Communication skills in child protection: how do social workers talk to parents?

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ABSTRACT

Communication skills are fundamental to social work practice, yet there is little research on the skills that workers have or how they use them. This study analyses 24 taped interviews between social workers and an actor playing a parent (a ‘simulated client’). Two child protection scenarios with different levels of seriousness were used. On average, social workers asked many closed questions and often raised concerns. They used few reflections and rarely identified positives. In all but one interview, social workers were rated as achieving clarity over issues of concern; however, they tended to demonstrate low levels of empathy. The responses of the simulated client were rated for resistance and information disclosure. The factor that most strongly influenced simulated client responses was empathy. Empathic social workers created less resistance and increased the amount of information disclosed by clients. This was not associated with failure to identify and discuss concerns. Empathy, therefore, appears to be central to good social work communication in child protection situations. Given the comparatively low level of empathy expressed by most participants, development of skills in maintaining empathic communication while raising child protection concerns appears a priority. Practical, theoretical and training implications are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) open their review of communication skills in social work education by commenting that ‘Good communication is at the heart of best practice in social work’ (Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) 2004a, p. 1). This is a statement that it would be hard to disagree with. Yet there seems to be a lack of consensus about what ‘good communication’ is, and little theoretical or empirical basis for defining what social work communication skills are.

The most common theoretical basis for the teaching of communication skills in social work appears to be a belief that counselling skills may be useful for social workers (Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) 2004a,b). A particular emphasis is placed on humanistic and client-centred theorists such as Rogers, Carkhuff and Egan, and the concept of empathy is considered important in published descriptions of training for social workers in communication skills (Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) 2004a). Yet as the authors of the SCIE review note,

There is little attempt to analyse critically the relevance of counselling theory to social work. As a result, insufficient attention is paid to the difficulties inherent when trying to apply concepts such as empathy to fieldwork settings, particularly statutory social work. (p. 14)

There appear to be virtually no British studies recording how social workers talk to parents about child welfare concerns – one of the key statutory requirements and practice challenges in child and family social work. Much research has been undertaken on what happens in ‘child protection’ or ‘family support’ interventions; however, almost all studies to date have relied on retrospective accounts by

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participants (e.g. Thoburn et al. 1995; Cleaver & Freeman 1995, and see Department of Health 1995). These provide much useful information, but they tell us little about the skills that social workers use in such situations and almost nothing about the place of counselling skills within the communication of social workers in challenging situations.

In extensive literature searches the authors were only able to identify three studies published since 1985 that directly collected information on interviews with parents where there were child welfare concerns. In the first, Lishman (1988) videotaped interviews between nine social workers and parents in a total of 22 families. An attempt was made to video an ‘early’, ‘middle’ and ‘final’ interview, resulting in 47 interviews altogether. Workers were based in a field team, a child psychiatric setting and an adoption agency. Lishman analysed the behaviour of the social workers with a view to exploring the relationship between social worker behaviours and outcomes (as judged by the researcher, social worker and client after the intervention). She found that positive remarks, nodding, smiling and laughing were associated with positive outcomes, while unchecked interpretations, confrontation, criticism and hostility were associated with negative outcomes.

There are important limitations in the Lishman study. The sample was very small and the research was carried out more than 20 years ago. It is also not possible to conclude that the social workers’ behaviours caused the outcomes; the social workers’ behaviours may have been because the concerns were less serious or the client more cooperative, and these factors were the reason for the association. Nonetheless, Lishman’s findings suggest the possibility that effective communication skills are linked to outcomes for social work clients. It appears very surprising that there has not been further British research exploring this crucial area over the last 20 years.

A more recent study was undertaken by Nijnatten et al. (2001) in the Netherlands. Nijnatten et al. videotaped 51 interviews between social workers and clients and analysed them using conversation analysis. They were not interested in evaluating the skills the workers used. Nonetheless, they provide interesting qualitative data on how social workers managed the tension between care and control. They concluded that in general Dutch social workers tended to downplay the power they had and that this could lead to confusion on the part of the parents. They suggest that social work education in the Netherlands should ensure that practitioners are comfortable with the power inherent in their role. Hall et al. (2006) undertook a similar analysis as part of a wider study of the use of language in a variety of social work contexts. Hall et al. provide an interesting interpretation of a single interview. Their analysis highlights the ways in which both participants attempt to frame and define their roles and actions positively. Both studies identified the subtlety of the interaction between social workers and clients, and in particular the complexity of the ways in which issues of power are negotiated in such interviews.

In contrast to the findings of Nijnatten et al., Forrester et al. (in press) found that British social workers appear to use a very confrontational style of communication. Their study explored the skills of social workers prior to a training workshop in Motivational Interviewing. They used vignettes as prompts and rated the social workers’ responses for level of empathy. Forrester et al. found that social workers demonstrated very low levels of empathy and tended to use a highly confrontational style. Care needs to be taken in interpreting this finding, as it relies on responses to vignettes, not actual practice. However, similar measures used in other studies correlated with skill levels as measured in interviews with simulated clients (Baer et al. 2004). Forrester et al. also found that the same measures used after the training correlated significantly with ratings of skill based on an interview with a simulated client. The findings suggest either that social workers have low levels of counselling skills or that they do not consider them useful in working with parents around child welfare concerns.

CURRENT STUDY

There appears to be a clear need for research on what communication skills social workers use and what appears to work in the complex interviews that social workers often have to undertake. The current study explores some key skills identified in the social work and/or counselling literature. First, empathy is considered. As noted above, empathy has often been assumed to be important within social work. Research asking service users what they value in social workers consistently identifies social workers who appear to understand them and who care as important (see, e.g. Mayer & Timms 1970; Davies 1985). These may be seen as manifestations of empathy. However, as the SCIE review noted, there has been little attention given to how empathy is used in complex and potentially challenging interviews.
Second, open and closed questions are an obvious aspect of the communication skills of social workers, yet we do not know how workers use these in practice. Trevithick (2000) suggests that ‘open-ended questions should form a major part of an initial interview or encounter’ (p. 87). The current study explores what might happen in practice in an initial encounter, in an attempt to identify the extent to which workers use open and closed questions and the impact on the process of the interview of each.

Third, a further important communication skill is the use of reflections. A reflection is a hypothesis about what the client means or feels expressed as a statement. Reflections are a key skill within counseling. They are central to the expression of accurate empathy; they encourage deeper exploration of emotional content; and they allow the worker or counselor sensitively to manage the interview, e.g. by summarizing one stage and opening up another (Miller & Rollnick 2002). It has also been suggested that reflections are important in reducing resistance and increasing engagement in interviews. Miller and Rollnick summarize counselling research that suggested that reflections should outnumber questions by a proportion of 3 to 1. Social workers are not counsellors and it seems unlikely that they would use reflections at this rate. However, if reflections are important in effective counselling, one might expect social workers to use them to some extent. The study will explore the extent and nature of the reflections used and whether they have any impact on the process of the interview.

Fourth, a difference between social workers and counsellors is that social workers also have to raise concerns. This is particularly true where there are child protection issues. Yet we know little about how social workers approach this difficult task and almost nothing empirically about how it should be done effectively. The study explores this through a global judgement of whether concerns were raised clearly by the end of the interview.

Fifth, there has been increasing recognition in recent years that raising of concerns should be balanced by a recognition of positives and strengths (Department of Health 2000). The study will therefore explore the extent to which social workers identify positives or strengths in interviewing parents. The study also considered other behaviours that social workers exhibit, including giving information and checking for understanding. However, as noted in the section of the development of the variables, a failure to achieve reliability resulted in the study being unable to comment on these skills.

One obvious reason for the lack of research in this area is that it is very difficult to observe directly difficult social work interviews. The current study therefore explores the use of communication skills in child and family social work practice through analysis of taped interviews between social workers and actors playing a parent allocated a social worker (‘simulated clients’). It attempts to address the following research questions:

- To what extent do social workers use counselling skills (specifically open and closed questions, reflections and empathy) and other skills (e.g. raising concerns or recognizing positives) in discussing child welfare issues with parents?
- What impact do such skills and behaviours have on the process of the interview?

The study uses scenarios in which parental alcohol misuse was an issue. Parental alcohol misuse is a common challenge for social workers, which research suggests that they often struggle to work effectively with (Forrester & Harwin 2006). It is also a good exemplar for the difficulties involved in interviewing parents about the impact of their behaviour on their child more generally.

METHOD

Data collection

Two scenarios were created. Both involved a meeting with a mother in which alcohol-related issues needed to be discussed, and in each scenario this was the second time that the worker had met the mother after a brief handover visit the previous week. (A mother was chosen because the actors happened to be women). In both scenarios, the 5-year-old child was on the child protection register as a result of the mother being found drunk in charge of him, poor school attendance and underperformance at school. In scenario A, the mother had been cooperating with the child protection plan and there had been general improvements in the child’s attendance and presentation at school; however, the mother had not attended the alcohol counselling service as suggested in the child protection plan. In scenario B, the situation had deteriorated, with the child missing a lot of school, reports that the mother appeared drunk on some occasions when she did pick him up and that she had not attended alcohol counselling. In this scenario the worker was told that care proceedings were being considered if the situation did not change.

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Two social work students were paid to act as simulated clients. Both had experience of playing simulated clients, and they each played both scenarios. A half-day preparation workshop prepared them for the roles they played. Each was briefly ‘debriefed’ after each interview and at more length at the end of the day. The students were not aware of the aims of the study.

Twenty-four social workers from a London local authority volunteered to undertake a simulated interview. They ranged from newly qualified to workers with more than 10 years’ experience. The interviews took place in rooms normally used to see clients and were undertaken in work time. The scenario and actor were randomly assigned. Interviews were digitally taped and transcribed. After each interview, social workers were asked to rate how realistic the scenario, the presentation of the simulated client and the simulated client’s responses appeared to be using a four-point scale (not at all/a little/a lot/completely). The average scores for completed questionnaires ($n = 22$) was 3.5 for the scenario, 3.3 for the client and 3.3 for the responses. Overall, the simulated client experience was perceived as highly realistic by the workers.

Each simulated client carried out 12 interviews. In total, 13 more serious and 11 less serious scenario interviews were carried out. The scenario involved the social worker having only 30 minutes available for the interview. Interviews lasted, on average, 26.5 minutes, with a range from 17 to 39 min. There was no statistically significant difference between the two simulated clients in any of the measures of their responses.

Development of variables for coding interviews

The research team read a number of transcripts of taped interviews with simulated clients carried out as part of a previous study (see Forrester et al. 2007). From these they identified social worker behaviours and skills related to counselling concepts and the social work literature that might be appropriate for study (outlined in the introduction and discussed in the section on the development of the variables). They also identified potentially important behaviours in simulated clients, such as types of resistance, disclosure of child care concerns or drink problems. The measures for social workers and for simulated clients were independently pilot-tested on six of the transcripts from the previous study in order to refine definitional issues and exclude variables that did not achieve acceptable levels of reliability.

Social workers’ and simulated clients’ talk were separately and independently rated for each 5-minute segment of each interview using a mixture of behaviour counts and ratings for the whole 5-minute segment. Behaviour counts were made based on whether a particular behaviour occurred within a ‘speech turn’. A speech turn was an episode of talk preceded and followed by talk by the other person. These varied greatly in length; however, piloting suggested that counting multiple behaviours in a single speech turn was misleading. For instance, several questions asked without reply were functionally similar to asking one question. The same was true for client behaviours such as resistance or information disclosure. Thus, it was decided to count the number of speech turns in which particular behaviours occurred within each 5-minute segment. A speech turn could also have more than one type of behaviour within it. In addition to behaviour counts, a researcher made judgements on the social worker’s expression of empathy on a five-point scale used in previous research with social workers and counsellors and rated each 5-minute segment using this scale (Carkhuff 1969; Nerdrum & Lundquist 1995; Forrester et al. 2007, in press).

Six transcripts from the current research study, and thus 30 five-minute segments, were independently rated by a second researcher. Only variables that achieved a reliability of $\rho > 0.590$; $P < 0.001$ are used in the analysis (most achieved $\rho > 0.700$). This level is generally considered ‘acceptable’ (Bowling 2002). Behaviours that did not achieve this level of reliability – and that are therefore not used in the following analysis – were social workers ‘providing information’ or ‘explaining procedures’. In addition, of the behaviours and ratings that were used, some were strongly correlated with one another. Thus, empathy and genuineness were highly correlated and only empathy is used. The three variables relating to information provision were significantly correlated to one another. Therefore, a composite ‘client disclosure’ variable was calculated by averaging the three. Finally, most resistance was denial or minimization, with relatively little aggression/confrontation, and therefore only resistance overall was coded.

The following behaviours were reliably coded. For the social worker, the number of speech turns in which the following behaviours were identified were counted:

- open questions;
- closed questions;
- total questions;
- simple reflections;
- complex reflections (relating to information other than that contained in the last speech turn of the simulated client (Moyers et al. 2003);
- strengths or positives mentioned; and
- concerns raised.

In addition, for each 5-minute segment the worker was rated for:
- Empathy (This was rated using a scale developed by Nerdrum & Lundquist (1995) for research on the communication skills of social work students. This was based on Carkhuff’s five levels of empathy (Carkhuff 1969, pp. 315–317). These can be summarized as level 1 (‘obstructing’), 2 (‘not listening’), 3 (‘minimal listening’), 4 (‘empathic listening’) and 5 (‘fully empathic and skilled listening’) (see Forrester et al., in press for a fuller description of the different levels).

For the simulated client, the number of speech turns in which the following behaviours were identified were counted:
- resistance (predominantly denial or minimization) and
- disclosure.

Finally, a rating for the interview overall was made in relation to whether concerns were raised, whether the key issues of concern were covered and whether there was clarity about what would happen next. Each was rated not at all/to some degree/completely. In addition, the number of speech turns and the words spoken by social worker and client were calculated (as a proxy for their share of the conversation).

Ethical issues

The research proposal was agreed by the ethics committee for the school of health and social care at Brunel University (where the principle investigator was working at the time of the study). All workers were provided with a transcript of their own interview and a draft copy of the findings of the study. It was agreed that the contents of the interview would remain confidential unless there were such serious concerns about malpractice that it needed to be raised with managers, and participants were informed of this. This did not occur.

RESULTS

In total, 132 5-minute segments were rated. On average, there were 31 speech turns in each segment, i.e. 15.6 per participant. On average the social worker spoke 486 words and the client 332. Social workers thus spoke for 59% of the time.

Table 1 shows information on the average incidence of the various behaviours rated for the social workers and the simulated client. For some behaviours there was considerable consistency. While most social workers (19) mentioned a positive, they did not do so often in the interview, with the vast majority (17) averaging less than one positive per segment and five never mentioning a positive. The picture was even more consistent in relation to reflections. Complex reflections were virtually never used and there were no summary reflections. Simple reflections based on the last speech turn of the simulated client were also rare. Eight workers never used a reflection and only one averaged more than one per 5 minute.

In contrast, there was great variation in the use of questions (open and closed), the amount of time concerns were raised and the level of empathy expressed by social workers. The most common type of behaviour coded was the use of closed questions. On average, social workers asked four closed questions each 5-minute segment, although the sheer variation (from averaging less than 1–8 per segment) was remarkable. Open questions were a lot less common than closed and there was more consistency in the number asked (most workers asked one or two in most segments). The number of times that workers raised concerns had the greatest proportionate variation between social workers, although as noted below, this variable was strongly influenced by which scenario the interview related to. The distribution of empathy across the sample was also very wide. Average empathy ranged from 1.0 (no empathy and obstructive to listening; an average score of 1.0 meant that this
was the score for every segment) through to three participants who scored over 4 (i.e. they averaged empathic listening over every segment of the interview and sometimes reached the levels of a skilled counselor despite the difficult role they had). As with the raising of concerns, there was a strong interaction with the scenarios, and this contributed to an increased range of responses.

The relationship between the behaviours and the different scenarios was explored through Spearman’s tests. There was no difference between the scenarios in the use of closed questions or reflections. However, for most other variables there was a relationship. For the less serious scenario, workers used significantly more open questions (Rho = 0.474; P = 0.019), identified positives more often (Rho = 0.615; P = 0.001), raised concerns less often (Rho = -0.751; P < 0.001) and were more empathic (Rho = 0.477; P = 0.019). The simulated clients also expressed significantly more resistance in the more serious scenario (Rho = -0.475; P = 0.019), although there was no variation in the level of disclosure.

In general, social workers established a very high level of clarity (2.92; only two did not establish complete clarity about concerns), and they successfully raised issues of concern (2.79; only three established concerns ‘to some degree’ and one ‘not at all’). They also generally managed to agree with the client what happens next (2.71; with seven achieving this ‘to some degree’ and the rest ‘completely’). For the more serious scenario, issues of concern were always raised successfully and clarity over the purpose of the interview was always achieved. In contrast to the workers’ success in being clear about concerns, achieving agreement about what would happen next was less likely for the more serious scenario (with five of the seven where this was not achieved being the more serious scenario).

Social worker behaviour over time

Social work behaviours were analysed by which 5-minute segment they occurred in. There was a statistically significant relationship between both open questions (r = -0.349; P < 0.001) and raising of concerns (r = -0.442; P < 0.001) and time. Workers tended to use open questions and raise concerns towards the beginning of the interview but do less of each as the interview progressed. There was no change in the use of closed questions, reflections or identification of positives through the interview, nor in ratings of empathy.

Relationship between social worker’s behaviour and client response

The relationship between social work behaviours and client resistance and disclosure was explored through partial correlations that allowed for which scenario was being undertaken. The results suggested that there was no relationship between the number of open or closed questions, simple reflections or identification of positives by the social worker and resistance or disclosure by the simulated client. There was no statistical relationship between complex reflections and resistance; however, there were indications that there might be a relationship between the use of complex reflection and increased disclosure by the simulated client. This relationship did not quite achieve statistical significance (r = 0.400; P = 0.058); however, given the small sample and the comparative rarity of complex reflections, it seems likely that with a larger sample this relationship would have been significant. It reflected the fact that four of the five workers who used complex reflections accounted for four of the five interviews in which clients disclosed most information. Even when the scenario was allowed for, there remained a strong relationship between the raising of concerns and resistance: the more often a social worker raised issues of concern, the more resistance the client expressed (r = 0.659; P = 0.001).

The only social worker variable significantly linked to both resistance and disclosure by the simulated client was level of empathy. Empathy was associated with significantly more disclosure (r = 0.578; P < 0.001) and less resistance (r = -0.483; P = 0.02). The strong relationship between the level of empathy and the amount of resistance and disclosure expressed by the client is shown in Fig. 1. Figure 1 illustrates that in 5-minute segments in which high levels of empathy were demonstrated by the social worker, clients exhibited less resistance and more disclosure of information. In contrast, where social workers showed low levels of empathy, the client became more resistant (particularly minimizing or denying problems) and less likely to disclose information.

None of the measures of social workers’ behaviour had any statistical link with whether clarity was established, whether issues of concern were raised or whether what happens next was agreed using partial correlations allowing for scenario. There was, however, a trend towards greater agreement about what happens next where social workers had higher empathy (Rho = 0.378; P = 0.068), and with a larger
sample this might have been significant. Overall, this suggests that the advantages of an empathic approach in reducing resistance and increasing disclosure were not at the expense of a lack of clarity over concerns and they may have contributed to greater agreement about what would happen next.

**DISCUSSION**

**Limitations**

A major limitation in the study is that it uses standardized, simulated clients. It is accepted that simulated clients are likely to react differently to real clients. For instance, Miller *et al.* (2004) found that simulated clients were less responsive to what counsellors said than genuine clients: they were more likely to follow a predetermined ‘script’. To address this issue in the current study the actors were not aware of the aims of the research, and their preparation focused on encouraging them to respond to what the social worker said and did. Perhaps as a result, some of the social workers reported that the simulated clients were more likely to be reasonable and to listen to what they said than genuine clients. However, overall there was a very high rating for the realism of the interviews from the social workers. As researchers, we were also struck by the authentic feel of most of the interviews. Nonetheless, these were not genuine interviews and this needs to be borne in mind in evaluating the results.

The aspect of the study most vulnerable to this issue is the attempt to evaluate the impact of social work skills on the responses of the simulated clients, because they are not genuine clients.

However, there are advantages to the use of simulated clients. First, the scenarios are standardized and this allows better comparison across social workers. It would not be possible to disentangle whether a social worker’s skill or a client’s disposition was leading to an interview going well with real clients. If an interview goes well for one social worker and poorly for a second when simulated clients are used, then exploring what the social worker did differently appears a reasonable approach to understanding the variation. Thus, the strong relationship between empathy and both reduced resistance and increased disclosure is not because a more cooperative client is eliciting a more empathic response from the social worker; it is because the social worker’s empathy is reducing resistance and increasing information disclosure. Second, use of simulated scenarios allows challenges not amenable to direct recording, such as very sensitive interviews, to be recorded and analysed. Finally, and most importantly, while the clients are simulated the social workers are not, and it is their speech that is the focus of the study. Given that the workers and the researchers felt that the interviews seemed relatively authentic, it seems reasonable to analyse the approaches that the social workers were using within them.
Key findings

The first key finding was that there was very wide variation between social workers in the styles and skills that they brought to the interview. Even when the different scenarios were allowed for, some stark differences in practice were identified. From a research point of view this is a bonus, as it allows exploration of the impact of differences on the process of the interview. However, from the point of view of service delivery, it is of potential concern, because it suggests a lack of consistency in the responses that parents receive.

This highlights the need for more research exploring which approaches seem most effective and a focus on ensuring that social work training teaches skills found to be effective in practice.

Second, the overall pattern of behaviours and skills demonstrated threw up some surprises. We had not expected to find closed questions outnumbering open questions by more than 2 to 1. The interview was the first meeting following an imagined joint handover visit the previous week. As noted in the introduction, Trevithick suggests that open-ended questions should be a major part of such an encounter (Trevithick 2000). In fact, only two workers asked more open questions than closed questions, while five asked five times as many closed as open questions and one asked 10 closed questions to every open question. This gave some of the interviews a very interrogative feel.

Less surprising, but perhaps more concerning, was the almost complete absence of reflections. As noted in the introduction, social workers are not counsellors and it seems legitimate that they should not use reflections as often as counsellors. However, to find that questions outnumbered reflections by more than 15 to 1, and that social workers used virtually no complex reflections and absolutely no summary reflections, suggests a systemic lack of training and supervision in this fundamental communication skill. There were also indications that complex reflections were associated with increased client disclosure of information. Care needs to be taken in interpreting this finding, because although the trend suggested that workers who used more complex reflections generated greater disclosures, this did not achieve significance within this small sample. Furthermore, this finding may not be because the use of complex reflections produced greater disclosure; it may instead be because the use of complex reflections is an indicator of practitioners with high skill levels. Nonetheless, the combination of the rarity of complex reflections and the finding indicating that they may be a crucial skill in increasing client disclosure of information is potentially of concern. Certainly, further work is needed to explore the place of complex reflections within social work interviews. It is possible that this is an important communication skill that is not sufficiently used by child and family social workers.

The study also produced interesting findings in relation to social work behaviours and skills that were associated with interviews going well or poorly. The strongest relationship between a social worker variable and the process of the interview was empathy. Empathic social workers produced less resistance and achieved more disclosure of information from clients. Furthermore, they did so while managing to raise concerns and be clear about their role. There were also indications that empathic social workers achieved greater clarity about what should happen next with clients. It was noted in the introduction that the role of constructs such as ‘empathy’ is not clear within social work communication (Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) 2004a). Our findings suggest that empathic social workers may manage complex and potentially fraught social work interviews better than non-empathic workers. This is in line with research on counsellors which has consistently found that high empathy is associated with lower resistance from clients (Miller & Rollnick 2002). It suggests that teaching counselling skills, as adapted for social work settings, may be appropriate within social work training, with a particular emphasis on empathic responses.

The raising of concerns had a somewhat ambiguous relationship with the process of the interview. On the one hand, it was strongly related to increased resistance from the simulated client. At the extreme end, there were a small number of highly conflictual interviews that were characterized by the social worker focusing exclusively on concerns and the client becoming entrenched in denying them, minimizing their significance and in some instances becoming abusive. On the other hand, there was one interview in which concerns were not raised and three in which they were only raised ‘to some degree’. These findings point to the potential dangers involved in either failing to raise concerns or focusing solely on concerns. Skilful social workers were clear about concerns, while facilitating a dialogue between the worker and the parent.

The general picture was that in almost all of the interviews social workers managed to be clear about why they were meeting the parent, to raise the concerns and to agree what would happen next. However, they varied widely in the degree to which they
managed to engage the client, as measured through the amount of resistance they created and the extent of information that the client disclosed. The most effective social workers raised concerns but they did not focus solely on them. Of particular importance was that workers who raised concerns empathically were able to challenge parents about concerning behaviour while retaining a positive relationship with them.

Discussion of findings

The findings have a number of implications. First, they highlight the importance of more research in this crucial area. It seems absurd that there is so much emphasis on social workers having ‘good communication skills’ and yet so little research on what good communication skills actually are in social work settings. This neglect is repeated at the policy level. For instance, the National Occupational Standards for Social Work and for post-qualifying child care social work (Skills for Care 2000, 2004) do not define what social work communication skills are. Rather they identify what the skills allow workers to achieve (e.g. ‘develop effective working partnerships’ with parents and carers). Thus, it is left to the individual student, practice assessor and lecturer to define what skills are involved in achieving these outcomes. Research has a crucial role to play in formulating a vision of what social work communication skills actually are.

Second, many of the social workers were not skilled communicators. The interviews that social workers had to carry out are often more challenging than counselling or therapeutic encounters. It therefore seems essential that social workers are highly skilled in their communication with clients. To find that workers use predominantly closed questions, that they use few reflections, that they rarely recognize strengths and that they tend to lack empathy is profoundly concerning. It was good that workers almost universally managed to raise difficult issues and that they were able to be clear about concerns with the parent. However, the way in which this was done often appeared unskilled and, in a few instances, virtually abusive to the parent. To promote better practice in this area, we need to retain social workers’ ability to focus on difficult issues, while combining this with the ability to empathize with the parent. As noted earlier, the best workers were able to combine the two, and as a result they created less resistance and encouraged greater disclosure from the simulated client.

One way of conceptualizing this might be to think of child protection communication skills as having three levels:

Level 1: Failure to raise concerns with parents. (Parent-focused)

This is a level of practice that many individuals might be at before or during social work qualification. This level might also apply to some non-social work professionals where the focus is on parental support. Generally, individuals enter the profession in order to help people, and some find raising concerns difficult. An inability to raise difficult issues with parents would raise issues of professional competence in a social worker for children. It was a factor in some high-profile child deaths, particularly in the 1980s (Department of Health 1991).

Level 2: Threshold competence. (Simplistically child-focused)

At this level, it is recognized that the focus of work should be the child, and concerns are raised where they exist – but the parent is not well engaged. This might be considered ‘threshold competence’, in that at least, the parent is clear about issues of concern, but the worker goes no further in engaging the parent. Such workers are likely to encounter considerable resistance in the parents they work with, and may in some families produce negative or harmful effects. This type of practice can perhaps be seen in the studies that informed the refocusing initiative, in which child protection investigations were consistently identified as confrontational and sometimes traumatic for families (see Department of Health 1995). It was present in many of the interviews in the current study.

Level 3: Skilled practice. (Child-focused plus)

For the skilful child and family social worker, concerns are raised but communication skills are used to ensure that the parent is related to empathically even during difficult interviews. Parents can feel confident that the worker will be open about any concerns they have, but strengths and positives are also recognized and highlighted. Workers at this level are often able to build positive working relationships with parents despite the difficulties involved in working with concerns around child welfare. This is the type of practice exhibited by the best workers in the current study.

Conceptualizing child protection practice in this way avoids a simplistic approach that might see empathetic engagement with parents and clarity about
child protection concerns as in opposition. For those developing their skills in this area, such as social work students or newly qualified workers, the task is not to lose the empathic and caring approach that often brought them into the profession, but to develop their empathic skills in order to be able to combine them with raising difficult issues with parents.

There is a sense in which the three levels may be typical of a common developmental path for those who enter the social work profession. Individuals often come into social work to help people and find challenging parents difficult. A key task in developing professional competence is learning how to raise concerns with parents. However, true professional competence is achieved once the worker is able to raise concerns in an empathic way that allows them to maintain their relationship with the parent and the child.

CONCLUSIONS

There is a sense in which the findings of the research suggest that the social work theorists discussed in the SCIE review of communication skills (Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) 2004a) were right all along: empathy, the use of reflections and recognizing positives need to be combined with an ability to raise difficult issues in effective social work. What is challenging about our findings was how rarely this happened in practice.

The fact that many social workers were not using good communication skills is a serious challenge for the profession. There is a sense in which communication skills are often taken for granted within social work: like the air we breathe, they provide an invisible but essential context for everything that we do. Yet the findings suggest that often social workers are not communicating well with parents. The implications for training, professional supervision and research are profound. The lack of research directly observing social work interactions was noted in the introduction. Yet this is perhaps just one manifestation of a general lack of attention to directly observing and improving the skills we use in practice. As a profession we need to focus far more on what social work communication skills are, what impact they have on the process of interviews and outcomes for clients, and how we can help individuals develop and maintain them. This is a substantial agenda for social work researchers, educators and managers. Yet if we are to ensure sensitive and effective services for children and their parents, it is an agenda we must start to address as a priority.

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REFERENCES


