

A report of a child observations



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

For confidentiality reason, I will refer to the child as A. Child A is a three years and two months old male, from a working class, mixed heritage background: mum is Indian and dad is English. He is a middle child with an older brother aged four and a nine months old sister. Parents are married and they all live together. A naturalistic, non-participant, target child observation was done for an hour a week over a six weeks period in a co-educational private nursery; with a class size of 20 children ages between 3-4, and 3 teachers.

Structured observation is done in a natural social setting to observe predefined activities. The avoidance of premature interpretation, without seeking to understand the context in which behaviour occurred is an important skill needed in structured observation. It eliminates the risk of instant judgement and moral absolutes. All aspects of observed behaviour according to Sheppard (2006) as cited in Adams et al (2009: 211), “ must be rigorously explained, analysed and contextualised”.

Objectivity in drawing conclusion by taking an observational stance is an invaluable skill. Objectivity is needed in systematically evaluating observed behaviour, context and situations in an unbiased, factual way. Heightened self-awareness of personal feelings, experiences, attitude and values and its effect on judgement needs to be recognised (Trowell and Miles 2004).

Effective communication skills enhance empathic understanding of observed behaviour and its social context. Direct observation of non-verbal behaviour adds information about emotional states. Social workers need to be attentive to non-verbal cues e. g. tone of voice and link behaviour with emotions that

might have caused it (Wilson et al 2008). Communication skills are the blinding blocks to forming relationships based on trust and confidence. Communication skills assist service users to modify their unrealistic expectations and clarify the respective goals (Thompson 2003).

Tolerating uncertainty is another important skill. It develops the “not knowing” way of practice: Briggs (1992) as cited in Wilson et al (2008: 106) states that “the process of giving emotional attention to what is observed and the deliberate delaying of ‘knowing’ facilitates in practice the kind of measured assessment that is blocked if stereotypes and prejudice are unthinkingly adopted”. The act of “not knowing” reduces ineffective hasty intervention because it helps social workers to reflect on situations (Tanner 1998).

Information gathering and documentation skill is invaluable in structured observation. Observed behaviours should be recorded in an accurate, factual and chronological manner; recording as soon as possible as this affects how much is recalled; the language used to code behaviour and experiences is also important: this minimises the risk of misinterpretation and the reliability of the information. Confidentiality should be adhered to in regards to all information (Thompson 2003).

Theoretical framework illuminates social workers’ understanding of behaviour thereby enhancing the appropriate use of social work strategies and intervention. Developmental psychology is concerned with understanding the interaction between individuals and their environment, and the impact this has on their long-term development. Crawford and

Walker (2003) as cited in Ingleby (2010) highlighted the impact biological and sociological perspective has on child development. Social workers work in a complex society dealing with individuals, family and communities.

In child development, the nature versus nurture debate is vital, if the extent to which environmental and/or heredity factors that affects child development is to be established. Nature looks at the impact of heredity factors whiles nurture concentrates on the environmental factors on the development of a child (Bee and Boyd 2010).

Attachment theory seeks to explain the effect social emotional interaction has on cognitive development. Bowlby researched the impact maternal deprivation has on development. He concluded that from birth to two years is the critical period in which emotional bond is formed; otherwise the impact will be an irreversible damage in later life.

Ainsworth developed this theory further by her “ Strange Situation” research and stated that the mother is not the only attachment figure as children can form close emotional bond to other attachment figure. She conducted a research on mothers and babies and concluded that emotional bond is formed with other attachment figure depending on the emotional responsiveness of the attachment figure. She identified four types of attachment: secure, ambivalent, avoidant and anxious attachment (Gross 2010).

Child A exhibited signs of distress during separation with mum; however, his teacher was able to comfort him. According to Ainsworth, child A would be described as been securely attached. He felt secure and able to depend on

the carer due to her emotional responsiveness to his needs. A child displayed a secure attachment toward his mother based on trust. This according to Erickson and Freud can be accounted for by the effective bonding with his mother during the critical period. For secure attachment to be formed, according to Freud, the child's gratifications should have been sufficiently satisfied (Gross 2010).

On the nurture side of the debate, is behavioural theories, child development is influenced by environmental factors and the unconscious they believe is of little importance. According to Watson 1913 as cited in Bee (2010), nurture plays an important part through the manipulation of environmental factors. This was demonstrated in his research on Little Albert and the effect of classical conditioning. Behavioural approach focus on the influences environment factors has on overt behaviour. According to behaviourist, an individual is a 'clean slate' and the environmental factors are the 'chalk' and the individual holding the chalk: what is written on the 'slate' is decided by the individual holding the 'chalk' (Ingleby, 2010, p. 5). An individual identity is therefore shaped by the interaction between the individual and the environment; this theory can be associated with psychologist such as Skinner, Watson and Pavlov.

Child A on arrival at the nursery knew where to hang his coat: his behaviour was positively affirmed by his mum with praise and a smile. A has therefore been conditioned to associate this behaviour with positive affirmation. This can be linked to the work of Skinner known as "operant condition," this refers to the link that exists between positively affirming behaviour that reinforces a particular "stimulus" (Ingleby, 2010).

According to Freud, the thought process of both the conscious and the unconscious; and early experiences can be accounted for human development. Through the manipulation of the thought process which he called the: 'id' which regulate biological needs; the 'ego'- social self and the 'super ego'- our social identity, individual develops through the six stages: oral, anal, phallic, latency, puberty and genitality (Ingleby, 2010, p. 8). Freud stages of development are more to do with the maturation than the environmental interaction.

However, according to Piaget cognitive development stages, the interaction with the environment accounts for more. His stages of development are sensori-motor, pre-occupational, concrete and formal. As children, interact with their environment: the biological need; the developments of self and social identity are met. At the preoccupation stage, symbolic thought is developed and the child is seen as egocentric. In contrast, according to Vygotsky's, cognitive development is influenced by an older experienced individual who act as a scaffold. Play is important if a child is to pass through this stage successfully: as it encourage interaction and the imitation of adult role (Wilson et al 2008).

Erickson's stages of development though similar to Freud's in the development of social identity, differ as his qualitative distinct stages expand through the lifespan. An example of this is the development of ego, which occurs in the autonomy vs. shame, doubt stage between the ages of 2-3. According to Freud the anal stage, is where children are susceptible to low self-esteem and reduced autonomy as they learn social norms and acquire new skills. A relationship based trust, which is developed in the previous

stage, between the child, and carer is critical for emotional well-being (Bee an Boyd, 2010).

During the observation and when relating observed behaviours to psychological theories I was petrified of mirroring my own early experiences and the influence this may have on my behaviour and responses to the observed behaviour . On reflection, at the start of the observation I felt anxious and concentrated on trying to relate psychological theories to observed behaviour. However, with time I became less anxious in my role as an observer. I felt happy at how responsive the carers were to the needs of the child especially during separation with parent and during play.

When interpreting the result of my observation, I was aware of my own assumptions about children’s behaviour based on my knowledge and experience of child development and socio-cultural influences.

“ Social workers bring to their profession not only their skills and knowledge but also their ’emotional history, values, commitment to social justice, biases, attitudes, anxieties, self-concept, protective instincts, cultural background and social identity” (Mandell 2008: 244).

An example of this, is attachment theory which according to Boyum and Parke (1995) when done in isolation does not give a true account of the type of attachment, as it depends on how emotionally expressive the cultural context is. I have also learnt to recognise the child’s position in the family and nursery, as well the wider social context and appreciate the diversity of these networks and the different theories that can aid my understanding of child development.

This experience has been invaluable: it contributes towards my personal development, by given me insight knowledge of theorising; enhanced my reflective ability including the importance of feedback; and the importance of self-awareness. It also enhances my understanding of the unavoidable impact of the emotional content of the interactions between social worker and service users; for example during the observation I felt isolated, confused, happy, anxious and frustrated at times. This experience also helps me develop and understand the importance of maintaining professional boundaries.

Reflexivity was the final stage of this reflective journey, the combination of reflection and critical reflection and the understanding of my own reflective journey (Wilson et al 2008).