Social work the 'art of relationship': parents' perspectives on an intensive family support project

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ABSTRACT

From the findings of a study examining the perspective of parents using Intensive Family Support Service based in northern England, this paper examines the constituent elements required for effective relationship-based practice. Although the study is based in a single site in England, the findings are more broadly relevant, given both national and international interests in relationship-based practice in child protection. The participants in this study – parents whose children had been assessed as being 'at the edge of care' – were asked to comment on the intervention they had received. Analysis of parents' interviews suggests that the service user–worker relationship was critical to their positive experience of the service. The paper provides an analysis of parents' descriptions of 'positive relationships' and identifies the key themes. It then considers these findings in the context of contemporary children and families' social work practice. Engaging with current debates, the paper makes reference to the impact of modernization, which has served to erode effective face-to-face work with families, given excessive 'backroom' demands of administration and audit. Discussion engages with an emerging emphasis on effective relationship-based practice following reports from Munro and the Social Work Reform Board. In this context, the paper concludes that the views of these families whose children are on the 'edge of care' offers insights into the skills required for relationship-based practice.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between service user and social worker has long been considered the 'bedrock' of social work practice with children and families. Indeed, there are many who have placed considerable emphasis on its importance in effective practice (Howe 1998; Trevithick 2003; Ruch 2005). Consistent with this, the social work literature provides evidence of the positive impact that effective relationships between worker and service user can achieve (Cleaver & Freeman 1995; Farmer & Owen 1995; Spratt & Callan 2004). Even in the context of compulsory removals of children, research has found that the quality of that relationship is often crucial in

determining the service user's experience and, arguably, in shaping the longer-term outcomes for vulnerable families (Ministry of Justice 2008; Broadhurst & Holt 2009). Whilst such arguments are persuasive, the literature does not often explicate how such relationships operate and what the constituent elements of such relationship are. Drawing on the narratives of parents (see Note 1) involved with an Intensive Family Support Service (IFSS) (referred to here as Project X), this paper aims to examine the constituent elements of 'positive' service user–social worker relationships.

Whilst a relationship of sorts inevitably exists simply as a consequence of the coming together of worker and service user, the successful working of that

relationship cannot be taken for granted. Positive relationships, particularly where there may be contentious safeguarding issues, depend on the worker possessing particular skills and qualities (Forrester *et al.* 2008b; Turnell 2008; Ferguson 2009). The findings of the study reported here offer some insight into those skills, and proffer thoughts as to what, *in particular*, service users valued in their workers.

This paper discusses research undertaken with Project X, an IFSS for families where there are child protection concerns and whose children are at risk of being taken into the care of the local authority. Given the intensive nature of the service, workers are required to spend considerable amounts of time with the families, and, as such, the project provides an excellent site for research that probes relationship-based practice. Whilst there are important differences between this project and mainstream child protection teams that cannot be ignored, the study offers a voice to an often unheard minority. Hearing these voices is currently highly relevant as social work practice is at crossroads, with considerable concern that social workers have lost the opportunity for relationship-based practice on account of a range of modernizing trends (Garrett 2003; Broadhurst *et al.* 2009; Lonne *et al.* 2009).

This paper is divided into four sections. The first section examines the literature relating to relationship-based social work and considers its salience for contemporary child welfare practice. Following this, a brief overview of the study is provided. In the third section, the key themes emerging from the data are presented and discussed. The paper concludes with comments regarding these findings in the context of contemporary child welfare practices.

'Relationships' in the context of child welfare and protection

A significant body of research in the field of social work, counselling and psychotherapy has focused on the importance of the relationship between service user and worker. Indeed, a growing number of studies suggest that the quality of that relationship is an important signifier of the outcomes of case work in these various settings (Dingwall *et al.* 1995; Farmer & Owen 1995; Holland 2000; Tunstill & Aldgate 2000; Lee & Ayon 2004). The reasons for this are undoubtedly complex, but a number of studies offer insights into how 'relationship' is entwined with outcome. For example, the importance of a shared perspective with regard to both risks and needs is highlighted (Cleaver

& Freeman 1995; Farmer & Owen 1995; Turnell & Edwards 1999; Spratt & Callan 2004), and where a good match exists between such a perspective and the goals set, better outcomes are more likely to be achieved (Cleaver & Freeman 1995; Platt 2007). Workers' perceptions of parents' willingness to cooperate or 'engage' with them also acts as an important measure. Platt (2007), e.g. highlights that when social workers perceive there is to be a positive parental co-operation, it is more likely to result in less coercive responses, a suggestion supported in other studies (Farmer & Owen 1995; Holland 2000; Dumbrill 2006).

A number of authors have discussed the notion of 'partnership'. The concept of working in 'partnership' with parents in child protection, and more recently safeguarding, has a long history. During the 1980s, following a number of studies and inquiry reports, pressure mounted for a greater degree of power sharing between parents and professionals (for a fuller discussion, see Broadhurst & Holt 2009). Indeed, this culminated with the introduction of the Children Act 1989 (Department of Health 1989). Undeniably, the principle of partnership has become a central tenet of policy and practice following the Children Act 1989, continuing as a key principle of social work practice with parents.

Furthermore, as Trevithick (2003) emphasizes, the importance of developing practitioners' ability to build effective relationships with service users is expressed in both The National Occupational Standards for Social Work (Training organization for the personal social services England 2002) and the Bench Marking Statement for Social Work (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2008). However, many studies have shown that the quest for such consensual solutions can often prove problematic (Aldgate 1991; Corby *et al.* 1996; Harlow & Shardlow 2006; Masson *et al.* 2008). Too often, the 'relationship' in social work can be seen as a one-way process through which e.g. parental characteristics are observed. Platt (2007, p. 333) notes that co-operation 'is not simply a parental characteristic to be observed, but a feature of the interaction between a family and the formal services'.

From this literature, the concept of 'relationship-based practice' appears somewhat elusive. For example, effective communication is seen as central to this approach; however, as Forrester *et al.* (2008b) point out, there is little consensus over what good communication actually is. In fact, there appears to be a dearth of research focusing on how social workers

talk to parents (Forrester *et al.* 2008b; Hall & Slembrouck 2009). Drawing on two studies, Forrester *et al.* (2008b) identify the subtle nature of the interaction between social workers and service users and the complex ways in which power is negotiated. Their study found that British social workers largely adopt a confrontational approach with service users, conveying low levels of empathy. This description concurs with others findings (Cleaver & Freeman 1995; Brandon *et al.* 1999).

Furthermore, studies scrutinizing social work practice suggest that the importance of 'emotional labour' (Gray 2002) still eludes many children and families' practitioners. Drake's (1994) work, e.g. comments that although social workers generally recognized the importance of good working relationships with service users, they frequently failed to exhibit the skills required to achieve these. Undeniably, this can, in part, be explained by the often difficult terrain that practitioners must negotiate. As de Boer & Coady (2007, p. 32) argue, the nature of child welfare work presents additional challenges to achieving and maintaining 'good helping relationships', particularly when there is an emphasis on statutory safeguarding responsibilities. Ruch (2005, p. 114) usefully focuses our attention on how the prevailing socio-political ideology further impacts on the significance placed on the relationship as the social worker attempts to shift between 'procedural and legalistic responses to one based on uniqueness, uncertainty and relationship'. However, the 'uncertainty and anxiety associated with this emotionally charged' (Ruch 2005, p. 111) work does not always lend itself (despite the evidence of its importance) to relationship-based practice.

Given these tensions, the findings from the study discussed here are important in demonstrating (i) that positive relationships *can* be established with parents even in the context of significant safeguarding concerns; and (ii) the *constituent elements* of these positive relationships.

Project X

Project X is an IFSS located within the Children's Services Directorate of a local authority in northern England. The service was established in 2003 with the aim of providing service to families whose children are at risk of being removed from their care. The service is premised upon a Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) model and is heavily influenced by the American Family Preservation model. The team comprises four practitioners: one family support worker, two social workers and a principal social worker who also manages the team. The staff group has had previous experience of working within the local authority's child protection and initial assessment teams and has received specialist SFBT training. Throughout the project's intervention, the project worker liaises closely with the case-holding social worker. All child protection concerns are explicitly addressed as part of the work, and both risks and protective factors are assessed and monitored throughout.

Family Preservation Services (FPSs) have been a form of intervention in the USA since the 1970s. Services primarily provide short-term, intensive services designed to prevent the compulsory placement of children public care (Wells & Whittington 1993; Berry *et al.* 2000). There are substantial differences between individual FPSs (Littell 2001); however, they share many key features, namely the goals of preventing the placement of children with local authorities and 'strengthening' families achieved through working intensively over a short time period (Wells & Whittington 1993; Berry *et al.* 2000). There are a number of critical elements to the approach of Project X that are closely aligned to the FPS model. The team undertakes to respond to a referral within 24 hours, workers have small caseloads spending approximately 10 hours a week with the family, and a worker is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week via mobile phone. The project offers a short-term intervention, typically 6–8 weeks in duration, and is underpinned by a SFBT approach (cf. de Shazer 1985; Berg 1994). The team offers a flexible approach, working to negotiated goals that take account of the requirements of the child protection plan as well as needs as identified by the family. As such, their intervention incorporates both 'practical assistance' (home repairs, domestic activities, budgeting) but also, utilizing techniques from SFBT, provides 'therapeutic' intervention. At the end of their involvement, a 'Moving on Plan' is developed which aims to ensure that other services are in place to enable continued, although less intensive, support.

METHOD

This study was commissioned by Project X in recognition of the importance of hearing parents' perspectives on their service. The study was an exploratory qualitative case study; therefore, rather than providing 'what works' evidence per se, the findings provide insights into service characteristics that were

important to its users. A purposive sampling method was used to identify participants for qualitative interviews. First, this allowed the researcher to attempt to capture the array of circumstances of the service users, and second, it allowed the researcher to attempt to capture typical responses, as well as responses from subgroups of participants (Patton 2002). To identify the sample, and following ethical approval from the agency, the project supplied a full anonymized list of families it had worked with since inception, categorized into three groups. These groups reflected the outcome following their engagement with the project:
1. families where, following the project intervention, children had successfully remained at home;
2. families where, following the intervention of the project, the children were removed from their parents' care and entered the looked-after system; and
3. families where children were currently in the looked-after system but, following the project intervention, had been returned to their parents' care.

Following this, 10% of families from each group were randomly selected for inclusion in the study, giving a sample of 20 families. Four were families whose children were returned home from the care system (group 3). Five were families where, following intervention, the children had entered the looked-after system (group 2), and 11 were families where, following intervention, the children had successfully remained at home (group 1). In cases where the family had moved out of the area or were not contactable, they were substituted by another family in the same category.

Each selected family was sent a letter outlining the research and inviting them to take part. This was followed by a telephone call and a visit to the family home to explain the purpose of the evaluation. Following the Economic and Social Research Council's ethics framework (Economic and Social Research Council [ESRC] 2005) and given the potential vulnerability of the participants, the principle of voluntarism was particularly important. Each potential respondent was clearly informed of what participation in the study involved and that their consent could be withdrawn at any point.

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with those who had consented to take part. All interviews were carried out in the service user's home. The researcher from Lancaster University, whilst being familiar with the project, had no prior knowledge or relationship with any of the participants. As a qualified social worker previously working with children and families, the researcher appreciated the resonance

between social research and practice (Thomas & O'Kane 2000). The research interview, like the social work visit, is a site where the interviewer and interviewee co-participate in the construction of knowledge; thus, rather than viewing the skills of interview as 'the art of excavation', the interview was grounded in dialogue (Mason 2002, p. 227). An attempt was made to encourage the interviewees to narrate and give context rather than to merely give generalized responses (Mason 2002). Attempts were made both to confirm the researcher's understanding of the parent's responses and to attempt to convey respect for them and their experiences. Time was taken at the beginning of each interview to ensure the participant was clear about the process and, as far as possible, to put the interviewee at ease.

Of the 20 families originally consenting to take part, five were subsequently unavailable. Of these, two were from group 2, two from group 3 and the last from group 1. This inevitably impacted on the representative nature of the data. However, given that this is a hard-to-reach sample, limitations in achieving representation were likely. In total, 20 interviews were carried out with adults from 15 families:

- nine families in which the children had stayed with their families following the conclusion of work with Project X (group1);
- three families where the children had later been taken into the looked-after system by the local authority (group 2); and
- three families where the children were successfully returned from the looked-after system to their birth families after the involvement of Project X (group3).

Of the participants, the majority (14) were mothers, five were fathers and one was a grandmother. The majority of parents were single parents, white females, with only five males in the sample. All interviewees, except one Asian heritage participant, were from a white British background. Each interview lasted between 20 and 50 min and was audio recorded. In acknowledging the subjectivity of the researcher and in keeping with the study's commitment to representing the service user voice, all participants were subsequently sent a summary of the research findings for comment. A full report was produced and discussed with the project, the details of which will inform its future work.

It is acknowledged that there were a number of limitations to the study. First, a small-scale, single-site study is limited in terms of generalizability. Second, the accounts of the participants are necessarily

retrospective, which can limit their authenticity (Forrester 2008b). Third, as Hall & Slembrouck (2009) remind us, communication between professional and service user is complex, and research interviews may not provide full details of the complexities of this talk. Omitting children from the study was a significant decision, one taken after considerable thought. The importance of hearing the child's voice in social work practice and research is a critical issue. However, careful consideration must be given to ensure that this is achieved in a *meaningful*, rather than tokenistic, way, and this requires careful thought, preparation and skill. Research design should ensure children are seen as 'social actors', ascribing meaning to their own lived experiences rather than incomplete or less competent 'others' (Thomas & O'Kane 2000, James & Prout 2005). With this in mind, and given the limitations of time and budget, it was agreed that the study did not have the capacity to meaningfully include children as participants and, therefore, it was ethically more appropriate to focus solely on parents' experiences. However, capturing the voice of the children in these families and ensuring their views also influence future service planning is an important area for future research. Similarly, it is also noted that Project X workers' views would also have led to some important insights and again may be an area for future work.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned limitations, a case study of this nature is particularly useful when the target population might otherwise be 'hard to reach'. Most notably, the study reports the voices of parents whose children are 'at the edge of care' – whose views are often neglected in policy and research terms. Furthermore, it provides an indication of service user satisfaction which may be an important factor in gaining good outcomes for social work service users (Trotter 2008).

Following the interviews, the audio data were downloaded to a password-protected computer. After being anonymized, the interviews were transcribed and subsequently analysed. Using a process of 'open coding' (Strauss 1987), categories were identified within the data and assigned a code. Codes were developed or refined as part of this initial process (cf. Coffey & Atkinson 1996). The data within each code were subsequently analysed, and relationships were sought between them. This led to a process of data reduction as connections were identified between codes (cf. Rapley 2011). To counter subjectivity, transcripts were shared with an academic colleague acting in an advisory capacity, who examined a sample of the transcripts. Analyses were compared for convergence

of codes. Whilst during initial coding the researcher utilized the subjects' own terms, the condensing procedure necessarily resulted in a degree of interpretation. Thus, analytic choices were made by the researcher, and it is acknowledged that, ultimately, subjectivity cannot be entirely erased:

> codes are organising principles that are not set in stone, they are our own creations, in that we identify and select them ourselves (Coffey & Atkinson 1996, p. 32.)

To take account of this, close attention was paid to disconfirming cases to ensure final themes were representative and not idiosyncratic. Following transcription, the audio material was deleted.

Developing positive relationships

Analysis of the data showed that there was no difference in dominant themes between the three sample groups. Of considerable importance is the finding that the opinions about the project's work were *not* dependent upon the subsequent decisions of the local authority in each case. The data suggest that the quality of the relationship between the worker and parents/carers explains why even those parents whose children were compulsorily removed felt the service was of value. The interviews highlight some of the important constituent elements that enabled the relationship to work successfully. The following key themes emerged:
1. Respectful communication: trust, honesty and feeling safe;
2. A shared goal;
3. Practical assistance and understanding parents' own needs; and
4. Reliability: being available.

Respectful communication: trust, honesty and feeling safe

Open and honest communication has been recognized as central to effective relationships between service users and social workers. This is emphasised in *Working Together* (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2010, p. 135):

> The importance of developing a co-operative working relationship is emphasised so that parents or caregivers feel respected and informed; they believe staff are being open and honest with them and in turn they are confident about providing vital information about their child, themselves and their circumstances.

Intrinsic to this statement is the notion that an open and honest relationship is more likely to lead to better

protection for the child. This is because with this trust comes an increased likelihood of disclosure about difficulties the family may be facing, a point emphasized by others (e.g. McCurdy & Jones 2000; Gray 2002; Platt 2007) and which resonates strongly with the findings from this study.

As one mother remarked:

'It (the intervention plan) was mainly stipulated by Social Services (child protection plan). But then Project X came and asked what I wanted and we wrote it down on a piece of paper like aim things. (Project X worker) were brilliant, really, really good. He were very friendly. . . .'

The parents spoke of feeling 'heard' by their worker suggesting the workers' *active* listening skills. Particularly notable was the stark contrast that the families drew between the worker from Project X and other child care social workers (frequently described as 'social services') involved with the family. Notwithstanding the obvious constraints upon the case-holding local authority social worker ('social services'), distinctions that parents described between the workers in order to ascertain what, *from a service user perspective*, amounts to a good relationship are worth noting.

'Even though well you know, it's like a form of Social Services isn't it, I didn't feel threatened. With Social Services coming backwards and forwards I get really nervous and panicky I don't want to say anything wrong, but when [Project X worker] were around it were so calm and friendly . . . I felt like I could ask him for anything, tell him anything, no matter what it were, what it were for; without thinking 'oh I'm going to get judged" ' (mother).

Indeed, this mother expressed the 'comfort' she felt with the Project X worker:

'I felt that Social Services were pushy but Project X made me feel comfortable. They never tret [sic] me like a child. They made me feel like an adult whereas Social Services looked down on me and I had to do everything that they asked. They (Children's Services Family Support team) basically . . . they talked to me like I'm a kid and I know I'm not. I'm 23 with 4 kids.'

Despite clearly acknowledging their authority (Project X was 'like a form of Social Services'), this mother conveys how she felt respected and safe with the worker and how this was more likely to lead to a frank dialogue (*I felt like I could ask him anything*). The micro-interaction with the Project X worker was important ('calm' *and* 'friendly'). The importance of feeling heard is further illustrated by this mother:

'They looked at my needs and took account of my views' (mother)

These parents' comments illustrate that *how* the worker carries out his or her work with the parent is as important as *what* he or she actually does (Trevithick 2003), and that social work communication when characterized by honest and respectful exchange can enable quality relationships, even in the context of child protection concerns. It must be acknowledged that the position of Project X workers was different from that of the case-holding social worker; however, the parents do clearly see the worker as tied into a child protection agenda. That Project X is seen as 'a form of Social Services' appears to be overcome because parents do not feel 'threatened', rather they feel 'comfortable' with the worker.

A shared goal

As discussed, a significant body of research provides evidence that children achieve best outcomes when workers have constructive relationships with parents and work to agreed goals (Reder *et al*. 1993; Turnell & Edwards 1999; Platt 2007; Trotter 2008). The importance of shared goals has similarly emerged in this study. The data demonstrate that parents believed that there was an agreed objective, which appeared to have helped build relationships:

'I was a bit wary like . . . I didn't trust them, they'd been sent by social services, I was cautious like . . . don't want them in . . . but [Project X worker] was alright, she's really down to earth . . . I knew her job status. But she were always friendly and always discussed things with us all. All the reports she wrote were spot on couldn't fault wi' them she brought to show us, we knew all she were saying (about us).' (father)
'We made three steps – she was very clear about goals. And they have all happened. They were all things I wanted too' (mother)

Again, these excerpts illustrate that although the parent knew the 'job status' of the worker, the worker was able to move beyond this initial mistrust towards shared understandings (*all the reports she wrote were spot on . . . we knew all she were saying [about us]*). This illustrates that shared goals and understandings can be achieved even in the context of significant child protection concerns.

Practical assistance and understanding parents' own needs

For many years, child-centred discourse has dominated social work with children and families. Placing the 'child at the centre' has arguably resulted in the construction of parents as 'others' (Dominelli 2002). In contrast, the work of Project X focuses on the

family, and supporting parents are seen as intrinsic to the best outcomes for the children. One mother, for instance, said:

'I was very tired when [Project X worker] got involved and he showed me ways to build my energy level up, he showed me how to make a decent omelette. They didn't throw the goals in my face; they went through it all with me. He helped me with going to Doctors, even arranged for counsellor. Yeah he took me there, brought me back home . . . If I ever needed help with shopping and that. They were always just there for me' (mother)

The workers support the parents to achieve goals, emotional and practical. Practical work is not 'instructed' but, rather, carried out alongside the parents. Thus, the workers gained an understanding of the particular needs of parents (*I was very tired . . . he showed me ways to build my energy*) and difficulties. The data suggest that this was an important factor in building a trusting and cooperative relationship with parents:

'she would come and help me tidy up . . . not just tell me to do it . . . that meant a lot that did' (mother)

Another mother comments:

'I just didn't like social workers . . . As soon as they handed over to [Project X] I felt much better. I always felt like everything had to be spotless when [child protection social worker] came round. With Project X it didn't feel like that . . . she'd come in and make me a brew and she would help me out' (mother)

The act of 'making a brew' was important to this mother; not only did it act as a signifier of nurturing for the mother but it also took on additional significance when contrasted with her view of the social worker from the child protection team. This resonates with Platt's (2007) discussion of congruence and co-operation. The approach taken by Project X allows for a high degree of understanding. Small practical actions conveyed a sense of caring and genuine support (*she would help me out*).

Reliability: being available

'I'd rung (Project X) at 1 a.m. and they were there for me' (mother)

The working practices of Project X are such that workers carry small caseloads and a duty worker is available should the family experience a crisis. This availability also appears crucial in fostering a sense of trust:

'. . . she just stepped in, it were totally different (to other services), she were always there . . . I were able to contact them when needed to, like when A got sent down' (mother).

In addition, parents also commented on how their Project X worker often helped in ways that were beyond what the families themselves expected. Again, these 'acts of kindness' were highly significant in building a strong relationship:

'She did a lot of running around for me . . . nothing were too much trouble' (mother).
'She came round with Calpol at 10 p.m. at night' (mother).

This gesture (providing a child's medicine in the evening) became an indicator of trust and reliability – a feeling that their worker was on the journey with them.

Many of the features that the service users of Project X valued were made possible by the working practices of this team. Inherent in the project's design is an emphasis on direct contact with the families and a great deal of flexibility in these arrangements. Clearly, there is a glaring disparity between this and the working practices of many highly pressurized local authority child care social workers. There is no doubt that this service is resource intensive, but it is also clear that the current constraints on practice in child care social work has resulted in workers spending less and less time in the family home. Small, mundane actions (bringing Calpol, making a brew) that bring service user and worker together appear intrinsic to trust formation.

DISCUSSION

helping families involves working with them and therefore the quality of the relationship between the family and professionals directly impacts on the effectiveness of help given (Munro 2011, p. 19)

This quote from the recently published interim report from the Munro (2011) Review signals a growing consensus of the centrality of relationship-based practice in social work. Munro echoes strong messages from the final report of the national Social Work Task Force (2009) and Social Work Reform Board (2010) that drew together views from a range of stakeholders. It is within this context that the findings of this study became more widely relevant to social work practice with children and families. Again, as highlighted by Munro (2011), social work involves making sense of other people's lives, and the vehicle for achieving that understanding is the relationship.

It is important to recognize the positive relationships described by service users in this study derived from a specialist project where, arguably, the workers enjoyed greater scope and flexibility for working closely with families. However, the skills and qualities described offer much good learning with regard to *the interactional elements of practice*. Moreover, there is only a limited body of research that pays attention to parental perspectives (Hunt 2010). In this study, giving voice to *parents* whose children are 'at the edge of care' is important, given this under-representation.

The study's findings crucially elucidate some constituent elements of relationship-based practice, namely respectful communication, a shared goal, practical assistance and reliability. Here, we have seen that trust is formed over time, through relatively mundane actions, (*showed me how to make a decent omelette*), and availability that appears to convey genuine support (*they were there for me; nothing were too much trouble*). Under these conditions, this study illustrates that the parents were willing to share openly and engage in shared negotiated goals. These findings offer a challenge to the notion 'non-engagement'. As Lefevre (2008, p. 89) points out, the relationship formed is 'key to engagement'. Thus, engagement with 'hard-to-reach' families must be considered as a two-way process that relies largely on the worker possessing the 'skills to reach'.

Within the field of child protection and family support, much of the work takes place within the private and sensitive space of the family home. In contrast to other studies, where all too often resistance is a common feature (Ferguson 2009), within this study, initial mistrust (*sent by social services*) is overcome. In fact, there was evidence to suggest that the worker was usually welcomed into the family, even in the case of unannounced visits. Here, Forrester's work (2008a) is useful; he points out that resistance can be seen as a product of the interactions between client and professional and is therefore influenced by the behaviour of *both*. From the perspective of parents, this study demonstrates the importance of workers having the time and the skill to move beyond this resistance. The findings from this study suggest crucially that it was the trust, openness and reliability communicated by the worker that facilitated a process whereby the family 'gave permission' for the worker to confront difficult issues.

Whilst the notion of working within a relationship may appear straightforward, this assumption belies the complexity of human interaction (Ruch 2010).

This study has begun to tease out some of the important elements of effective face-to-face work; however, this remains an under-researched area. If social work is going to reclaim relationship-based practice in the spirit of the Munro Review, a better understanding of the detail of these interactional elements of effective practice is needed.

Whilst, as Munro (2010, p. 9) asserts, 'there was no golden age', there is substantive evidence that the increase in bureaucratic procedure, brought about under the New Labour's modernization agenda, has undermined relationship-based practice by curtailing both professional discretion and the time available for direct work with families (Howe 1998; Parton 2008; Broadhurst *et al.* 2010; Wastell *et al.* 2010). In a culture of performance management, as Ruch (2005) argues a 'leap of faith' is required to adopt contemporary relationship-based models, and what is more, practitioners may need to revisit and develop their skill and confidence in this approach. To achieve this goal, detailed research that identifies the elements of these interactional aspects of practice, in particular in the family home, is urgently required (Ferguson 2009).

CONCLUSION

Early indications from the government are that concerns to relax bureaucratic requirements and reclaim direct work with families are being taken seriously. Commenting on the Munro Review, Tim Loughton, the Children's minister, said he hoped it would get social workers back on the front line rather than 'shackled to their procedure manuals and computers' (Press Association 2010). Under the auspices of the Munro Review, several local authorities are currently piloting flexible timescales, as a first step in reclaiming 'professional judgement'.

These developments offer some hope, but they must also be seen in the context of the government, which is making unprecedented cuts to the public sector. As others have argued, relationship-based models of practice provide an opportunity for practitioners to engage with the complexities of service users' inner and outer realities, and this undoubtedly requires investment and commitment to engaging in the emotional aspects of the work (Trevithick 2003; Ruch 2005). This study offers a timely reminder that the word 'relationship' tells us little about the important aspects of that interaction and how complex and skilled 'the art of relationship' can be.

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NOTE

1 For the purposes of this paper, the interviewees will be referred to using the general descriptor of 'parents'; for details of participants, please see methodology.