'DARK LISTENING'

A PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH METHOD TO ENHANCE PROFESSIONAL LISTENING TO CHILDREN AND ADULTS IN NEED/AT RISK

Background.

Who's involved and what's it about? Dr Johanna Motzkau, Dr Justin Rogers, Dr Steve Hothersall (Research Associate) (Open University) and Prof. Michelle Lefevre (University of Sussex) along with other colleagues are piloting an innovative new research method called 'Dark Listening', which aims to help us learn more about 'cultures of listening' in social work teams and relevant practice settings.

In part 1 of data collection, we invited practitioners working in adult and child/family social work contexts to volunteer for involvement as participants and record a series of audio diaries which have been transcribed, analysed and selected excerpts have been re-recorded by voice actors and turned into an audio 'collage' for use in the workshops.

What's the idea behind the project? In professional contexts like social work, *listening* is a crucial part of the job, as the quality and outcomes of such activity can have significant consequences. Research shows that less powerful people, very often those in need, at risk, or requiring protection, are often either misheard, misinterpreted or not really heard at all (Lefevre, 2018). Social workers therefore have a critical role to play, and yet over recent decades the societal, political/ideological and personal conditions shaping their working environments have created barriers that systematically undermine the effectiveness of their listening and their subsequent capacity to be heard themselves when taking action on the basis of what they hear Munro 2011; Murphy 2022). In particular, continuous austerity measures alongside increasing caseloads, a politics of punitive interventions, managerialism, the characterisation of social work(ers) in media and other narratives of blame and failure, as well as individual scapegoating has left the profession in what many feel is a crisis (Pascoe 2025). As a consequence, existing good practice is very often obscured beneath organizational and other ideologies, practice-based 'algorithms' and mandated

protocols Thyer 2025; Murphy & Murphy 2025), and with professional confidence becoming increasingly undermined, social workers often feel that they are practising within unsupportive professional contexts, leaving them *unable* to listen, thereby creating further inequality and injustice for those relying on their support, as well as exacerbating the likelihood of stress and burnout in practitioners and, arguably, services (Ravalier 2025).

Why is this project important? This project draws on Motzkau & Lee (2022) and their work on 'troubled listening' in UK child protection practices. They believe that such detrimental processes can be understood and addressed in new and impactful ways through the concept of 'cultures of listening' (Motzkau 2021). This research showed that listening is not merely an aspect of auditory perception or communication, but is shaped by and expresses ideological, political, (Monbiot & Hutchison 2024) social, and experiential contexts and processes, i.e. 'cultures' which permeate all forms of professional practice(s). Hence, practice deficiencies are not solely the result of individual shortcomings but are *generated and perpetuated* systemically by a range of actors, factors, mechanisms and structures. Different contexts, practices, cultures, traditions, histories, backgrounds and values together shape: (a) how practitioners engage and communicate with children, young people and adults in different roles and contexts; (b) what practitioners can hear and are *allowed* to hear and how they then make sense of it; and (c) what they feel they can do with what they have heard, including how they record and share information within and across agencies. We're also interested in how these complex interactions and processes happen against a backdrop of our personal experiences of working within a rapidly changing social/political world. Our pilot study aims to test and refine a new way of giving practitioners an opportunity to reflect on professional listening with the aim of ultimately improving practice.

The listening workshops, through the use of the audio collage(s), aim to encourage you to participate in examining and exploring the relationship(s) between listening, discourse, power and context, especially in situations of acute need, risk and protection, and to promote reflection on the facilitators and barriers to effective listening/action based on this. Such engagement, we hope, might promote and provoke constructive reactions to current practice(s) within and across organizations to foreground the importance of *listening*.

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