

Pilot research project

**Cultures of Listening in Child Protection:
Researching the experience of listening and decision-making in multi-agency practice**

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1) Project outline:

Cultures of Listening in Child Protection: Researching the experience of listening and decision-making in multi-agency practice

The term ‘cultures of listening’ captures the idea that child protection agencies, and those working within them, each have different practices and values that influence how they listen. Here listening is not just understood as how they hear, or how they use specific skills when talking to children/families; but also how they make sense of-, record and share information when working with families/children, colleagues within their own and other agencies.

Such ‘cultures of listening’ are in part determined by policy, statute and training. But they are also shaped by each professional’s personal experience of doing their job in the context of:

- continuous radical reform of practice;
- a persistent tendency of government, media and policy makers to blame front line workers for problems with practice, thus undermining professional confidence;
- adverse media reporting and public opinion;
- long term austerity measures that have increased case loads and eroded working conditions;
- introduction of the charge of ‘willful neglect’, which further raises the stakes for those working in child protection.

The impact this has on front line workers’ confidence and experience, and how it shapes the resulting practices- and cultures of listening, is not well understood and has not been researched in detail. Further, there is a lack of institutional and public appreciation for the personal, emotional and professional skill, cost, effort and risk involved in this work, how best to support workers and how to systematically foster existing good practice (see p. 8/9 of this document).

This research aims to generate a detailed picture of what it means for front line workers to listen at a time when policy and practice are under constant public scrutiny, as well as in permanent transformation, while also being affected by austerity measures and decreasing resources, raising the risks and stakes for those delivering frontline services (Ferguson 2015).

Aims and outcomes of this pilot study:

- create a more systematic picture of existing practices- and cultures of listening in child protection work;
- create an opportunity for front line workers from different agencies to collaboratively reflect on the cultures of listening they are part of in order to
 - explore what constitutes, hinders and promotes good listening within and between agencies;
 - contribute to the development of a toolkit for listening to share good practice;
- inform policy and public opinion by contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the important and difficult work child protection workers do, and how best to support it;
- inform a larger research project into cultures of listening by helping test and improve methods and research questions.

2) Information for participants: Methods and data collection

1. **Shadowing training courses and interviewing practitioners:** between February 2015 and December 2017 Dr Motzkau interviews professionals in the field and shadows training courses for social workers and police officers including those about 'active listening skills', case conferences for senior social workers, junior social workers, other child care and child protection professionals involved.
2. **Audio diaries** (uncertainty logs): 12 safeguarding children practitioners will keep audio diaries over a period of 6 weeks between March 2016 and December 2017.
 - a. *uncertainty log:* participants are provided with small, easy to operate, recording devices (password protected), and are asked to audio record, at the end of every working day (or at intervals they find suitable), their impressions of what the day was like – in particular what instants/moments/cases of uncertainty they have encountered, how this manifested, how they experienced these and acted as a result.
 - b. **Note:** You are **not expected to record any sensitive or identifiable information!** The audio recorders are password protected (in case of loss).
Method of recording: audio recorded logs will be transcribed.
3. **Listening Workshop:**
 - a. all participants are invited to a one day event held in winter 2017 (date and location to be agreed, travel expenses covered);
 - b. purpose: Dr Motzkau will chair a collaborative
 - i. review and discussion of selected examples (anonymised) from the data collected so far ('uncertainty vignettes'). These are presented in the form of audio collages made up of examples from the audio diary recordings (re-recorded by actors to ensure anonymity);
 - ii. discussion of practice experience
 - c. attending this meeting will count towards participants' ongoing training, practice reflection and supervision portfolio.

Method of recording: the meeting will be audio recorded and transcribed.

Expected time commitment:

Interview: will take up to 1 hour and is audio recorded (areas for discussion sent and agreed in advance).

Audio diaries: those recording audio diaries are free to decide how much/when to record, but should expect to spend approximately 1 - 5 minutes each day recording an entry (or, if they chose to record at more irregular intervals, a total of 10min per week; approx. 1 hr in total).

Listening workshop: this is a one day event (5hrs) which requires 1hr advance preparation (reading), but you will be able to record attendance against your ongoing practice reflection, training and supervision portfolio.

3) Data protection, ethics and consent:

Data confidentiality, use and protection:

1. All data collected and the identity of participants will be strictly confidential. All data will be fully anonymised at the point of transcription/collation and will only be circulated and used in anonymised form.
2. Data use is restricted to the designated research purpose, as outlined in this document (this includes analysis and publication in academic and practice contexts for reporting and dissemination). All recordings and files will be stored safely and treated according to the Open University research data storage/protection guidelines.
3. Listening workshop: Data presented at this session will be fully anonymised. Prior to the session participants will be informed individually about the planned use of examples from their data set, and they are free to withhold their consent.

Ethics approval:

This pilot research has been approved by the Open University research ethics committee
<http://www.open.ac.uk/research/ethics/human.shtml>

Freedom to withdraw consent:

You are free to withdraw your consent to participating in this research at any point during data collection and up to December 2017, when this project ends. You can withdraw without giving any reasons. As a result collaboration will cease immediately (if consent is withdrawn during data collection). Further, up to February 2018 you can request for some, or all, of the data collected in relation to you, or recorded by you, to be removed from the data set and destroyed.

Access to data and findings:

Participants can request a full transcript of their own data. This is a pilot study so there will not be a formal report and findings will largely be used to inform a bid for funding for a larger research project.

However, Dr Motzkau will prepare an informal report that will be made available to you. Participants will also get access to academic research publications that result from this pilot study.

Research steering group:

Work to develop this pilot project and the overall research project is guided by a set of individuals with senior roles in child protection practice, research and/or teaching.

This includes:

- Ann Potter (senior safeguarding consultant, independent; formerly Barnardos);
- Dr Gofred Boahen, Lecturer in Social Work, London Metropolitan University.
- Prof. Nigel Parton (Professor of Applied Childhood Studies, Huddersfield University);

4) Short biography of lead researcher:

Johanna Motzkau, PhD, CPsychol., Dipl. Psych.

- PhD at Loughborough University, German Diplom in Psychology at the Freie Universität Berlin, Germany;
- specialised in theoretical psychology, child psychology and forensic psychology; background in philosophy and German Kritische Psychologie (Critical Psychology);
- *Practice*: worked extensively with children at risk of sexual exploitation as part of her training at the Institute for Forensic Psychiatry (Free University Berlin, Germany). This included interviewing parents/carers and child witnesses (predominantly alleged victims of sexual abuse), psychometric assessment, and providing expert testimony on the credibility of child witnesses in criminal court (using Statement Validity Analysis, and approach approved by German criminal courts).
- *Research*: interested in theoretical issues in psychology, children's rights, child sexual abuse, gender, and the way in which psychological knowledge is used in legal and policy contexts. Past work has compared child witness practice in England/Wales and Germany and explored the history and theory of suggestibility research in relation to child witness practice (PhD thesis, Loughborough University, 2007: Cross-Examining suggestibility: Memory, Childhood, Expertise);
- contributed to consultation documents by the BPS on fighting sexual offences in Northern Ireland and has provided consultation for family law and child protection agencies in Australia.
- organized Research-Practice Conference 'Lost in Application', in collaboration with Barnardos (2009): <http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/lostinapplication/>
- recent blog in openDemocracy, "**Historical Abuse: Moral panic, witch-hunt, scapegoat?**" see
 - <https://opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/dr-johanna-motzkau-dr-nick-lee/historical-abuse-witch-hunt-scapegoat-moral-panic>
- Publications include:
 - Motzkau, Johanna (2011). Around the day in eighty worlds: Deleuze, suggestibility and researching practice as process. In: Stenner, Paul; Motzkau, Johanna; Cromby, John and Yen, Jeffery eds. Theoretical Psychology: Global Transformations and Challenges. Toronto, Canada: Captus Press.
 - Motzkau, J. F. (2010). Speaking up against justice: Credibility, Suggestibility and Children's Memory on Trial. In: P. Reavey & J. Haaken. Memory Matters. London: Psychology Press.
 - Motzkau, J. F. (2007, January). Matters of Suggestibility, Memory and Time: Child Witnesses in Court and What Really Happened [42 paragraphs]. Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research [On-line Journal], 8(1), Art. 14.

See <http://oro.open.ac.uk/view/person/jfm238.html> to access more publications.

For staff profile see:

http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/main/staff/people-profile.php?name=Johanna_Motzkau

5) Why this research?

Extended background information

Since the 1980s awareness for child abuse and neglect has increased dramatically and welfare as well as justice services have engaged in significant positive reform efforts (e.g. improving multi-agency practice and introducing special measures for child witnesses). Still, child protection in England/Wales has repeatedly been in crisis for decades. This project is inspired particularly by the effects of ongoing radical reform of the child protection systems against the backdrop of austerity politics and an increasingly dominant narrative of 'blame and failure' directed at front line practitioners by politicians and the public:

- (1) the Munro report (2012), has recommended the removal of statutes and targets to create more flexible, confident approaches to social work, as well as suggesting that stronger multi-agency practice is needed; the report was much praised, but its recommendations were not implemented in full and the resulting changes receive very mixed reviews;
- (2) severe cuts to police and social services budgets mean staff shortages, and services are having to raise thresholds for intervention;
- (3) in 2015 then Home Secretary Theresa May stated that 'denial and inaction' of front line staff were to blame for failures and declared that this will be tackled by "extending the new offence of willful neglect to those who work in children's social care, education and elected politicians" (carrying a maximum penalty of five years' imprisonment).

This indicates that well evidenced review and guidance did not have the desired effect to improve practice, while practitioners' working conditions get increasingly difficult and the stakes for delivering good outcomes are rising.

Reports from both police and social services backgrounds point to persistent problems with child safeguarding work in welfare and justice contexts. But they also express concern about the lack of knowledge about why well thought through procedure does not seem to work. E.g. "Understanding why evidence based, well thought through procedures and guidance do not result in good practice is a conundrum which requires further thought." (HMIC 2015, p. 75).

The reports further highlight insights from cases in Rochdale and Rotherham (where large numbers of children and young people were sexually exploited for years, and even though some of them had reported this to police or social services, claims were not investigated). These underline the key role of listening, as they indicate that

1. **Listening is active:** evidence consists largely of what children/young people report, and that for this to become effective it needs to be enacted. This means the active use of personal and professional discretion and curiosity, as well as communication between individual professionals and agencies. Hence *listening* in this context is more than just hearing what is said; it is *active listening*; it is hearing what is being said as well as what is *not* said, and acting on it in a multiagency context.
2. **Listening is a finite resource that carries personal cost and risk:** it is time consuming in the present and raises the prospect of future risk and effort; there is reason to believe that performance varies within and across agencies; each practitioner can only handle a limited number of cases; and practitioners require continuous support and guidance to be able to deal with the inevitable uncertainty handling such cases brings.

Listening is not well understood or researched:

Importantly, the reports unanimously find that while very good practice is evident in all agencies, very little is known about how this good practice comes about and what conditions are needed to allow it to thrive. They highlight that individual workers' approach to engaging with children and colleagues across agencies seems key to successful practice, yet, as the HMIC report spells out, too little is known about why and under what conditions such good practice can thrive. "Strengths identified in the report merit fresh attention: the impact of good quality policing by skilled, engaged, empathetic staff cannot be overstated. (...) Identification of the conditions in which this behavior can thrive would help extend good practice!" (HMIC, 2015, p. 80).

It is this gap in knowledge the proposed research aims to address by focusing in detail on practitioners' experiences of *listening*, at a time when the stakes for front line child protection workers are rising and policy, practice and public perception are in constant transformation.

Getting an experience based picture of what shapes the cultures of listening practitioners find themselves in, and how these hinder or promote their work, could contribute to identifying and broadening existing good practice, as well as showing how unproductive cultures of listening can be tackled collaboratively and without contributing to the 'narrative of blame and failure' that has long driven policy developments in this field (Parton 2015).

Literature and Reports referred to in this section include:

- Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC, 2015, 'In Harms Way: The police's role in keeping children safe')
- The Children's Commissioner (2015) "Protecting Children from Harm"
- Smith, N., Dogaru, C. Ellis, F. (2015) "Hear me. Believe me. Respect me."
- Parton, N. (2015). The Contemporary Politics of Child Protection. *Child Abuse Review*.