

Unit 1, Reading 2

Constructive first engagement: best practice in social work interviewing – keeping the child in mind

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Introduction

Interviews are increasingly common experiences for people in the world of work. In the world of social work the interview takes on an even greater significance. Few would disagree with Kadushin and Kadushin's (1997: 3) assertion that 'It is the most important, most frequently employed, social work skill'. The interview is often the central means by which social workers make person-to-person contact and a 'constructive engagement' with others in order to begin the process of working together. In this chapter I will be exploring a recorded interview between a social worker and a service user in order to illustrate the expertise involved in making a relationship and working to keep it going. The analysis draws upon 'constructivist' theoretical perspectives as a way of highlighting and understanding the everyday, but mostly unrecognised, critical best practice skills of interviewing in social work.

This is the first of two chapters that purposefully sit either side of the 'perspectives' and 'interventions' sections of this book. The intention is to illustrate the point that theory and practice are not separate but integrated aspects of social work practices. Theoretical perspectives can be drawn from practice interventions and vice-versa. Although the focus of analysis is upon 'engagement' in this chapter with 'negotiating and assessing' in the next, these are not discrete activities. In the same way I will argue that relationship making, assessment and negotiation are also

indivisible aspects of the social work interview. The analyses of the interview in these two chapters were created through a number of discussions between myself, as author, and Sally, the social worker. Sally is an experienced child care social worker. I was a social worker for twelve years in child care and adult mental health before becoming a social work lecturer. These reflective discussions were important in the writing of these chapters. I have argued elsewhere (Cooper, 2001) that establishing a participative involvement between people is essential for reflective practice learning as well as the understanding and analysis of direct practice with service users. There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, there are many interesting perspectives that could be drawn from just me analysing the interview. However, it would have lacked the practice-based point of view of Sally. I could only speculate about what she meant or what she was aiming to do by saying what she said. Sally could verify and add other ways of looking at it. In other words, my account would have lacked the richness of understanding that Sally could contribute. Exactly the same principle applies to the service user, Adam, as well. However, in writing this chapter, it wasn't possible to involve Adam and this has to be acknowledged as a limitation. Secondly, the approach to critical best practice taken in this chapter is one where meanings, understandings, and agreements are 'constructed' between those involved. In other words, the extent to which people are enabled and encouraged to participate in working relationships will determine the quality and degree of any subsequent understanding or agreement. Thirdly, it is a 'key role' of social work, as part of the new qualifying degree in the different nations of the UK, that people are supported to ensure their views are heard. This can only have an impact if people are included and enabled to participate in relationships that prioritise the processes of negotiation and agreement-making. In social work, although there may sometimes be non-cooperation and other limitations to

participation, these core social work processes remain constituted through talk and understood through analyses of language.

Constructing social work through relationships and language: We are what we speak

Relationships are crucial in social work. In social work, perhaps more than in any other professional activity, the quality of the relationship and ensuing communication virtually determines the nature of the work. The effect of this interdependence between the character of relationships and communication is often overlooked and needed re-statement thirty years ago,

What the relationship “means”; how it may influence the person’s motivation and behaviour; what its powers are in facilitating or hindering the person’s use of service and resources; in what ways our own feelings, thought, and actions affect that relationship - these are among the particulars we need to learn afresh or re-examine. They lie at the heart of whatever we do in the interchange between ourselves and another person (Perlman, 1979: 3).

This is not to assume that everybody wants, needs or can achieve the ‘counselling ideal’ of a secure and trusting therapeutic relationship. However, it is important to recognise the realities of different kinds of social worker / service user, or social worker / colleague, relationships, for different purposes, in different contexts, and affected by all sorts of apparent constraints, circumstantial factors, and histories. It is a core feature of a CBP perspective (Ferguson, 2003) that the conditions and structures surrounding practice are not necessarily fixed limits. Situations can be construed as either constraining or as opportunities to move forward. An examination of the ways in which social workers approach their work can be illustrative of good practice even in the most difficult of

circumstances. CBP, therefore, can be understood as essentially 'constructive' (Parton & O'Byrne, 2000) in being situated in specific contexts and yet amenable to skilled intervention and influence.

A constructivist approach to social work can be found within the key distinction between situational contexts and the different viewpoints of people involved in social situations. From the interplay between the two arises the scope for different 'ways of knowing' (Fisher, 1991) and, therefore, different ways of talking with people, negotiating and constructing definitions of problems and working out future solutions. Creative, constructivist approaches to situational re-definitions can be traced back to the seminal work of George Kelly and his psychology of personal constructs (Kelly, 1991). Kelly's theoretical emphasis, upon the ways in which individuals have unique realities within patterns of commonality and relationships, explicitly highlights and celebrates personal and cultural diversities. It is this recognition of difference and contrast that poses both an opportunity for service user advocacy as well as a challenge to the organisation of professional social work (Hugman, 1996). A core philosophical distinction in the understanding of social problems goes back a long way and is central to a constructivist approach. Fuller & Myers (1941) [cited in Parton & O'Byrne, 2000: 15] argued that 'social problems' are defined by a considerable number of persons as a deviation from some social norm which they cherish. However, such definitions are contestable and subject to change. So,

Every social problem thus consists of an objective condition and a subjective definition. The objective condition is a verifiable situation which can be checked as to existence and magnitude by impartial and trained observers. The subjective definition is the awareness of certain individuals that the condition is a threat to certain cherished values (Fuller & Myers, 1941: 320)

Subjective definitions are the different 'takes' that different people will bring to social situations. Assessments of social situations cannot be 'objective' in the same way that an engineer would assess a structure or a dentist would assess your fillings. The explanation for this is simple but challenging of 'westernised' ethno-centric assumptions about linear cause and effect. The simple but profound difference between engineers or dentists and social workers is that the boundaries of structures and teeth fillings can be clearly identified and they do not change when they are being assessed. This is not the case with people. Social situations and social relationships are complex and need to be understood holistically (Jack, 2001) within networks of different cultural communities and environments. These networks, in turn, are made up of individual people where each individual will embody a complex set of unique perspectives. These views and perspectives are likely to change through the relationships created by social work processes of engagement and assessment. In other words, processes of assessment are themselves increasingly recognised as constituting an intervention. It is almost an interpersonal impossibility for there not to be changes. What's more, if no changes of view or perception can be discerned in a social work intervention, then questions should probably be asked about its effectiveness or, indeed, its relevance. These processes are essentially constructive (Parton & O'Byrne, 2000). In other words, we are sustained, or constructed, as individuals in our roles and relationships through 'talk'. Talk helps us to locate, negotiate and maintain ourselves and our relationships within a reality that is 'social'.

To argue for the social construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1971) is to identify the importance of a social reality in contradistinction from a 'natural world' or concrete reality of external objects. Few people argue about whether or not unproblematic external objects, such as buildings and teeth fillings, actually exist or not. However, the meanings, or

significance, or importance, or implications, or, to re-use a much over-used word in social work, the 'values' that we place upon people and objects are of a different order. These levels of meaning are, in a literal sense, what makes our own world-view, of our ourselves and our relationships, 'meaningful'. These meanings arise out of the interactions between people, are both socially and personally constructed (Paris & Epting, 2004), and thereby constitute a social reality for those involved in construing those realities. In other words, the processes of making a relationship, sharing perspectives and working towards agreements about different ways of understanding situations, are all ways in which outlooks are shaped and social realities constructed. The difference, therefore, between people and objects is that human beings are interactive 'others' that, uniquely, change in response to interpersonal processes of contact and communication. This is of crucial significance for making sense of what happens between social workers and service users and for understanding how, together, people can begin to anticipate and negotiate constructively their options for their future. A robust social work relationship will maintain an awareness and, crucially, an acceptance of the values of different peoples' positions, views and perspectives. These values, in turn, will focus the social work task upon assessing the scope for negotiation and agreement about the ways forward in any future services and interventions. The social worker, as illustrated in this and the following chapter, is on the front-line of such negotiations.

Being 'on duty' or 'intake' in social work are phrases that you often hear in local authority social work agencies in the UK . The shorthand label describes and reflects a way of organising the initial stages of service delivery and is an important and often unrecognised 'gateway' to other services potentially available to agencies and members of the public. It usually involves offering a response to situations that have arisen, or are referred from another part of the welfare network, and that have been

initially defined as problematic in some way. This, of course, means that not only can the variety of 'presenting problems' be very wide, but that the scope for variations in 'problem definition' is similarly dynamic. The opening stages of contact or engagement with a situation can take many forms and involve a lot of inter-agency communication and liaison in addition to or before any direct work with service users. Throughout these processes, working rationales are formed to determine whether longer term work may be required. So, duty or intake work can often be a very exploratory activity needing enquiries and investigations and a lot of flexible 'thinking on your feet' in relatively uncharted territories with a strong sense of newness and, because of this, feelings of increased uncertainty. Some writers (Beresford & Croft, 2004, Parton, 1998) have argued that this sense of working with ambiguity captures an important essence of social work and needs to be recognised. For new social workers, this can be a source of anxiety as it involves negotiations and judgements that are necessarily tentative in a process of evolving 'hypotheses' of what is going on in situations. There may be a strong sense in which the reasons and justifications for social work involvement have not yet been fully understood or agreed by either the social worker or the service user. There are likely to be, then, a number of unresolved issues as the people involved start to draw maps of where they are in their working relationship and make sense of where each other is 'coming from'. This sense of exploration in new territories and the potential for creativity that it offers can be a source of great appeal to some social workers. It is skilful work demanding flexibility, stamina, tolerance of ambiguity and a desire to engage in tussles with people as positions are negotiated and re-negotiated over time. However, the practice requires skill and commitment within an organisational and political context that is not always conducive. A constructivist approach assumes uncertainty as a prerequisite for creativity. It prioritises the importance of change through processes of

communication and negotiation in social work practice. However, language can be 'taken for granted' (Timms, 1968) despite 'talk' being the very material making up the foundation, building blocks and complex structures and processes of social work. Gregory and Holloway (2005) have recently re-emphasised the argument that language helps to 'shape' our sense of professional identity and therefore influence our understanding of what it is we are doing when we 'do' social work. It is what is said; how it is said; why it is said; and when and to whom, that conveys the message and the meaning of social work relationships and agreements. Looking at our conversations therefore offers a gateway to analysis and understanding of how our lives are constructed by what we say (Shotter, 1993). For the purposes of learning about what happens in social work, an investigation of 'talk' offers a way into the under-recognised skills and strengths of the profession.

The interview and the analysis

This interview offers a privileged entrée into the dynamics of an ordinary social work interaction. Social work, for important reasons of privacy and confidentiality, is an activity that is rarely 'open' to examination. The interview is taken from a recording between the social worker, Sally, and the service user, a father, Adam. The interview was recorded, with Adam's permission, as part of a post-qualification, continuing professional development course that Sally was undertaking at University. The dialogue has been produced below as verbatim accounts of what was said, by whom and in response to what. I have also tried to convey some of the important features of how it was said as an illustration of the 'realness' of two people talking and negotiating about issues of great personal and professional importance. You will notice that the grammar and syntax is not perfect; most ordinary people, including social workers, rarely speak 'perfectly' all the time. However, the meaning is nonetheless conveyed in

real-life situations. This next section outlines a brief background to the situation that led to the interview.

Case Background

Both the family and the social worker are of White UK origin. The family unit consists of Jane 13; her sister Hannah 8; and their parents Leanne and Adam. The social services duty team for the locality were involved with the family after Jane had run away from home claiming that her father had 'kicked and punched' her. Sally had been part of the early investigation and had helped to draw up a 'written agreement' as a 'contract' for the initial intervention between the agency and the family. The effect of this was to exclude Adam from the family home pending an investigation. However, the family had a pre-booked holiday arranged – so Adam didn't go but stayed behind to look after the family's dog. Sally had met with Jane and her mother since they returned from holiday and this interview is the first with Adam since the incident with Jane and the family's return from holiday. Adam has come into the social services office at Sally's request.

How is she to play this one-to-one meeting? Although Sally was involved in the precipitating 'crisis' before the family went on holiday, there is at this early stage little background relationship to build upon and yet there are duties and professional obligations that Sally needs to pursue without really knowing what Adam's attitude or reaction will be. Sally's opening statement offers her recognition that there have been some difficulties at home.

S the reason I wanted to see you again today was that I would have had a chance, did have a chance, to talk with Jane, and mum there as well, and Hannah on Friday ... and I realise there's a lot of pressures at home – a lot of 'behaviour' from Jane ...

A yeah

S ... that most parents would find challenging...

A yep, told you so... [light laughter]

S yeah, but umm, ok, we went over this I guess last time, we were saying well there's still thresholds....

A yeah

S ... that you can't go over....

A yeah, I understand that

S ... but it's also about finding ways that might change the patterns at home.... yeah?....

At this early stage Sally is being quite formal and setting out the 'professional line' about 'boundaries', 'patterns', and is establishing a sense of control over the direction, or purpose and aims of the interview. A lot of social work interviewing advice or guidance would confirm this as an important aspect of starting an interview. Trevithick (2005: 140) for example, advises that 'planning and preparation are the hallmarks of a successful interview: failing to plan is planning to fail'. This is undoubtedly good advice although, as this interview demonstrates, in the pressured realities of practice situations there are probably limits to how much practitioners can rely upon planning and preparation. Quite often social workers need to be prepared for the unexpected. In this example, quite quickly, whatever plans Sally may have for this interview seem to be blown off course by Adam's rapid disclosure and implicit 'challenge' to the agenda. He wants Sally to know that things have changed

A well we had a nice weekend this weekend to be honest with you I stayed over there this weekend! Saturday we had a nice Chinese and all that and watched like Casualty and that sort of thing....

S [audible intake of breath] How did that come about Adam? [through clenched teeth]

A cos she phoned me up said do I want to stay the weekend...

S who's she...

A Leanne...and yesterday, well Sunday, we had a nice tea and watched Lord of The Rings, the first one, cos I've got it on DVD, and yesterday evening we all went up town and had a Kentucky meal... and watched LOTR 2...[pause]... And we had a nice night out.

So, Sally may well have had a professional agenda which she needed to work within but it would be a mistake to assume that she is in control of how this interview will proceed. After all, this isn't a doctor's surgery where there are cultural expectations about how people should behave. In social work there is little, if any, agreed norms about a social work version of the 'patient role'. Adam isn't passively going along with Sally's opening gambit! On one level, you might think that Sally has 'had the rug pulled out from under her feet' but it is important for social workers to be prepared for the direction of an interview to change suddenly. Adam has a very different starting point and he is quite able to begin the interview from his perspective of what is important. For Adam, it seems essential that a different version of his family's reality is provided: 'things are OK and we're now doing all the things that normal, happy families do...'.

At this point, and throughout the interview, Sally is using the communications between herself and Adam to construct the meaning of what is being said. Fook (2002: 119) describes this as a process of 'constructing a professional narrative' and goes on to make clear that:

(Workers') own assumptions and interpretations will influence how and what knowledge is selected and what narrative is created. The narrative produced represents the worker's version or perspective on the situation, which may or may not be used to service users' advantage [emphasis added].

Sally has a choice and a dilemma. Does she pursue the approach of 'risk minimisation' that was started with her agency's initial intervention and take a stand at this point by 'confronting' the change/challenge presented in Adam's different version of what is happening – his 'story'? Or does she take a more subtle approach and 'go with' the changed reality as presented by Adam and switch tack by offering a more empathic response that acknowledges Adam's need to demonstrate that he is still a 'good parent'? There is a balance to be struck here and Sally has to make an instant decision about how to react to Adam's response – preferably in a way that maintains a working relationship and yet doesn't jettison the basis for her involvement. Sally has general duties and obligations as a statutory social worker and, to some extent, she may feel that she needs to defend her position; but she also has a very specific responsibility for her 'primary client' in all of this – and that is Jane. As I emphasised in the quote above, and as Sally confirmed in my discussions with her about this interview, it was important to try and keep to a narrative that would eventually work to Jane's advantage. Sally's instinct as a social worker was to acknowledge Adam's story through what Egan (2002) describes as 'advanced empathy'. In other words, Sally's acknowledgement goes beyond a response to what Adam literally said and, instead, ventures into that zone of uncertainty that characterises social work. Sally makes a skilled judgement about the feelings that lay behind Adams disclosure; whilst keeping Jane very much in mind...

S I know Leanne was missing you and more from what, I guessed, Hannah was very much missing you as well ...

A yes...

S uhmm [pause] ... I'm not sure about Jane... for the future – when she was talking about 'futures' you were always around....

A she was alright yesterday! ... kissing and cuddling and stuff...

Adam is still wary of what Sally might be 'getting at'. It is difficult to overestimate the extent to which, through anecdotal evidence, it is commonly believed that social workers just 'take people's children away'. So there is an implicit challenge within Adam's reaction to, even the possibility of, social work having a privileged 'reading' of a young person's views. This is, perhaps, a 'to be expected' reaction of a parent who would assume to have a far better knowledge and insight into their own child's attitudes towards them than an outside professional. But what is a social worker to make of a father's claims that his 13 year old daughter was 'kissing and cuddling and stuff' with him? Is this a 'normal' part of this family norms and expectations? How can Sally judge this? Would it be based upon her own experience of family life? If so, would Sally's experience be applicable to this specific family with whom she may have little or nothing in common? The point of raising these questions is to 'problematise' the tendency for all of us to make judgements based upon sets of assumptions about what is 'normal'. For example, there may appear to be some degree of cultural commonality between the family and Sally insofar as they are both of White UK origin. However, this cannot be the basis for an assumption that issues of working with diversity are not applicable in this case. Social workers have to develop working hypotheses about situations within increasingly diverse, multi-cultural and pluralistic societies. There is unlikely to be one clear, socially accepted, cultural norm or 'objective condition' (Fuller & Myers, 1941) of family behaviour that can be found in child and family development books. These are real dilemmas of judgement or 'social definition' [op.cit.] that Sally is in no position to make right now. Such judgements are the essence of what is meant by being 'critical' in practice and Sally may make a mental note of this as a question to be explored at some point in the future.

A ... speaking to each other and having laughs and everything...

S yes, [acknowledging this] when she was looking ahead to how she would want things to be, [A - yeah] you were in the picture [A - yeah] ... which I thought was quite significant...

So, Sally is still carefully weighing her words and maintaining this balance of acknowledging Adam's position whilst keeping her role and professional responsibilities in mind. However, there comes a point in an interview – and this has all happened very early on with little time for deliberation – where it is vital to assert the professional perspective. The reasoning, in plain language, may go something like this: 'you [Adam] may want to play happy families and forget what happened to precipitate the authorities' involvement – however, you are here in this office because of alleged serious events and you need to understand the social work [and police] agenda as well as social services needing and wanting to empathically understand yours...'. In other words, there are still, at least, two readings of recent history and at least two agendas. However, Sally didn't explicitly use the power of her position (Hugman, 1991) and speak in the example of 'plain language' above. Skilled best practice in social work is often illustrated through a less 'in your face' confrontational style. In this situation, Sally is working on instinct and calling upon her holistic understanding and appreciation of how best to proceed.

S But, I remember her saying to me at the police station – you [Adam] won't stay away and things won't be different ... they'll be different for a little while [A – subdued, yeah] but then it'll be back to what it was. Ummm , so... this might, in a sense, bear out what she says...

Sally has achieved two things at this, still early, stage of the interview. Firstly, she has implicitly addressed the fact that Adam has 'broken' the terms of the written agreement made with the agency. This needed acknowledgement and Sally has subtly, and skilfully, achieved this without

setting it up as a fixed-position confrontational issue. Secondly, she has brought the professional reading of the situation back to the top of the agenda and has articulated it through the words and views of the young person, Jane, for whom she has a primary protective responsibility. Moreover, Sally couched the young person's views in the critical terms of how Jane saw the future. It will be helpful to look more closely at these two factors.

Firstly, what is the rationale for using 'contracts'? Written agreements are being used more often in social work and there are compelling arguments both for and against their use. On the plus side, they appear to have an obvious advantage of clarity. If someone has to write down what they want and expect all parties to the agreement to do, then the writer has to think this through and put it into words that are clear and unambiguous. Aldgate (2002: 24) maintains that written agreements are a 'tangible manifestation of working in partnership'. This focus upon clarity and agreement about behavioural expectations is also a central feature of the 'task-centred approach' to social work (Doel & Marsh, 1992). Written agreements share aspects in common with this approach to social work in that there still has to be a judgement made about the viability and utility of their application in particular situations. The following conversation between Sally and myself explores her perspectives on this:

Sally I think there are some written agreements that, if breached in any way, mean that you are reacting more strongly [than others]; but, some of the rows and some of the patterns I see of risk of family breakdown relationships and risk of family violence when they (young people) are in adolescence... you are riding with what you've got really. You've got to a certain extent go with what the family gives you... erm, a teenager will storm out saying they're never going to return, you know, they go and stay with gran until it settles down and then you come back after the weekend to find that the

teenager has returned. Families will often have their own pattern and if you're not talking about something as 'heavy' as active sexual abuse then you're not, necessarily, trying to enforce the letter of the agreement – which is not a legal document.

BC Is there an element of bluff to these agreements?

Sally No, it's not a bluff. Written agreements have lots of levels on which they can help. They're useful tools. On the most cynical level, which I'd only ever mention last, is that they do cover the agency's back by making clear what the agency's thoughts and actions were... in a way that the family can't say "no, it wasn't like that" later on... but that's a management agenda and it shouldn't be the main social work agenda. It makes clear what the risk is and the beginning of what people think the solution is... why 'a gap' is needed and what needs to be done in that gap. What's gone wrong? What the concerns, risks, immediate plan and outcomes should be. A written agreement, in as simple a form as you can do it for most families, is that. It also emphasises to the family how serious it is ... and it is something that is vital when (perpetrators) minimise the violence or blame the victim.

On the minus side, they can be criticised as being levers of bureaucratic power. It is arguable whether people are really persuaded to change their behaviour or adapt their lives simply through having a 'contract' to sign. Some of these issues were a hot topic of debate around the time of the introduction of this formal approach into social work. The issues have implications for fundamental values about the nature of social work relationships. The exchanges were characterised in terms of questions about written agreements as 'contracts or con tricks' (Corden & Preston-Shoot, 1987, Rojek & Collins, 1987) (Corden & Preston-Shoot, 1988, Rojek & Collins, 1988).

Secondly, perhaps the more subtly skilful aspect of Sally's communication is that she has aligned herself with the child. As a child care social worker she will be mindful of the fact that successive reports, inquiries and resulting guidance, following high profile child protection tragedies, have emphasised the imperative of remaining focused upon the child as the primary 'client'. [See, as just two examples, the reports into the cases of Jasmine Beckford (London Borough of Brent, 1985) and Victoria Climbié (Laming, 2003)]. However, Sally has not just 'sided' with Jane in an alliance that might run the risk of alienating her father. Sally's chosen way of representing the child's view is an example of CBP in that she has sought Jane's view of the future, from Jane's own personal perspective. This emphasis upon an individual's orientation towards the future is a key feature underpinning constructivist approaches to social work. A personal construct theory approach to working with young people (Butler & Green, 1998, Ronen, 1996) focuses upon the ways in which they construe themselves and others within a view of their future. A focus upon a person's capacity to 'envision' their future also underpins solution-focused brief therapies (De Shazer, 1985, De Shazer, 1988). It is a powerful tool as it offers a way of directly accessing an individual's choices and anticipations about what is important to them in their future. Jane included her father in how she saw her future; but she also felt that things weren't going to change and Sally has to convey both these messages to Adam.

However, at this time, as we will see below, he only hears one side and he gets angry at this. It seems that he still needs to defend his position and tries to reassert his perspective and his reading or understanding of what happened and why. But he also reacts to the implicit use of 'empowerment' by Sally. Drawing upon similar principles of advocacy outlined by Dalrymple & Horan in chapter 9, by acting as a 'representative' for Jane's views, Sally is lending her professional power to Jane's 'voice'

and reinforcing her position in what has become a contested area. The 'contest', in this example, is about working towards an agreed version of events. The core battlegrounds are about the meanings placed upon what happened; the understanding that this supports to explain about what happened; and how any agreement can inform plans for the future. The work of Foucault (Foucault, 1980) offers a helpful perspective in understanding social work as an activity that takes place within networks of power, influence and authority (Danaher et al., 2000). These networks or relationships are constructed by people within complex social realities, 'the social' (Donzelot, 1988), where individual's meanings and 'versions' of events struggle with each other for acceptance. Adam's reaction to Sally's fairly innocuous observation can be understood in this way. In other words, he recognises the power of Sally's position; he is fearful of what he thinks she might be 'getting at'; and he needs to assert his perspective and version of events...

A [interrupting] don't you think that could be like a case of Janey like 'spitting venom'? Like she knows she's been given all this opportunity – she knows she had some power and control, innit, she was saying this because she wanted to get me into trouble? ... for, because she was in trouble? Don't you think that could be the case..? cos she's a clever girl....

S I think that prompted it [A – yeah!] I think that prompted it...

A she's not as stupid as she acts, you know what I mean...?

S I will agree with you as far as ... if the Police hadn't come looking for her at the place, you know, because she was missing, [A – right] if

they hadn't found her somewhere else... I don't think she would have said what she said at that time... I don't, you know, I don't think there is any doubt about that...

This part of the interview contains a key statement from Sally and I have italicised the crucial part. It is an admission and agreement with Adam that a full understanding of what was said and why it was said is located in the specifics of situations. In other words, the meaning at a 'deep' level is 'situated' in a previous 'historical' time and context. Therefore, Sally is acknowledging the potential validity of different perspectives. This is an important and frequently overlooked aspect of interpersonal communication, which is basically what 'an interview' is. There doesn't need to be a conflict about 'right' versus 'wrong' readings as Adam's is viable to him and Sally can accept some or all of it. As long as she can get Adam to accept some or all of hers, there will be the basis for a negotiation. This process of negotiating, or co-constructing, areas of agreement between versions of events is a vital aspect of the social workers' skill and expertise in situations where there are often conflicting versions. It isn't necessarily an insurmountable problem that different versions cannot be reconciled. There can be an agreement to disagree whilst acknowledging that people have reasons for holding to different perspectives.

This process is starting to happen as Sally tries to very tentatively explore the possibility of common territory whilst holding on to her position as a social worker needing to work for the young person, Jane, as her primary client; but also having to work with the parent. The respective positions of Sally and Adam have yet to be established in this process and there are still areas that will be contested...

S ummm... and I guess when she's saying like... the first time she can remember you kind of.... getting very angry and physical with her was about, when she was about 11, she wasn't too sure...

Sally is still finding her way through the communication jungle. She cannot easily predict how Adam is going to react to her continued empowerment and representation of Jane's 'voice' as an important perspective. In this respect Sally needs to be both courageous and quietly assertive as she is unable to know that she either has a very aggrieved or determined [or both] parent who is unable at this stage to entertain Sally's [equally determined] counter-reading and interpretation of the situation – and he goes on the assertive offensive...

A [interrupting] ah, this is crap, this cracks me up, this really cracks me up, I'm being labelled as a child abuser [S – she hasn't said it before] and I'm not – I do no different from what other parents do with their kids..

S well... I think....

A ... that's what's the matter in this time and age... people like you giving 'em too much 'reins' and giving them the power instead of how it used to be. Look at schools now, kids whacking teachers and stuff like that... it stems from them being given too much power... that's how I look at it... and I said to Janey, at the end of the day, if I comes back or no, if you're told to do something [tapping the table] you've still got to do it... Whether it's tidy your room or come in on time.... All this codswallop that you keeps on spouting to me about, flippin', giving her more of a free rein, more power, I said to her yesterday, I said 'if you behave yourself this week', there's a new Eminem film she wants to go and see, I said 'I'll take you to see that.. I said, and I'll take you to have a pizza or something and

that'll be your present for the week'. She was over the moon at that and said 'I'll behave this week then' ...

S [emolliently] because she wants to make things right again...

A yeah, and so do I but you keep on saying Look, I wouldn't have been allowed over if Leanne had asked Janey and she'd said 'no I'm frightened of our dad', then I wouldn't have come over. Simple as that and I know Leanne would've asked her.

Adam is aggrieved – he is desperately trying to defend his position and reassert the legitimacy of his perception of how things are. He feels threatened by his perception that Sally is arguing against the way that he sees himself and his reading of what happened; that Sally somehow has him 'labelled' (Levy, 1981) as a 'child abuser'. Adam's reaction to his belief that he is being wrongly categorised and misunderstood is to go on to the offensive and verbalise an example of some fundamental differences of perceived standards and expectations. On the one hand he believes that the way he acted is 'no different from any other parent' so he feels he is being unfairly singled out. At the same time Adam challenges the right of Sally [or anybody else] to 'advise' on ways for him as an individual to parent his daughter. He contests Sally's territory of being 'for the young person' and speaking up for her view by referring to how both Jane and her mother had agreed that it was 'alright' for Adam to spend the weekend. Adam's description and explanation of how he had placated Jane by promising 'treats' is a good illustration of the sort of 'parenting strategy' discussion that Sally will want to come back to later in the interview. There would be advantages in negotiating with the family for a longer-term involvement that specifically address 'whole family issues' such as this.

At this time, however, Sally needs to keep in mind and maintain the agency perspective and rationale for their intervention in the past as well

as the legitimacy of her current position as constituted by this interview. Adam isn't explicitly questioning the 'right' of Sally or social services to be involved. Nevertheless, he is angry and he is challenging the ways in which he perceives he is being labelled along with his perception of social work advice as being 'codswallop'! Sally doesn't react or respond to any of this. As Celia Keeping explores in chapter 4, a focus on the emotional dimensions of social work relationships recognises that people often have a need to 'ventilate'. In other words, they have a build up of strong feelings and verbalising them is a healthy way of releasing the tension of these feelings. There is, therefore, in an entirely non-judgemental perspective, nothing wrong with it. It would risk sounding patronising, at this stage, for Sally to actively acknowledge this so she quietly 'contains' the powerful feelings being expressed and stays with the flow of the interview by maintaining her representation of Jane's views...

S I think she wanted to make things right again.

A well so do I. Our family works as a unit, we're all like a key member, I can't just stay away like you said for about three months because all my wages are paid in to Leanne's account....

S ... and then we were saying four weeks, weren't we because...

A ... well even four weeks because I haven't got any bank account of my own or anything like that – I've got no food and I've got to like go to work and stuff.... All my clothes is over there, I can't just stay away, you know what I mean, I can't.

The interview has now begun to move into a different phase. Adam has expressed his angry feelings about how he thinks he is being labelled and he is now expressing a very different set of emotions. Adam's complaint is based within his experience of the implications for individuals and families of major social work interventions into the complexities of people's lives. It is a very 'real' appeal that is addressing the social work 'value' of

empathy. How would we feel in his position? The practical and personal implications of a contractual 'agreement' for Adam to be out of the house whilst a risk assessment is undertaken or 'a breathing space' is established makes the situation very difficult to sustain. Adam's powerful plea seems to make the agency's position appear unreasonable. The ways in which practical and ethical realities such as these are handled can have a big impact upon the quality and effectiveness of the relationship between the agency and the service users. These kinds of issues are unavoidable aspects of risk assessment that are bound up with most, if not all, social work interventions.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the first part of an interview that, in real time, lasted little more than ten minutes. And yet enormous amounts of information and powerful perspectives have been unpacked. There have been some important exchanges, the setting of 'positions' from both Sally and Adam, and some groundwork laid to help encourage the fundamental social work processes of negotiation and assessment. This analysis of a small segment of a fairly common interview for social workers has highlighted great complexities as well as some basic human reactions. Sally has had to be focused on her role and her responsibilities to Jane; but at the same time, she has had to be flexible and accommodating to Adam's reactions. She has had to be clear in her communication and has implicitly 'contained' Adam's expressions of powerful feelings by being quietly authoritative but without appearing confrontational. In maintaining this balance, above all, Sally has begun a 'constructive engagement' with Adam and kept open the options and opportunities for further work. These are examples of the often 'hidden' and uncelebrated strengths of skilled social work practice. The following chapter continues a CBP analysis of this

interview through a focus upon the constructive processes underpinning negotiation and assessment.

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