

# **'Working the house': The art and skill of home visiting in social work with children and families**

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Social work research has largely failed to get close enough to actual practice encounters to produce understandings of how practice is performed and achieved and what goes on between social workers and service users. I argue that such research and knowledge must be place specific, sensitive to the routines and challenges that arise in performing social work in particular spaces. This paper addresses the sociology of practice in the most common place where social work with children and families goes on, the home. It draws on a participant observation study in which 87 practice encounters between social workers, children and parents/families were observed and audio-recorded, 71 of which were on home visits. From the findings, and by drawing upon a material culture studies approach to the home (Miller, 2010), three particular skills are identified and conceptualised. 'Accommodating' refers to the process of adjusting to the 'agency' of the home, the internal world of the family and the energies and atmospheres within the home. 'Multi-relating' refers to how workers frequently have to do more than one thing at a time and sometimes several different things at once: meet children and settle and calm them down; relate to parents, dogs, friends, the TV. On home visits conditions and 'order' that enable the work to be done have to be created and workers achieved this through what I will call 'partitioning', which refers to the breaking down of the work into manageable, doable pieces and completing discreet tasks by seeing children and parents all together, separately in particular combinations, or as individuals on their own, in different places (the home, school etc), in different rooms within the home, or in gardens. The value and implications of such a sociology of home visiting will be identified.