Child Protection Social Work in COVID-19

Reflections on Home Visits and Digital Intimacy

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ABSTRACT: This article brings together digital anthropology and social work scholarship to create an applied anthropology of everyday digital intimacy. Child protection social work involves home visits in the intimate spaces of others, where modes of sensorial and affective engagement combine with professional awareness and standards to constitute sensitive understandings of children's well-being and family relationships. In the COVID-19 pandemic, social work practice has shifted, partly, to distance work where social workers engage digitally with service users in their homes while seeking to constitute similarly effective modes of intimacy and understanding. We bring practice examples from our study of social work and child protection during COVID-19 together with anthropologies of digital intimacy to examine implications for new modes of digital social work practice.

KEYWORDS: child protection, COVID-19, digital anthropology, digital intimacy, home visits, social work

'Rose', the children's mother, let us in. On entering the home, a big retriever-type dog jumped up on Angelina the social worker. In the sitting-room, Angelina sat down in the armchair and spoke to the two children. Five-year-old Suzanna immediately crossed the room and snuggled up to Angelina, backing into the space beside her legs, half leaning and half sitting on them, and the social worker gently placed her arms around her. The child and social worker interacted on five occasions during the visit, and this involved talk and some play, for instance with the social worker's car keys. The episode of physical intimacy between them ended when Angelina decided to go into the kitchen to avoid the loud TV and a young adult sibling who had arrived, so she could speak to the parents about her concerns about the 'neglectful' home conditions and sexual harm. The nine-year-old boy was sat on the floor in front of the TV, and the social worker told him (again, she said) that it will damage his eyes. Before leaving, the social worker went upstairs and checked the children's beds and the state of their bedrooms. She had known the family for 15 months and explained afterwards how uncomfortable

visits used to be, especially because Suzanna climbed all over her. Just before snuggling into the social worker, Suzanna came up very close to me as I sat on the other armchair and asked: "What's your name?" I told her, and the social worker repeated what I had explained on arrival, which is that I was there to watch how she works with children.

In performing child protection, the primary place where social workers meet with service users is in their homes. As the above vignette shows, home visits involve close engagement with the family's intimate spaces, bodies and sensory, physical and emotional worlds, technologies and non-human companions (Ferguson 2018). The COVID-19 crisis has disrupted these taken-for-granted practices and presented governments, social work leaders, managers and child protection practitioners with unique challenges. As the vignette, which draws from our previous research, reveals, a crucial way that child protection work is achieved is by social workers getting close to children, especially on home visits and in help-

ing parents by immersing themselves in their lives and the routines of the family (Cook 2020; Ferguson 2016; Ferguson et al. 2020). Child protection social work involves being in the intimate spaces of others, where modes of sensorial and affective engagement combine with professional awareness and standards to define and frame sensitive understandings of complex situations. During the COVID-19 crisis, one way in which social workers avoided the risk of contracting and transmitting the virus has been to undertake work they would previously have done in person, in service user's homes, from their own homes using digital communications technologies.

In our study of social work and child protection during COVID-19, the first stage of fieldwork with 47 social work staff at four local authority sites in England has revealed key ways that they seek to create the sense of intimacy required to support their practice digitally. This article presents an early analysis of the changing modes of intimacy emerging for child protection social workers in the United Kingdom in these circumstances. We examine how insights from the social worker experience dialogue with and advance anthropologies of digital intimacies to suggest that applied digital anthropology can contribute to generating frameworks for future social work practice in times of crisis.

Anthropology and #stayathome with Digital Technologies

Anthropologically home is understood beyond the built environment of a house, apartment or other dwelling as a feeling generated by configurations of things, socialities and processes. Much of what is important in life happens at home (Miller 2001), an intimate place where feelings of familiarity and comfort are consolidated by everyday routines and activities surrounding social, interspecies, sensory, material and technological processes (Pink et al. 2017). Home is not always a safe space, but it is a feeling that might be generated while surrounded by less benign elements. Thus, the correspondence between house and home is not necessarily direct, and the COVID-19 #stayathome message is ironic in conflating home and house while disrupting the home that was constituted within houses. While staying in a house and self-isolating were necessary measures during the COVID-19 pandemic, their association with the concept of home is complex. Working from home can involve attempting to undertake professional duties in a spatial environment where the feelings, routines

and intimacies that constitute both home and professional identities overlap or clash. Thinking design anthropologically, this is where people innovate or improvise, in order to cope with these circumstances and the contingencies associated with them. As anthropological research shows, when health-care workers undertake home visits, the values of professionalism and intimacy are contingent and fluid – for instance, as community nurses modify their personal protective equipment (PPE) by removing their shoes out of respect for a patient's home, or cutting fingertips off gloves to better deliver clinical procedures (Pink et al. 2015). In child protection social work practice, home visits likewise involve social workers undertaking professional work in service users' homes. Similarly, their ability to sense and engage with the intimacy of the social and material relations of home is fundamental to their professional practice in ways that resonate with how home tours (Pink and Leder Mackley 2014) bring digital anthropologists up close to research participants' sensory and affective ways of knowing in domestic environments.

Yet, digital anthropologists also emphasise the role of digital communications technologies in generating intimacy at distance (Madianou and Miller 2011) and their entanglements in sensory, affective and social relations of home-based routines (Pink et al. 2015), while media scholars note the hapticity (Parisi et al. 2017) and sensoriality of digital media (Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer 2019). We explored with social workers how, in the COVID-19 context, they have engaged with some families using digital technologies in place of home visits. Thus, we explored how new modes of digital intimacy are constituted through these practices, and how social workers' modes of learning and knowing through these intimacies are experienced and integrated into new practice.

A Glimpse of New Digital Social Work Practice

There was no existing template for shifting social work practice online in a working-from-home context. During lockdown, the social workers who participated in our study innovated through phone and video calls made from their own homes. The example of a social worker's experiences of working with one migrant family, whose members were experienced in digital communications with family overseas, shows how such encounters emerged. The social worker described how she sought to engage with their baby, in order to understand the baby's well-being:

I am not a huge physical contact person anyway, but with babies . . . so this is the baby that I was talking to over video, and I found myself getting really, really close to the screen so my face was really big and making really over-the-top gestures to which the baby really responded and was smiling and babbling away yesterday, and the parents were supportive of that: they held the phone up really close to the baby so the baby could see me. And I think in terms of how I am working with the parents, it wouldn't be any different other than I would be in the room with them, rather than on the end of the phone. But I think [that] with the baby it is all about that facial expression and the eye contact and the close-up and the, you know, gaining their attention by stroking their hand or tickling their cheek, and I would be more inclined to do that in a home visit and that is the real difference: maybe engage them with a toy.

The social worker spoke of the proximity, the visual intimacy of the video call and the emotional engagement that she sensed with the baby, but was concerned about the absence or impossibility of other modes of sensory engagement, particularly not being able to practise physical intimacy and the uncertainty associated with this inability:

You know sometimes there is [sic] babies that do you know smell musty or they look clean but you know you can smell that they maybe haven't been washed, they maybe having had nappies changed, and these are whole areas that in my assessment I just can't comment on, and I am reliant on the information from other professionals, so health visitors, medical professionals, anybody that has been in or has had that direct contact with the child to see if there is anything of any concern or of note that would further inform my assessment. Because obviously it is a holistic thing, you're looking at the whole picture and we're involved because of this conflict between them [the parents] but what is the whole picture like for this child and there is a big section of that that you just don't have.

While social workers' narratives frequently point to how they experience the screen as restricting their capacity to get close to people and the home itself, some had experiences of digital communication enabling greater intimate engagement compared to what they had achieved on in-person visits to the home. Children sometimes reveal more about their lives and narrate their experience in a different and more fulsome way when communication is mediated through a screen. As another social worker elaborates about her overall initial experience of online casework, this is connected to children having charge of the phone and some control over the video call:

If you ask them to go in to another room, they will, or they just walk around. If you say, 'oh show me your house, show me what you have been doing', they will show you pictures or talk about what they have been doing or take you to show you their bedroom, and the parent might be lagging behind, but they are chatting away and they almost. I think with WhatsApp, it's sort of when they are worried, it's sort of, because they are talking on a phone it is almost like they are not talking to you directly, they are talking to the phone. You know, especially with children that have been told not to talk to you, that might be a medium that we can use in the future because they are not actually talking to you, they are talking to a screen . . . when we visit them at home, especially if they are particularly hard to talk to, then you get more from [observing] their behaviour but you know when they are talking; a lot of children like talking to a screen, and they find it interactive. Does that make sense? And you can read a book with them and do stuff on the phone with them.

Applied Digital Anthropology

Communications technologies, such as smartphones are part of the 'mundane intimacy of everyday life'; they are used for everyday checking, keeping in touch, experiencing feelings of 'togetherness' while physically apart (Hjorth et al. 2018). Above, we highlighted three examples of social work practice, an account of the researcher observing the social worker's practice in a home, and two social workers describing how they sought to generate similar modes of intimacy using a video call. The digital intimacy of transnational family relations documented by anthropologists is socially and institutionally differentiated from that generated through video calls with social workers, yet the continuities between existing personal and emerging professional modes of digital intimacy are suggestive. For social workers who participated in our research, digital technologies offered helpful but incomplete sensorial experiences of the family environments they sought to evaluate. Digital intimacy cannot replace physical encounters, thus to understand how it can participate in social work practice we need to account for the new and alternative modes of intimacy it generates and how these might be differently employed to evaluate children's situations.

The sudden disruption caused by COVID-19 and the absence of familiar embodied experiences due to working from home and communicating digitally has generated in social workers a longing for physical connection with service users and forms of

intimacy such as being able to hold the children they seek to help. This has resulted perhaps in an overly negative evaluation of online encounters and the digital intimacies they make possible, some of which could not be achieved when together in person. While virtual home visits have limitations, an applied digital anthropology approach alerts us to the role of digital intimacies in contemporary everyday lives. It encourages us to explore how digital intimacies are generated in virtual home visits, where for some children, parents and other family members they provide modes of communication that are intimate, meaningful and helpful. These insights help us to consider how digital intimacies might extend social work practice in the future by drawing on the possibilities they create for new modes of knowing and engaging with service users. Post-COVID-19, for some families and children at least, a hybrid approach seems desirable where social work connects through in-person and digital intimacies.

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