

Has made good progress but could try harder

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Commissioning Editor

This edition coincides with the 40th anniversary of the formation of BAAF (British Association for Adoption and Fostering). Its predecessors, ABAA, ABFA and ARE, laid the foundations for the training, dissemination and research that has marked its development since 1980, and its incorporation into the larger Coram charity in 2015.¹

Back in 1980, the changes introduced in the previous decade were beginning to take effect. Central responsibility had passed from the Home Office to the Department of Health and Social Security (DHSS), the 1969 and 1975 Children Acts were shaping practice, generic social services departments were fully operational, training had been consolidated and new findings on children in care were emerging. There were nearly 95,000 ‘looked after’ children in England at this time, 34% of whom lived in residential settings (compared with 78,000 and 12% today).

There were two trends that ran partly but not wholly in parallel with these developments and both of them are highly relevant to the aims of this journal. The first is the increasing amount and influence of research.

The 1971 move in central government responsibility from the Home Office to the newly formed DHSS (an amalgam of two departments) initiated a new research agenda. The Home Office had commissioned studies and had its own Research Unit. It collected annual statistics on children in care but these were fairly limited and there was more interest in young offenders (who came into the DHSS as well) than in the larger group of children in need.

This move to the DHSS exposed social work to scrutiny by ‘health’ professionals who worked in a culture sympathetic to scientific investigation and its practical application. They were surprised by the dearth of research into children’s services and the weak science of many studies, manifest in the rarity of randomised controlled trials and quasi-experimental designs. They wished to do something about it and were supported by an enlightened group of civil servants and politicians.

Roy Parker (who later became Chair of BAAF) was an adviser to the Department’s newly formed Children’s Research Liaison Group (RLG) and in the mid-1970s proposed ways of taking things forward. He suggested a programme of research comprising three interlinked studies: children likely to be considered for entry to care, the problems of maintaining links between those in care and their families and the factors determining

children's length of stay. More studies were soon added, such as leaving care, movement in and out of care and child placement changes. At the same time, researchers elsewhere were scrutinising legal processes and there was a tranche of research into young offenders, such as on intermediate treatment and alternatives to custody. So it was an active and exciting period.

Michael Rutter at the Institute of Psychiatry was another RLG adviser and was directing research into children's psychosocial development and inter-generational continuities. He expressed concern that child care research was often descriptive rather than explanatory and recommended that projects should move from exploring statistical associations to analysing processes and focusing on outcomes.

So the first question raised by this discussion is whether today's research is better in terms of its theoretical sophistication and scientific quality?

I think the answer is yes and no. There are certainly fewer large-scale, quantitative follow-up studies that paint a broad picture and view issues in a wide context; but at the same time, there are more reviews, meta-analyses and 'what works' publications, although these tend to consolidate knowledge rather than develop new thinking. Also, there is greater understanding and application of theoretical concepts like attachment and resilience, and projects take a more holistic approach, incorporating factors such as children's education, health and social relationships which were scant in the earlier emphasis on placements. Complementing all of this, there is a growing child care international research community as reflected in the increasing number of overseas articles published in the journal. And, of course, practice has changed with children once considered unsuitable for family placement now commonly fostered, residential care becoming more humanised and new models of adoption developed.

On the other hand, there are now many more qualitative studies where, typically, a small group of people recount their experiences and feelings on a selected topic to identify common themes. These provide insights into processes – which is welcome in the light of Rutter's observation – but produce findings that are difficult to generalise. To be authoritative, they need to be tested on large samples using robust outcome measures and this aspect of the research process is now less common. So, 'has made progress but could try harder' seems a fair judgement.

The second surprise to the DHSS professionals was the lack of a research culture in social work. The post-1948 Children Act child care officers had succeeded in creating a new service but had little to go on in terms of evidence. Two magazines, *Social Work Today* and *Community Care*, were widely read and provided research summaries but were seen by the Department as 'too chatty' to serve as a scientific journal. A new strategy was needed, this time to link research, policy and practice more effectively.

One of the first initiatives was to disseminate the findings of the projects described earlier and although these were available in books, it was feared that social workers did not read them. As one cynical researcher explained: 'Read a couple of books and you can be a world expert; in physics we'd all be lab techs.' In response, the Department commissioned a summary publication of the projects designed in a way that would gain the attention of social workers and Jane Rowe, the Director of BAAF, was asked to compile it (she

undertook a later study of changes in placements). It comprised a summary of each project and a set of 'true for us' exercises that encouraged practitioners to apply the findings to practice. A series of similar overviews based on commissioned research programmes soon followed under the general title *Messages from Research* and many other organisations began to produce 'What Works' publications. In addition, several publishers (including BAAF) established series of social work books and initiatives such as *Research in Practice*, *Making Research Count*, and specialist websites were created to improve dissemination mechanisms.

Accompanying all of this was the development of research-informed practice tools to help with decision-making and ensure accurate background information. These proved useful for assessing children's needs and managing processes and several quickly became incorporated into practice. However, they were not universally welcomed as some practitioners saw them as encouraging a tick-box approach to social work that contrasted with its traditional relational style. Problems were also encountered in setting outcome measures suitable for child care. Some could be easily fashioned, like readmission rates or number of placement changes, but broader aspects of child development proved more slippery. Sceptics raised challenging questions such as 'Whose outcome?' and 'When?'. In developing the materials for the substantial initiative, *Looking After Children*, it proved much easier to agree on things that were bad for children than those that were good for them as these are often specific to cultures or contexts; obedience to elders and religious observance were cited as examples. A typical argument concerned whether it was desirable for teenagers to have a part-time job like a paper round. The general view was that it would boost their confidence and provide them with a bit of money. However, the consensus was shattered by a dissenter who argued that this condones the exploitation of disadvantaged youngsters with poor life prospects.

So what is the judgement on research cultures? I think it is more favourable than for research studies in terms of access to current knowledge. Reliable information is more readily available than ever, thanks mainly to the internet. Official reports and training have never been so numerous or evidence based, and scientific assessments feature regularly in case reviews and court hearings. But research still tends to be used selectively to support specific causes rather than to form an integral part of professional discussions or provide overarching theories to underpin policy and practice. I used to worry that I had never seen a copy of *Adoption & Fostering* in a social services office but probably this matters less than it did, thanks to modern technology. The gap between motivation, access and take-up is still too wide for my liking but, hopefully, is diminishing and is certainly narrower than 40 years ago.

So, given all this change, readers might well ask what is the future role of a peer-reviewed specialist journal? Clearly, it has to adapt its style and form to fit in with other developments but I would suggest that the need for quality control of the information published and the availability of a regular and stimulating digest of new knowledge from a range of disciplines remain important in an area where there are still many unknowns, risks of extreme claims and a heritage of shocking practice.

Note

1. To celebrate this 40th anniversary CoramBAAF has produced a special journal supplement featuring a selection of articles originally published in *Adoption & Fostering* over the last four decades. These are introduced by John Simmonds, Director of Policy, Research and Development at CoramBAAF, who uses the articles to reflect on some of the main themes that have dominated child and family social work during this time.

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