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## Practice-near research: Exploring insights from different degrees of closeness

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# Practice near research

Exploring insights from different degrees of  
closeness

Winter, K., Hallett, S., Morrison, F., Cree, V., Ruch, G., Hatfield, M. &  
Holland, S.

# Aims

To report methodological issues from a practice-near study that spans the four nations of the United Kingdom;

To compare two forms of practice-near research and explore the different data forms and insights that arise from each method.

# Practice near methods

Ethnographic observations – office based observations, pre and post home visit interviews, home visit observations;

Video stimulated recall – social worker/child meeting recorded, play back to social worker/child to stimulate discussion and reflection.

# Project

ESRC – Talking and Listening to Children – 2013 – 2015 in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland;

3 phases:

- *Phase one* - office based (eight teams in total – 2 in each nation) to observe office dynamics and to accompany social workers on home visits
- *Phase two* – video stimulated recall
- *Phase three* – production of training and practice development materials in collaboration with local sites.

Research aims and objectives	Research questions
How social workers communicate with children in practice	How do social workers create/seize opportunities; how do they respond; how do they manage in different contexts?
Enable social workers and children to reflect on specific practice encounters, helping to identify barriers and the enablers	What are social workers' reflections; how do they manage tensions in role/theory and practice; how do children experience/understand their r/ship with SW; what are their reflections on the encounters identified strengths and weaknesses and indicators of success?
Identify how practice could be improved and develop resources to enable improvements to be realised	What is the impact of the environment; how does purpose shape interaction; what is the impact of inter-personal factors; how and in what ways could practice be improved?

# Practice near methods

‘Practice-near inquiry might be defined as the use of experience-near methods for practice-based or practice-relevant research. Such methods include ethnography, some forms of in-depth qualitative interviewing and observation, and the use of images and other sensory data in research’.

Froggett and Briggs (2012, p. 3 of 17)

# Practice near methods

## Conventional conceptualisation - research **on** practice

‘the systematic, detailed exploration of an area of specific interest in the domain of professional practice and the generation and dissemination of new knowledge arising from such studies. Methods include well-established qualitative research methods such as ethnography, semi-structured interviews and focus groups’.

## Innovative conceptualisation - research **in** practice

‘utilise practice approaches and interventions as research methods. This approach is characterised by a greater sense of immediacy and refers to the integration and application of new practice knowledge within the immediate research context and directly in the practice domain’.

Ruch (2013)



# Challenges of practice near research

If we want to ask what it might mean to get 'near' to practice then we might rephrase the question as 'what happens when we get close, emotionally or physically, to people?'

(Cooper, 2009, p. 432)

# Challenges of practice near research

The smell of the real;

Losing our minds;

The inevitability of personal change;

The discovery of complex particulars.

Cooper (2009, p. 432)

## An example from phase one – the arts and crafts box

SWA places the arts and crafts storage box on the floor, sits down on a **settee** (and I take a seat on the other settee that is facing the front window). She says from the settee, while Jessica and John are **sat on the floor** playing lego 'Right, boys and girls, can I interrupt you for one wee minute? Jack is standing in the doorway watching on. The children carry on playing with the lego not looking up or speaking.

*My thoughts: It might help if SWA got down on the floor, said hello and began to build a rapport before launching in to today's task (which is to establish how the children are feeling – this will form their feedback to the case conference) – Do the children have any idea what a case conference meeting is and what this particular meeting is about? Do they know why SWA even visits?*

# Example

SWA says 'Do you remember yesterday when I was at – [John is not looking up or talking – he is completely engrossed in sticking lego together to make a tall tower]

SWA says to John 'John, are you going to listen to me, no? Right, will I talk and you listen? We're getting thumbs up or are we getting thumbs down today? John, am I getting thumbs up or thumbs down? He's not playing with me at all today.

*Thoughts: Oh dear – this is not going well – do I intervene or watch? The first thing that might help is mirroring body position and object of interest – get down on the floor and begin by showing an interest in the lego. Should I do sit on the floor maybe? I don't at this point remembering my role as observer but feeling quite frustrated...I wonder if that's how the children feel too?*

# Example

SWA then says 'Right. Well, if I play with you for five minutes, then will you help me do a wee bit of colouring in? Let me say what I'm going to do. I'm going to do something that's going to annoy your dad. I'll get my stickers out'. At this point Jack asks 'What are you going to do? SWA says 'Pull out stickers [laughter]. SWA takes new packets of stickers from the storage box and begins to take off the covers.

Neither Jessica nor John engages in taking the stickers out of their covers. SWA does this alone bent forward from the settee she is sitting on.

*Thoughts: Cringe. I wonder what Jack (the father), who is still standing in the doorway, makes of this.*

# Example

SWA then says 'Right, we're going to play with the Lego first of all then. Is this going to be successful I wonder? [half talking to herself and half to me about the apparent non interest in stickers]

SWA tries again to engage the attention of the children in the stickers by saying 'Oh look, do you think that is a ghost or is that a plane? What would you say? What's that, John, is that a ghost or is that a plane? He's too busy building at the minute [as John continues to build the lego tower]

# Example

*Thoughts: I am going to change my position from the settee to the floor so that I am at the same level as the children.*

I change my position and John looks up at me and smiles. He holds out to me a red lego block and sticks it to the others he has collected. When he has done this he checks I am still watching and smiles again.

I say to John holding up the sticker 'What's this?' He says 'It's a plane'. I say back 'it's a plane'. **At this point SWA changes her position and joins me on the floor.** She says 'Is it a plane? Do you want to draw? Would you like to draw a picture?'

# Example

John says to SWA 'What's that?' pointing to glue sticks in the box. SWA says 'It's for big, big boys and girls who can't draw. Wee boys and girls like you can draw brilliant things. SWA gets out a new pack of brightly coloured A4 paper and says to the children 'What colour paper would you like, pink or blue?'

Jack has left the doorway and gone into the kitchen at the back of the house.

Jessica says 'Pink?' and SWA hands her a pink piece of paper.

SWA says to John 'And what about you, John? What paper would you like? Would you like pink or blue or orange?' John says 'Blue'. SWA says 'Blue? Good boy. Okay, there you go'.



# Another example

Alicia then turns to watch children's TV in the background. She is standing next to settee and doing some swaying. She laughs when she catches my eye. I wave to her. She gently laughs back. She then rolls her tongue at me. I roll my tongue back. She gets embarrassed. She climbs back onto settee and jumps up and down on the settee next to Anne.

*Thoughts: Alicia is making her own efforts to engage. She becomes shy when I respond by mirroring her facial gestures. I do wonder if I should sit and observe like a statue or respond to Alicia's efforts to engage with me. I decide on the latter because I think it might feel strange to Alicia if I don't respond to her efforts. It feels like we are developing our own conversation that is running parallel to the conversation between SWJ and Anne.*

# Reflections

‘I think the conventional view about sound research methodology is that it protects the research(er) from the distorting influence of his or her subjectivity and emotional responses; good practice-near research seems to me to depend upon subjectivity and emotional engagement with the object of research’.

Cooper (2009, p. 438)

# Reflections

I observe



I observe through lenses of professional, personal and practice wisdom



I observe : agency/rights of children; likeness of these with my own children; need for SW attunement



I observe an impasse, a way of addressing it and I act



I observe in acting researched/researcher boundaries blur – I reflect on reasons why/consequences



I observe through my lenses that not moral or ethical to stand by and do nothing



I observe the influence of self/subjectivity in, through the research process

# Reflections

‘By its very nature, this kind of close, shadowing ethnographic research cannot control, erase or avoid stepping into potentially compromising situations. The critical issue is for researchers to be clear about what constitutes ethical research behaviour, to reflect very hard on it on the spot and to have a repertoire of responses at the ready to respond appropriately to ethically important moments when they arise’

Ferguson (2014, p. 13 of 16)

# Examples from phase two

Plan for phase two

- Recruit
- Film
- Reflect

Reality of phase two – examples

- Access
- Recruitment
- Research process

# Reflections

Dislike of video (child and social worker)? Time required in the reflective process?

Surveillance?

Emotional labour – Hoschild (1983) *The Managed Heart* – social workers expected to manage their feelings in accordance with organisational norms, rules and guidelines. What are the officially sanctioned and acceptable norms regarding individuals' expression and regulation of emotion and what are the consequences of those efforts? Is social worker engagement in a reflective process the antithesis of this? Example from work of Cooper (2009)

Psycho –dynamic approaches - Ruch (2012, p. 1325) – the role of splitting and projection 'an individual or group separating off unbearable feelings and locating them in others in order for the individual or group to continue to function'.

# What for phase three?

Production materials and training that 'get to the heart' and that enhance opportunities for reflection and to understand the role of emotions

Materials that move beyond the DIY approach - 'this-is-how-you-do-it'

System change as well as individual change – 'without a well-developed level of contextual awareness that includes the physical, relational and emotional contexts of practice, the communications skills of practitioners will be impaired' (Ruch 2013, p. 2158)

Developing understanding of framework for successful communication

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