourselves in the other" and refusing to perceive difference as a threat (hooks, 2000: 93). Within this
41 encounter, where difference is marked on the brains and bodies of the boys and the professional
42 identities of social workers, within a non-classroom of inclusion-exclusion, love is enacted as a
43 political practice, enabling a different kind of onto-ethical mode of being-social worker. Vivienne
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3 becomes a warm, caring professional who does not pursue order and control but engages with
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5 children in their complex, spatialised and embodied knowledge practices.
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10 Discussion and conclusion

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14 In this paper, bringing together and reading insights between theoretical concepts, interview data,
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16 participant subjectivities and our researcher selves assists to illuminate some differences as they
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18 emerged (Barad, 2007). This process involved re-reading agency as dispersed, entangled, material and
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20 discursive configurations. And, instead of stepping back and critiquing the subjectifying effects of
21
22 normative knowledge and binaries of child/adult, client/social worker and learner/teacher, we
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24 immersed ourselves in the data to attend to some differentiated moments where the boys and social
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26 worker evolved “beyond the boundaries of the sets [they had] been distributed into” (Deleuze, as
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28 cited by Davies et al., 2013: 681). We note the worldliness of the boys’ knowledge practices in intra-
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30 action with the nuanced power dynamics and affective relations with each other, the adults (present
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32 and absent), and the materiality of the furniture, the room and the school. We affirmed some vital
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34 moments of relationality which signal children’s subjectivities and school social workers’ professional
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36 identities are inscribed but not defined by discursive practices of vulnerability, social order and
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38 therapeutic expertise. Diffraction enabled us to actively seek out instants of difference which
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40 expressed multiple, ambiguous, and incoherent meanings, power relations, desires, affects and
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42 subjectivities (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012: 19) and stimulate different lines of becoming. The little man
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44 and his brain processing the emotional and social cues in the moment, and the other boys climbing on
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46 the furniture in the room affirmed themselves as distinct from who they were before. So too for
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48 Vivienne experiencing love with the little man as he articulated his self-knowledge, she mutually
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50 recognised herself as competent and as a different kind of school professional. Diffractively examining
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52 accounts from social workers about their own practices helps to understand how they are working to
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54 flatten hierarchical power and disrupt normative accounts of children and themselves, and move
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56 towards alternate knowledge practices involving intra-actions in-between discursive
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58 conceptualisations of boys, dis/order, bodies, furniture, and places in schools. In this respect,
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60 <http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/QSW>

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3 diffraction cuts across the theory-practice divide which means, as Lenz-Taguchi (2009) proposes,
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5 “practice is already and simultaneously theoretical and material, and that theory is totally dependent
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7 on experiences and fantasies of lived material practices” (p. 21).
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12 The alternate lines of becoming, discussed in this paper, were configured in a process in which we as
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14 researchers re-engaged with a piece of conventional qualitative interview data. We do not reject
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16 the use of established qualitative methods. Indeed, this paper demonstrates how data gathered
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18 using qualitative methods and interpreted within a discourse analysis strategy can be re-imagined
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20 with posthumanist and feminist new materialist concepts. Thinking with post-theory can be used
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22 with larger chunks of data and data gathered from other qualitative collection methods. Although,
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24 to be clear, shifting qualitative inquiry to a post-frame cannot be achieved through relying on
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26 systematic thematic coding steps which reduce qualitative data to categories in an effort to establish
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28 clear narratives (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012, ix). Nor can it be taken up without disrupting the
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30 human-centred orientation of conventional, interpretivist qualitative research which seeks to
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32 represent the unambiguous human ‘voice’ of experience, excluding other forms of data. If social
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34 work research is to engage with the relational, entangled and indeterminate intra-actions of human
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36 and non-human processes of social change, then this should not be lost in qualitative practices
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38 which merely represent phenomena. Diffraction favours more opened-ended and incomplete
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40 material-discursive stories activated through ‘response-able’ knowledge practices in which we as
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42 researchers enact “our ability to respond, our responsibility, to help awaken, to breathe life into ever
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44 new possibilities for living justly” (Barad, 2007: x).
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52 This paper has offered some indeterminate possibilities which cut across normative accounts of what
53
54 it means to be boys and social workers in schools. However, we are cognisant that there are many
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56 lines for being or becoming other. Performing post-research is ‘plugging in’ with theory in order to
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58 make new connections (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, 19) - a process of doing, which actively intervenes
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60 with what can be done or known. We hope the diffractive analysis we have explicated will aid and

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3 join with other social work knowledge practices, producing new ways of encountering normativity and
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5 constituting alternate processes of becoming.
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