What do children think about their social worker? A Q-method study of Children's Services

Abstract

Understanding how children experience social work interventions is an important part of gauging whether what is provided is genuinely helpful. In this paper, we describe the findings from a research project using Q-method, aimed at understanding what children involved with statutory services think about their social workers and how they experience the time they spend together. Using a pre-existing practice framework, we explored skills including empathy, collaboration and purposefulness from the point of view of children and young people. The participants in our study (n=22) were insightful observers of social work practice, able to describe not only how they experienced time spent with their workers but also inferring differences in motivation and approach. In addition, workers who were described in similar terms by different young people were nevertheless experienced differently. This suggests not an archetypal 'good social worker' – instead, there are skills that are good for specific children at specific times within the context of specific relationships.

Introduction and background

The importance of listening to children and understanding their views is widely acknowledged within social work research and practice (Graham, Powell and Taylor, 2015). Yet engaging with children and young people in an effective and meaningful way is often far from straightforward (Cossar, Brandon and Jordan, 2016). In this study, we used Q-method (Brown, 1980) to explore how a mixed sample of children and young people with an allocated statutory social worker experience the time that they spend together.

Previous studies have explored what children and young people think about social work and what they want from their social workers. One key recurring theme is the importance of trust, which enables children and young people to voice their thoughts and feelings, and participate in decision-making (Schofield and Thoburn, 1996; Rees et al., 2010). Bell (2002) found that continuity was also important, with some children in care saying they were left feeling "*bereft, forgotten and confused*" (p. 5) when their long-term worker left. McLeod (2010) highlighted the importance of a positive and sustained relationship between child and worker, and how this promoted the child's sense of wellbeing. Similarly, Cossar, Brandon and Jordan (2016) found that children did not like it when their social worker appeared as 'a remote figure', preferring to have regular contact. All of these findings support the centrality and importance of the worker-child relationship.

Other studies have focused on the attributes of a 'good' social worker. Baldry and Kemmis (1998) found that children in care want their social worker to show a genuine interest in them, to listen, to be reliable and punctual, to do what they say, and to be open and honest. Mainey, Ellis and Lewis (2009) similarly found that children want social workers to be empathic, good at listening, warm, honest, informal but professional, interested, committed, respectful, reliable and willing to take action (see also Triseliotis et al., 1995; Butler and Williamson, 1994). The importance of emotional support has likewise been highlighted (Butler & Williamson 1994: 84; Munro 2001), while Aldgate and Statham (2001) found that children want to be treated as whole people, with workers taking an interest not just in their family but in all areas of their life. Mcleod (2010) produced a composite description of the characteristics identified as important by children and young people across a number of studies:

> "[Good social workers are] *accessible, trustworthy and reliable; s/he is sociable and listens; s/he offers effective practical and emotional support; perhaps most crucially, good social workers are fair, respect children as autonomous individuals and do not abuse their position of power"* (p. 778).

The social worker-child relationship

There has been less research on the relationship that social workers and children have, what it should be (as opposed to what children would like it to be). In a review of literature exploring child participation in social work, van Bijleveld et al. (2013) emphasised the importance of the relationship between children and social workers, from both the child's perspective, and the social worker's. However, they also noted how some social workers found it hard to develop good relationships with children, perhaps because of feeling unskilled or because of a wider working environment that made this more difficult (Archard and Skivenes, 2009).

In a recent study notable for its use of direct observation, Winter et al (2017) describe how social workers seek to engage with children and how children experience and understand their relationships with workers (p. 1438). As the authors explain:

> "*Some children and young people appeared to experience their social worker negatively as a threat, a stranger, an intruder, the enemy...on* [other] *occasions, the social worker was observed to be...a visitor, a friend and a source of support"* (pp. 1438 – 1439).

This extract illustrates the importance not only of asking children and young people what they want from their social workers but understanding how they experience them in practice.

Engaging children in social work practice.

Various studies have found that children are often not 'visible' enough (Ferguson, 2017), their voices and needs becoming overshadowed by those of adults (Winter, 2011; Munro, 2011). A recent report by Narey and Owers (2018) found that children in care can feel as if they are not included in major decisions about their lives (p.118). Mcleod (2006) argues that although 'listening to children' is universally accepted as good practice, it is a complex skill, varying in form and function depending on the needs of the child or young person, the nature of the encounter and the relationship between the child and the listener.

This is also an issue for social work research. The 'accessibility' of children, a focus on standardised measures, and the researcher-child relationship can make including children in research complicated, with older children and those in care more likely than younger children and those involved in child protection services to take part (La Valle, Payne and Jelicic, 2012, p. 2).

Although there is an increasing amount of literature that explores what makes a 'good' social worker, there is little research that engages children in evaluating whether the skills that make social work practice 'good' are actually being used. In wider social care research, there is a move towards not just descriptive accounts of practice, but evaluative research of its effectiveness. It is important therefore to find ways to meaningfully include the views and experiences of children and young people in this process.

Study aims and objectives

The aim of this study was to explore and understand how children and young people experience the time they spend with their social workers, and the skills that their workers use, not "what makes a good social worker" per se. We sought to link the child's experience with a specific framework of practice, rather than simply looking at individual experiences, which, while valuable, are difficult to interpret in relation to large scale change. The study forms part of a much larger action-research project between [our research centre] and an inner-London authority. This wider project is aimed at implementing a model of practice known as Motivational Social Work (MSW). MSW is predicated on collaborative working between practitioners and families, including young people and children, particularly in high-risk situations. The MSW model seeks to incorporate principles and skills from Motivational Interviewing, task-focused social work and trauma-informed practice (Forrester et al, 2018; Forrester et al, 2019).

As part of the wider project, social workers are routinely observed and audio recorded when meeting with families and young people. These recordings are analysed by a team of researchers using an established coding framework (Whittaker et al., 2017). The framework is based on MSW practice skills which fall into two categories:

1. Care and engagement skills (collaboration, autonomy and empathy);
2. Good authority skills (purposefulness, clarity about risk or need and child focus).

A seventh skill, evocation, relates to behaviour change and only applies in limited circumstances, for example, where substance misuse is a concern. We did not include evocation for this part of the study, as we felt in most instances social workers would not focus on asking young people to change their behaviour, rather they would seek to help the adults around the young people support them in different and more effective ways. This view was shared with practitioners that we consulted on the framework.

In this paper, we describe an attempt to explore with children and young people how they experience MSW skills (not including evocation) in relation to their worker. Our research questions were as follows:

(1) How do children and young people experience the time they spend with their social worker?
(2) Can children and young people's views be used to understand social work practice skills?

Methodology

To explore these questions, we used Q methodology (hereafter Q). The purpose of Q is to make explicit subjective viewpoints, including beliefs, views and feelings, about a given topic (Brown, 1980). Q involves the quantification of qualitative data (Shemmings, 2006) and offers a novel solution to the challenge of using a child-friendly research method while maintaining reliability and comparability. Q has been used successfully in this field before, for example, to explore how young people in care understand the concept of 'family' (Ellingsen, Shemmings and Størksen, 2011) and how social workers understand the use of attachment theory in practice (Anonymous, 2017). Participants are asked to sort a series of statements onto the grid according to how they see themselves (or someone else) in relation to each statement e.g. "I am sometimes afraid that my foster parents will let me go"; "My biological family thinks that I am more a part of their family than I think in relation to them" (Ellingsen, Shemmings and Størksen, 2011).

Factor analysis is then applied to these Q-sorts to reveal patterns of shared subjectivity or shared 'ways of thinking'. Thus, if two (or more) Q-sorts are similar, they will likely end up in the same factor. Q offers a way of understanding subjectivity without the need for verbal elaboration, which can make it particularly suitable for children and young people (Ellingsen, Størksen and Stephens, 2010).

Alongside Q, participants also completed a qualitative interview, both about their Q-sort, and their wider experience of their social worker.

Participants

Twenty-two children and young people took part in the study, recruited as part of the wider research project outlined above. Four of the participants lived at home with their birth families and were known to children's services because of concerns about their safety. Nine of the participants were in local authority care. The remaining nine young people were previously in care and were, at the time of the study, working with leaving care services. Eleven of the young people were male, and eleven were female. Five were white British, five of mixed heritage, four were black African, three were black British, one was black Caribbean and two white European (two of the participants did not give their ethnicity). Two of the children were aged 10 or under, two were aged between 11 and 13, nine were aged 14 to 17 and nine were young adults, aged 18 or over.

The statements

The first step of a Q study is to generate statements about the topic of interest (Paige and Morin, 2016). These can be generated from a range of sources, including relevant literature and interviews with experts (whether by experience, practice or education). From an initially large set (or concourse) of statements, a smaller set is selected for use in the study, with the aim of ensuring sufficient diversity to represent heterogeneous viewpoints.

In this study, we took a different approach, based on the existing model of MSW. We were interested not in the range of diverse ways in which children and young people might experience their social workers (important though this is), but specifically in how they experienced their worker in relation to this pre-existing framework of practice skills. The research team generated statements to represent examples of how each MSW skill might be experienced by children and young people in practice. For example, we identified behavioural indicators of empathy, such as "My social worker understands me" (Table 1). A sample of these statements were selected which represented the full breadth of the 'concourse' (encompassing all of the skills) while leaving us with the smallest number of statements possible (to allow for the method to be accessible to the whole age range of participants).

Category	MSW skill	Statements
Care and engagement	Collaboration	My social worker listens to me
		My social worker asks me what I want to happen
		My social worker is fun to spend time with
	Autonomy	My social worker tells me what to do
		My social worker helps me make decisions for myself
		My social worker always tells me the truth
	Empathy	My social worker spends time getting to know me

		My social worker understands me
Good authority	Purposefulness	My social worker tells me each time why they need to see me
		My social worker asks me the same questions every time we meet
		My social worker is helping my mum and dad or the adults who look after me
	Clarity about concerns	My social worker tells me what they are worried about
		My social worker tells me why they are working with me
	Child/young person focus	My social worker wants the best for me
		My social worker cares about me
		My social worker is helping make my life better

Table 1: Statements used in the study and how they relate to MSW skills

Procedure

The statements were presented on laminated cards and each participant was asked to sort them onto a grid in accordance with what they thought was 'more like' and 'less like' their social worker (Figure 1). As the statements were sorted, a researcher sat with the participant and prompted them to talk about why they were sorting the statements in particular ways.

Figure 1: The grid used for sorting the statements.

Analysis

Each sort was entered into PQMethod for analysis (Schmolck, 2002). In Q, the sorts are subjected to factor analysis, rather than individual items as in traditional quantitative research. The factors that emerge reveal how overlapping viewpoints can be grouped together. In this analysis, we extracted factors with at least an Eigen factor of one, onto which at least two Q-sorts were flagged, and which represented at least 2 participants.

The qualitative interviews were grouped based on the factor that they linked to, and thematically analysed with the factors as a framework for cross referencing and interpreting the responses in relation to the factors.

Strengths and Limitations

Our study has two main strengths and two main limitations. First, we used Q-method flexibly with younger and older children alike and from different parts of the social work system (e.g. child protection and children in care). This allowed us to consider whether certain characteristics, such as age, or part of the system, created a shared experience of social work. We used the same statements and method of sorting to enable children and young people of different ages to take part while producing comparable results, which allowed for the inclusion of groups that are sometimes excluded in standardised measures of practice, such as younger children, or children with disabilities. Second, we attempted to understand children and young people's experiences of their social worker based on a developing practice skills framework, rather than relying on our own interpretations. This is unusual, not in relation to social work practice more generally, but related to practice skills frameworks specifically. Our ultimate aim is to use the knowledge produced by children and young people to shape the content of the framework itself.

However, linking our statements to a pre-existing framework is a limitation of our approach because elements of the worker-child relationship will not be captured by our statements. One way of further understanding social work skills from the child's perspective would be to develop statements collaboratively with children and young people. A final limitation of the study is the small sample size, albeit one relatively typical for Q research. (Most Q-studies involve between twelve and forty people (Webler, Danielson, and Tuler, 2009)).

Ethics

Ethical approval was granted by our University ethics panel for the overall project outlined above. This approval included direct research with children and young people about potentially sensitive topics using a variety of methods. Social workers identified families to take part in the research, who were then given information sheets and consent forms by a member of the research team. For children and young people living at home, parental consent was obtained prior to contact with the child. Children were also given child-friendly information sheets and the chance to opt out or ask any questions before taking part. For children in care, consent was sought from the child's social worker, foster (or other) carer and, where possible, from birth parents. For young people aged over 16, consent was also sought directly. Where we have referred to individual children below, pseudonyms are used and some details have been removed or changed to maintain anonymity.

Our analysis resulted in four distinct factors on which at least two Q-sorts were significantly, positively associated with (labelled A to D), which together account for 61% of the variance, and eleven of our Q-sorts (out of twenty-two) loaded onto these factors. The other eleven Q-sorts were not significantly, positively loaded onto any of the four factors.

The correlation between factors was low (Table 2), indicating that they represent relatively distinct viewpoints. The factor loadings (numbered 1 to -1) indicate the degree to which each Q-sort correlates with each factor (Table 3). Sorts with significant loadings are marked with an 'X', which means that this sort (representing a participant) is mainly accounted for within the factor. Interpretation of the factors is based on the overall configuration of statements, as well as distinguishing statements that help differentiate between different sets of sorts (Table 4). In our analysis, only one factor had a distinguishing statement (indicated by an underlines number in Table 4). Within the factor descriptions we have presented some of the data from the point of view of a child or young person.

	Factor A	Factor B	Factor C	Factor D
Factor A	1.0000	-0.0083	0.1834	0.1426
Factor B	-0.0083	1.000	-0.0574	-0.1361
Factor C	0.1834	-0.0574	1.0000	0.3125
Factor D	0.1426	-0.1361	0.3125	1.0000

Table 2: Correlations between the four factors

Q sort	Factor A	Factor B	Factor C	Factor D
1	0.7548X	-0.1339	0.1274	0.1546
2	0.7133X	-0.1837	-0.0337	0.2518
3	-0.0082	0.1342	0.9127X	-0.0126
4	0.5890	-0.2703	0.4354	-0.0300
5	0.1919	0.0478	0.8602X	0.0879
6	-0.0962	0.9076X	-0.1412	-0.0378
7	0.4885	0.1741	0.3999	0.3536
8	0.5408	0.2666	0.1625	0.6135
9	0.3672	0.6043X	0.2376	0.0279
10	0.8396X	0.1588	-0.1398	-0.2114
11	0.8014X	0.1433	0.3995	0.0814
12	0.4531	0.3966	0.0233	0.0830
13	0.0323	0.1274	0.1016	-0.0060
14	0.0902	-0.1853	0.8420X	0.1973
15	0.3926	-0.6232	-0.1567	0.4833
16	0.0222	-0.1045	0.4103	0.7911X
17	0.0805	-0.0804	-0.0865	0.7339X
18	0.0109	0.4102	0.5821	0.4857
19	0.0219	-0.2773	0.2689	0.5155
20	0.5406	-0.1627	0.4909	0.1470
21	0.1898	-0.0228	-0.0167	0.1907
22	0.2422	-0.0134	0.3741	-0.3658
expl.var.	19%	11%	18%	13%
Eigen value	6.3349	2.9338	2.6892	1.9131

Table 3: Factor matrix with an 'X' indicating a defining sort (p<0.05)

No	Statement	Factor			
		A	B	C	D
1	My social worker spends time getting to know me	1	-2	-1	0
2	My social worker understands me	2	-1	-2	1
3	My social worker listens to me	0	0	1	3
4	My social worker asks me what I want to happen	0	3	0	2
5	My social worker tells me what to do	-1	1	-3	-3
6	My social worker helps me make decisions for myself	1	0	0	-1
7	My social worker tells me each time why they need to see me	-2	2	0	-1
8	My social worker asks me the same questions every time we meet	-2	<u>1</u>	-1	-2
9	My social worker wants the best for me	3	-1	3	-1
10	My social worker cares about me	2	0	1	2
11	My social worker tells me what they are worried about	0	1	0	-2
12	My social worker tells me why they are working with me	-1	2	-1	1
13	My social worker always tells me the truth	-1	-1	2	0
14	My social worker is fun to spend time with	1	-2	-2	0
15	My social worker is helping make my life better	1	0	2	-1
16	My social worker is helping my mum and dad / the adults who look after me	-3	-3	1	1

Table 4: Factor scores for each of the sixteen statements. Values underlined represent distinguishing statements for the specific factor at significance level $p<0.05$. There were no consensus statements.

<u>Factor interpretation</u>

Below we describe the main factors and our interpretation of them. To illustrate key aspects of each factor and how they were experienced by different participants we have also included quotes from the qualitative interviews.

Factor A: My social worker cares about me, but is a bit of a mystery

Our interpretation of this factor suggests that some workers are experienced by children and young people as being very caring, and even fun, although perhaps not purposeful in the work that they are doing. It is not always clear to the young person if they are being completely honest. The child perceives that the worker is acting in their interests, but the role of the worker may be confusing as there is little focus on the reasons for visits or involvement.

My social worker is quite fun (14: +1) and doesn't always focus on worries (11: 0). I know

they want the best for me and care about me a lot (9: +3; 10: +2). When we meet, my worker asks me different questions (8: -2) but doesn't usually tell me why they need to see me (7: -2) or tell what me what to do (5: -1). I'm not really sure why I need a social worker (12: -1) and sometimes, I think they might not be telling me the whole truth (13: -1). I'm not sure if they really listen to me very much (3: 0) or are interested in what I want to happen (4: 0) but I do think they understand me (2: +2; 1: +1) and they help make my life better (15: +1). They are definitely not working to help the adults in my life (16: -3).

Four children and young people positively and significantly loaded onto Factor A, which explains 19 per cent of the total variance. Two of the young people were involved with leaving care services, one an eighteen-year-old White British female and the other a twenty-year-old White European female. The other two young people were in care, one a fourteen-year-old Black African male and the other a sixteen-year-old male of mixed heritage.

From the accompanying interviews, we identified five comments that help to illustrate this interpretation. The first three highlight the fun nature of the relationship in particular, while the fourth is also quite positive, suggesting the worker respects the young person's wish not to discuss certain things. The fifth comment however reflects some confusion, suggesting the young person is unsure how her worker sees her or whether she believes what she says:

1. *"We usually meet and go somewhere, we talk issues and have 'bants', it's pretty casual when I talk to her"* (Josh, aged 16).

2. *"She's a great laugh, she comes down to my level"* (Josh, aged 16).

3. *"[She] doesn't ask me the same questions every time. That is why she is fun to be with, we have different conversations every time. This is why I enjoy it"* (Sindi, aged 20).

4. *"She doesn't tell me why she is working with me because she knows I know already. She actually never told me, someone else did. I've had three social workers. She tried telling me once but I said I don't like it, I've heard it"* (Aaden, aged 16).

5. *"I wouldn't lie to her but* [I think] *she might think I'm lying to her"* (Louise, aged 18).

Factor B: My social worker keeps me in the loop but asks me the same things over and over

Our interpretation of this factor suggests that some workers are experienced by children and young people as professional, and good at sharing information, while being less focused on helping and relationship-building. This factor had a distinguishing statement (my worker asks me the same questions every time we meet +1).

My social worker gives me lots of information. I know why they need to see me (7: +2), I know why I have a worker (12: +2) and I usually know what they are worried about (11: +1). They always ask me what I want to happen (4: +3) but sometimes tell me what to do as well (5: +1). They don't really help me make decisions for myself (6: 0). When they visit, they tend to ask me the same questions over and over (8: +1), and this can be pretty boring (14: -2). I'm not sure they listen to me (3: 0) and I get the impression they don't always tell me the whole truth (13: -1). I'm not sure they want the best for me (9: -1) or care about me (10: 0). They don't spend much time getting to know me (1: -2) and they don't understand me either (2: -1). I'm not really sure whether they are helping me or not (15: 0) and they're definitely not helping the adults around me (16: -3).

Two young people loaded positively and significantly onto Factor B, which explains 11 per cent of the total variance. Both were involved with leaving care services, one an eighteen-year-old White British male with learning difficulties and the other a nineteen-year-old White British female.

We identified four illustrative quotes for this factor from the accompanying interviews. The first two suggest a relatively positive or improving experience, the third comment is more mixed and the fourth suggests a somewhat negative experience:

1. *"I liked that they went over stuff"* (John, aged 18).

2. *"My worker has been getting better…he wouldn't answer his phone, he wouldn't be checking up on me, he wouldn't tell me the whole truth but definitely he's been getting better. He is coming to see me much more often and I'm happy about that"* (John, aged 18).

3. *"He tells me what he's worried about, but then he worries a lot. He seems like that in general, not just as a social worker. He's always worried about something"* (Sarah, aged 19).

4. *"I could have more support with decisions I am making about my own life… [My*

worker] *could help by finding the information I need. He should be researching it for himself...he needs to understand specifics like housing, and needs to be clued up"* (Sarah, aged 19).

Factor C: My social worker gets things done

Our interpretation of this factor suggests that some workers are experienced by children and young people as practically helpful, and making life better for them, but not especially warm and engaging.

> *My social worker is helping to make my life better (15: +2; 16: +1) and they obviously want the best for me and they seem to care about me (9: +3; 10: +1) but it is very serious when we meet (14: -2). Although they listen to me a bit (3: +1), they seem less interested in what I want to happen (4: 0). My worker never tells me what to do (5: -3) but I don't really think they help me make decisions for myself either (6: 0). My worker doesn't explain to me clearly why we're working together (12: -1), what they're worried about (11: 0) or why they need to see me (7: 0) but they do tell me the truth (13: +2). Although we talk about different things when we meet (8: -1), they don't spend time getting to know me (1: -1) and they don't understand me very well as a person (2: -2).*

Three children and young people loaded positively and significantly onto Factor C, which explains 18 per cent of the total variance. Two of the young people were involved with leaving care services, one a nineteen-year-old Black African woman with a young child of her own and the other an eighteen-year-old Black British man. The third was a fourteen-year old White British male teenager living at home with his parents and subject to a child protection plan.

The comments in relation to this factor are mixed, with the first two indicating a positive experience, the third and fourth being not clearly positive or negative, and the fifth more cautionary:

1. *"We covered everything she said we would cover in the beginning. She's agreeing to get the help I need, e.g support."* (Shantal, aged 18).

2. *"She lent me her charger, it helps with calling as I don't have credit...She helps with the practical things, she told me what I was entitled to from the start which I like...I know what I want to get out of a session. I tell people to be truthful and not sugar coat and* [just] *get to the point"* (Haley, aged 19).

3. *"We stick to business, we don't go out and have coffee. We have less time. Every time we see each other, it is a busy time"* (Haley, aged 19).

4. *"Don't just give sympathy. Young people want to hear that their life is going to change, not focus on their past"* (Shantal, aged 18).

5. *"I learnt the hard way - don't get too close to a social worker. She is good but we are not too close. I had one before, she got pregnant. They just leave"* (Haley, aged 19).

Factor D: My social worker listens to my views but I am not sure what they want to achieve

Our interpretation of this factor suggests that some workers are experienced by children and young people as being particularly good at listening, but it was unclear whether this always led to concrete actions that made a difference.

> *My social worker cares about my point of view. They're good at asking me what I want to happen (4: +2), and they spend a lot of time listening to what I have to say (3: +3), we talk about lots of different things (8: -2). They definitely don't tell me what to do (5: -3) but they don't help me make decisions for myself either (6: -1). They don't particularly spend time getting to know me (1: 0) but they understand me pretty well (2: +1). Although I don't think of them as fun, they're not boring either (14: 0). When we meet, they don't necessarily focus on why I need a social worker or why they are visiting me (7: -1) but they tell me why they are working with me (12: +1). I don't think of them as someone who worries about me (11: -2) it's hard to know if they always tell me the truth (13: 0). I don't really think of them as making my life better (15: -1) but they seem to be helping the adults in my life (16: +1). Overall, it's not clear that they want the best for me (9: -1) but I'd say they definitely care about me (10: +2).*

Three children and young people loaded positively and significantly onto Factor D, which explains 13 per cent of the total variance. Two of the young people were in care, an eleven-year-old Black Caribbean female as living in her first foster placement and a seventeen-year-old mixed heritage female in her second placement. The third was a fourteen-year old White British male teenager living at home with his parents and subject of a child in need plan.

Below are two illustrative quotes from the children and young people who loaded onto the factor. The first suggests the young person feels relatively autonomous in relation to their worker, while the second indicates a negative experience:

1. *"I don't let anyone tell me what to do. I do what I do because I do what I want to do for me. He has asked me to do stuff, but that is only because I agree. I wouldn't do it if I didn't want to"* (Harry, aged 15).

2. *"I don't know if she is telling me the truth when she talks to me. She could just be telling me a pack of lies"* (Kara, aged 11).

Discussion

How do children and young people experience the time they spend with their social worker?

As one might have predicted from the outset, children and young people have complex and varied experiences of their social workers. Rather than finding an archetypal 'good worker', we found instead that similar workers (in terms of their skills) could be experienced quite differently by different young people. For example, some children shared a view of their worker but felt differently about whether this was positive, negative or mixed. Sharing a subjective view of how a worker behaves does not mean the children or young people will share a view about whether this is helpful or not, or whether they might prefer a different approach. Some children had workers who they saw as caring and understanding – and felt this was a very good thing. Other children had workers who were better at listening and understanding than taking action – and felt this was not such a good thing. Often, children and young people were very insightful about why their worker might be behaving in certain ways. One young person said their worker always seemed worried, but this was because the worker was generally a worrisome-person (rather than being worried specifically about the young person). Another said their worker did not explain to them why they were in care but said this was 'ok' because she already knew why.

Children and young people were also conscious of the complex nature of their relationships. Factors A and B for example, indicate that children and young people are given certain information, but that it is not necessarily clear what social workers are trying achieve. While not giving information to some children may be the right course of action on some occasions, our findings indicate that they still have a sense of not being given the full picture. This implies that workers need to reflect on what their role is for the young person, what they are trying to achieve and how best to communicate this. Young people are more than capable of analysing the actions, skills and role of their worker, but without clear information and transparency, they may end up speculating in order to fill any gaps.

Can children and young people's views be used to understand social work practice skills?

Our findings also suggest that universal descriptions of good social work may end up masking important complexity, including the reality of how messy human relationships work in

practice. While there might be universal good skills, irrespective of context – including collaboration, empathy and reflective listening (Ross, 2011) – these skills are not simple tools to apply in practice. They need to be personalised and adapted to individuals and families, and for particular workers. Collaboration, for example, can take different forms. The statements that we identified in relation to collaboration refer to shared problem-solving and decision-making, as these seemed important elements in the literature. However, the types of decisions that young people are involved in will (rightly) vary depending on age, interest, ability and context. This does not mean that collaboration is unimportant, but it does suggest there is no one way of collaboration that works with everyone, all of the time.

With regard to communication skills, we found that children were able to understand different forms of listening, including the difference between a worker who listened but did not take action and a worker who listens with a genuine intention and desire to act. One child told us that their worker "*listens to me, they ask me different questions, but they don't understand me*" while another said, "*She knows what I like and dislike. She tries to avoid what I dislike and help with what I like. For example, in the meeting, she gave me this look which said "I know, I know"* [and] *I didn't have to say anything but she understood.*"

The implication is that workers need to be flexible in their approach, taking care to use their skills in different ways in different sessions – but without losing their sense of authenticity. Perhaps the ideal worker would have a 'core' style (with an associated skill set) while varying their approach to engage young people in different ways, being more or less playful, directive or task focussed, depending on the needs of the young person and the context in which they are working together.

Using Q gave a way to explore a child's subjective experience, but also quantify that experience with other similar experiences to typify social work practice, and allow social workers to better understand how the skills that they are using are experienced by different young people. Moreover, the method could be easily understood by all of the children in our sample, and many of those that took part reported that it was 'fun' to complete.

Conclusion

Before we started this study, we wondered whether children and young people, depending on their characteristics, might group together around particular factors. For example, might children in care share a similar view of their workers? Often, the debate about children and young people in social work implicitly or explicitly identifies children and young people as having a shared group identity (as teenagers, as children in care, as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, and so on). Yet in practice, although the sample was not large enough to explore correlations, we did not see a link between the factors and characteristics of the child such as nature of social work involvement, gender, ethnicity or age. This suggests that, rather that there

being an 'ideal' type of social worker for children, or even for groups of children, instead it may be more accurate to say that there are workers and approaches which are good for *some* children and young people at *certain points*, and others which are *good* at *different times*, for *different reasons*.

This paper highlights the possibility of exploring the nuanced reality of social work skills from the perspective of children and young people. Children and young people are very insightful observers of social work practice and are quick to notice the nuances of behaviour and approach. Q offers a way to meaningfully explore the views and experiences of children and young people when seeking to understand and develop social worker skills in practice.

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