

Walks, Home Visits and Atmospheres: Risk and the Everyday Practices and Mobilities of Social Work and Child Protection

Harry Ferguson*

Harry Ferguson is Professor of Social Work at the University of Nottingham. His books include Protecting Children in Time: Child Abuse, Child Protection and the Consequences of Modernity (2004, Palgrave), Best Practice in SW (2008, Palgrave).

*Correspondence to Harry Ferguson, Centre for Social Work, University of Nottingham, Nottingham, NG7 2RD, UK. E-mail: Harry.ferguson@nottingham.ac.uk

Abstract

Research into social work practice and inquiries into cases in which practitioners are deemed to have failed to protect children and vulnerable adults are predominantly focused on examining and changing organisational systems and inter-professional communication. This leaves largely unaddressed practitioners' experiences of the work they have to do that goes on beyond the office, on the street and in doing the home visit. In providing such an analysis, the paper argues that we need to think about social work in terms of the walks and other bodily movements that are required on the streets and in the homes of service users and evoke the adventures and atmospheres that deeply influence how the work is carried out. The paper draws theoretically on the new 'mobilities' approach and on my research into social workers' experiences of doing the work, past and present. Analysis of the mobile, lived experience of practice enables deeper understandings of risk to emerge—what I call *practice risks*—which concern whether professionals meet the requirements of good practice by looking around homes, walking towards children to properly see, touch, hear and walk with them to ensure they are fully engaged with and safe, here and now, on this home visit, or in this clinic or hospital ward.

Keywords: Risk, home visit, child protection, adventure, mobilities, social work

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Introduction

Is it not truly extraordinary to realise that ever since men [sic.] have walked, no-one has ever asked why they walk, how they walk, whether they walk, whether they might walk better, what they achieve by walking, whether they might not have the means to regulate, change or analyse their walk: questions that bear on all systems of philosophy, psychology and politics with which the world is preoccupied? (Theorie de Balzac, 1833, cited in Ingold, 2004, p. 315)

de Balzac is referring here to the neglect of attention to the nature of walking by people in general and, although written some 175 years ago, he could just as easily be writing about social work today. His questions have great relevance to how in what follows I will argue that understandings of risk need to be grounded in the everyday actions of practice, and walking in particular. I will analyse why social workers walk, how they walk, whether they walk at all or in what situations do they not walk enough, how they might walk better and in what circumstances does this matter. The aim of such an inquiry is to help provide knowledge that can increase social workers' capacity to reflect on and analyse the nature and quality of their movements so that best practice can be identified and advanced.

The argument of the paper is that understandings of risk need to be grounded much more in the lived experience of social work and what social workers actually do, where they do it and how they must use their (mobile) bodies and senses in doing so. While social workers have to spend a great deal of time seated at desks doing administrative work, social work is in crucial respects a professional life spent on the move. If children and adults are to be seen and worked with, everyday practice requires workers to leave their desks, make car journeys, walk the streets, housing estates and walk into and around the homes in which their service users live. In bringing the mobile, lived experience of social work to light, the paper draws heavily on a theoretical approach that has recently become known as the study of 'mobilities' (Adey, 2009; Sheller and Urry, 2006; Cresswell, 2006; Urry, 2007) and that I have begun to apply to social work (Ferguson, 2008, 2009, 2010). Urry defines the term 'mobilities' as referring to a:

... broad project of establishing a 'movement-driven' social science in which movement, potential movement and blocked movement are all conceptualized as constitutive of economic, social and political relations (Urry, 2007, p. 43).

Utilising this approach, I argue that mobile, lived experience is the very stuff of risk, as it concerns fundamental issues such as whether professionals move towards children to properly see, touch, hear and walk with them to ensure they are fully engaged with, here and now, on this home visit, or in this clinic or hospital ward, to uncover any risks to them. Social work always

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involves *potential* movement, as mobility does not always happen when it should and the paper shows that a key dimension to the risks of vulnerable service users not being protected arise from the ways in which movement is blocked and fails to occur, such as when service users refuse entry to homes or overtly or covertly constrain the worker's movements; or when workers do not assert their need to be mobile when in the presence of the child and family and restrict their own movements. This can happen on the street, in the high-rise housing block, as well as in the key site of the service user's home.

In grounding risk in these everyday actions of practice, I want to try and capture the adventures and atmospheres of social work. How social work practice is generally written and talked about lacks atmosphere, as it largely fails to capture the texture, feel, the lived experiences of where the work goes on and how this impacts on perception and what does (and does not) get done. Urry defines 'atmosphere' as being 'in the relationship of people and objects. It is something sensed often through movement and experienced in a tactile kind of way' (Urry, 2007, p. 73). This usefully helps us to focus on how, in having to move to meet their objectives, social workers must engage in highly tactile ways with objects such as the street, the service user's home and children's bodies.

Elsewhere, I have introduced the notions of atmosphere and lived experience by discussing some of the dynamics of home visiting (Ferguson, 2009). Here, I want to develop these ideas by covering a larger canvas of historical time and places, such as the street, housing estates, as well as the home, and providing a broader theoretical analysis of the atmospheres, adventures and experiences of social work and child protection and the place of risk in that. In trying to develop this theoretical perspective further, I draw here on empirical data from my research into historical and contemporary social work practices and child protection. The current work I refer to is a participant observation study of social workers as they go about doing child protection work. This work is in progress and my aim here is not to report the findings in a systematic way, but to use the data selectively to illuminate the key theoretical and practice issues under consideration. Reclaiming this lost experience of movement, adventure, atmosphere and emotion is an important step in developing better understandings of what social workers can do, the risks and limits to their achievements, and provides for deeper learning about the skilled performances and successes that routinely go on.

Focusing on practice and risk in modern social work

In 1898, an Inspector for the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) based in the North of England received a referral that a child was being neglected. Of his visit to the family, he wrote in his case record:

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With the man's permission we went upstairs and found all the family have to sleep on one bed which was in a wretched dirty state . . . back upstairs room absolutely empty.

In a cradle laid a baby Ralph fourteen months old—since dead—in a very ill condition suffering the wife said from pneumonia. The child's face was bedaubed with mucous and dirt, whilst the back door was open exposing the child to a draft. The morning was particularly cold A few days later the child died (Stockton and Thornaby NSPCC case record, 1898, NSPCC Archives. For a full account of these sources, see Ferguson, 2004).

This is a classic modern experience in social work and child protection in how it involves practices that are fundamentally focused on trying to gain access to children in their homes, having to negotiate on doorsteps, get permission to look around the home and deal with resistant and sometimes hostile and violent clients. It is classic, too, in the mobility involved, moving from the office, to the doorstep, across the threshold and into the home, and moving within people's private spaces, including even their bedrooms, the most intimate corners of their lives and selves. It is a deeply bodily experience in which all the senses—sight, smell, touch, hearing, and taste—are used as the worker looks for the child and checks their well-being, as well as the home conditions. Like all classic modern experiences in social work, the scene is full of risk, most obviously to the child who died, but also to the worker from the unknown of what was behind the door and the parents'/carers' responses and the existential dread of working within such 'wretched dirty' home conditions and with children who are 'bedaubed with mucous and dirt' and enduring pain and suffering.

In social work today, we have largely lost the ability to describe and analyse practice and risk in the way that I have just begun to do, in terms of its lived experience, the senses and the movements, actions and emotions involved (de Montingy (1995) is a notable exception). There is a remarkable absence of research into what social workers say to service users and do when conducting the work (Forrester *et al.*, 2008a). Analysis and discussion of what social workers do have become deeply concerned that the work is too defined by bureaucracy, time spent at the computer and engaging in inter-professional collaboration. This leaves some social workers with too little time to spend on home visits and doing quality work with children and families and creates risks of failures to protect that have their origins in poorly designed and managed systems (Broadbent *et al.*, 2009; Munro, 2005).

More generally, a focus on the risks caused by ineffective systems has been deeply influential since the 1970s, when public inquiries into failures to prevent the deaths of children from abuse began. Policy makers have regarded the key factor in why professionals did not protect children as arising from problems in the inter-professional *system* and failures by agencies to communicate vital information that could have brought the abuse to light. Levels of performance management and bureaucratisation of social work are, if anything, intensifying in the 2000s, as more horrific

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cases of abuse and organisational failure are publicly disclosed, the workers involved are blamed, named and shamed, yet more performance management targets are imposed by government and new information technologies provide more scope for standardisation and organisational control of workers (see, in particular, the 'Baby Peter' case, Haringey, 2008, 2009; and the official response to it, Laming, 2009). Such frantic government responses support Webb's argument that greater managerial control of front line practice typifies how heightened awareness of risks of system failures to protect are managed in 'risk society' (Webb, 2006).

These analyses of the development and implications of complex professional systems and managerial responses have made an important contribution to knowledge by identifying what can be called the *systemic risks* that contribute to problems in how social work is organised and delivered, within which failures to protect children occur. But while systemic risks are, of course, important, it is crucial that the nature of risks is also understood in terms of the practices involved in the *doing* of child protection face to face with service users, namely *practice risks*. This is to turn attention to the decisions professionals take in clinics or on home visits about whether or not to walk across a room to engage with a child, whether to touch or examine them, or to ask them or their carers relevant questions, and the many other day-to-day actions and movements they do or do not make to relate to and protect children.

In this paper, I want to shift the emphasis onto *practice risk* and the individual practitioner's unique experience of doing social work. Crucially, these are practices that go on and risks that are experienced in particular places: the street, the car, the service user's home. As the death of fourteen-month-old Ralph in the above case extract shows, workers have struggled with trying to prevent the deaths of children in casework for as long as child protection work has gone on and their experiences and performances on doorsteps and when in the home have been crucial to outcomes. The response and contribution of service users are hugely significant in shaping what occurs and the unpredictability of practice. We need a sociology and language to capture the sphere of activity and action that goes on beyond the office, on the street, doing the home visit, where the worker is outside of the organisation and most often acting alone. Every practitioner is, of course, on one level, always embedded in organisational systems, even when they are not actually in the office, the expectations of which they carry with them. The size of caseloads, management dictates about things such as case recording, the quality of supervision and support with thinking and connecting with feelings, clarity of role, aims, vision and knowledge of good practice, all have some influence on what goes on with families. But every practitioner is required to act in the places beyond the office because that is where their service users usually are and their performances and experiences in those places are unique to them and cannot be reduced simply to what the system allows.

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While there certainly have been changes to social work in the over 100 years since the above case record was written, at a deep, shall we say primal, level, the experience involved in going on the move, walking the streets and footpaths, and trying to gain access to children in their homes remains an essential core element of what social work and child protection are. It is imperative then that we acknowledge, evoke and fully understand social workers' everyday lived experiences of practice, the risks involved and how best to manage them.

Walking the walk in social work

To capture the essence and atmospheres of social work and risk, it is necessary to go with the 'flows' of how its practices are routinely enacted and I will organise the discussion around the walks and other (mobile) ways in which social work is done. We will follow the practitioner as she leaves the office, makes a journey by car or on foot, walks to the doorstep and (tries to) gain access to the service user's home, walks into and within the home, and then leaves and does the return journey.

The best way to begin this atmospheric inquiry into social work is to accompany social workers from the moment they first had to take to the streets and walk through the environments they routinely had to in order to reach their service users. From its beginnings in the late-nineteenth century, social workers have walked into what have been regarded as the most unsavoury and dangerous places in society. The investigative brief of child protection workers meant that they were at the forefront of such techniques, going into the slums to root out child cruelty. How the early social workers used their legs and bodies is exemplified by an NSPCC worker's case record in 1898:

When patrolling various slums, I discovered the four children of Thomas P They were all sickly, pale faced and greatly distressed in appearance . . . I examined them and found their clothing swarming with monster lice, their clothing was also filthy and bloodstained. Their bodies a mass of bites and full of eruptions. The house (two rooms) was foul and filthy with dirt and the only bedding was a shakedown (Stockton and Thornaby NSPCC case record, 1898, NSPCC Archives).

In the 1880s and 1890s, it was common for social workers to do as this one did and follow or take home abused and neglected children they saw on the street—cases the agency referred to as 'cruelties of the street'. By the early 1900s, this category had disappeared and the only basis on which investigations could occur was in response to referrals from third parties. Hereafter, child protection took its modern form of investigating the well-being of children primarily in their homes. The effectiveness of child protection now rested on social workers' skill at home visiting. Developments in

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auto-mobility, from the push bike, to the motor bike and then the car, which came into general use in social work in the 1950s, have impacted on the speed of access to service users and the experience of getting there has dramatically changed (Ferguson, 2010). But the car can only take the worker so far, be it to the street and front gate outside the home or the edge of the high-rise housing block. There is still significant walking to be done.

Walking around the kinds of typically disadvantaged public places social workers routinely have to go involves having to negotiate conditions that assault the senses—unpleasant smells, poor lighting, aggressive dogs, human and animal excreta, as well as actual threats from service users and/or other residents. These comments are not meant to stereotype disadvantaged communities and service users. Such conditions are an indictment of a society that fails to provide decent housing for its most vulnerable citizens. The effect, though, ‘on the ground’ is that social work involves walking in an atmosphere of tension and sometimes menace, pervaded by uncertainty, anxiety, fear and adventure. Urry (2007, p. 88) writes of there being ‘some walks that involve moments of adventure when the body is put through its paces and the bare body painfully physicalises its relationship with the external world’. Urry identifies adventure as a key aspect of the mobile experience of modern life, including the activity of walking. ‘Adventure involves the body as spatially situated, experiencing and knowing the world through being in and moving around it’ (Urry, 2007, p. 86). Social work is walking as an adventure: up the stairway of high-rise flats, up the path to the home in anticipation of the visit; crossing the threshold of the home, in the door, walking around as well as sitting while in the home; and then getting out again. Even walking from the office to the car to make the journey can provoke anticipation and deep emotion.

At the extremes, the deeply physical ways practitioners’ bodies are put at risk and through their paces involve the environment itself being physically used against them to make their job harder and even harm them. In my current interviews with social workers, I have been told of housing estates with lifts where infected hypodermic needles have reputedly been pressed in beside where the lift button is, with the intention of harming visiting professionals. Such public housing estates are an example of places that often have a particular atmosphere that derives from a design that results in very few people typically being out and about in their public spaces. This lack of people can lead to an intangible, uneasy feeling that something is wrong, and a sense of danger and insecurity (Halgreen, 2004). Social workers know this feeling well and it is often exacerbated by the fear that it is the recognisable presence of their car and themselves on the estate or in a high-rise block that is causing the uneasy quiet. A common fear is that retribution, if not visited upon them, will be taken out on their car, which is important as a secure base for them to return to and escape from the hostile environment (Smith, 2003).

auto-mobility, from the push bike, to the motor bike and then the car, which came into general use in social work in the 1950s, have impacted on the speed of access to service users and the experience of getting there has dramatically changed (Ferguson, 2010). But the car can only take the worker so far, be it to the street and front gate outside the home or the edge of the high-rise housing block. There is still significant walking to be done.

Walking around the kinds of typically disadvantaged public places social workers routinely have to go involves having to negotiate conditions that assault the senses—unpleasant smells, poor lighting, aggressive dogs, human and animal excreta, as well as actual threats from service users and/or other residents. These comments are not meant to stereotype disadvantaged communities and service users. Such conditions are an indictment of a society that fails to provide decent housing for its most vulnerable citizens. The effect, though, ‘on the ground’ is that social work involves walking in an atmosphere of tension and sometimes menace, pervaded by uncertainty, anxiety, fear and adventure. Urry (2007, p. 88) writes of there being ‘some walks that involve moments of adventure when the body is put through its paces and the bare body painfully physicalises its relationship with the external world’. Urry identifies adventure as a key aspect of the mobile experience of modern life, including the activity of walking. ‘Adventure involves the body as spatially situated, experiencing and knowing the world through being in and moving around it’ (Urry, 2007, p. 86). Social work is walking as an adventure: up the stairway of high-rise flats, up the path to the home in anticipation of the visit; crossing the threshold of the home, in the door, walking around as well as sitting while in the home; and then getting out again. Even walking from the office to the car to make the journey can provoke anticipation and deep emotion.

At the extremes, the deeply physical ways practitioners’ bodies are put at risk and through their paces involve the environment itself being physically used against them to make their job harder and even harm them. In my current interviews with social workers, I have been told of housing estates with lifts where infected hypodermic needles have reputedly been pressed in beside where the lift button is, with the intention of harming visiting professionals. Such public housing estates are an example of places that often have a particular atmosphere that derives from a design that results in very few people typically being out and about in their public spaces. This lack of people can lead to an intangible, uneasy feeling that something is wrong, and a sense of danger and insecurity (Halgreen, 2004). Social workers know this feeling well and it is often exacerbated by the fear that it is the recognisable presence of their car and themselves on the estate or in a high-rise block that is causing the uneasy quiet. A common fear is that retribution, if not visited upon them, will be taken out on their car, which is important as a secure base for them to return to and escape from the hostile environment (Smith, 2003).

Research suggests that the more people there are in public places, the safer people feel (Urry, 2007). But, for social workers, the presence of people can also be viewed as potentially hazardous. The Laming report into why professionals did not prevent the death from abuse of eight-year-old Victoria Climbié gives an example of an encounter that occurred when two social work staff were looking for Victoria and her carers:

Ms Bridgeman and Ms Hobbs spoke to a number of people hanging around outside the premises, some of whom were drinking alcohol. They asked where room 10 was, if anybody knew who lived there, and if there was anyone upstairs. The people they spoke to informed them that the family had moved away about a week ago. This was of course true, as [Victoria's Great Aunt and carer] Kouau and Victoria had moved in with [Kouau's boyfriend] Manning on or about 6 July 1999. However, Ms Bridgeman agreed in evidence that she should not have relied on this information. They went upstairs to room 10 and knocked on the door. There was no answer. They asked people they had spoken to earlier if they had any concerns about the family, but none were raised (Laming, 2003, p. 91).

The injunction that the workers 'should not have relied on such information' involves a rational interpretation being put on their thinking, experience and actions. An alternative form of inquiry involves taking full account of the emotions and risk and exploring why workers rely on certain information and perceptions in particular circumstances. From this perspective, the professional response described above was likely to have been influenced by the visceral feelings that arise from having to be in an environment that was unknown, in which groups of people who are consuming alcohol may be indifferent towards you, or friendly and even kind to you, but who equally may distrust and want to attack and punish you.

There is, in fact, a significant literature on walking, which can help to deepen our understandings of the complexities of people's mobile experiences and perception. Ingold's fascinating work on the human foot shows how differently the world can look when perceived through the feet and not the head. Social science, he argues in a wonderful turn of phrase, is 'head over heels' in that it biases what is 'seen' through the eyes, ears and the mind and ignores or downplays touch, the feet and lower body. A deep relationship must be maintained between mind and body in understandings of how perception and behaviour are shaped. For Ingold (2000), locomotion, not cognition, must be the starting point for the study of perceptual activity. Cognition should not be set off from locomotion, along the lines of a division between head and heels, since walking is itself a form of embodied knowing (Ingold, 2004, p. 330). Such a separating off of mind and body, thinking and action/movement, is precisely what happens in social work and child protection discourse, as evidenced

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above in the quote from the Laming report. Reversing it, which is our aim here, means developing:

... a more literally *grounded* approach to perception [which] should help to restore touch to its proper place in the balance of the senses. For it is surely through our feet, in contact with the ground (albeit mediated by footwear), that we are most fundamentally and continually 'in touch' with our surroundings' (Ingold, 2004, p. 330; see also, Lewis, 2001).

The implications for social work theory are that we need to produce detailed accounts of how practitioners experience their work, their bodies, how they perceive their service users and make decisions while on the move, how they think on their feet, or even *through* their feet and other parts of the body. It is through this kind of inquiry that practitioners' experiences of what I am calling 'practice risks' can emerge. This means that thinking, walking and getting the body to move cannot simply be understood on a common sense level and are much more complex and difficult than is usually recognised. The wisdom of this can be seen in how it comes out in social work humour about visits to dirty homes in comments like: 'Wipe your feet on your way out!' It is not simply a matter of the mind telling the body what to do, but what Merleau-Ponty calls the 'lived body' that is significant here:

My body is the seat or rather the very actuality of the phenomenon of expression . . . [It] is the fabric into which all objects are woven, and it is, at least in relation to the perceived world, the greatest instrument of my 'comprehension' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 235).

The aim then of an atmospheric inquiry into social work is to understand much more about the lived body of social workers and how they comprehend things as they are in motion and move through public spaces and then into the private lives and spaces of service users. For all the risks, atmospheres and adventurousness walking in public involves, having reached the service user's home, the adventure has only just begun.

Moving and the risks of becoming immobilised in the home

The adventure of social work and risk amounts to much more than the unknown in terms of physical threats or actual violence from aggressive clients, as significant as that is. The adventure in social work is characterised by feelings of excitement, dread, fear, often extreme anxiety, thrill and adrenaline rushes. Such an intense array of feelings are often present in the same moment, while on the same journey/visit and are part of the routine experience of social work and often referred to as the 'buzz'. As a social worker in my research exemplified it, 'You get on a high from it, you get a buzz from all the activity and going out and . . . yeah, there is a buzz about it, about being busy and on the go'.

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The expression 'going out on it' is a common way in which social workers describe their response to referrals that require investigation through home visits. The experience of the car and its dynamism in transporting the worker to the place of danger/risk is a fundamental part of the adventure, especially when the use of speed is called for in response to very serious referrals. But nowhere is the buzz of the adventure more deeply felt than when walking up the garden path or stairway and knocking on the door. Doorsteps and the adventures that go on at them are hugely significant but neglected places where important social work goes on. It is a common-place for practitioners to experience it taking considerable lengths of time to be allowed to enter the home, and sometimes they do not succeed in getting in at all and this can have tragic consequences for the child (London Borough of Greenwich, 1987). This is a vivid example of how blocked movement occurs in social work and its impact.

The threat on the street or the stairs of the high-rise block can be so high that entry to the client's home can seem like a relief. This may be momentary or, when the atmosphere is more welcoming, a longer-term comfort. Yet, the move into the private domain is not an escape from atmospheres, but rather a stepping into them. All homes and the relationships within them have atmospheres and how professionals manage stepping into and negotiating them is at the core of performing social work and child protection and managing risk effectively. Despite being the core site where face-to-face work goes on in child protection, the home (visit) has been largely ignored in analyses of practice. As the historical case examples featured earlier show, moving around the home and checking on bedrooms and other intimate spaces was once regarded as best practice and we know from inquiries into children's deaths today that the absence of such mobile social work practices is a vital reason why the serious abuse of children is missed.

An obvious but still remarkable feature of walks in the home is that they are very short. There is not much space to move in and whether or not children are protected routinely comes down to professionals taking or not taking a few short steps. But the tighter, reduced amount of space does not make actually moving in the home any easier. As I have shown elsewhere (Ferguson, 2009), it can have the opposite effect, as the atmosphere of the home and how the parents and carers manipulate the space and position the children (and the worker) within it can cause the worker to misinterpret the truth of the child's painful situation. There are many examples in child abuse death reports of professionals having been in rooms with abused children who, it became known afterwards, were fatally injured but the workers did not move towards and directly engage with or touch the child and their injuries were missed.

In the case of 'Baby Peter', who, at the time of his death at the age of seventeen months, had a broken back and some fifty injuries, the social worker saw the child on a home visit four days before he died. There was

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