



## COMMENTARY

### Outcomes from a pilot project on workplace culture observations: getting evaluation outcomes on the agenda

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Understanding in practice what enables effective care to flourish and grow can be complex. As practice developers we know and understand the significance and importance of 'culture' and 'context' however translating this understanding to the 'real world' setting of clinical practice that is frequently challenging and complex can be less easy. In addition, at times of rapid, unrelenting change within organisations that are constantly seeking opportunities to reduce cost and increase productivity whilst maintaining quality, the context can be immensely challenging for practitioners and managers on a day-to-day basis responsible for operationally delivering services along with facilitators who are attempting to help individuals and teams to develop and transform practice.

This paper describes how a collaborative practice development pilot project (within a larger scale emancipatory practice development programme) used 'observation' as a 'learning activity.' This enabled clinical leaders to take the first steps in understanding how patients experience care through observing the setting for care, leading to an understanding and interpretation of contextual and cultural behaviours. The paper critiques the place of observation within the contemporary practice development literature and its use within ethnographic research in which researchers are permitted to study people in their environment in order to gain enhanced understanding from their perspective. Whilst not being seen as research, the project presented in the paper mirrored research governance processes from a research ethics perspective.

The pilot project had five key objectives, to:

1. Enhance observation skills (*of participants*)
2. Carry out and contribute to a team development activity
3. Share and develop critical questions for local practice development action planning
4. Build up active commitment to practice development work within the group
5. Collect local evidence/ data about current practice to inform practice development

Analysis of the data by participants carrying out the observations identified key emerging themes: inconsistency and contradictions; light and dark; cleanliness and clutter; quiet and noise; calmness and busyness; conversation and chatter; communal and bedside; respect and disrespect.

The focus of this paper is embedded in multi-professional collaboration and learning from using observation in practice. This provided evidence about the workplace culture which is linked to other aspects of practice development work that group members were leading and facilitating. The authors identify that group members learnt how to develop observation skills to a 'certain degree', however these would need to be developed further to make use of the Workplace Culture Critical Analysis Tool (WCCAT). Although the observers in the project were already immersed in the field of

observation, this created a set of different issues for them compared to those potentially experienced by 'external' observers. These included: issues around gaining access to what was going on, power imbalance, self identity and personal fears.

The paper brings to the fore how observation embedded in active learning and collaboration can help both practice and practitioners develop skills to understand, transform and work with the workplace culture. Learning from and in practice is both complex and multidimensional and cannot happen haphazardly. Facilitating the skills in practitioners to become effective observers of their workplace culture requires systematic learning and a developmental approach, coupled with 'authentic participation' to enable 'personal transformation'. How the observation method is used to promote individual and collective learning and action within the workplace is the outcome needed to make a difference.

In the workplace, the landscape of service delivery can be constantly changing. Being able to demonstrate evaluation evidence of small projects, such as observations of the care setting, is one way of ensuring practice development makes a positive contribution to organisational priorities coupled with demonstrating deliverable outcomes. In addition, collaboration and learning in and from practice is key to both enabling individuals and teams to develop and make a positive difference to both the context and culture of care as experienced by patients, their supporters and staff.

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