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# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of figures</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meet the author</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Seen, but not seen and not heard</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Approaches to observation</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Developing skills in observation</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Using observation in practice</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Making sense of what we observe: theory helps!</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concluding thoughts</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figures

2.1 Selected theoretical developments 26
2.2 Example of time sampling 30
2.3 32
2.4 33
2.5 Example of target child observation 35
3.1 Sample observation agreement 52
3.2 Rules of evidence: Family Court proceedings 59
4.1 Common errors when observing 80
Meet the author

Gill Butler has worked in a variety of statutory and voluntary social work settings, that have included practising as a children’s guardian for many years while also teaching at the University of Chichester in the social work department. She was head of social studies programmes and as deputy dean had particular responsibility for learning and teaching. Her practice and thinking is also informed by her role as a trustee of a domestic abuse charity, as well as her personal experience as a mother and grandmother.
Over the years I have been very fortunate to work with many wonderful colleagues and students at Chichester, from whom I have learned a great deal. Special thanks go to former students and practitioners who generously gave their time to share their experiences of using observation: Anita Ademah, Emily Beirne, Jenny Brennan, Jo Green, Lissi Holstad, Sian Kemp, Sara Lee, Donna Price, Sue Ridgewell, Hazel Rumsey and Mohammed Taha, and to Chris Smethurst who facilitated this process.

The children who have been observed are at the heart of this book, so I am greatly indebted to them. My thanks to all the children and their carers for allowing us a window into their lives.

While writing this book I have received much encouragement, support and helpful feedback. I would especially like to thank Pia Parry, Jean Duncombe and Jan Spafford, who has also contributed excerpts from her observations, for reading and commenting on earlier drafts of the book.

Lastly, but by no means least, my thanks to John for his endless support and encouragement and to my children, particularly Sophie, for her help and skills in drawing diagrams, and my grandchildren, for being themselves!
This book in part reflects my own journey in learning about observation. When I was first invited to participate in an observation seminar group facilitated by Gillian Miles of the Tavistock Institute in the late 1990s, it triggered an anxiety in me that perhaps there was rather more to observing than I had hitherto realised, despite being an experienced social work practitioner. The ensuing opportunity to observe a young child over the course of a year resulted in a unique and rich learning experience for me, where I came to realise that, rather like the fictional Dr Watson who accompanied Sherlock Holmes, I could see, but on a daily basis I failed to observe, or understand, much of what was actually in front of me (Conan Doyle 1892). My observation was perhaps more akin to a surface glance to confirm or disprove my expectations about what I expected to see, based on my own experience. I might know some of what was happening, but had I understood the meaning of what I was observing? How carefully had I focused my attention on the finer details of what was there, but was not on my immediate agenda? Did I think about what I was seeing, or was my thinking driven by what I had been told?

The journey to improving my observation skills has at times been difficult, but the benefits have made this very worthwhile. Greater awareness of what I bring as a practitioner has resulted in a deeper understanding of what is entailed in observation and greater confidence that I am a little closer to understanding the experience of children and young people. Maintaining effective observational skills is an ongoing struggle and the battle can easily be lost when life is difficult, personally or professionally.

Since undertaking my training in observation I have taught observation skills to multi-disciplinary groups at post-qualifying levels and to final-year social work students on the undergraduate qualifying social work programme. This book is intended to be a helpful, practical source of support for any student or practitioner seeking to develop their skills or deepen their understanding of observation. While it has primarily been written for those working in social work, it may also be useful for a wider range of professionals working with children and their families, hence the term ‘practitioners’ will be used predominantly throughout the
book. It is designed to enable you to explore your understanding of the concept of observation and to enrich your skills as an observer. It will attempt to explain the unique insights that holistic, experiential observation can bring to practice with children and families and will help you to further develop your own approach to incorporating observation in your practice. It also provides a range of examples from practitioners who use observation in their practice.

**Observation**

The importance of observation in work with children and families is highlighted in the *Framework for the Assessment of Children and Families* (Department of Health 2000), and the Munro review called for practitioners to have ‘well developed skills in observation’ (Munro 2011: 6.35). These documents reflect an assumption that observation is a core component of social work practice, and that practitioners need to be good at it. However, there has been very little discussion of what is meant by observation, of how to go about it, of how skills in observing can be developed, or of what factors might make observing challenging. Neither are there any explicit references to observation within the HCPC *Standards of Proficiency* (Health Care Professions Council 2012) or the College of Social Work *Professional Capabilities Framework* (College of Social Work 2012), although the ability to observe is arguably implicit in the following capabilities.

- **Gather information so as to inform judgement for interventions in more complex situations and in response to challenge.**
- **Use assessment procedures discerningly so as to inform judgement.**
- **Develop a range of interventions; use them effectively and evaluate them in practice.**
- **Expand intervention methods and demonstrate expertise in one or more specific methods relevant to your setting.**

Skills in observation will also support the development of skills required in the critical reflection and analysis domain.

- **Routinely and efficiently apply critical reflection and analysis to increasingly complex cases.**
- **Ensure hypotheses and options are reviewed to inform judgement and decision-making.**
- **Start to provide professional opinion.**

It might be assumed that there is so little discussion about observation because it is not needed, perhaps it is a straightforward task; we all know how to do it well and share a common understanding of what is entailed. However, it is far from straightforward. Social conventions are designed to diminish conflict and thus tend to obscure truth and accuracy, so what we are presented with may consciously or unconsciously be designed to conceal the truth (Hammond 2007: 38). According to Hammond this is a defence mechanism that exists in all human interactions, but will clearly be to the fore when working with children and families in contexts where there is uncertainty and anxiety about the consequences of the truth being revealed. What practitioners are being told may often be at odds with what they are
observing, and what is being selected for a practitioner to observe may have been carefully set up or selected by those whom we are observing.

It is also apparent that both on an individual and on a professional level there are different understandings of and approaches to observation which will be explored, enabling you to develop approaches to observation that are best suited to the context and needs of the work that you are engaged in.

**What do we mean by observation?**

Most of us carry an unconscious understanding of what it means to observe, shaped by our personal experiences and culture, which may then be modified by our professional frame of reference as well as the purpose of the observation. Hence, before we begin any observation we have a ‘view’ about what we will see, which then informs what we observe.

Within this book ‘child observation’ refers to the process of giving our total, focused attention to the child, to learning about the child, directly from them, from their appearance, their movements, the sounds they make, their expressions, their actions, their play, their use of language, their interaction with others, their interaction with their environment and every facet of their lived experience. This approach is best described as experiential and holistic. It entails developing a way of being open, staying with uncertainty and making use of our reactions and responses as part of a process of developing an understanding of what we are seeing (Trowell and Miles 1991). It is a tool and a stepping stone to reaching an understanding of the child’s lived experience.

The word ‘children’ will be used to includes babies and young people up to the age of 18 (in accordance with the definitions used in The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the Children Act 1989). However there will be some specific references to babies and young people when there are issues that need to be considered separately. The main focus in the book is on observing children, as without a clear focus, they can so easily slip from our sight. However, children also need to be understood within the wider social and economic context that they live in, so it is also important to observe their interactions with their families, carers and, ideally, teachers and friends, as well as recognising the impact of the physical environment. The approach to observation that will be explored can be seen as relevant in all these contexts and across the lifespan, if adapted with sensitivity to the context and wishes of those being observed.

In Chapter 1 we will briefly explore contemporary understandings of what it means to be a child in the United Kingdom in the twenty-first century. Our ideas about children shape our views about them and inform the ways in which we choose to spend time with them. They impact on how we interpret what we observe when we are with children. This chapter will explore these ideas and provide a rationale for the need to re think how we see children in the twenty-first century in the United Kingdom. The chapter will then consider the findings of some child death inquiries that illustrate some of the difficulties in seeing, thinking about and developing an understanding of children’s experience.
Chapter 2 describes a range of approaches to observation that are commonly used in work with children and their families in the UK, noting the preference for particular approaches in different professional settings. It will address the debates about objectivity and the role of observers as non-participants or participants. The experiential, holistic approach that we have used at Chichester, based on the Tavistock method, will be explored more fully and is presented as being of particular relevance for social workers. Vignettes will be used to demonstrate the application of the approaches with supporting activities to encourage reflection on their relative advantages and disadvantages.

Chapter 3 is designed to support the development of the skills needed to develop an observational stance. A series of activities has been designed to help observers through each stage of the process, including preparing themselves to observe effectively and negotiating their role with those whom they wish to observe. A sample agreement form is included as well as discussion of the issues relating to consent in relation both to the child and to any adults who may be observed. Approaches to recording, reflection and developing an understanding of what has been observed are discussed, alongside an emphasis on a transparent approach to practice that requires openness in sharing what has been observed with those who have been observed. This chapter is accompanied by activities that replicate typical issues that are explored in seminar groups.

Chapter 4 addresses some of the key issues that practitioners need to consider in any practice setting, including ones where they will be observing; an appreciation of issues related to identity, power and difference are central to all direct work with children and families. The chapter then provides examples of the way in which observation may make a valuable contribution to practice. While some of the suggestions come from published articles, most were provided by former students on qualifying and post-qualifying courses. They were invited to participate in focus groups or individual interviews to talk about their views on observation and to provide examples of how they had used observation in their practice. In some cases managers passed the invitation on to others who were in direct practice, hence not all the respondents were former Chichester students. They provided an interesting range of examples of the use of observation, primarily in the context of assessing children and families, but some examples illustrate the potential for observation to have a therapeutic impact in interventions with children and families.¹

Chapter 5 highlights the relevance of key theoretical concepts and research as the basis for reflecting, analysing and making sense of what has been observed. Social work practice is enriched by thinking from a wide range of disciplines, although the perceived value of these within the profession has varied over time, depending on the prevailing political and ideological discourses in social work. The selection of particular theoretical concepts necessarily reflects my personal biases as well as the revival of interest within social work in relationship-based approaches to practice.

The chapter includes an introduction to some of the recent thinking on the process of exercising judgement enabled by developments in neuroscience and cognitive psychology. Insights

¹ All examples have been anonymised and some details changed to ensure that any identifying details have been removed or altered.
are provided from psychoanalytic thinking, relating to transference and containment, as well as from theory that may be more familiar to those working with children and families, such as attachment and separation. These will be discussed with reference to practice examples to help you to use research and theory to inform your thinking about practice. In this chapter the problematic nature of the concepts of developmental progress, norms and milestones, discussed in Chapter 2, is recognised, but it will be argued that tools based on these concepts may also be of value if used with a critical awareness of their limitations.

Learning activities

Each chapter is accompanied by reflective activities and case studies which practitioners can relate to their own practice. It is however recognised that skills cannot be developed by simply reading a book. Practice, reflection and ideally practice discussions are needed to support the development of skills. As part of the development of your professionalism you are encouraged to make use of the activities and seek the support of your colleagues to explore your thinking.

A cautionary note

Arguably the most profound thing that I learned from my participation in a year-long child-observation seminar group, where each of us had undertaken an extended observation of a young child, was that the child whom each of us presented to the seminar group reflected very closely the preoccupations and worries in our own lives, arguably reflecting these more closely than the reality of the lived experience of the children whom we had observed. We had presented our own insecurities, boundary issues or façade that all was well. We had somehow made these issues a core part of our understanding of the child. The subsequent process of reflection in the context of theoretical frameworks enabled us to recognise these limitations and see beyond our initial surface views. My experience was echoed by Rosie King (2002), who was ‘struck by the way the children observed seemed to mirror the personality and preoccupations of the observer’ when she participated in a similar observation seminar group.

The difficulty of trying to see beyond the limits of our own experience emerges as a core issue that is worth holding in mind as you read the book and reflect on your own practice.

References


## Index

agency, children's, 11
Alderson, P., 11, 39
applied behaviour analysis, 31
attachment behaviour, 90–91
attachment theory
- defined, 89
- and emotional development, 89–90
- grief process, traumatic separation, 95–96
- internal working models, 92–93
- loss and separation, 28, 95
- strange situation procedure, 93
- types of attachment, 93–94

babies, observing, 7–8
Beckford, Jasmine, 15
behavioural methods
- checklists, 32
- developmental charts, 29, 32
- event sampling, 31–32
- journals and diaries, 34–35
- learning activities, 30, 34
- overview, 25, 28–29, 40
- Portage planning, 32
- rating scales, 33–34
- Target child method, 34
- time sampling, 30–31
Bick, E., 27
Bion, W., 94, 96
Bowlby, J., 28, 89, 95
bracketing (of personal issues), 50–51
Brandon, et al (2012), 21

Carlisle, Kimberley, 57, 78
checklists, 32
child death inquiries
- analysis of, 12–13
- and research findings, 97
- Daniel Pelka (2012), 19–21, 43, 46
- facing the reality of observations, 20–21, 22
- Jasmine Beckford (1984), 15
- lack of meaningful engagement with child’s experiences, 14, 15, 16, 18, 19–20, 22
- learning activities, 13
- Maria Colwell (1973), 13–15
- Paul (1993), 15–16

Peter Connolly (2007), 18–19
Victoria Climbié (2000), 16–18, 20–21, 78
Children Act (1989), 3, 11, 53
children see also perceptions of children
- child-centred informed assent, 39–40, 53–55
- children’s agency, 11
decontextualised understandings of, 10
dependence/independence of, 9
learning activities, 7–8
meaningful consent, 39
movement and non-verbal communication, 45–46, 71–72
perceptions of, 8–9
as social actors, 10–11
social context and observation of, 3, 97–98
term use, 3
as victims, 9–10
child’s lived experience
- experiential and holistic approaches, 3
- facing the reality of observations, 20–21, 22
- lack of meaningful engagement with, serious case reviews, 14, 15, 16, 18, 19–20, 22
- observer’s preoccupations and preconceptions (personal ‘lens’), 5, 36
- observer’s remaining focussed on, 57–58
- uncertainty in the observation, 2, 3, 21, 22, 36, 57, 101
understanding of, use of observations, 26, 36–37, 37–38, 40, 60
Climbié, Victoria, 16–18, 20–21, 78
Colwell, Maria, 13–15
Connolly, Peter, 18–19
consent
- child-centred informed assent, 39–40, 53–55
- children’s capacity for meaningful consent, 39
- establishing parameters of the observation, 53
- examples of practice, 69–70
- informed consent, 39, 41, 53, 69–70
- learning activities, 40
- legal (parental) consent, 39–40
- practice issues, ethics and consent, 40, 53–55
- written agreement, sample, 53
containment, 94–95
contexts of observation
- frequency and variety in, 71, 78
- organisational context, 66
contexts of observation (cont.)
  physical context and environment, 66–67
  practice contexts, 66
  socioeconomic factors, 3, 97–98
Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), 3, 39, 40, 53
counter transference, 96
criminal responsibility, age of, 8
Cunningham, H., 8, 9
Darwin, Charles, 27
deads see also child death inquiries
  incidence of, 13
  public reactions to, 9
developmental charts
  cultural factors, 29, 88
  learning activities, 89
  limitations of, 29, 88–89
  uses of, 32, 88
developmental psychology, 10
developmental stages
  childhood as transient state, 10
  defining adulthood, 11
  Piagetian view of, critiques, 10
disconnection, as a defence mechanism, 20–21, 22, 77, 101
domestic abuse, signs of, 74, 97
dominant beliefs, 55–64
educational settings
  Target child method, 34
  use of behavioural observations approaches, 29
emotions
  containment, 94–95
  deflection from face-to-face work, 36
  disconnection as a defence mechanism, 20–21, 22, 77, 101
  situational anxiety, 48–49
epoché, 50
ethics see also consent
  child-centred informed assent, 39–40, 53–55
  children’s capacity for meaningful consent, 39
  Gillick ruling, 39, 40
  informed consent, 39, 41, 53
  legal (parental) consent, 39–40
  practice issues, 40, 53–55
event sampling, 31–32
Fagan, M., 70
family relationships see also parents
  lack of focus on fathers, 97
  observing, 37
  possible observer issues (learning activity), 49–50
  power relationships (social worker/carers), 51–53, 65
  sibling relationships, 74–75
Fawcett, M., 35
Ferguson, H., 66
Framework for the Assessment of Children and Families, 2
Freud, Sigmund, 27, 40, 96
Hammond, K.R., 2, 84, 87
holistic experiential observation
  and effective practitioner reflection, 36
  learning activities, 38
  non-participant observation, 37, 64
  overview, 35, 40
  personal ‘lens’ and observation work, 36, 37–38, 40–41
  practical skills for, 38, 44
  recording observations, 38, 40–41, 44
  understanding the child’s lived experience, 36, 37–38
Howe, D., 90
human becomings, 10–12
identities
  class identity and preconceptions, 65 and social categories, 64–65
  ill health, child’s, 41
  incomplete adults, children as, 10–12
  interpretation, 47–48
  interviews within an observation, 72–73
  Isaacs, S., 27, 101
James, A., 10
Jenks, C., 10
journals and dairies, 34–35
judgement
  coherence, 87
  confirmatory bias, 87
  conscious/unconscious interplay, 83–84
  correspondence, 87
  and intuition, 84
  multiple fallible indicators, 84–86, 93
  and perception, 83
Kant, Immanuel, 43
Kanyal, M., 34
Kirkman, E., 87
Klein, M., 94
Lawler, S., 64
learning activities
  advantages of observation, 68–69
  age of criminal responsibility, 8
  attachment behaviour, 90
  child death inquiries, 13
  developmental charts, 89
  ethics and consent, 40, 53–55
  holistic experiential observation, 38
  identity and social categories, 65
  incomplete adults, children as, 12
  methods of observation, 30, 33, 34, 37
  notion of being ordinary, 55–56
  overview, 5
  preparing to observe, 49–50
  receptivity, 45, 46–47
  sensory perception, 45
  victims, children as, 9–10
  view on children, 7–8
legal frameworks, 9
mealtimes, 72
Melrose, K., 87
methods of observation see also behavioural methods;
holistic experiential observation
applied behaviour analysis, 31
checklists, 32
child-watching approaches, 26
development of, 26–28
empirical filmed observations, 28
event sampling, 31–32
experiential approaches, 25
journals and dairies, 34–35
learning activities, 30, 33, 34, 37
method selection, 28
non-participant observation, 37, 64
rating scales, 33–34
research-based ethnographic enquiries, 25
selected theoretical developments, 26
Target child method, 34
Tavistock method, 27–28, 28
time sampling, 30–31
Miles, G., 47
Miller, et al (1989), 56
movement and non-verbal communication, 45–46, 71–72
multiple fallible indicators, 84–86, 93
Munro review, 2, 102
non-participant observation, 37, 64
non-verbal communication
alongside verbal communication, 11
children’s movement patterns, 45–46, 71–72
observation see also methods of observation
concept of, 3
and eliciting the truth, 2–3
pre-conditions for observational practice, 101–102
process of, 56
as training tool, 26
and understanding individuals and groups, 26, 37–38
views on, 63–64
within social work practice, 2, 68–69, 70
the observed
benefits of observation, 75–76
effects of being observed (the observer effect), 78–79
previous experiences, 65–66
observers
bracketing (of personal issues), 50–51
common errors, 79
dealing with observational uncertainty, 3, 36, 57, 79, 101–102
defence mechanisms and uncertainty, 2, 21, 22
disconnection as a defence mechanism, 20–21, 22, 77, 101
epoché skills, 50
facing the reality of observations, 20–21, 22, 73, 78–79
interpretation, 47–48
intervention, 58
the observer effect, 37, 41, 55–56, 78–79
the observer stance, 56–57, 67
perception and contextual issues, 46–47
personal uncertainty, 66
and power relationships, 51–53
preoccupations and preconceptions of (personal ‘lens’), 3, 5, 36, 37–38, 40–41
preparing to observe, 48–50
previous experiences and insecurities, 66–67, 78
receptivity, 44–46, 68
remaining focussed, 57–58
situational anxiety, 48–49
subjectivity of, 46–47
top tips for, 79
parents
communication with valued over communication with
the child, 15, 20
inconsistency of what being told and what being
observed, 73
informed consent, 39, 41, 53, 69–70
interviews within an observation, 72–73
legal (parental) consent, 39–40
observations as interventions, 75–76
parenting, concepts of, 65
power relationships (social worker/carers), 51–53, 65
re-enforcement of positive behaviours, 75–76
participation
and children’s agency, 11
level’s of, 70
Paul (child death inquiry), 15–16
Pelka, Daniel, 19–21, 43, 46
perception
contextual issues, 46–47
and judgement, 83
perceptions of children
as incomplete adults, 10–12
learning activities, 7–8
and Social Workers’ practice, 12
as victims, 9
phenomenological research, 50
Piaget, Jean, 10
Portage planning, 32
power relationships
identity and social categories, 65
social worker/carers, 51–53
Pritchard, C., 13
professional development, 26
protectionist discourses, 9
psychoanalytic observations, 27–28
rating scales, 33–34
receptivity, observers’, 104.30, 68
recording observations
Family Court Rules of Evidence and, 58
free-flowing narrative, 38, 40–41, 44
personal reflections, 60
practitioner approaches to, 76–77
recording observations (cont.) timing of, 58 what to include, 58 reflection within experiential observation, 36 on the observations, 77–78 and personal learning, 39 preparing to observe, 48–50 private writings, 50 in seminar groups, 44 separation of personal experiences and observation, 47–48 skills development, 2 research, use in practice, 97 Robertson, James, 28 Robertson, Joyce, 28 Rustin, M., 21 Scotland, 8 seminar groups, 44 sensory perceptions learning activities, 45 of the observer, 44–45, 68 Sheridan, M., 29, 88 sibling relationships, 74–75 social context see also contexts of observation children as social actors, 10–11 cultural factors and developmental charts, 29, 88 and observation of children, 3, 97–98 social work competing demands of task and process, 36 deflection from face-to-face work, 36, 102 socioeconomic contexts, 3, 97–98 sway, concept of, 70 Target child method, 34 theories, observation analysis, 82 Thiele, T.N., 44, 83, 84 time sampling, 30–31 transference, 96 Trevithick, P., 79 Trowell, J., 47 uncertainty and coherence strategies, 94 defence mechanisms and, 2, 21, 22 and multiple fallible indicators, 84 of the observer, 66 staying with during observations, 3, 36, 57, 79, 101–102 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 3, 39, 40, 53 victims, children as, 9–10 Williams, R., 13 work, children’s, 9 young people, observing, 73–74