From Communication to Co-operation: Re-conceptualising Social Workers' Engagement with Children

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Abstract

Communicating and engaging with children is a foundational component of child care social work practice but all too frequently, in the wake of serious incidents, it is the focus of criticism. Drawing on findings from a large scale ESRC funded research project conducted in the four UK nations this paper explores, through a psychosocial analytic lens, how social workers anticipate, enact and reflect on their encounters with both children and their families. Close analysis of what social workers said about their practice alongside what they were observed to do in practice, revealed perceptions, patterns and processes of communication that firstly, minimise emotions and the complexity of the professional task, and secondly, overly privilege verbal interaction. An original re-conceptualisation of this professional task, from a communicative to a co-operative one, affords a space for social workers to develop more attuned communicative practices that include rituals, gestures and the minimal use of force. The theoretical insights and evidence-informed practice recommendations arising from this research have conceptual significance for the social work discipline and practical significance for the child care social work profession, across national and international contexts.

Key words: child care social work, communication, co-operation, psychosocial, dialogue

Introduction

On a daily basis social workers face the professional risks of having to balance being neither overly optimistic or pessimistic about a child's circumstances. Whilst over optimisim risks serious adverse practice outcomes, including the possible death of a child, an unduly pessimistic stance can lead to overly-intrusive interventions into family life, resulting in the potentially unnecessary removal of children from their birth families. A focus on the everyday context of social practice also highlights the complex interface between the internal, psychic and external, social and political worlds which social workers are required to navigate. Introducing these harsh 'realities' at the outset of this paper might appear somewhat alarmist. In light of the research findings reported in this paper we argue it is, nonetheless, necessary. Our aim is to ensure that the emotionally and intellectually challenging dimensions of social work practice that permeate social workers' everyday encounters with children and their families are foregrounded, named and addressed.

Between 2013-16 the ESRC funded Talking and Listening to Children (TLC) Research project gathered extensive and diverse data from local authority child care social work teams across the UK. The research explored how in their everyday encounters social workers communciate with children. Drawing on these data this paper explores how social workers anticipate, enact and

reflect on these everyday communicative encounters. Our interest lies particularly in the perceptions, patterns and processes of communication; how the practice of communicating with children is understood and enacted and what is required to improve its quality. The detailed psychosocial analysis of the data highlighted how social workers negotiate the challenging dynamics of everyday practice by minimizing the emotional impact of these encounters and by privileging verbal interaction. Building on these findings we explore how the application of the conceptual frames of co-operation and dialogical communication (Sennett, 2012) can inform the development of original and distinctive pathways for enhancing the quality of social workers' practice. The paper concludes by profiling some practical applications of co-operative, dialogical approaches in child care social work contexts that provide practitioners with new and transformative responses to the daily challenges they face.

The Social, Political and Professional Context of Communicative Practice

The social and political drivers
The repercussions of the history and development child care social work, to date, in the UK have made a significant impression on the shape and structure of contemporary child care social work pedagogy, practice and policy (Lefevre, 2015a and b; Munro, 2011; Social Work Taskforce, 2009).The history of social workers' communication with children and families in the UK in particular (Ferguson, 2011; Forrester et al, 2019), but also more widely (van Nijnatten, 2010), has been significantly influenced by high profile cases of child deaths and serious injuries that resulted in public inquiries and serious case reviews (Brandon et al, 2012; Featherstone et al, 2014; Reder and Duncan, 1993). Repeated recommendations from these reports have underlined the paucity of social workers' ability to understand children's experiences:

> *Throughout the studies there was a sense of disconnection from the children themselves; not paying attention to children's emotional development and not thinking about what it's like to be a child living in that family or beyond the school setting; seeing the disability not the child; and most powerfully holding back from knowing the child as a person (Brandon et al, 2012:7)*

Whilst not explicitly referring to communication skills, by definition understanding how a child experiences their everyday circumstances requires social workers to communicate with that child. Immediately the complexity of what communication with children comprises, beyond simply verbal exchange, is highlighted.

Alongside its history, other forces responsible for the contemporary configuration of social work practice derive from the wider social and political influences on social work and the rise of neo-liberalism and its concomitant, managerialism, particularly in the UK, United States, Australia and many European countries (Hingley-Jones and Ruch, 2017). In response to these pervasive trends, professional relationships with families have become, in recent times, overly bureaucratic and, in many instances, notably authoritarian in nature (Featherstone et al, 2014). Partnership working, a distinctive feature of the original 1989 Children Act in the UK, and a core element in the subsequent reiterations, remains a pivotal feature of practice. All too frequently,

however, it is experienced as an aspiration in the face of limited opportunity to establish genuine, authentic partnerships with children and families. Much of the recent interest in the quality and nature of child care social work has focused on social workers' relationships with parents, with particular attention being paid to the serious implications on parenting of the prevailing adverse and austere social and economic climate (Morris et al, 2017). This re-calibration of practice with a return to a more family-parent, as opposed to a child-centred focus, reflects the dynamics of the widely recognized 'child-adult pendulum' (Beckett, 1996; Featherstone et al, 2014). The challenge being faced is to prevent the pendulum swinging too far in either the direction of the child or the parent and for practitioners to maintain a balanced, non-polarised position that recognizes the needs and rights of all parties.

The imperative to maintain such a balanced perspective is located in a professional context where there is growing evidence that social workers are spending insufficient time *per se* in direct contact with both children and parents. According to a survey conducted by the British Association of Social Workers (https://www.basw.co.uk/media/news/2018/may/basw-england-launches-80-20-campaign)
on average 80% of social workers' time is spent at their desks and only 20% with children and families. Whilst causal correlations cannot be made, the co-incidence of this worrying work phenomenon with adverse statistics in relation to child care social work, for example, the significant increase in the number of children entering the care system (Care Crisis Review, 2018; Children's Commissioner, 2018), demands attention.

Professional developments in direct work with children
Within the wider context of the history of child care social work interest in how social workers communicate with children is by no means a new phenomenon (e.g. Aldgate and Simmonds, 1988; Winnicott, 1963). In the early 2000's a Social Care Institute for Excellence review of the current state of research into social workers' communication skills with children (Luckock et al, 2006) reported that the teaching of communication skills with children:

> 'has yet to be consolidated as a distinct and discrete topic in social work research or education. This means that few examples of effective practice can be identified.'

Subsequent publications (Lefevre 2015a and b, 2017; Winter, 2010) provide clear accounts of the continuing underdevelopment of social workers' communication skills with children and importantly provide a tri-partite, 'knowing-being-doing' pedagogic framework (Lefevre, 2015a and b) to structure how qualified and experienced social workers can enhance the quality of their interactions. It is only relatively recently that research has begun to make more visible the nature of everyday communicative encounters in practice. The TLC research informing this paper (W/Author own et al, 2017; W and C, 2015), along with Ferguson's (2009, 2014, 2016a and b) studies of home visits, are two major bodies of research that have begun to unlock and reveal this hidden professional world. In the case of the TLC project the findings have informed the development of an ecological model of communication (W/Authors own et al, 2017), as well as evidence-informed conceptual ideas that focus on specific aspects of encounters, including emotional labour (W/ Authors own et al, 2018), children's agency (M/Authors Own et

al, 2018) and social pedagogic practices (AA et al 2016). For Ferguson (2009, 2014, 2016a and b) the focus has been on the mobile practices and visceral experiences of everyday encounters and the risk, under such circumstances, of social workers losing sight of the child.

With the external world backdrop of contemporary practice firmly established we turn to how, through our research methodology, it has been possible to explore the interface of this external world with the internal worlds of social workers and the implications of these dynamics for social workers' communicative practices with children.

Adopting a psychosocial approach to analysis

A psychosocial analytic stance acknowledges that research is affect-ful (Clarke and Hoggett, 2009), unconscious dynamics infuse research relationships and both researcher and research participant are, to varying degrees, operating from defended positions (Hollway and Jefferson, 2012). Although the TLC project was not informed from the outset by a psychosocial methodology our experiences of data gathering in the field suggested it might be a fruitful analytic approach in light of observed, but unvoiced, interactions and dynamics. A distinctive feature of psychosocial analysis is the holistic perspective adopted towards the data which seeks to avoid the fragmentation and dislocation associated with more orthodox, thematic, qualitative analytic practices.

The research data was generated through a range of methods. Ethnographic observations of social work practice were undertaken in eight child care social work teams (two per national context) covering the whole spectrum of mainstream child care social work – duty and assessment, long term work with looked after children and children with disabilities. Social workers' meetings with children and parents, in a range of settings - homes, schools, offices, public spaces – were observed and recorded with fieldnotes. Finally, eighty two interviews with social workers before and after their meetings with children and parents were audio recorded and transcribed. From these data sources we were able to compile fifty eight 'full datasets' i.e. a pre- and post-encounter interview transcript and observation field notes

The demands of the psychosocial analytic method being adopted prohibited all fifty eight full encounters being analysed. To ensure the analytic process was feasible, trustworthy and proportionate, five 'full encounters' from each of the four national sites were purposively selected (twenty 'full encounters' in total). In the first instance four 'full datasets' from each of the four nation sites were selected, comprising 'full datasets' from each of the two teams involved in each national site, with some compiled earlier and some later in the fieldwork, thereby allowing for the development of the researcher's skills in data generation. The fifth case from the middle of the chronological sample for each site was analysed after the initial analysis of the first sixteen cases had been completed. The 'full datasets' comprised a diverse sample of children's circumstances, including a social worker observing a contact session of a mother with her 5 month old baby daughter, a statutory visit to a foster placement to meet with a girl with severe cerebral palsy, a home visit to a family where all four children (aged 8-15, with the youngest having severe autism) were on the child protection register and a post-school review meeting with a teenage boy with cerebral palsy and a chronic physical health condition. In some instances it was the first time the

social worker was meeting the child and family, in others they had known them for several months and multiple encounters had taken place. On the basis of this systematic purposive, sampling procedure there is no reason to suggest that the selected datasets were not composed of a cross-section of encounters representative of the complete dataset in this ethnographic phase of the project. By implication we are confident that the sample findings are representative of the project's complete dataset.

The psychosocial analytic process involved a first reading of each 'full dataset', which sought to establish an overall sense of the encounter, for example, by identifying patterns shaping how social workers began, continued and ended their pre- and post-encounter interviews. The second readings interrogated the data in more detail, particularly looking at the social workers' use of language in the transcripts. From these analyses a composite narrative began to emerge that comprised a set of professional behaviours or tropes, two of which are explored in this paper. Of note in this process was the importance of retaining an analytic awareness of social workers as whole individuals and the affective impact of their responses on the analytic process, whilst at the same time being able to recognise patterns of engagement that overlapped between individuals.

Professional Communicative Tropes

Close examination of the three data sources associated with each 'full dataset' revealed two overarching, but inter-related professional tropes – firstly, the minimisation of emotion and management of the professional task and, secondly, the privileging of verbal interaction.

Minimisation of emotion and management of the professional task
The language used by practitioners to outline their concern in pre-encounter interviews invariably appeared to understate the issue being explored and downplay the nature of the social work task. The use of 'hedging' words i.e. '*those words that pull us back from the edge, that keep us from laying out our emotions, actions or descriptions in full, unapologetic fashion'* (http://theeditorsblog.net/2010/11/18/hedge-words), underlined the apparent need of practitioners to understate the circumstances they were about to encounter and the complexity of the communicative task ahead of them. Tannen (1993, cited in Hyvarinen, 2008, p.456) identifies hedging words -*indeed, just, anyway, however* - as those words *'that flavour the relation between what was expected and what finally happened'*. Hedging words such as *'just', 'sort of'* and *'obviously'* for example, appeared on numerous occasions when social workers were setting out the purpose of their visit. '*I'm **just** going to check up on…', 'So it's a very **sort of**, it's a meeting with the only purpose is to catch up', 'It is easy'* and *'It's just a chat'*, are verbatim examples of phrases used by social workers to describe the communicative task in a range of situations, including initial child protection enquiries, statutory looked after children home visits and on-going duty assessments. In the context of a follow-up child protection home visit to a 5 year old boy the social worker described her visit as *'… not sort of a long, formal visit, it's just a chat with Danny[1]'.* In another instance the social worker, in response to the researcher asking what the home visit was about, outlined the concerns regarding a mother's alcohol issue and her reluctance to engage with

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[1] All names have been changed

Children's Services. She went on to describe the task as:

> *Yeah, just to try and get a handle on what's going on'…Mum hasn't engaged– OK mum has been referred to [name of service] but hasn't engaged and we would be looking for her to engage, plus I need to check her fridge.*

The references to the visit to Danny not being '*formal*' and the need '*to check the fridge*' appear to overlook the emotional dimensions of these encounters and turn the focus of the visits into a casual conversation about nothing in particular, or simply a routine practical activity. In Danny's case there was no reference to the children. Defined in these terms the tasks can be 'successfully' completed but do not constitute meaningful, communicative encounters and may allow social workers to 'legitimately' avoid them.

The psychosocial reading and analysis of the data, that avoided disaggregating it into fragmented themes, revealed telling professional perceptions and behavioural patterns. A stark contrast was noted, for example, between the opening 'hedging' remarks made in the pre-encounter interview and the more complicated picture that developed as the details of a child's circumstances were verbally outlined during the course of this interview. These complexities then visibly emerged during the observation of the encounter itself. For one social worker completing a child protection assessment with a family of four children, her ambivalence about her role was apparent in the oscillations in her pre-encounter interview between normalising the visit as a regular '*touching base*' affair, only to immediately increase, and simultaneously downplay, its complexity with the use of the words '*slight complication*':

> *So yeah it's just a regular weekly child protection visit to touch base with the family and to check in with the children. The slight complication is that the children are highly anxious about social work being involved so my interaction with them is quite a long visit because they basically think that they're being taken away no matter how much I've tried to explain that and [name of other social worker] has explained that. They somehow have it in their head that that's the case.*

The downplaying of the task to '*just a regular visit*' and the concern to '*a slight complication*' relating to the '*highly anxious*' children vividly illustrates what social workers are trying to reconcile, in the moment, to enable them to perform their job. Later in the interview the social worker refers to the same family's circumstances using dramatic phrases such as '*then she'll [the mother] lunge at you*' or references to hoping the situation would not '*kick off*' or '*get heated*' or '*very heated*'. This additional information helps to make sense of the ambivalence the social worker is experiencing and expressing through hedging terminology. For another social worker the idea that a mother's behaviour could affect her children prompted hedging words, such as '*probably*' and '*a wee bit*', perhaps protecting her (the worker) from having to recognise the emotional impact on the children and, by association, on her:

> *Yeah, I suppose it's probably sometimes frightening and a wee bit anxious for them, not knowing what way Mum is going to be.*

Another example arose with a social worker describing a regular statutory visit to a young girl (of note, her actual age is never stated) with learning disabilities living in foster care with whom she had been working for several months. The initial description of the visit referred to the focus being on *'just going to check on how she is in the placement and just generally catch up with her'.* When asked if there were any specific challenges involved with this visit the social worker's heavily 'hedged' reply is indicative of her hesitancy about how effective she can be in her role:

> *Yeah no, not really I mean because of obviously she's got global delay sometimes it's difficult to sort of, in a conversation with her, it's difficult to just check that she has understood what I've said because she's quite, she likes to please people and sometimes she'll say yes to everything even though its maybe not what she, you know, means but she just likes to agree with people.*

As she discussed further what her work involved it emerged that the social worker had difficulty communicating with the girl (who had limited speech) and lacked confidence in how much the girl understood of the conversation and the accuracy of her (the social worker's) understanding of the girl's responses. In addition, she spoke vehemently about how she found the girl's wish for physical closeness and her touchiness very off putting and difficult to manage:

> *…when I first started to meet with her she was very quite, she is a very touchy feely person anyway and she likes to sit quite close and sometimes like that can make me feel uncomfortable because I don't like people too close like she's got sort of no, if she likes someone she'll show you and if she doesn't like someone she also makes it quite clear. But if she likes you she likes to sit very close and just talk you know she's really really close and you're like this and she's got no awareness of like personal space at all. So sometimes that's a bit off-putting if I'm trying to talk to her and she's right next to me than I'll have to say to her '[Child] sit back a little bit', you know give me a bit of room to breathe.*

The transcript conveys a powerful, physical discomfort through the use of emphatic and graphic language. In a similar vein in two other instances social workers referred viserally to how their abhorrence to the smells in the homes (food in one case and cigarette smoke in another) curtailed the length of their visits and their ability to concentrate when undertaking them.

This pattern of an initial minimisation of the complexity of the encounter followed by the subsequence emergence of contradictory verbal (in interview comments) and visual (in fieldnotes) evidence powerfully highlights the complex dynamics at play when such encounters take place. Hedging, specifically, might be understood as serving a twofold purpose. Firstly, it reduces the unbearable thought that children might be distressed by the behaviour of others, notably their parents. Secondly, downplaying the effects of such behaviours the children helps to diminish the for the social worker the emotional impact of being involved with this family. Both perspectives have the effect of reducing, albeit superficially, the power of affect. Adopting an holistic and psychosocial approach to the data, which acknowledges the affective and cognitive dimensions of

the whole encounter, enabled us to access how social workers manage their capacity to *physically* tolerate the challenging contexts of encounters and, perhaps more significantly and less visibly, their *psychological and emotional* capacity too. The framing of the nature of the visits in this minimizing way could be understood as a defensive gesture. It is not an ideal practice response but is certainly less avoidant than not engaging in the encounters altogether, which is not unheard of, with 'missed visits' being one manifestation of such defensive practice.

Recognising the subjective nature of the analytic process an alternative interpretation of the social workers' behaviours and their use of hedging terminology could be a reflection of their lack of clarity about their professional role and the purpose of their encounters. This certainly was conveyed by their conduct and infact is not unrelated to the minimisation of emotions interpretation. Indeed both interpretations leads to a 'chicken and egg argument' highlighting the complexity of the phenomenon being researched: does the uncertainty about role and task lead to distanced and emotionally detached responses or does the emotional demanding nature of the work lead to uncertainty and ambivalence about role and task?

Privileging verbal interaction
Of the twenty cases that were subjected to close examination social workers predominantly communicated with the children using words. On a few occasions physical inter-actions, for example, touching an arm to say 'hello' to a 5 year old girl with limited verbal communication skills, were observed. Fifteen of the cases examined were with children over three years old. Of this subset of cases there were only three instances when social workers used communicative resources or activities in addition to words: one social worker undertaking a statutory home visit to a five old boy (Danny) joined him in a game of marbles that he was already playing; another visiting a six year old boy for the second time took LEGO with her, having remembered how much he had enjoyed playing with it in their first meeting; the third instance involved a social worker visiting a 13 year old boy with moderate learning difficulties and using a Talking Mat, a specific device for engaging with children with communication impairment. Apart from the second and third of these three instances there were no other examples of social workers having *prepared* activities to share with the children. When compared with the whole dataset the low percentage of social workers in the purposive sample using play materials to engage children mirrored the percentage of social workers in the dataset as a whole. This overall lack of evidence of child-centred engagement was notable given that play and other activities - in social pedagogical terms 'the common third' (Petrie, 2011) - are recognized as the primary medium, alongside talking, through which children of all ages communicate (Lefevre, 2018). Instead, as social workers' descriptions of the purpose of their visits conveyed, the emphasis was on solely verbal exchanges - *'just having a chat'* or *'catching up'*. What was observed and recorded on numerous occasions were social workers asking children sequences of questions, with little evidence of more sustained, child-centred and child-led conversations unfolding.

This finding came as a surprise given it is widely recognised that asking children a sequence of questions is an unattuned and generally ineffective response to their ways of communicating (Lefevre, 2018; O'Reilly and Dolan, 2016). Our psychosocial analysis suggests that not only was play a low priority for social workers when communicating with children but that the professional

expectation to communicate and engage with children was reduced, for largely unrecognized or unacknowledged unconscious reasons, to predominantly verbal interaction. An exception was a social worker who did recognize, and explicitly acknowledged, the reason for his resorting to a barrage of questions whilst visiting a 7 year old girl to ascertain her views to inform a child protection conference report:

> *…it's very harrowing and if I allowed it to do so it could wreck me emotionally I think, um I hide behind the questions I ask and I hope that the questions I asked were open-ended rather than closed questions but I can't remember...*

In most instances, it was not that there was a total absence of good enough communication with the child but that what was enacted and observed was not genuinely child-centred and generally appeared to be a one directional activity for the benefit of the social worker, as opposed to a reciprocal experience.

Organisational pressures also played a significant role in shaping how encounters unfolded in ways that emphasised the spoken/written word and minimized their emotional impact on the workers. One social worker reflecting on his encounter with a 12 year old girl, where he was tasked with completing a report in relation to her poor school attendance, captured something of the tension social workers experience between institutional drivers and child-centred approaches:

> *I kind of thought it all went relatively well. I don't like the sort of standardised, you kind of need to do it because I'm filling in a report and I hate having sort of like times where she's sitting not saying anything and I feel like I'm bringing in this environment of answer this question and what about this and what about that and I don't necessarily like that, I like the more sort of fluid sort of dialogue that happens you know and I quite like speaking to her saying ok well what could happen in that or you know it starts off thinking she starts talking because then it becomes more comfortable and she starts speaking about other sort of things. There's good and bad points with that and I thought it worked quite well there but sometimes I end up on a massive tangent and we end up talking about something completely you know.*

Navigating on a daily basis the line between what a child needs and what the organisation demands is a constant challenge and highlights the emotional labour of the work (KW and Author own et al,). Alongside the privileging of verbal interaction there was some evidence of attention being paid to non-verbal messages. It was unclear, however, how much weight or value the social workers placed on non-verbal communication.

Identifying the emotions, that are both explicitly acknowledged and minimised, and the hedging terminology used to describe professional encounters, raises urgent questions about how social work practice is adversely affected by practitioners' and managers' underlying understanding and conceptualization of the communicative task and pre-requisite skills required to accomplish it. Finding ways to re-conceptualise the communicative task might offer a generative way forward.

From communication to co-operation with children

On the basis of these research findings the current state of affairs in relation to social workers' communicative skills and practices with children suggests there is significant room for improvement. It would be disingenuous not to acknowledge, at this point, a strong inclination to keep quiet about these findings, on the grounds that they could be used to further pathologise social workers, holding individual practitioners responsible for poor practice, with a concomitant attack on their already depleted sense of professional identity and agency. Alternatively we could allow these findings to re-focus our attention away from individual practitioners, and instead focus on posing some fundamental questions about the nature of the communicative task; questions such as how is the social work communicative task with children understood, what is it intended to achieve and what does it require for it to be effectively performed? Adopting this approach creates the possibility for a new communicative space to open up. In this re-configured space social workers can take up a different professional stance and establish more meaningful relationships with children and their families. Re-configuring communication as co-operation and dialogue (Sennett, 2012) offers a creative, conceptual framework for structuring just such a space.

Developing co-operation and dialogue

In his book *Together: The Ritual, Pleasure and Politics of Co-operation* Sennett (2012) makes an important distinction between dialectical and dialogical communication. Dialectical communication is intent, usually through argument and persuasion, on finding a resolution based on common ground. In contrast a dialogical approach is more empathic, inclusive and exploratory, and leads to more co-operative, respectful relationships. It involves careful observation and listening, as much as talking. In the neo-liberal atmospheres surrounding contemporary social work practice communication is invariably aligned with a dialectical position – one that is linear, seeks a shared truth and requires an agreed outcome. As such communication, or perhaps more accurately information gathering, is narrowly conceived as assessing, evidence gathering and report writing, activities. These activities are closely identified with the completion of overarching statutory, safeguarding tasks. Communication is perceived (and practiced), largely, as a confrontational, one directional process, with its emotional content stripped out (Lees, 2017). Indeed much of our research data illustrates exactly this practice dynamic and driver in operation – social workers asking children a battery of questions in order to gather information. Whilst the questions may have been asked in a sensitive and dialogical manner, most of the time there was little evidence of a common ground having been created.

A pertinent observation from Sennett's work relates to the distinction between information sharing and communication. According to Sennett:

> *Information-sharing is an exercise in definition and precision, whereas communication is as much about what is left unsaid as said; communication mines the realms of suggestion and connotation.*

Recognition that Sennett notes communication is as much about what is <u>not</u> said as what is, offers

a highly pertinent observation in the context of communication with children involved with Children's Services. Crucially for Sennett (2012: 19) the end goal of dialogical communication is *understanding* rather than necessarily agreement:

> *Though no shared agreements may be reached, through the processes of exchange people may become aware of their own views and expand their understanding of one another.*

The significance of this insight for child care social work is not difficult to see and our research findings endorse it. Information gathering (in Sennett's context information sharing) is the social worker's imperative. Learning to hear and to observe the unsaid, moving beyond the preoccupation with verbal exchanges, are critical communication skills social workers need to develop. The emphasis on 'sticking to the facts' and 'avoiding opinions' can deter social workers exercising this skill (Forrester et al, 2019) . If they are able to remain curious, open to hypotheses and to their intuitive responses, while at the same time not being caught thoughtlessly or uncritically in their thrall (Cook, 2017), social workers' communication skills can grow. The reciprocity that is integral to dialogical conversations directly promotes co-operative engagement and reduces problematic power imbalances. This position of shared, co-operative agency '*looks at circumstances in the round to see the many sides of an issue or practice*' (Sennett, 2012:277). This shift from dialectically to dialogically driven conversations places the emphasis on communicative techniques and skills that have the potential to increase reciprocity and afford greater prominence to the agency of the child and the expertise of parents, both of whom will communicate through the 'not said' as much as the 'said'.

Rituals, gestures and the minimal use of force: Developing tangible co-operative practices

Building on Sennett's ideas a co-operative and dialogical approach to communication is characterised by specific behaviours. Choosing words carefully, using the subjunctive tense and being open and curious as opposed to insistent and argumentative are all behaviours Sennett (2012:211ff) recognises that encourage 'lightness in gesture and speech', prefer 'the nudge to the command' and promote dialogue. In social work parlance these characteristics can be readily aligned with the creation of communicative partnerships. These co-operative and dialogical behaviours are rooted in 'embodied social knowledge', comprised of *rituals* that develop embodied skills, *gestures* that embody informal social relations and *the minimal use of forceful responses* to resistance or difference (Sennett, 2012:211). In combination rituals, gestures and use of minimum force contribute to the creation of co-operative relationships.

For the ideas of co-operation and dialogue to meaningfully translate from Sennett's generic application to specifically social work contexts, where relationships are predominantly of an involuntary nature, requires careful consideration. This particular contextual feature need not invalidate co-operation and dialogue as fertile conceptual frameworks for social work communicative practices if it is aligned with paradoxical understandings of practice. A long recognized tension in statutory social work practice is the requirement to attend to both the caring and controlling dimensions of the professional task. To enable social workers to manage this practice tension they need to be alert, in contexts of uncertainty, to the risk of binary, polarised thinking taking hold (Brandon et al, 2012). Retaining an awareness of the need for a paradoxical mindset – the need to offer 'caring control' or 'controlled care'- will help social workers to reconcile

dialogically, empathically and with minimal force, seemingly incompatible behaviours, such as co-operation and coercion, and hold them in a lively, creative tension. There is a danger that the apparent hesitancy or reluctance to intervene in a clear and authoritative manner that the social workers exhibit could be attributed to their wishing to use minimal force, whereas it is more accurately attributable to workers' lack of clarity in their role and uncertainty about the task. To apply Sennett's concept in this way is to misunderstand it. In contrast by acknowledging social workers' responsibility to be simultaneously both caring and controlling from the outset makes transparent a deliberate commitment to the 'minimal use of force' (Sennett, 2012: 211) and in so doing increases the potential for a co-operative relationship to develop.

One tangible and foundational way of introducing co-operative and dialogical skills and mindsets, as opposed to 'communication tools', involves social workers devising explicit ways to explain to children (and adults) what their role is and, if engaging with a child over time, developing some regular practices - rituals and gestures - that help the child understand what social work interventions involve. Sennett (2012) describes how co-operation develops in children through repetition and rehearsal, through ritual and gesture, allowing understanding of, and trust in, others to grow. A simple example is the use of a homemade book compiled by the social worker which introduces them to the child, outlines their role and has space for the child to fill in information about themselves. The book can be kept in a folder, especially purchased for the child, that the social worker retains but brings every time they and the child meet. Subsequent 'work' completed with the child, for example, an eco- or lifemap, can be stored in the folder which the social worker looks after on the child's behalf for the duration of their relationship. At the point of closure the child can decide who keeps the folder.

Ritual and repetition have enormous significance for children of all ages. The sense of continuity and reliability that they evoke in children (and adults) whose lives are often chaotic and unpredictable cannot be over-estimated and help to position the social worker as a 'reliable presence' (Winnicott,1986) for the child, and indeed their family, and can be enacted over shorter or longer time periods. Repeated use of the same play resources with a child over time serves to reinforce a co-operative relationship. Such practices appear straightforward and obvious but were not evident in our research. In some instances social workers openly acknowledged they did not think the children knew why they were meeting them. Simple rituals and gestures were overlooked. These repetitious practices, in turn, also benefit social workers who become more grounded and able to withstand the inevitable unpredictability that comes with social work encounters. Repetition and familiarity must not however, lead to complacency. As the TLC ecological model of communication (W/Author et al, 2017) has highlighted each child and their circumstances and each social worker and their circumstances are unique and this uniqueness must be respected at all times. Care needs to be taken that rituals and gestures do not get reduced down to 'tools', running the risk of responses becoming perfunctory and functional, instead of considered and bespoke.

Dialogical approaches place a particular emphasis on 'being as doing', with less weight placed on verbal exchanges. Given one of our key research findings highlighted the exact opposite with verbal interactions dominating encounters, there is clearly scope to promote a more inclusive

understanding of the core elements of communication. A flexible, but structured, application of a co-operative model of dialogical engagement, using rituals and gestures, enables social workers to move beyond a pre-occupation with verbal interactions and to develop their skills in observation and understanding through being, as much as doing. Developing greater awareness of non-verbal communication and enhancing practitioners' observational skills are two core strategies for developing a co-operative approach. Awareness of the challenges of communicating with children and their families in this way renders visible the invisible; the complex, skilled interactions that invariably are under appreciated, taken for granted, not recorded, acknowledged or talked about.

Research limitations

Whilst carefully and credibly constructed we were aware that our analytic strategy could invite criticism given some shortcomings in our data. For example, the digital interview transcripts were verbatim but we did not have access to the accompanying audio recordings and the observation data were fieldnotes and not verbatim recordings. In addition interpretative analytic approaches run the risk of 'wild analysis' (Hoggett, 2006:191) but the adoption of a systematic process to undertake the analysis, as was the case for this project, reduced the risk of this occurring. However, other interpretations are always possible, as we acknowledge in relation to the use of hedging terminology. The recognition of patterns of behaviour across practitioners also offers reassurance about the accuracy of the analytic process.

Concluding thoughts: Evidencing and sustaining co-operative practice

This paper has drawn on empirical research evidence that highlights shortcomings in social workers' communicative practices with children. Given this new knowledge about the existing state of affairs it is imperative that alternative ways of conceptualising communication are explored. Sennett's model offers just such an opportunity. In the interests of the social work discipline and profession's growth and maturation it is incumbent on the research community to undertake further empirical research to substantiate the potential of the co-operative communicative approaches, outlined in this paper, to positively impact (or not) on social workers' engagement with children. The core commonalities of child care social work which require practitioners to communicate and engage with children experiencing distress and vulnerability suggest that the findings from our research are of international relevance and applicability even in contexts where welfare structures and systems are differently configured.

All that has been may appear to place disproportionate responsibility on individual social workers to manage for themselves the daily communicative challenges they encounter. By stressing that for social workers to establish co-operative and dialogical practice requires an openness to the difficulties and distresses children and families experience, in turn recognizes that practitioners must also have access to similarly co-operative and dialogically configured supportive spaces. It is the responsibility of social workers' supervisors and their organisations to ensure such provision is made available. Going further, the discovery through the research of social work employers' failure to take responsibility for providing their practitioners with appropriate resources to undertake their work with children must be made public and used as leverage to address this serious organisational shortcoming. It is unethical and unjust for social workers to be expected to undertake challenging work without appropriate resources for the task in hand. Until these organisational failings are

resolved the risk of poor communicative encounters persisting remains high and opportunities for individual social workers to develop and realise their full communicative potential will be significantly compromised.

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