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Social work home visits to children and families in the UK: a Foucauldian perspective

Abstract

The home visit is at the heart of social work practice with children and families; it is what children and families' social workers do more than any other single activity (except for recording), and it is through the home visit that assessments are made on a daily basis about risk, protection and welfare of children. And yet it is, more than any other activity, an example of what Pithouse has called an 'invisible trade': it happens behind closed doors, in the most secret and intimate spaces of family life. Drawing on conceptual tools associated with the work of Foucault, this article sets out to provide a critical, chronological review of research, policy and practice on home visiting. We aim to explain how and in what ways changing discourses have shaped the emergence, legitimacy, research and practice of the social work home visit to children and families at significant time periods and in a UK context. We end by highlighting the importance for the social work profession of engagement and critical reflection on the identified themes as part of their daily practice.

Introduction

'Not nearly enough attention is given to the detail of what social workers actually do, where they do it and their experience of doing it. In particular, the practice of home visiting, which is the methodology through which most protection of vulnerable adults and child protection goes on, is virtually ignored' (Ferguson, 2009, p. 471).

Ferguson's comments draw attention to the gulf between the practice of undertaking social work home visits, a core aspect of daily social work practice, and research about these. Until recently, the relative neglect of the social work home visit has extended beyond research into professional practice and training (Beder, 1998; Hancock and Pelton, 1989; Lyter and Abbott, 2007; Allen and Tracey, 2008). In the absence of a general literature regarding the social work home visit, the aim of this article is to provide a critical review of what we do

know, spanning both historical and contemporary perspectives, focusing in on social work with children and families. In so doing, we draw on insights from the work of the French post-structuralist philosopher Michel Foucault (1977, 1980), engaging specifically with his ideas about power, discourse and truth. We begin by setting the theoretical scene in a discussion of the Foucauldian ideas that form the basis of our analysis.

Why a Foucauldian perspective?

One of the most comprehensive accounts of the usefulness of Foucault's theoretical framework to social workers is found in an edited collection by Chambon *et al.* (1999). Here the editors argue that Foucault provides insight at a structural level into 'how the ideas that guide professional practices come into existence and how they acquire power' (p. xiii).

Chambon's own chapter unpacks this further. She suggests that Foucault's work does this by firstly, encouraging the idea of 'historicizing our understanding of reality by retracing how particular practices and forms of knowledge have been created and adopted over time' and secondly, encouraging 'critical inquiry into knowledge and practice by questioning the nature and effects of our activities and the ordinary assumptions and taken-for-granted realities that sustain them' (Chambon, 1999, p. 52, 78). Foucault's concern, then, is with how knowledge is both generated and generative or, put more simply, what types of knowledge gain hold, and keep hold and by what processes. Foucault's work encourages a critical reflexivity in which taken-for-granted ways of knowing are problematised and, through which, the contested nature of our social work activities and understandings is highlighted. Crucial to this is an understanding of power and knowledge which Foucault names 'power/knowledge' reflecting the view that the two are inseparable.

Writing about power, Foucault (1977, p. 93) said that 'power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere, including from us'.

Importantly, then, power is not imposed but embedded and emerging from social relationships and social practices themselves reflective of their time and their context. Power

is reinforced by the production of knowledge (discourses). Within this framework Foucault describes power as producing its 'object' of knowledge (what is known) and 'the subject to which a particular knowledge/object relates'. Hence relationships are built on the exchange of these truths or discourses.

A range of conceptual tools accompanies Foucault's analysis of power/knowledge work including discourse, regimes of truth and discursive practices. Foucault (1980, p. 80) said of the definition of discourse that, 'Instead of gradually reducing the rather fluctuating meaning of the word "discourse" I believe I have in fact added to its meanings: treating it as sometimes the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualisable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements'. The meaning of the word 'discourse' is therefore broad and refers then to shared ways of thinking about, understanding, talking, writing and practicing around a particular issue located in every day practices and decision-making processes. Foucault argues that discourses produce 'a truth' or 'truths'. Importantly several discourses can co-exist, but which ones gain hold depends on a combination of broader political, economic and social considerations. He says "truth" is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements' (Foucault in Rabinow, 1984, p. 72). Truth is therefore not a universal given or an independent object but rather what becomes a 'truth', or a dominant discourse, is socially constructed. This is explained by Foucault (1984, p. 72) when he states 'truth isn't outside power, or lacking in power...truth isn't the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world'. Because of this, the generation of truth and its generative capacities are created by and within structures that are 'linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extends it'. This, he says, creates a 'regime of truth' (Foucault in Rabinow, 1984, p. 74). Foucault explains further:

'Each society has its regimes of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements; the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true' (Foucault in Rabinow, 1984, p. 73).

The effect of a 'regime of truth is that it creates a 'taken-for-granted' and authoritative consensus regarding the definition of an issue, what the response should be and how it should be undertaken. This draws attention to the inextricable link between power and knowledge. They co-exist, they generate and they are generative. This takes us back to the concept of power, in that 'Power is neither given, nor exchanged, nor recovered but exercised and...only exists in action' (Foucault in Gordon, 1980, p. 89). By this Foucault means that 'there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterise and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse. There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth, which operates through and on the basis of this association. We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth' (Foucault in Gordon, 1980, p. 93). According to Foucault the generative links between power/knowledge are also reproduced through 'regimes of practice'. These are called discursive practices, which refer to the texts, languages, practices, and values in which and through which particular institutions and the individuals within them operate.

In this article, Foucault's conceptual tools will be used to examine the dominant discourses (that is, ideas and practices), that have underpinned the emergence, legitimisation and current experience of the social work home visit. It will be argued that the recent

conceptualisation of a 'relationship-based discourse' (Ruch *et al.*, 2010) and 'humane social work' (Featherstone *et al.*, 2014) has strong links with other earlier ways of thinking about home visiting and, at the same time, challenges bureaucratic ways of working that emerged under neoliberalism in the late 1970's - 1980's and what Wastell *et al.* (2010, p. 310) have argued has created 'the iron cage of performance management'.

The emergence of the social work home visit in the UK

Home visiting has a very long history. From a Foucauldian perspective, the 'truth'/knowledge about social work home visiting as a discursive practice betrays complex origins and underpinnings. Not only was the home visit inextricably linked to feudalism and feudal obligations, it was a familiar practice within the Judeo-Christian tradition, as those who were better off sought to offer support to the needy in the parish. Charity of this kind was not an idle activity; on the contrary, it was believed that 'doing good' was necessary to secure a place in heaven (Prochaska, 1980). While the extent of the influence of the church has been disputed (Webb, 2007), it is the case that by the eighteenth and into the nineteenth centuries, emerging in the context of industrialisation, urbanisation and concerns about the administration of the poor relief system, the home visit had become a common practice/activity associated with volunteers working under the auspices of visiting societies that were either linked directly to churches, or had religious affiliations (Young and Ashton, 1956; Rack, 1973; Hewitt, 1998; Cree and Myers, 2008; Burnham, 2012). Underpinned by moral and spiritual principles as well as notions of benevolence and citizenship, the discourses associated with the home visit - the regulation of family functioning, the reform of individuals and the reinstatement the principle of self-help – were reflective of the influence of classical liberalism. The prevailing discourse was that the unfettered administration of public relief through the provisions of the Poor Law could foster dependency on the part of the recipient and resistance on the part of the benefactor and stifle the development of more localised and spontaneous support networks (Woodroffe, 1962). Within this context, the home visit was constructed it as a social necessity and moral imperative. This, in turn, shaped what

Foucault refers to as 'discursive practices' (Foucault in Gordon, 1980, p. 93) namely the values and practices in and through which institutions and individuals operate. Rack (1973) and Hewitt (1998) have illustrated, for example, that the practice of the home visit relied on the presumption of 'a right of access', as opposed to the existence of a legally mandated and systematic framework to guide practice. However, while the focus of the visit was essentially the same – that is, to assess claims for help and connect families with local sources of support in order to build self-reliance and good character - there was great variety in individual practice. Some home visitors were noted as being uncompromising in their approach; it was not uncommon for them 'to march into homes with the occupants still in bed, demand that they got up and appeared downstairs for censure or improvement, and refuse to leave until they had done so' (Rack, 1973, p. 358). At the other extreme were those home visitors who were criticised for not being discerning enough because, 'Without training, and often without adequate preparation regarding the aims and purposes of the society they served, these good-hearted, somewhat sentimental workers all too often were taken in by apparent distress that they tended to give relief as a matter of course' (Young and Ashton, 1956, p. 93). Thus, as Gadda (2012) asserts, the home visit, viewed through a Foucauldian lens, can be understood as a key strategy within the new techniques of social control that emerged during this period, techniques that aimed to create the 'docile subject', that is, a body 'that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved' through processes of training, correction, normalisation and surveillance (Foucault, 1977, p. 136).

There is, however, another consideration here, one that really confronts the gendered and classist assumptions at the root of home visiting. 'Friendly visiting', as demonstrated in the work of the housing association movement and the many other visiting charities that emerged from the eighteenth century onwards, was grounded in an assumption that the one-to-one relationship established between the visitor and the visited was a reciprocal, though not equal, one: the visitor had, it was believed, greater knowledge, education and, of course, social class, and it was their mission to get close enough to the poor person to share what

we would today refer to as 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1986). The historian Philip Seed argues that visiting was part of a social mission to understand and to influence the social environment through personal intervention, in the spirit of 'not money, but yourselves' (1973: 37). But it was more than this. Friendly visitors were almost always middle-class women; their clients were almost always the poor working-class, and in work with families, this meant working-class women and children. The 'lady visitors' brought to their voluntary work specific (middle-class) ideas about class and gender, family and work, age and sexuality. They believed that their own, bourgeois culture and beliefs were superior to those of working-class people; their goal was to make the working classes more like themselves; more 'middle-class'. As Octavia Hill wrote: 'My only notion of reform is living side by side with people till all that one believes becomes clear to them' (quoted in Lewis, 1996 p. 51). The lady visitors also believed that men and women had different 'natural' qualities and abilities, and that as women, they had a special contribution to make to the daily household management of poor families and the care of sick and older people. It is not without irony that the middle-class women who instructed poor women in childcare and housework paid their working-class female servants to do this work for them in their own houses (Digby and Stewart, 1996; Summers, 1979).

The new techniques and discursive practices, viewed through the conceptual lens of Foucault, allow 'the effects of power to circulate in a manner at once continuous, uninterrupted, adapted, and "individualized" throughout the entire social body' (Foucault, 1984, p. 61). Thus, Gadda concludes, new forms of power are more complex than old ones, and involve interactions at all levels of society. Hence what the home visit did more than anything else was to reinforce the idea that individuals were the problem to be sorted, not society, and that this would be best achieved by disciplining the body, not through brute force, as in olden times, but through the internalisation of social control once taught; moreover, women were well-placed to do this disciplining, because of all the gendered ideas about women's qualities and role in society. By the end of the nineteenth century, a more

systemised and structured approach to home visiting was called for, itself creating the context for the dominance of a new set of emergent discourses regarding the purpose and practice of the home visit that had the effect of transforming the social work home visit from a philanthropic venture into a core mode of social work practice. These developments are explored further below.

Establishing the legally mandated social work home visit

In the early twentieth century, several factors had an influence on the transformation of the social work home visit from a philanthropic venture into a core mode of social work practice. A core aspect of Foucault's work is to consider how prevailing discourses take hold. In theorising how power is exercised, Foucault was interested in identifying what mechanisms provide the means through which the 'production, accumulation, circulation and functioning' of the dominant discourse and 'relations of power' are further consolidated (Foucault, 1980 in Gordon 1980, p. 93). It is argued here that developments in the law, namely the introduction of the Prevention of Cruelty to Children Act 1889 (and the subsequent Children's Act 1908) signalled a new acceptance of the right to intervene in family life, although significantly, it was a voluntary agency, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), that was given the power to remove children being abused, by permission to obtain warrants to enter properties, search for children and have them medically examined. This mirrors the thinking behind the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, which gave the newly-established (voluntary) National Vigilance Association powers to check commercial premises, houses and lodgings where prostitution was suspected (Cree, 1995). This demonstrates the ambivalence felt by those in government about intervention in what was regarded as the 'private' sphere. What happened in families and behind closed doors was not considered a concern of the state; patriarchal attitudes assumed that 'a man's home is his castle'; nobody had the right to enter without his permission. The legislation, and the agencies that were set up to carry it out, thus represents a compromise between those

who wanted greater involvement of the state, and those liberals and traditionalists who did not (Cree, 1995; Cree and Myers, 2008).

Records from the early twentieth century illustrate that a predominant aspect of home visiting practice at this time was an emphasis on the warning of, instruction to and imprisonment of, parents. Home visits could be high in frequency; sometimes occurring sometimes several times a week and without warning – a practice that carried on from the 1920's to the 1960's (Ferguson, 2004; Robinson, 2004; Clapton, 2009). However, this seemingly 'punitive' approach ran concurrently alongside another development in practice, namely the emergence of the social casework approach. Expounded by Mary Richmond, a prominent American social work academic, the social casework approach emphasised the application of standardised, systematic social scientific principles during home visits, in contrast to the spiritual ones that had characterised earlier practice. Richmond (1917) outlined the stages in what she called a 'social diagnosis': the collection of evidence about the client, their family and relevant circumstances outside the family; a comparison of evidence from different sources ('inference'); and interpretation of evidence ('interpreting its meaning'). This list demonstrates that she did take factors outside the individual into account – what came to be known later as a 'psychosocial' perspective – but the causes of social problems were still seen as individual ones and the remedies were also located in the individual. This conceptual framework acted as a powerful 'regime of truth', generating an authoritative consensus about the aims and methods of the social work home visit across the US and the UK. Alongside this, the skills' base of individual caseworkers was emphasised. As Richmond (1922, p. 256) wrote: 'the most successful case work polices are encouragement and stimulation, the fullest possible participation of the clients in all plans, and the skilful use of repetition. Sometimes there must be warning and discipline; always there must be direct action of mind on mind'.

Thinking again about what mechanisms provide the means for the consolidation of the dominant discourse and 'relations of power' and the example of social casework, it is argued

that Richmond's influential publications (1917, 1922) that provided such a mechanism, and a series of world tours that she gave to publicise her work. Based on the detailed case-notes of the volunteers, her studies revealed the conditions of the homes and the characteristics of the families and children concerned. The descriptive accounts of household squalor and family dysfunction were evidence 'that spoke for itself' in terms of legitimising the need for home visits. These were followed by detailed accounts as to how the social casework approach was to be applied and the positive impact it had. These publications acted as a form of social scientific evidence, legitimising the approach because it was empirically grounded; they became the core reading of all 'professional' social work programmes across the world. But Richmond was not without her critics. On the contrary, her work demonstrates a battle for pre-eminence that took place at this time between the social casework, professional social work movement that she led, and the more community oriented approach that was being developed at the same time by Jane Addams (1910) in Hull House in Chicago, building on the settlement movement principles of living alongside others in community with them. It is fair to say that although this tension within social work did not go away, it was the casework model of practice that won out. Indeed, such was the dominance of this approach that practice around the home visit was not the subject of any critical enquiry. As Timms (1964. P. 195) noted, 'until the late 1930's the home visit seems to have formed an unquestioned part of the process of fact-finding at the commencement of a piece of social casework [...] the home visit was largely taken for granted and no commentator seems to have considered it advantageous to describe or analyse the obvious'.

Legislative developments also provided a further consolidating mechanism. The post-Second World War period (1948 to 1968) saw the implementation of further child care legislation and the expansion of social services. A notable feature of these developments was the introduction of Child Care Officers whose location (as statutory employees) epitomised the post-war ideas of reconstruction and the benevolent state. Child Care Officers were tasked with: undertaking investigations into abuse and/or need; assessments

of risk and/or actual harm; and in providing access to support services. While the social casework approach remained dominant in their daily practices, further guidelines prescribing the purpose of the home visit and the role of the social worker were introduced that were indicative of the emergence of discourses regarding protection and risk management (Jehu, 1963). Research evidence of the time indicates that the expansion in their legal duties and the increased emphasis on both investigative/protective and social case/preventative work led to some uncertainty among social workers about the approach they should adopt. Some perceived their role as an investigative/monitoring one, with the 'family or social casework element' relegated to social workers in voluntary organisations; other local authority social workers saw it as their role to undertake the casework themselves (Prynn, 2000, p. 16-17).

The growth in state regulation of the home visit

Changes in the political context with the emergence of the New Right, itself characterised (as indicated earlier) by a combination of neo-liberalism and authoritarian conservatism, were associated with a new set of discourses on the family, the role of the state and children in the late 1970's and early 1980's that, we argue, found articulation in a series of 'truths' (Foucault in Rabinow, 1984, p. 72) clustered around: 'the failing social worker'; 'the developmental child'; 'the failing and expensive corporate parent'; the 'undervalued birth parent'; and the 'rights-bearing child'.

Research played a critical role in generating these 'truths' and the nature and type of research of the time is also indicative of the generative capacity of dominant discourses (Foucault in Rabinow, 1984, p. 72). A government-commissioned report (DHSS, 1985), itself the amalgamation of nine separate government-commissioned research studies, painted a picture of 'the failing social worker' that was 'generally quite disturbing and depressing' (p. 5). There were concerns about the use of social worker discretion in decisions to admit children into care, concerns that were heightened by the lack of clear guidance and social workers' apparent lack of understanding regarding the developmental needs of children. The

discourse regarding 'the developmental child' shaped and was shaped by research that drew attention to children 'languishing in care' and by media reports of the deaths of children living at home, which highlighted social workers' lack of knowledge and skill in working with children (Parton, 2004; Corby *et al.*, 1998). These combined discourses had, in the words of Foucault, 'generative capacities' (Foucault in Rabinow, 1984, p. 72) in that they framed public and professional understanding of the 'problems' they identified, organising the presentation of knowledge, and, most importantly, providing the parameters within which 'solutions' could be sought. These emphasised the need for greater guidance and accountability for actions, connecting with the then-emergent discourse regarding 'expense', with a focus on cost and the requirement to provide an efficient, effective, 'value for money' social service. The use of such terminology relates clearly to the influence of neoliberalism, with management tools and governance frameworks imported from the private business sphere into the public sector (Parton, 1998).

Two further discourses emerged at this time, again backed by findings from the government-funded research projects (DHSS, 1985) and from a series of government-led inquiries (including Cleveland, 1987) that highlighted the lack of resources aimed at supporting parents and the lack of attention given to the rights of parents and children by social workers. The 'undervalued birth parent' and the 'rights-bearing child' (itself a discourse inextricably linked to the endorsement of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989) re-positioned the family in relation to State intervention, and their combined influence gave further weight to the drive for transparent, accountable and effective practices and services.

It is within this context that the children's legislation that was subsequently introduced in the late 1980's (England and Wales) and early 1990's (Scotland and Northern Ireland) tightened the parameters around the 'private' sphere of the family through increased regulation of the social worker visit. Thus the discourse informing the delivery of the home visit moved away

from a social casework approach towards that of assessment, risk and case management. A statutory requirement, introduced as part of the 'looked after child' LAC framework (Parker *et al.*, 1991; Ward 1996), was placed on social workers to complete structured, standardised assessment forms with families in need and/or at risk. These forms informed the purpose of, and activities undertaken, during the visit. The forms were multi-purpose and designed to: define and prescribe the purpose of social work home visits; assist social workers to gather relevant information; make practice more transparent and accountable through working in partnership with parents and children and through the production of a paper trail that could hold professionals to account in their delivery of services to children. Lastly, it was argued that the standardised nature of the completed forms would form an evidence database, which could then be interrogated through research and reflection (Ward, 1998). Subsequent to this were various iterations of assessment frameworks and guidance were introduced that spanned children in need, at risk as well as those in care (DoH *et al.*, 2000; DHSSPS, 2008; Scottish Government, 2012).

As highlighted earlier, research of the time acted as a consolidating mechanism (Foucault in Rabinow, 1984, p. 72), it both reflecting, reinforcing and reproducing these dominant discourses. Projects investigated whether the frameworks were fit for purpose (Garrett, 2003), how were they being implemented and used (Holland, 2011; Cleaver and Walker, 2004), what social workers' experience of using them was (Jones, 2001; Broadhurst *et al.*, 2010), and lastly the views of children and parents regarding their involvement in assessment processes. Findings were varied. It was reported by some that the introduction of standardised frameworks improved recording, parental and child involvement in assessment processes (Cleaver and Walker, 2004). However, it was reported by others that while social workers understood the importance of parents and children being more actively involved in assessment processes, this often did not happen in reality (Jones, 2001, Munro, 2011). Social workers indicated that one reason for the failure to work more closely in partnership with parents and children was because they were encouraged to limit the

opportunities to build relationships in case these interfered with their ability to make more objective assessments (Jones, 2001) and, in the face of increased bureaucratic requirements, their contact during home visits remained more fleeting (Munro, 2011). Reflective of the dominance of neoliberal managerialist organisational imperatives, Wastell *et al.* (2010) in their own research came to the conclusion that these (as noted earlier) represented the iron cage of performance management curtailing, as they did, the exercise of the subjective, personal aspects to practice.

Contemporary discourses and the social work home visit

More recently in the UK, the social work home visit has become the site of conflicting and contested discourses pivoting around two themes: firstly, the demand for increased regulation through the introduction into practice of a greater range of evidence based measurement tools and interventions; and secondly, the demand for deregulation through less adherence to prescribed assessment tools and greater emphasis on relationship-based practice. Interestingly, and maybe an indication of the effect of a particular 'regime of truth' (Foucault in Gordon, 1980, p. 89), is the fact that contemporary debates are not about whether the State should intervene or not – because today we expect statutory authorities (police, teachers, health visitors, doctors and social workers) to intervene in cases of neglect or harm to children and vulnerable adults, just as we expect the authorities (police or procurator fiscal) to prosecute in such cases too. The debate is rather about how best to intervene and what is likely to achieve the greatest success.

Focusing first on the drive for increased regulation through evidence based assessment and intervention this discourse, on one level, is not new. Historically, when home visits were the domain of voluntary organisations, their effectiveness was measured in terms of the documented reduction in poor relief applications. In the 1940's, debates about the effectiveness of a home visit as compared with an office-based meeting caused 'considerable controversy amongst social workers' (Timms, 1964 p. 195). The crux of the

issue was whether the office interview produced a better output (a more objective assessment) than a home visit (Weiss, 1993; Timms, 1964). What is new in current times is the degree to which this emphasis has intensified within a political and economic context where there is an ever-greater concern about questions of effectiveness (do home visits work? are they value for money?) and evidence of impact (what outcomes can be evidenced?) (Sheldon and MacDonald, 2009). Furthermore these questions occur in a context where the influence, in England, of the 'Troubled Families' agenda (Department for Communities and Local Government, DCLG, 2011) cannot be ignored. As argued by MacLehose (2011, p. 43, 47), this policy agenda promotes the targeted intervention of services into family life to improve parental capacity and is premised upon the conjoined discourses of 'the behaviour of individuals' and 'the failures of families', which together have created 'truths' (Foucault, 1980, p. 80) around 'a culture of irresponsibility' and 'disruption' (within and outside the family), reinforcing the idea that problems lie with individuals, not society, and that change needs to therefore come from families, not from the State or even communities.

Against this backcloth, where the targeted intervention into family life 'for the good of all' is legitimised, we have seen a growth in the use of standardised assessment frameworks and evidence based interventions applied in the 'space' of the home visit. At the level of assessments the introduction of the 'Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire' (SDQ), used as part of home visit assessments and as an early screening tool to indicate mental health needs (DoH *et al.*, 2000), is now one of a number of measures that assess parental and familial wellbeing. Government backing for their use has led to increased take up by a number of Local Authorities in the UK (<http://www.childandfamilytraining.org.uk/>) and is complemented by research exploring social workers' perceptions of their usefulness (Glad *et al.*, 2013). With regards to the use of targeted, evidence based interventions, the introduction in England of the government programme (DFE, 2014) to support the development of, and

research regarding the effectiveness of, innovative evidence based social work interventions with families, is noteworthy.

Compare these developments with the *Review of Child Protection in England* (Munro, 2011), which demonstrates a pull in a very different direction. Here we see a demand for the deregulation of the social work visit through less reliance on prescriptive assessment frameworks and greater engagement with creative and relationship-based practice (Ruch, 2010; Munro, 2011). Initiatives such as the 'Reclaiming Social Work' Initiative (RSW) in Hackney (Cross et al., 2010), 'Social Work Practices' (Stanley et al., 2012) and 'Systemic Units' (Forrester et al., 2013) have brought about changes in the delivery of services to children and families' social work that include reduced bureaucratic requirements, decreased case-loads and increased time spent on home visits. Findings from the projects suggest evidence of some positive outcomes from increased opportunities for face-to-face contact, the reduction in the numbers of children coming into care and reduction in staff sickness and turnover rates. But, viewed from a Foucauldian perspective, there is no challenge in any of this to the individualising messages that are at the core of social work home visiting. On the contrary, social work has become even more focused on the individual, as the 'personalisation' agenda takes root in a new 'self-directed support' (SDS) strategy, that is rapidly crossing over from adult social care services. Critics of SDS argue that in the absence of adequate funding, SDS has little to do with the aspirations of the Disabled People's Movement (Roulstone and Morgan, 2009). The current situation may be seen as illustrative of the ambivalent place that social work policy and practice inhabit, under more scrutiny than ever before, and at the same time, at the mercy of competing discourses that have little to do with social work's wider social goals.

Conclusion

It seems as if we have come full circle and are now in a situation once again where the private space of the social work home visit is back under the spotlight, with a number of

recent and current research studies examining exactly what is happening in the home visit (see Ferguson, 2009 and 2014). This work presents us with an exciting opportunity to learn more about social work practice with children and families today, and consider how we might do it better. But this research also gives us a much more important opportunity, we believe. It will enable us to tell it like it is – to point out the cruel impact of welfare cuts and austerity measures on the poor, while social workers struggle at the margins to try to minimise harm and contain the impossible. Furthermore, we hope to see the development of a research agenda that enables families known to social services to ‘tell their stories’ about how they actively reconstruct their public/private space in light of the changing policy and practice. We believe that Foucault has provided us with an ideological toolbox that has allowed us to interrogate the everyday; to ask questions about power, knowledge and truth in the social work home visit. It could be argued that, together with child protective and family assessment home visits as sites of construction and negotiation of the regime of knowledge/power/truth, the oppressive populist views of "troubled families" may itself be the perceptual site of resistance perpetuating Foucauldian privileged discursive practice. We end with Stan Cohen, sociologist and social worker, writing in 1975 (reprinted in 1998):

‘Stay in your agency or organisation, but do not let it seduce you. Take every opportunity to unmask its pretensions and euphemisms, use its resources in a defensive way for your clients, work for abolition’ (p.112).

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