information services
gwasanaethau gwybodaeth

How *not* to observe social workers in practice

Abstract

The home visit is central to the practice of contemporary child and family social work, yet we know comparatively little about what social workers use them for and how. Descriptions of practice and policies and procedures that overlook the emotional, physical and relational complexity of the home visit will inevitably miss something important about the social work role. More and more researchers are using observational methods to produce descriptions of home visit practices, while the Department for Education has been trialing observations as part of a national accreditation programme in England. Local authorities have for many years engaged in observations of students and newly qualified workers. However, none of these developments mean that observing social workers in practice and on a wider scale is straight-forward. This paper describes an attempt to introduce regular observations of social work practice in three inner London local authorities – and discusses how and why this attempt failed. By so doing, we hope to provide helpful lessons for others who may be thinking of using observations of practice more widely within their own authorities or as part of a research project.

Introduction

Student social workers are used to being observed in practice, as are many newly qualified social workers as part of their Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE). However, it is much less common for social workers beyond the ASYE to be observed in practice as an activity distinct from co-working. And yet, without understanding what social workers do in practice with families on a routine basis, we risk "*concealing the very nature of the job*" (Buckley, 2003, p. 202). In recent years, there has been a growing research interest in the home visit (Forrester et al, 2008; Nicholas, 2015; Gibson, 2016; Ruch et al, 2016) and an acknowledgement of how complicated it is for social workers to navigate the physical, emotional and relational contours of private family spaces (Ferguson, 2016; Warner, 2013).

Nevertheless, most social workers are not routinely observed in practice with families and undertaking such observations is far from straight-forward (Ruch, 2015). This paper describes a failed attempt to introduce widespread observations of practice in three

inner London authorities and highlights some important lessons that may, we hope, assist others who are thinking of trying something similar.

Outline of the project

In the past 3 years in England, the Department for Education has provided funding to many local authorities to develop innovative approaches to child and family social work (Donovan, 2016). As part of this project, three inner London authorities introduced a wide-scale model of systemic social work practice. Their aims included - creating a culture of systems thinking, greater coherence and confidence in the practice system and reducing numbers of re-referrals. To help achieve these aims, practice-based feedback loops were to be introduced across the three authorities, using regular observations of practice and formative feedback. These were to help practitioners to embed new ways of working and hone their systemic skills.

Census data for the three authorities suggests they are providing services to complex and dynamic client populations. Between the 2001 and 2011 censuses, two of the authorities saw population growth of 10.4 per cent and 21 per cent, while the third had – unusually – a stable population. In all three boroughs, around 15 per cent of the population were aged less than 15. All three boroughs are in the top ten most densely populated authority areas in England. Overall, the three boroughs between them account for nearly 20 per cent of 'short term residents' in London, defined as "*anyone born outside the UK who has stayed or intends to stay in the UK for a period of three months or more but less than twelve months*" (Office of National Statistics, 2011). At the time of their most recent Ofsted inspections, two of the authorities had referral rates per 10,000 children of 411 and 579 (which is relatively low) while the third had a referral rate of 830 (which is relatively high).

Between them, the three authorities identified a cohort of 24 coaches, senior, experienced practitioners and managers. As part of the support provided for these coaches, it was our intention to co-create a training programme, based on the delivery of actual observations and coaching sessions. Specifically, the aim was to have each coach undertake an initial observation and to use reflective learning groups to review the audio recordings together and discuss how best to provide feedback to the practitioner. Before expecting the coaches to complete their first observation, they were also provided with at least two introductory workshops on the principles and practicalities of the coaching role. In addition,

these coaches would interview family members following each observation to understand their subjective experience of the home visit and provide a further learning opportunity for the practitioner and the organization (see Figure 1).

<Insert figure 1 about here>

Senior managers were supportive of this model and the coaches met regularly to discuss their new roles and how best to organise and provide observations and feedback. And yet, from what was intended to be a conservative estimate of 288 observations during the first year (one observation per coach per month), by the end of the project, we had obtained only eight. The attempt to introduce regular observations of practice was a failure. But why?

<u>Why did the project fail?</u>

Observing social workers in practice means negotiating a complex set of ethical and practical demands. Nevertheless, it is possible to observe social workers in practice – as noted above, students and newly qualified social workers are regularly observed and several researchers have based their projects upon such a method (Forrester et al, 2008, Ferguson, 2016; Gibson, 2016). Perhaps one of the key differences for this project was the attempt to introduce observations not for a specific group of practitioners (students or newly qualified social workers) or for a specific project. Rather, the intention was to normalize the use of observations across three whole authorities and to use these observations as the basis for skills-based feedback and development. In principle, every social worker in the three authorities was 'eligible' for observation and coaching. Senior managers were clear that, because they wanted the coaching programme to be supportive rather than punitive, practitioners would be encouraged to take part but not mandated. To our knowledge, the introduction of such a widespread programme of observations has only been done once before, in another London authority (Authors Own, forthcoming). In these three authorities, difficulties started to emerge when the coaches began asking social workers to arrange the observations. These difficulties emerged in the first two months of the project and were never satisfactorily resolved. As it became increasingly clear that social workers were reluctant to be observed (and many of the coaches were reluctant to observe), we began to

meet regularly with groups of practitioners as well as the coaches, to talk about the project and see if we might understand and ameliorate their concerns. Although these attempts were ultimately unsuccessful, they were useful in revealing some of the reasons for our failure. These reasons can be grouped into three categories – concerns about the family, concerns about being observed and concerns about being the observer.

Concerns about the family

Social workers expressed their concern that families would not agree to being observed or, if they did, that the act of being observed would somehow disrupt their relationship with the family. Some social workers suggested it was unethical to ask a family to be observed because of the inherent power imbalance between statutory social workers and families. They felt families could feel under pressure to take part because of how a 'lack of engagement' might be interpreted by the service. Our position was that each family had the right to decide for themselves whether to take part in the observations and that it was inappropriate for the social worker to effectively take this decision on their behalf (by not asking them in the first place). Reflecting on these discussions, we felt at times that social workers were engaged in a form of beneficial paternalism, based on the social worker's desire to protect the family from the ill-effects of being observed or even of being asked. These arguments may reflect a belief that taking part in such programmes, whether for research or practice, has the potential only to do no harm to participants or to harm them but not to benefit them – for example, by giving the family a chance to provide feedback on the service they have received (Westlake and Forrester, 2016). Nevertheless, it is true that having a third person observing could alter the dynamics between social worker and family members, perhaps for the worse although perhaps in some cases for the better. For example, knowing they are to be observed, the social worker may prepare more carefully for the visit than might otherwise be the case.

Concerns about being observed

Social workers also expressed the view that home visits are only one part of their role – which is of course true. They pointed out that if a particular home visit does not go well, this is not necessarily indicative of poor practice more generally. Many of the social workers expressed anxiety about how the 'results' of their observations might be used and

whether senior managers saw them as a form of performance management. Some social workers asked whether doing poorly in an observation might result in capability or even disciplinary action. Other social workers felt that being observed in practice was patronizing, that although observations were useful for students and newly qualified social workers they were unnecessary for those with more experience. Some of the workers questioned what they had to learn from being observed.

Concerns about being the observer

As well as the reluctance of those who would be observed, and despite an initial sense of enthusiasm, several of the coaches expressed reservations as well. Some were worried about their position within the authority and felt uncomfortable giving feedback to peers and colleagues. Although some of the coaches were managers (and a small number were senior managers), approximately two-thirds of the group were practitioners being asked to observe other practitioners. Some felt that their own systemic skills were still in development and so they felt unsure about giving feedback to others. More generally, there appeared to be no clear consensus as to what 'good practice' might look like (or the variety of different ways it might look at different times). We debated at length the relationship between systemic social work skills, generic social work skills and the context in which the observation might be taking place. For example, you might observe a social worker displaying high levels of empathy and collaboration with a parent but without an informed knowledge of the context, how difficult would it be to know whether these skills were obscuring a clear-sighted view of risk to the child? Finally, several of the coaches felt that social workers were already observed in practice on a regular basis – accompanied by managers on home visits, co-working with colleagues or clinicians and meeting regularly with family members and other professionals. As such, they felt there was little need for a distinct and separate programme of observations.

<Insert table 1 about here>

Discussion

In recent years, researchers have become increasingly interested in observing what social workers do in practice. We, the authors, have been personally involved in several

projects which together have generated more than 500 observations and audio recordings of social work home visits. Other researchers, such as Ferguson (2016), have been similarly successful. The project described in this paper may represent something of an anomaly – an unsuccessful attempt to observe social workers in practice - and understanding why may offer useful lessons for others (Authors Own, 2017). Despite the failure of this project, we still believe in the value of observations and feedback for social workers not least because of the extensive literature demonstrating the limited impact of training on practice and the valuable role that on-the-job, skills-based coaching can have for practice development (Jones et al, 2016).

There are two main differences between this project and the others we have been involved in - the role of the person performing the observations and the purpose of the observations. In other projects, observations have been completed primarily by people external to the organization (a researcher). This difference seems to underpin many of the problems we encountered. While social workers are familiar with external inspection and internal auditing, outside of specific 'learning' roles – as a student or NQSW – they are often unused to being observed in practice, certainly as a distinctive activity with the aim of learning and development. In our experience, social workers were more reluctant to take part than families (in other projects, between 50 and 70% of families gave consent when asked). Being clear about the role of the observer and the purpose of and basis for the observations seems key. What authority and expertise does the observer have (both objectivity and subjectivity)? How does their role as observer relate to the individual being observed and to the wider organisation? To develop a culture in which practice-based feedback can be used as a reflective opportunity to promote learning and development, answering these questions would seem an important first step.

For social work students, the purpose of being observed is more clearly defined. In any event, students are usually mandated to take part in a programme of practice observations as a requirement of their course. This places them in a different position than the practitioners involved with this project. Nevertheless, there may be similarities between the anxieties of the coaches and the role of practice educator. Being in the observer role is not straight-forward. It can be hard for practice educators to offer critical feedback to students (Finch, 2014 and 2016). Bogo et al (2011) found that independent observers are more reliable (for the purposes of assessment) than observers who have a pre-existing

relationship with the student. This suggests that the arrangement of most social work courses, where the student is observed only by their practice educator, may not be the most helpful approach for learning and development.

Social workers also need to be supported in understanding the purpose of observations and the value of being observed. Allowing a researcher to observe you as part of a research project may be one thing. Being observed for learning and development evidently feels different for many. Developing a framework for practice observations with 'buy in' from those being observed is therefore an important step. This should include a description of which aspects of practice are being observed and an acknowledgement of and sensitivity about the context.

Introducing system-wide change within any complex organization requires staff 'buy in'. The observations described here were meant to be introduced as part of a much wider change programme and we encountered several times the idea of 'change fatigue' – having undergone significant changes already in philosophy, training and structure, the introduction of regular observations may also have been simply a step too-far and at the wrong time.

<Insert table 2 about here>

References

Author's Own (forthcoming)

Author's Own (2017)

Bogo, M., Regehr, C., Logie, C., Katz, E., Mylopoulos, M., & Regehr, G. (2011). Adapting objective structured clinical examinations to assess social work students' performance and reflections. *Journal of Social Work Education, 47*, 5-18.

Buckley, H. (2003). *Child Protection Work: Beyond the Rhetoric*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Donovan, T. (2016). Government to pump £200m into innovative children's social care projects. *Community Care*. Retrieved from

http://www.communitycare.co.uk/2016/04/04/government-pump-200m-innovative-childrens-social-care-projects/

Ferguson, H. (2016). Making home visits: Creativity and the embodied practices of home visiting in social work and child protection. *Qualitative Social Work*, doi: 10.1177/1473325016656751

Finch, J. (2014). Running with the Fox and Hunting with the Hounds: Social Work Tutors' Experiences of Managing Students Failing in Practice Learning Settings. *British Journal of Social Work*, *45*, 2124-2141.

Finch, J. (2016). Decision making and defences against anxiety – an ethnographic and practice-near study of practice assessment panels. *Journal of Social Work Practice,* doi: 10.1080/02650533.2016.1158156.

Forrester, D., Kershaw, S., Moss, H. & Hughes, L. (2008). Communication skills in child protection: how do social workers talk to parents? *Child and Family Social Work*, *13*, 41 – 51.

Gibson, M. (2016). Social worker or social administrator? Findings from a qualitative case study of a child protection social work team. *Child and Family Social Work*, doi**:** 10.1111/cfs.12335.

Jones, R., Woods, S. & Guillaume, Y. (2016). The effectiveness of workplace coaching: A meta-analysis of learning and performance outcomes from coaching. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, *89*, 249 – 277.

Nicholas, J. (2015). Why do home visits matter in child protection? *Community Care*. Retrieved from http://www.communitycare.co.uk/2015/09/02/home-visits-matter-child-protection/

Office of National Statistics. (2011). *2011 Census: Non-UK born short-term residents in England and Wales*. Retrieved from

https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/international/internationalmigration/articles/nonukbornshorttermresidentsinenglandandwales/2013-03-26

Ruch, G. (2015). Evidence scope regarding the use of practice observation methods as part of the assessment of social work practice. *Research in Practice*. Retrieved from https://www.rip.org.uk/download/280/RiPExecsummaryrepracticeobs.pdf

Ruch, G., Winter, K., Cree, V., Hallett, S., Morrison, F. & Hadfield, M. (2016). Making meaningful connections: using insights from social pedagogy in statutory child and family social work practice. *Child and Family Social Work*, doi**:** 10.1111/cfs.12321

McNicoll, A. (2016). Next steps for accreditation – what social workers need to know. *Community Care*. Retrieved from http://www.communitycare.co.uk/2016/07/12/next-steps-accreditation-social-workers-need-know/

Warner, J. (2013). Social work, class politics and risk in the moral panic over Baby P. *Health, Risk and Society*, *15*, 217 – 233.

Westlake, D. & Forrester, D. (2016). Adding Evidence to the Ethics Debate: Investigating Parents' Experiences of Their Participation in Research. *British Journal of Social Work*, *46*, 1537 – 1552.