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Observing Children and Families

Beyond the Surface



Gill Butler

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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.

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Introduction

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 include 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.

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