

Summary of CASCADE's programme of research into social work practice skills

Since 2007, researchers from CASCADE, along with colleagues from other Universities, have been involved in a number of studies looking closely at social work practice and communication skills. Most of these have been led by CASCADE's Director, Professor Donald Forrester.

In 2007, two of these studies looked at how social workers [talk to parents about child protection concerns](#), and in one of them, whether [training in Motivational Interviewing](#) made a difference. In a simulated client interaction (with an actor playing the part of a parent), workers generally asked closed questions, raised concerns, while rarely showing active listening skills or identifying positives. Training in MI made little difference, although the workers themselves were positive and said it made a difference to their practice. A [similar study in 2008](#) found that social workers tended to be confrontational and at times, even aggressive. When workers were more empathic, there was less resistance in the simulated interactions, and more information disclosure. A [theoretical paper in 2012](#) suggested that while parental resistance might be caused by social structures and disadvantage, the nature of child protection work, and denial or minimisation of concerns – the behaviour of the worker is also an important causal factor. These studies provided a foundation for later ones looking in more detail at Motivational Interviewing, whether similar patterns of communication were seen in real practice encounters, and about the relationship between communication skills, engagement and outcomes.

In 2016, we published two studies, starting to look at [what happens in supervision](#) case discussions, and at whether communication skills in social work can be [measured reliably](#). The first study found that supervision discussions were often focused on the agenda of the supervisor, meeting an organisational need for oversight of practice. Workers were often, if not always, in a relatively passive role of providing information, rather than exploring dilemmas, thinking through decisions and evaluating and planning for practice. There was little explicit evidence of reflection. The second study found that independent coders were reasonably reliable when assessing social work communication skills. This study should help us feel more confident about some of the later relationships identified between social work skills, engagement and outcomes. In 2017, we also published a study showing that [student skills could also be reliably measured](#), albeit the two academics involved were more reliable with each other than with the practice educator involved.

From 2017, we published a conceptual article looking at [outcomes in child and family social work](#) – asking who gets to decide what outcomes are measured and how, and whether a focus on outcomes ends up overlooking the importance of the quality of service provided? While social workers do help children and families to change, they also have a significant role in assessing need and risk, and identifying which families need intervention and which do not. This means that quite apart from outcomes, social workers have an important role to play in a liberal society, helping balance the rights and interests of the state, professionals, parents and children.

In 2018, two studies were published, the first looking at [what empathy sounds like](#) in practice. This involved an analysis of 110 audio-recordings and found that high empathy was

characterised by more open questions and reflections, and greater curiosity about and understanding of parents' experiences, including their emotional responses. However, the study also found that most workers in the sample were not very empathic. The second was a randomised controlled trial of Motivational Interviewing (MI), which involved workers being randomly allocated to receive a package of training and supervision or not, and families being randomly allocated at the point of referral a worker who had accessed the training or not. Subsequent practice encounters between workers and parents were audio-recorded and analysed for MI skill, and outcomes data collected 20-weeks' later. The MI-trained workers did exhibit higher MI skills, but this might have been due to change. There was no difference between the groups in relation to the outcome measures. The main conclusion of this relates to the training and supervision package being insufficient to influence practice skills, which suggests that while training can be helpful in all sorts of ways, it probably does not make differences to practice in ways that families would notice.

Most recently in 2019, we published four studies, based on further studies of MI in child and family social work, and looking at group supervision. The two MI-related studies looked at 127 practice encounters between workers and parents and looked for patterns of worker skills. The first of these found that skills could be grouped together into care and engagement (or relationship-building), good authority and support for behaviour change. Skilled workers combined the different types, rather than being better at one or the other. In other words, we did not find on the whole that some workers were good at relationship building but poor at using authority, and vice versa. Workers less skilled at using good authority also struggled with relationship building skills. The second MI study looked at the [relationship between skills and outcomes](#). Relationship-building skills predicated parent-reported engagement, while good authority and support for behaviour change skills had stronger relationships with outcome measures. When workers visited families more often, the relationships between skills and outcomes were stronger, partly because of increased involvement but also because such families had more significant problems. The two supervision studies involved the development of a [coding framework](#) for systemic group supervision, and then the application of this framework to [observations of supervision paired with practice encounters](#) between workers and parents. These studies found that group supervision which adhered more closely to a systemic model and which involved a systemically trained clinician were associated with more skilful practice, including relationship-building skills and good authority of skills.

Taken together, these studies have significantly advanced our understanding of social work practice skills in child and family settings. Elsewhere on the website, you can find a copy of the skills coding manual that we developed, and blogs that go into more details about specific aspects of the research findings.