
A short study

The Victoria Climbié Foundation

Understanding how psychology and politics can be applied within a practical setting to support existing knowledge and theory

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Introduction

During my work shadowing week I went to work with the Victoria Climbié Foundation (VCF) based in London. My intention was to find out how my Political and Psychology studies applied in a “real life” working environment, in addition to finding out more about the organisation and how they operate. I found that both politics and psychology link very nicely into the workings of this organisation and certainly in the case of the VCF you must understand the political side of the organisation to understand the psychological side of it and vice versa. In general the VCF seek to enhance the child protection system through supporting good practice and challenging bad practice, they do this essentially by taking a statement from the service user and then use this to establish the kind of support that service user needs. The organisation operates under many methods to be able to provide their services to the public in order to achieve their ultimate goal. They are unique in that they could be viewed as using both outsider and insider pressure group methods to achieve those goals. It is political knowledge, such as pressure groups, along with democracy and conservatism that I have been able to link into the everyday workings of the VCF.

As for the psychological aspect, I had to look more into the internal workings of the organisation, that is to say, how they help people, rather than the external work, how the organisation is run. Psychological theories are used within this kind of organisation in two main ways. Firstly, to explore why a service user or a relation of a service user is doing something. To answer this question they would look into that individual’s background, the environment in which they grew up and the relationships they had with the people around them. Another way of using psychological theories within this type of organisation is to help service users deal with the events that are taking place around them. Using psychological theories could prevent people from suffering from serious things such as depression. It has only recently become a more common practice to relate situations such as those the VCF come across with a psychological theory in order to deal with the cases more effectively.

I used many different approaches and methods to build up my knowledge of the VCF in order to apply my previous learning of politics and psychology to the workings of the organisation. After my initial idea to request a work shadowing placement at the VCF I began to do some research on their website to find out what the organisation was about, who they helped and what they did. Once my request was accepted I began to think hard about what I wanted to get out of the placement. When I started my placement I interviewed different members of the staff at VCF, to whom I asked specific questions so as to best collect the information I needed to apply my politics and psychology studies. I was also given access to the minutes of a meeting attended by VCF in relation to a serious case review. This information also helped me to better understand what the organisation is involved with. I also used written articles to help answer the questions I had about the organisation, and a publication called “Safeguarding Children’s Rights” written by Stephen Briggs et al.

VCF Background

VCF is a unique, independent charity which began 10 years ago after the death of Victoria Climbié, and was established following a *public inquiry (something set up to identify why events happened, in the case of Victoria Climbié, agencies and government failed to protect her)*. The VCF campaigns for the rights of children to be properly protected by agencies such as social workers, police, education, health, etc. and influence changes to the child protection system radically by lobbying government. It is also the first charity to have pushed the implementation of recommendations from a public inquiry.

Co-founder of the VCF, Mor Dioum originally worked with the Climbié family in their campaign to seek justice. The inquiry into Victoria's death was held in public, and Mor provided emotional support to Victoria's parents and assisted the Climbié's legal team in revealing the truth about the failings of all the agencies surrounding Victoria's death. He then went on to set up the Victoria Climbié Foundation and was later joined by a team of staff, Stephanie Yorath as program director and Sabrina Mckay; senior case manager. The current team also includes Manjeet Bhullar, Amina Begum and Mary Adeshipe. When Mor first began the Victoria Climbié campaign he had no experience in child protection but worked from his background in law and civil rights. Whilst working for the campaign he gained work experience in child protection and organising/working for the voluntary sector.

None of the additional members of the VCF have received training specific to the organisation. Mor explains this by saying that all employees volunteer for at least three months before being paid; this ensures that the staff working at the foundation do in fact feel passionately about what they do and it is not just "a job". Mor did say however that the VCF ensures that all volunteers are given sufficient child protection training after a period of time.

The foundation is committed to its campaign against child abuse, working to remove child maltreatment, child exploitation and child trafficking. It aims to influence the improvement of good practice in child protection policies and procedures, and campaigns for the rights of the Black and Minority Ethnic child to be protected from abuse and to challenge crimes against children committed either by families, communities, or by the inaction of statutory and governmental agencies. These aims are presented on the mission page of the VCF website (<http://vcf-uk.org/mission-statement/>)

Campaign for childrens' rights and improvements to the child protection framework

The government responded to the release of the Victoria Climbié Public Inquiry Report with new child protection legislation (The Children Act 2004), which included many of the recommendations mentioned in the report. As an overall goal VCF have an ongoing campaign to enhance the child protection system through supporting good practice and challenging bad practice. They campaign for all authorities across the country to implement the 108 recommendations that arose from the Victoria Climbié report which was produced as a result of the public inquiry. Many recommendations

have already been implemented over the years, but the campaign continues to monitor progress and to ensure that most, if not all, are eventually put in place. The VCF found this campaign initially challenging due to authorities being unwilling to accept change. This could be linked into my political studies, as I recognise it is a very conservative view which, in this case must be strongly criticised, as the current system of child protection is clearly not good enough or there would not be such a radical number of changes suggested.

Besides the Foundation's ongoing campaigns, they have also had successes in other campaigns, such as:

Campaign for full disclosure of serious case reviews

Campaigning to make the public viewing of the serious case reviews (SCR) mandatory. SCRs take place when a child dies or is seriously injured. Originally they were internal investigations and only the top statutory people were allowed to read the report (not even the child's parents were allowed to read it). Supported by the Shadow Children's Minister (now the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families,) Tim Loughton MP, VCF were successful in their campaign to disclose SCRs and it is now legislated that all SCR reports must be publicised.

As a politics student I completely agree with the intentions and the outcome of this campaign as the results show direct democracy at work in a subtle way, yet in a very real situation. Especially in the case of the child's parents and family, it is important that they have a chance to speak up and give any information, which would lead to a more detailed and possibly more useful inquiry in which lessons can be learned and improvements can be found. A public inquiry shows democracy because it accepts evidence and conducts its hearings in a more public forum. The VCF succeeded in improving SCR processes, making it a better example of representative democracy and forcing public involvement.

After speaking to members of the organisation I found that other agencies were unhappy with the developments of SCRs because essentially it now meant that all the cases that they dealt with would be publicised whether they were well done or not.

Campaigns for families to be more involved in the SCR process

This campaign is seen as best practice as it involves families at the time the report is being written, where as before parents were not involved in the process of writing the report after their child's death.

The organisation has faced many challenges from their campaigns. Recently they have been working with the family of a 15 year old French boy who died after suffering physical abuse from his sister and boyfriend (now convicted). After the child's death a review was carried out and the VCF pushed for an SCR because it was a unique case and identifying lessons that could be learnt from the case would be very important. Local authorities met to discuss the possibility of using the SCR process but eventually decided against it because "it would not aid learning". Technically this decision was

breaking the law, but shows the reluctance authorities have to accept the developments and inevitable consequences of SCRs, as it may hinder the prevention of such cases happening again. Furthermore, lost opportunities for lessons learned with regard to enhancing the child protection system in the UK.

Following an interview I had with the co-director Mor, I started to build up an idea about how the public view the VCF and their opinions about what the organisation does. The members of the organisation are very proud that they have had significantly little negative feedback and even when such feedback has accrued it has not been justified. The VCF has received many positive comments from the public concerning what they do and how they go about it. The methods used to ensure that the community receives appropriate services is a common topic that the public mention along with the work that the VCF do to ensure the better protection of children.

Methods used by the VCF

The methods the VCF use to challenge practices and achieve their goals are very effective and the organisation is very respected. I observed this during a General Medical Council event, in Euston, London, for the launch of the new child protection guidance for doctors. Many of the organisations present were pleasantly surprised and in some cases, in awe once it was mentioned that Mor Dioum, Stephanie Yorath and myself were with the VCF. I was not expecting a reaction like this, as before I began my work placement I had no idea just how well known and influential the organisation was.

Although the organisation does not solely see themselves as a pressure group their methods are very similar to insider pressure groups in that they go directly to government ministers to get their point across and challenge the practices that they disagree with. This has proved to be a very successful method, especially having Tim Loughton in support of the Foundation. Being the parliamentary under secretary of state for children and families he has a lot of influence in the various departments of government that would be able to make a difference.

However like many other charities and various pressure groups, VCF looks to gain public support to raise awareness and therefore gain finance from that support, similar to an outsider pressure group. Speaking to Stephanie Yorath I found that although VCF is well known within the public sector particularly the children, young people and families that they have worked with, they are not so well known within the wider community. Through an evaluation of their work in 2011 VCF was told that they were considered to be a very professional organisation. However they could make improvements to the way their work and organisation is communicated. Stephanie Yorath then informed me that although being better known in the wider community would have its benefits, the potential increase in service users may challenge its current capacity and resources. She also pointed out that promoting the name of the organisation was not what they want, but rather to promote the work that they do.

The organisation currently receives government funding due to their respected reputation and well known drive to get things done effectively and to the best standard they can. They have had a small amount of public funding over the years, however in this current year they have found that funding has been considerably weak. This could be down to many reasons, two of which may simply be that in the current economic climate many organisations have a decrease in funding which therefore might explain the situation in relation to VCF, but also, as I have previously mentioned, VCF do not often find themselves in the public spotlight and from my own experience I have come to realise that outside of London very few people know about their work, even if they have heard of the organisation.

A small number of people over the years have come to VCF with the intention of helping them by taking part in various events to fundraise and raise awareness of the organisation. Whilst I was with the VCF team I attended a staff meeting where their most recent contact interested in fund raising was present to discuss what she had been doing to prepare for the event and provide details surrounding the event. Even after spending the majority of the week with the VCF team it still struck me at this moment just how grateful, dedicated and passionate these people are. Observing the meeting I realised just how important public support is to the members of the VCF, not in the sense that they rely on the funding that is generated from public support, but rather the support itself. Mor Dioum added in the meeting that it is this support that encourages and energises himself especially and the rest of the team to carry on with their jobs and continue to influence change through all the challenging aspects. This I felt was a very respectable and genuine response which is a refreshing change from other charities who simply campaign and centre their adverts around the raising of funds.

Coping with difficult cases, sensitivity in dealing with issues of child abuse

In the last couple of years psychological theories are beginning to be used more widely in the child protection and social work areas. The theories can be applied in two main ways; firstly to explore why an individual is behaving in a certain manner, and secondly to establish a theory that can be applied in order to help an individual deal with events surrounding them. During my placement I got a chance to speak with a member of the team currently training to be a social worker, who therefore had a great span of knowledge into psychological theories and helped me to link them into the work that they do at the VCF. The psychodynamic approach is the key approach used by organisations like the VCF. It centres around thought processes and tries to make sense of an individual's relationships, experiences and how they perceive the world.

The many different backgrounds and cultures from which their service users come from provides one of the greatest challenges when it comes to applying psychological theories to their cases. Most psychological theories come from more western ideas so when the VCF is dealing with cases based around, for example Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) they find themselves having to adapt those theories to fit around a more dominantly African practice which obviously comes from a much

different culture. The FGM Act 2003 made it illegal to perform the practice in the UK, however the VCF still come across young people who have been affected by the practice. VCF is currently supporting a young person who is seeking a reversal of the procedure against her family's wishes. It is possible that the organisation could take into account the principles of the behaviourist approach in psychology when dealing with this case and supporting the individual. Even though many of the individuals VCF deal with are now UK citizens, they have been brought up in different cultures and communities and have been told by a respected authority figure (often Mothers or Grandmothers) that to have the procedure would be the right thing to do. The theory of classical conditioning could also be applied in situations like this in that the females involved associate not having the procedure as making them "unclean" and unable to get married, they would therefore naturally assume that they should have the procedure and not have to face the consequences. Other cases that require the adaptation of psychological theories are those related to that of witchcraft and spirit possession when that belief system leads to the harming of a child. However I believe it is important not to focus too intently on trying to match a case to a psychological theory. Although of course it would be extremely useful when it comes to how to deal with the service users, the social worker or case worker might become so transfixed with analysing the service users' actions and behaviours that they miss out on the more simple details. I would have liked to look further into these themes that VCF work around which could not be incorporated into this report due to the time frame (4 days).

Another essential aspect of the VCF is their Advocacy work. This is key when it comes to coping with difficult cases and sensitivity in dealing with issues of child abuse. The staff at the VCF once again showed their compassion by saying that they base their advocacy work around empowering their service users and encouraging them to act responsibly. VCF take many approaches in their advocacy work including, supporting, encouraging and empowering the service users as well as speaking on their behalf in situation such as court cases, writing letters, attending meetings and making phone calls. Speaking to a member of the VCF I learned that they often help service users who do not communicate well or are uncomfortable when telling their story which is where their advocacy system comes into play. However, the source of the problem could be put down to psychological reasons; If an individual has witnessed or experienced a traumatic event they may suffer from what's called denial theory, this takes place when an individual is unable to accept reality and therefore the memory is pushed from their mind and when asked to recall it they find it very difficult.

It is important when working within this subject area that the members of VCF have some kind of defence mechanism to reduce the psychological impact working with tough cases would inevitably have on them. When I interviewed members of the VCF team each person gave a slightly different answer as to how they separate their work from home so as to not impact their home life in a negative way. Clearly, everyone at VCF is different so would have different ways of coping. Some might find the work emotionally draining, when they focus on tough cases it could very often take months to achieve their overall goal, and they would have to go through a lot to get to that stage, therefore it would be very hard to "switch off" outside of work. Of course others might find that their life outside of work helps them to cope with the emotional side of tough cases in that they may be too busy to worry about it and have other things to focus on. Mor Dioum said his way of preventing

that clash of work and home life and therefore reducing any psychological influence, is to structure his working hours so he doesn't have to take work home, because he finds it hard to "switch off" from his work. This is in contrast to Sabrina McKay who has had a history working in criminal law and has therefore learned to not let her work affect her at home because she has been dealing with tough, high profile cases for a long time. Sabrina also suggested that another important coping method at VCF is due to the close knit team within the organisation, as much of the work they are dealing with is confidential they cannot share their emotions about aspects of certain cases to anyone outside the office, they rely on each other to talk to.

The rewarding and challenging aspects of working at VCF

What I was very keen to find out when I was working with the VCF is the personal opinions of the members of the organisation of what they find most challenging and rewarding about working at VCF. I was very pleasantly surprised to find that each answer was very different and that no one gave me a generic reply. As the newest member of the team, social worker trainee Mary Adeshipe said that working with VCF was an "eye opening experience". I very much agree with her statement here; although I was only with them for four days I have realised just how much we as a society are ignorant to child abuse and the actions towards child protection. In cases such as disabled child abuse, unaccompanied minors, child trafficking and especially FGM and witchcraft/spirit possession, we are just unaware of them. Mary also mentioned that just being able to support a family and possibly being able to prevent a death of a child from becoming psychologically damaged is a very rewarding factor of working with the VCF. Mor Dioum shared his views about this in saying that he finds it most rewarding when a service user feels that he or she is being supported through the VCF support mechanism. Sabrina McKay looked at it from a slightly different angle by saying she found it most rewarding when the organisation was able to work with and support a family by successfully correcting a wrong decision made by the local authorities and return a child home to their family. The feedback VCF gets from the public also provides rewarding aspects for the job as a very large majority of it is positive.

One of the biggest challenges for VCF staff is trying to get local authorities on board with what they are doing. VCF have found it very difficult to encourage the authorities to actively engage in terms of supporting the families they work with. This situation is made inevitably more challenging when VCF actually disagree the decisions made by the authorities, of course all with the best intentions of the child at heart. Mor made it clear that one of the things that he finds most challenging is ensuring that the service users of VCF act upon their advice. Sabrina McKay elaborated on this statement saying that ensuring service users are thinking positively and trust in the service of VCF and continue to take their advice and acting upon it correctly is a challenging task, along with ensuring service users know how to behave properly, in court cases especially, in order to achieve more productive outcomes.

Conclusion and personal opinion of the experience

I am very grateful to VCF for taking me on for my work shadowing week, I learned a great deal during my four days and I felt extremely welcomed into the organisation. When I began the week I knew relatively little about what the organisation did and how they operated, even my knowledge about how the organisation was formed was slim. However, after observing the team, attending staff meetings and interviewing members of the VCF I have built up a good idea of how they work and have a great deal of admiration for everything VCF do. I believe the morals and principles that VCF are based around are very respectable in that they always keep in mind the beliefs, religions, traditions and different cultures of all their service users, so as to not be biased, and all this in aid of protecting children and making sure they are brought up in the best possible environment for them. After my time at VCF I am glad that I have indeed been able to put theory into practice. My psychology and politics studies fit very nicely into the workings of this organisation, arguably better perhaps than anywhere else I could have gone for my work shadowing week. Seeing many different aspects of the organisation from many different viewpoints has given me a chance to link theories from my studies to VCF which I didn't think I would be able to do. I found that VCF is an influential and empowering organisation and has provided me with a very successful work shadowing experience.