

Case study on observations of a child



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For confidentiality reason, I will refer to the child as A. Child A is a male, from a working class family, mixed heritage background: mum is Indian and dad is English. He is three years and two months old, a middle child with an older brother aged four and a nine months old sister. Parents are married and they all live together. The Tavistock Model of observation was used, as it helps social work student to reflect upon situations before intervening. A naturalistic observation was carried out in a co-educational private nursery; with a class size of 20 children ages between 3-4, and 3 teachers. To respect the rights of the carers and child A's parent, consent was acquired. A target child observation was conducted for one hour a week over a six weeks period. To ensure the ecological validity and reduce “ demand characteristics” an undisclosed “ non-participant observation” was carried out.

Observations provide a means of objective measurement of a wide range of behaviours as they occur in the natural environment. The use of direct observation allows for the description and evaluation of specific behaviours. Observational data have greater external or ecological validity. Behavioural observation can provide information about the purpose or cause of a given behaviour by evaluating its origin and consequent events that maintain the target behaviours.

Structured Observation

The most important skill needed for structured observation is an understanding of developmental theories and the effect environmental factors have on development. All aspects of observed behaviour according to Sheppard (2006) as cited in (Adams, Dominelli, & Payne, 2009, p. 211), “ must be rigorously explained, analysed and contextualised”.

A structure observation has been defined as a detached rigorous approach adopted by researchers in a naturalistic controlled observation. This approach according to——, produces an ecologically viable and reliable data free from a demand characteristics due to its scientific nature. Given the complexity of a scientific observation, and the constraints of time, only scientific aspect of behaviour is observed.

Objective- that is free from personal feelings or thoughts for example my previous experiences, attitude and values. In conducting the observation, I strive to avoid jumping into conclusion; making generalisation; expressing personal opinions; and labelling.

Listening skills- both verbal and non-verbal communication. 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.

Retaining the role of the observer- this was done by avoiding initiating or responding to the children.

Avoid premature interpretation, without seeking to understand the context in which behaviour occurred.

Accurate recording in a factual and chronological manner. This was especially helpful when relating observed behaviours to psychological theories.

Recording as soon as possible as this affects how much I was able recall and the language used to code behaviour and experiences was also important for understanding my material.

From a social work perspective, in order to gain useful information and reliable interpretation, a reflective approach has been used. Allows control of extraneous variables. Reliability of results can be tested by repeating the study. Provides a safe environment to study contentious concepts such as infant attachment. The implementation of controls may have an effect on behaviour. Lack of ecological validity. Observer effect. Observer bias.

Key psychology theories

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, p18) as cited in (Ingleby 2010, 74), highlighted the impact biological and sociological perspective has on child development. Social workers work in a complex society dealing with individuals, family and communities. For social workers to be effective practitioner, the ability of relating theories to practice must not be underestimated.

In the child development, the nature vs. 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.

Psychodynamic theory focuses on the nature side of the debate. Nature influences the societal norms especially in the classification of milestone development. This is evidence in the classification used by psychologist such as Freud in his classification of psychosocial stages of development.

According to Gesell, through maturation, the sequence of later development is determined. He used this term to describe, “ Genetically programmed sequential patterns of change” (H Bee and D Boyd, 2010, p. 5). The psychodynamic theory is based on the assumption that development is in stages and “ maturation is based on the inner conflicts and environmental demands”. According to Freud, the language and thought development can be accounted for by the “ egocentric” nature of a child. He divided his theory into psychosexual stages; the libido was seen as the most sensitive part at that stage. The observed child was fascinated about his toilet habit: this stage of development according to Freud was referred to as the anal stage

as the “ libidinal energy” is focused there. The observed displayed the anal stage with little or no signs of the previous stage, which according to Freud is known the oral stage. For Freud, “ a stage cannot be completed if the child’s need were not sufficiently met”.

Erikson like Freud is a psychoanalyst; he believes that development is through stages and that the successful interaction between the child and the environment accounts for the development. He unlike Freud believes the environmental demands accounts for more in comparison to maturation. The observed child display a secure relationship toward his mother based on trust. This according to Freud can be accounted for by the effective bonding with his mother during the critical period. Erickson stages of development

Ego Development Outcome: Autonomy vs. Shame

Basic Strengths: Self-control, Courage, and Will

During this stage children learn to master skills for themselves. They have the opportunity to build self-esteem and autonomy as they gain more control over their bodies and acquire new skills, learning right from wrong. It is also during this stage, however, that they can be vulnerable. If they are shamed in the process of learning important skills, they may feel great shame and doubt of their capabilities and suffer low self-esteem as a result.

The relationship between the child and carer is critical for emotional well-being. By responded in a loving way, the carer helps to build A’s self-esteem. He felt secure and ready to explore more through play and interacted well with both peers and carers. Erickson Expanded on Freud’s theories, he

believed that development is life-long. He emphasized that at each stage, the child acquires attitudes and skills resulting from the successful negotiation of the psychological conflict.

Basic trust vs. mistrust (birth – 1 year)

Autonomy vs. shame and doubt (ages 1-3)

Initiative vs. guilt (ages 3-6)

For secure attachment to be formed, according to Freud, the child's gratifications should have been sufficiently satisfied (Gross, 2010, p. 495).

Whilst carrying out this observation, child A was involved in solitary play. I noticed that A was very imaginative in his play and engaged in private speech, as he used pieces of Lego to make a train track.

According to Piaget's Stages of Cognitive Development, A should be in the pre-occupational where symbolism is used. " By about 2 years of age a child can let one object stands for (or symbolise) something else". During play, A would get upset if the Lego were not held in place. A did not act out his frustration as appropriate attention and recognition was given by the carer. A responded happily, smiled and said thank you.

Child A was dropped off at nursery at 8. 00 by his mother along with his older brother. He was very happy on arrival; he knew were to hang his coat and bag. His mum praised him and gave him a hug. A has therefore been conditioned by his mum as he associate getting a kiss and hug from mum, with hanging his coat and bag. BEHAVIOURISM-This behaviour can be linked

to the work of Skinner known as “ OPERANT CONDITIONING,” this refers to the link that exist between positively affirming behaviour that reinforces a particular stimulus” Ingleby (2009). He showed his mother and brother his friends and identified them by name. However there was a change in behaviour when he entered his class, he was very quiet asked his mother to stay. However, when his mother explained that she had to leave he started crying. His mother assured him and with a hug and a kiss said goodbye. His carer was then able to comfort him. After about 5 minutes he was settled and assisted himself to breakfast.

According to Bowlby and Ainsworth on attachment theory child A would be described as being securely attached. He exhibited distress when mother dropped him off, but because he has formed an attachment to the carer as well, she was able to comfort him. He felt secure and able to depend on the carer this is because A knows that she will provide comfort and reassurance, in times of need.

The observed child displays a secure relationship toward his mother based on trust. This according to Freud can be accounted for by the effective bonding with his mother during the critical period.

Secure Attachment-The carer was also seen as another attachment figure because of the behaviour, responsiveness and sensitivity of the carer. This was also demonstrated through play as the carer did not intrude but take the lead of the child and assisted when appropriate.

He independently buttered his bread and poured some milk. After breakfast, he informed his carer in a cheerful tone that he had finished his food. The

carer replied saying “ good boy”. He smiled and started putting away his cutleries and instructed a group of 3 boys and 2 girls to help tidy up. This observed behaviour has linked to:

Lev Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory

Children’s cognitive development is heavily influenced by social and cultural factors. Children’s thinking develops through dialogues with more capable people

Zone of Proximal Development: child A needed guidance during play by the skilled carer who acted as a scaffolding: by providing temporary support. Adults help children learn how to think by scaffolding, or supporting, their attempts to solve a problem or to discover principles. Scaffolding must be responsive to a child’s needs

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 by (H Bee and D Boyd, 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. The focus of the behavioural approach is on how the environment influences 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 is a theory that can be associated with psychologist such as Skinner, Watson and Pavlov.

Nature and nurture interaction is complex and both cannot independently shape a child's development. Rultter A, --- as cited in --- that nature should be considered by examining the “ vulnerability” and “ protective” factors effects on child development.

Stages of human development and there relevance to social work

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, p18) as cited in (Ingleby, 2010, p. 74), highlighted the impact biological and sociological perspective has on child development.

It is difficult to determine specific times when developmental changes occur, as they differ from person to person.

The importance of observing children

It gives a true and accurate account of the stages of development

It aids our understanding of child development

It provides evidence on our knowledge of what influences may affect development

A clear understanding of the value and theories of play

Observation helps us to fill in the gap between theory and practice.

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Fawcett (1996) describes the purpose of a child observation as: ‘ to develop professional competence in work with children and families...observation should help you understand children and their range of behaviour better, to reassess your own preconceptions on the subject’ (Fawcett 1996, cited in ‘ The Frame work for Assessment of children in need...)

objective

An increased sensitivity to children and a heightened awareness of the unique qualities of childhood

A greater knowledge of how Child A thinks, feels, view the world, and how this compares to developmental norms

A picture of child A, based on conditions that changes as new information added over time (Feeney, 2001, p. 107-112)

When interpreting the result of my observation,

I was aware of my own assumptions about children’s behaviour based on my knowledge and experience (i. e. child development, socio-cultural influences, individual experience, etc.)

The different perspectives that can contribute to a better understanding of the child’s behaviour.

I also learn to reflect on my feelings without distorting the observation.

I also learn to recognise the child’s position in his family and nursery, as well the wider social context and appreciate the diversity of these networks.

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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 about the process and I was beginning to feel relax 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 play. Following the death of Baby P, Laming (2009) recommended a full remodelling of social work training: good observation & analytic skills; development of emotional resilience; reflection on and analysis of what is observed.

Reflection according to Ruch (2000)

supports insight into: how personal background affects learning and practice;

the unavoidable impact of the emotional content of the interactions between social worker and client;

the experiences of the client

enables holistic approach to self and practice by integrating thinking and feeling

On examining attachment I believe it is important to examine how emotionally expressive the culture in question is only then can we build a true picture of the attachment of the child based on an anti-discriminatory theory base.

This experience has been invaluable as it contributes toward my personal development as it has enhanced my reflective and self-aware use of self which necessary for personal development and use of the professional self.

As started by Mandell (2008 p. 244) ‘ 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’

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.

Closely observing a child over time has given me insight knowledge of theorising. I was able to integrate theory with practice and an understanding of the variety and range of factors that have an impact upon children’s development and performance. The understanding of self, self-awareness and been reflective in practice and learning and acknowledging how my personal background may affect my learning and practice; Understanding 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 for example maintaining the role of an observer; and integrity in initiating the contact between the nursery and the parent of the child observed by been honest about my intention and maintaining

confidentiality. On the issue of seeking the consent of the child, I faced no dilemmas as the child was unable to give informed consent.