

# Storytelling among child welfare social workers: constructing professional role and resilience through team talk

## Abstract

Child welfare social work is emotive and demanding work, requiring highly-skilled and resilient practitioners. In a context of austerity, increased public scrutiny and accountability, defensive practice has been identified as a feature of professional practice. However, little is known about the processes through which social workers develop resilience or come to adopt a defensive stance in managing the demands of their work. This article focuses on professional storytelling among child welfare social workers. It examines how social workers to construct their professional role through team talk, and the implications of this for our understanding of professional resilience and defensiveness.

Drawing on an in-depth narrative analysis of focus groups with social work teams, eight story types are identified in social workers' talk about their work: emotional container stories, solidarity stories, professional epiphanies, professional affirmation stories, partnership stories, parables of persistence, tales of courageous practice and cautionary tales. Each story type foregrounds a particular aspect of child welfare practice, containing a moral about social work with vulnerable children and families. The article concludes with the implications of these stories for our understanding of both resilience and the pull towards defensiveness in child welfare social work.

## Introduction

Stories act as a 'frame' for understanding ourselves and the world (Czarniawska, 2010: 61). Telling stories about our lives helps to render our experiences intelligible to ourselves and others (McAdams, 1993). Our stories often contain a 'moral' or a hard-won piece of learning that enables us to find meaning within a challenging experience. Storytelling has therefore been linked to resilience – our

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3 capacity to overcome adversity and learn from difficult experiences (East *et al*, 2010). Stories may also  
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5 serve a defensive function, allowing the individual to manage emotion by protecting and justifying the  
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7 self. The way we 'story' our lives, together with the structure and omissions within our narrative, can  
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9 perform a repressive function, allowing us to block unacceptable or overwhelming experiences,  
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11 emotion and thoughts from immediate awareness (Billig, 1997). Such stories may help us to cope with  
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13 emotional challenges or threats to our sense of self, but we may be withdrawn, disengaged or  
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15 defended in our response to others. This article focuses on the functions of storytelling among child  
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17 welfare social workers. The emotional demands of child welfare social work have been well-  
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19 documented in the US (Travis, Lizano and Mor-Barak, 2016) the UK and Europe (Antonoupoulou *et al*,  
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21 2017; Mänttari-van der Kuip, 2014) yet little is known about the *processes* through which resilience is  
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23 constructed and maintained in everyday practice. The aim of this exploratory paper is to shed light on  
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25 these processes through examining storytelling in the context of focus groups. The stories, or 'team  
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27 tales', generated in these groups enabled workers to construct a resilient sense of self, framing their  
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29 experiences in a way that could help them to manage the emotional demands of the work and  
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31 transmit this practice wisdom to colleagues. However, some stories appeared to serve a defensive  
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33 function, representing risks for professional practice. This article offers some reflections on how  
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35 storytelling might be important for understanding how to promote resilient, rather than defensive,  
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37 cultures of practice in child welfare social work.  
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## 47 **Context**

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49 It has been argued that child and family social work in England operates as a 'hybrid' system,  
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51 combining family support services and child protection, and as such, is placed somewhere between  
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53 the child protection focus of the U.S, and the family support service orientation of the Nordic  
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55 countries, such as Norway and Finland (Gilbert *et al* 2011). The balance between family services and  
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57 child protection in England and Wales is variable and highly contested (see Featherstone *et al*, 2014;  
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3 Axford and Berry, 2018). Social workers have become the target of 'blame, hostility and anger' (Ruch  
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5 *et al*, 2014: 318) following high-profile child death enquiries. This, combined with increased  
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7 monitoring of risk and accountability, has increased demands placed on workers, creating 'powerful  
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9 incentive for social workers engage in defensive practice' as means of protection against blame  
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11 (Whittaker and Havard, 2016: 1159). The Care Crisis Review in England and Wales (FRG, 2018) argued  
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13 that the pendulum has swung further from support towards a more risk-averse, child protection  
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15 orientation. Against this, however, there is a strong policy emphasis on early intervention, prevention  
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17 and family support, with widespread uptake of strengths and relationship-based approaches to social  
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19 work such as the 'Signs of safety' approach (SoS, 2018). Through the lens of professional storytelling,  
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21 this article examines how social workers construct their professional role in this febrile policy context,  
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23 and implications of this for our understanding of professional resilience and defensiveness.  
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### 31 **Professional storytelling**

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33 Organisational researchers have identified professional storytelling as key to understanding the  
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35 dynamics, culture and emotional experience of working life (Fineman, 1993) and the processes of  
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37 learning and knowledge-transfer within organizations (Brown *et al*, 2009). Collecting naturally-  
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39 occurring and elicited stories is an established method for researching organizations (see Czarniawska,  
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41 2010). The structure of the stories told by professionals, including metaphor, plot and use of rhetorical  
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43 techniques, can help us to understand organisational meaning-making (Tietze, Cohen and Musson,  
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45 2003). In *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that human cognition is  
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47 underpinned by metaphor. Metaphor is defined as 'understanding and experiencing one thing in  
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49 terms of another' (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 6). For instance, take the familiar metaphor 'time is  
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51 money'. Like money, time can be spent, squandered, invested or borrowed. This way of seeing the  
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53 world has implications for our social practices – we come to view time as a monetizable commodity.  
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55 When studying work practices, collecting these 'metaphors of the field' (Tietze, Cohen and Musson:  
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3 43) can tell us about the way professionals understand and experience their work. Drawing on the  
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5 work of Lakoff and Johnson, Beckett (2003) analysed social workers' talk about their practice, drawing  
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7 attention to the metaphor 'social work as war'. This metaphor provides a frame for making sense of,  
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9 and managing, the emotional experience of undertaking social work, a profession involving high levels  
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11 of conflict and stress in a time-pressured environment. However, this metaphor also creates a way of  
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13 seeing practice which focuses on the adversarial, rather than collaborative aspects of social work  
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15 practice.  
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19 Within social work research there has been interest in the stories told by social workers about their  
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21 work. Through a constructionist lens, social workers' stories are not regarded as providing a  
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23 straightforward window onto practice – instead, such stories are regarded as constructed, negotiated  
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25 and sustained through social interaction (Urek, 2005). Studies of social work practice have therefore  
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27 examined the way that cases are constructed through collegial talk (e.g. Doherty, 2016). These stories  
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29 are shaped by local cultures and frames of reference (Helm, 2013) and the wider discourses about  
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31 social work identified above. Listening to social workers talk about their work can provide insight into  
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33 the formation of their professional identity (Wiles, 2012) and how they manage the emotional  
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35 demands of their role (Forsberg and Vagli, 2006). Organisational learning involves the construction,  
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37 telling and re-telling of stories between workers. For instance, Orr's (1996) seminal study of  
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39 photocopier technicians demonstrated how local, specialised knowledge was transmitted from  
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41 experienced to novice workers through the telling of 'war stories' – tales which reconstructed prior  
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43 instances of overcoming difficulty in professional practice. These stories served to:  
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47 ...preserve and circulate hard-won information and... make claims of seniority within the  
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49 community. They also amuse, instruct, and celebrate the tellers' identity as technicians. (Orr,  
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51 1996: 126).  
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56 Similarly, Dingwall's (1977: 376) study of health visitors identified the telling of 'atrocious stories' in  
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58 which the teller is positioned as brave protagonist, challenging other professionals:  
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3 By casting occupation members as hero, atrocity stories maintain the intrinsic worth of the  
4 teller and, by implication, his colleague audience. Acquiring an appropriate repertoire of such  
5 stories and being able to identify appropriate occasions for telling them are important parts of  
6 being recognized as a competent member of an occupation...  
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12 Examining structure and language within professional storytelling can therefore provide insights into  
13 professional role, well as organisational culture and learning. However, despite the fact that peer  
14 support has been identified as promoting resilience (Biggart *et al*, 2017) there is relatively little  
15 empirical research examining how social workers share stories of their practice with each other. The  
16 present study addresses this gap, focusing on the function of shared storytelling in social work teams  
17 and the potential implications, and risks, of these stories for workers' practice with families.  
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## 30 **Methods**

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33 The data for this analysis consists of two focus groups which were conducted as part of a wider project  
34 investigating social workers' experiences of undertaking home visits in the context of child welfare  
35 assessment. The interviews (n=18) focused on social workers' experiences of specific home visits  
36 (Cook, 2017). During these interviews, workers identified discussion with team colleagues as key to  
37 managing the demands of their work. A focus group methodology was therefore employed to examine  
38 the nature of the exchanges *between* team colleagues. Focus groups consist of a moderator facilitating  
39 a small group discussion, using 'the group process to stimulate discussion and obtain information on  
40 the beliefs, attitudes, or motivations of participants on a specific topic' (Linhorst, 2002: 209). In the  
41 present study, focus groups participants were invited to share their experiences of home visiting in  
42 the context of child welfare assessment. They were asked how they prepared for, and managed home  
43 visits, including the emotional demands of the work.  
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3 Following approval from the University Ethics Committee, participants were recruited from Children's  
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5 Services within two local authorities in England. Children are referred to these local authority services  
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7 on the basis of perceived risk or need, and following initial screening, a social worker will typically  
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9 undertake an initial assessment to determine the level of intervention required. Focus group one  
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11 comprised workers from a single safeguarding team. This team undertook assessment work with  
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13 families subject to child protection investigations as well as duty and initial assessments (where there  
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15 was an immediate need to investigate concerns around abuse and neglect). The second focus group  
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17 comprised four members of a single duty team. This team undertook initial assessments of cases  
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19 referred from the local authority front-door referral screening service. Workers in this focus group  
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21 were tasked with determining the level of need for services as well as determining the need to refer  
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23 concerning cases to safeguarding teams.  
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Focus group	Team	Participants	Duration	Composition
1	Safeguarding team	5	1 hour 57 minutes	3 (male) 2 (female)
2	Duty team	4	1 hour 30 minutes	1 (male) 3 (female)

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Once discussion gained momentum, the groups required minimal facilitation. Workers discussed a range of topics, including their experiences of challenging encounters with children and families and how they conceived of, and managed, their role. This included sharing stories about their daily work together with memorable practice experiences that had changed them personally and professionally. The focus groups were lively and characterised by debate and humour. Workers were surprisingly

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3 open with the moderator about their emotional experiences and the challenges of their work. This is  
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5 perhaps attributable to the perception of shared professional background between participants and  
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7 the moderator; a researcher who had a social work background.  
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10 A key criticism of focus groups is the tendency towards 'groupthink' (McDougall and Baum, 1997); the  
11  
12 tendency of participants to adjust their responses to conform to the views of the group. This desire  
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14 for consensus can lead to errors in judgement and decision-making (Janis, 1972). In the present  
15  
16 research, it is acknowledged that social workers may have adjusted their responses to preserve group  
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18 cohesiveness. However, rather than viewing groupthink as a weakness of the data, the way that social  
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20 workers reinforced and responded to each other formed a crucial part of the data analysis itself. For  
21  
22 instance, occasions of mutual reinforcement provided insight into how team members might achieve  
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24 a sense of shared role or collective identity, as well as the risks that such group processes might pose  
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26 for practice e.g. in 'othering' professionals or service users (see 'solidarity stories' in section 2). In  
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28 other instances, workers questioned their colleague's perspectives (see section 1) suggesting a  
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30 tolerance of alternative viewpoints within the teams.  
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35 An audio recording was taken of each focus group. Following this, transcription was undertaken by  
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37 the researcher. Data were analysed using a psychosocial narrative approach which recognises  
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39 storytelling as a way for workers to generate meaning in relation to their practice (Czarniawska, 2010)  
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41 while also acknowledging how the choice of story and its structure may act as a way to defend the  
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43 teller against anxiety (Billig, 1997). Accordingly, attention was paid not only to what was said, but *how*  
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45 it was said – the apparent omissions, structure and self-corrections in social workers' exchanges about  
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47 their practice. Particular attention was paid to the identification of metaphors, together with  
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49 individual and collective stories (Tietze, Cohen and Musson, 2003). Throughout the focus groups,  
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51 workers told stories about specific and pivotal moments of their work. These reconstructed snippets  
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53 of practice, together with structure and use of language, were captured through line-by-line coding of  
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55 the 207 minutes of transcribed dialogue. Coding focused on the specific language used by participants  
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3 to describe cases, service users, practice and members of the team itself, as well as each occasion  
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5 where social workers recalled a prior instance of practice. Following this, similar and overlapping codes  
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7 were consolidated and re-labelled; instances of practice were grouped according to the 'moral' they  
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9 conveyed about practice and recurring uses of instances of rhetorical techniques and metaphor were  
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11 also grouped. This resulted in the distillation of eight key story types, reported below.  
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### 18 **Findings: 'Team tales' in child protection and duty social work**

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21 The term 'team tales' is used to describe the stories that were told by workers individually and  
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23 collectively in the focus groups. At an individual level, workers told stories about their own practice,  
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25 often recalling experiences which contained a moral or lesson about the work. Workers also engaged  
26  
27 in collective story-building, where members of the group built on each other's narratives to present a  
28  
29 detailed picture of child welfare work. Eight types of 'team tale' were identified and will be presented  
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31 in turn. Each includes a discussion of the potentially positive function of the story type alongside the  
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33 potential risks for professional practice.  
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#### 40 **1. Emotional container stories: *absorbing and the need to 'vent'***

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43 Throughout the first focus group, workers developed a specific metaphor to frame the emotional  
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45 experience of undertaking child protection work. They described how they acted as a 'container' for  
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47 other people's emotions, including other professionals and service users:  
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51 SW3: I think we're like a *sponge*... you don't realise sometimes how it can build up and you can  
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53 get *saturated*... I think it can slowly mount up, actually... *like a cup, it can brim over* and I think  
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55 that can creep upon us as social workers. Because we *absorb* it. Unless we use good techniques  
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57 to kind of get rid of it, *where does it go?* It can't go anywhere.  
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3 Using Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) formulation, this metaphor can be expressed as 'emotions are  
4 water' and 'self is container'. Like water, emotions fill the container (the worker) and without an  
5 outlet, the container threatens to brim-over. Later in the focus group, the metaphor is picked up by  
6 another speaker:  
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12 SW1: I think we're very good at recognising we've reached our peak and we can't take anymore!

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14 Getting really *saturated*, we need to *drip it out somewhere* else...

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17 In this sense, emotions absorbed in the course of the work can leave the worker 'saturated' and in  
18 need of release. As the perceived pressure builds, the metaphor then develops - water becomes  
19 steam, and needs to be 'vented'. Talking to others in the team was then identified as having an  
20 important function in releasing pressure, since it:  
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28 SW5: ... lets you *vent* –

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31 SW4: Yeah.

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34 SW3: Mmm.

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37 SW5: It lets you get it out of your system and it's 'Ah, I feel better for that now!'

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40 SW2: Yeah!

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43 SW3: Because that's what you do with families – you take it all!

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46 Venting to one's colleagues was identified as a way to manage emotions – a way to empty the  
47 container (the worker) who could become full. 'Emotion as water' and 'self as container' provided an  
48 organising metaphor for team members, allowing them to articulate the shared emotional experience  
49 of the work. As workers described the process of venting they also *demonstrated* it in their exchanges.  
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52 For instance, one worker shared details of their challenging week with the team. They in turn showed  
53 empathy and concern, allowing the worker to release some of their built-up emotion. The conceptual  
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3 metaphor 'self as container' implies that workers have a *finite* capacity to absorb and contain emotion.

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5 This suggests that unless there are opportunities to vent within organisations, workers may become  
6  
7 saturated and unable to offer containment to families. The emotional container metaphor had an  
8  
9 implicit message: this is difficult material to absorb and hold - in order to be managed, it needs to be  
10  
11 shared.  
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14 However, while this metaphor was useful for expressing and sharing the emotional reality of the work  
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16 it could potentially have negative implications. For instance, one worker stated that venting to  
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18 colleagues could be 'very politically incorrect' and 'offensive'. Venting in this sense appeared to  
19  
20 involve inappropriate characterisations of service users. It is possible to envisage how this could foster  
21  
22 an oppressive or cynical view of families. Most workers in the group did not appear comfortable with  
23  
24 this characterisation of venting, describing it as being about sharing their personal reactions with  
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26 colleagues, rather than expressing negative views about families. An interesting question, therefore,  
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28 is whether there is a distinction between 'venting' and a more productive 'talking through' of  
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30 difficulties to reach a resolution.  
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## 39 **2. Solidarity stories - *us* as different from *them***

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42 In both focus groups, workers articulated the unique aspects of their assessment-heavy roles by  
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44 comparing themselves to other professions, and to other roles within the profession. These stories  
45  
46 involved characterisation of the typical duty and safeguarding worker – a portrait of the type of  
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48 person, their qualities, skills and characteristics – needed to perform the role. In relation to duty work,  
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50 participants stated that:  
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54 SW6: It's a *huge* thing to do. I think there's real skill in that. I think we're *lucky* in our duty team,  
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56 we're all – it's *our* thing.  
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59 SW8: Mm!  
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3 SW6: I don't think you can work in a duty team unless it's *your thing*. You have to have a low  
4 boredom threshold, I think (laughs) otherwise you'd want to carry on working with families all  
5 the time and that would drive you insane. We've had people who have *tried* to work in duty and  
6 couldn't cope with only going in once or twice. And you've got to be really curious as people,  
7 and be willing to hear the whole life story from families and... work in a really quick way. Your  
8 brain has to work *fast*, as SW9 said, you're on your toes.  
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Characterising the 'type of worker' who would fit with the team served to emphasise the unique characteristics and skills of the team and its members. Specifically, workers identified a sense of vocation as a necessary criterion for success in the team, i.e. that duty social work needed to be 'your thing'. However, there is also the uncomfortable suggestion that long-term work with families is undesirable or 'madness'. These solidarity stories emphasised the endurance and shared skills of the collective team, but involved a degree of 'othering' of both other professionals and service users. For instance, those workers who could do assessment work were sharply contrasted to those who were perceived as not being up to the job:

SW4: Yeah, safeguarding and duty is *specialist* work -

SW5: Yeah.

SW4: - And if you can't do it, *don't* do it.

SW3: Yeah.

SW4: Don't come in and come into a team – because we – it'll burn you out, you'll leave a hole in our team which is more stress on the social workers that actually *want* to do it as a career. Social workers who think 'Oh, I need to do a year of that to get it on my CV' are just frustrating [to] me really.

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3 The purpose of these stories appeared to be to emphasise the team's unique identity in terms of skills  
4 and vocation, and to reinforce team membership by comparison to those workers who had tried, but  
5 who failed to go the distance. However, implicit in these tales is a cautionary message that if you don't  
6 fit or uphold the norms of the team you won't last. In this sense, there were echoes of Dingwall's  
7 (1977) atrocity stories, in which workers reaffirmed their own identity by telling derisory stories about  
8 other professionals (in this case, those who didn't go the distance, or those who wanted to work with  
9 families on a longer-term basis). While setting boundaries around timescales may be productive, there  
10 was an assumption that a preference for short-term work with families is necessarily a virtue. There  
11 is also the message that if you struggle, you will be a burden to other 'career' social workers – and you  
12 shouldn't be in the team (If you *can't* do it, *don't* do it). Celebrating individual and collective  
13 professional skills is important, but it is also possible to imagine a how a problematic culture of  
14 bravado could develop, potentially preventing workers from seeking support. While professional pride  
15 is important, a 'them and us' view of other professionals and service users could be unhelpful for  
16 practice, potentially preventing communication with professionals outside of the team.  
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### 38 **3. Professional epiphanies- *what I have learnt about myself as a social worker***

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41 Workers provided short stories about a professional experience that had a lasting impact on them,  
42 shaping their sense of identity as a professional. Like Orr's (1996) war stories, these were characterised  
43 by a short, pithy example of practice – usually depicting a professional challenge, a particularly  
44 harrowing or emotional case. These experiences were presented by workers as transformative – they  
45 had learnt something fundamental about the work or about themselves as a professional:  
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52 SW6: It was one of those visits that *everyone* thinks of when they think about risky social work.

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54 It was 7 at night, nobody knew where I was. It was in the middle of nowhere... I know the  
55 manager was very concerned about it afterwards. But there was *nothing* to suggest that these  
56 grandparents were a risk beforehand...  
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3 The worker then went on to describe a situation in which they had been threatened and held hostage  
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5 in the house before managing to escape to safety. The account was concluded with the moral of the  
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7 story:

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11 The family were not known to us previously – and now we're amazed that they weren't... And  
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13 that's always the way – *the risky visits in this business are the ones you can't see.*

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16 Before this incident, the worker had been relatively confident in their ability to manage challenging  
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18 situations as she thought of herself as a 'seasoned and experienced' professional, and as such 'able to  
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20 engage anyone'. However, the worker was changed by this frightening experience, recognising the  
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22 inherent risks posed by the work. She now recognised her professional vulnerabilities and sought  
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24 support rather than managing risk alone. Other professional epiphanies included experiences of being  
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26 accused of a crime by a service user, experiencing assault and witnessing extreme cases of abuse and  
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28 neglect.  
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32 Each of these stories contained a moral, or important piece of learning about one's own practice and  
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34 resilience, such as making peace with the fact that it is simply not possible to 'fix' things for every child  
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36 and family. Like Orr's (1996) war stories, these accounts allowed workers to articulate the  
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38 development of their sense of professional identity and transmit learning to others in the team. For  
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40 instance, the story recounted above represented an important piece of learning for the team as well  
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42 as the worker; it led to detailed discussions about how measures could be put in place to improve  
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44 worker safety.  
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49 However, not all professional epiphanies had positive outcomes. For instance, one worker described  
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51 entering the profession feeling a desire to develop relationships with families and be 'liked'. However,  
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53 a particularly challenging practice experience had led them to move from a position of openness in  
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55 their work with families to a stance of 'expecting to be lied to.' Some professional experiences could  
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57 lead to workers becoming more cynical or suspicious in relation to their work with families and  
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59 arguably, the telling of such stories by experienced workers could shift perspective of other team  
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3 members.

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9 **4. Professional affirmation stories - *this important work, society needs us***

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11 Undertaking a high volume of initial and investigative visits meant that workers frequently  
12 encountered families who were understandably distressed at the prospect of social work visit.

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14  
15 Workers described how, to manage an initial home visit, they would need to marshal their emotional  
16 resources prior to entering the family home (see Author's Own, 2019). A way to do this was to  
17 generate affirmative narratives about social work as a profession – to tell a positive story about social  
18 work and its role in society. This could act as a salutary reminder of the value of the work one was  
19 preparing to undertake. For instance, one worker described the need to call to mind that:  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
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26  
27  
28  
29 SW4: You are doing this because ... ninety-nine percent of society actually *want* you out there  
30 doing this job.  
31

32  
33  
34 Drawing on the societal benefits of the profession acted as a way to affirm the positive purpose of  
35 the worker's current intervention. For instance, one worker told the following story of social work  
36 as a profession:  
37  
38

39  
40  
41  
42 SW1: We're trying to break the cycle... get involved in the child's timescale, make those changes,  
43 get them on a path to where they can grow up as human beings who are responsible and  
44 respectful of others.  
45  
46

47  
48  
49 Reminding oneself of the importance of the role, and the wider benefits of their professional activity  
50 allowed workers to tolerate emotional challenges associated with a particular piece of work. Re-telling  
51 and holding on to positive stories was vital in countering negative stories about the profession:  
52  
53

54  
55  
56  
57 SW6: The *very nature* of our role is to be is to be going out to risky families on our own – I think  
58 that's where our skill-base lies actually. The number of DV (domestic violence) cases we go out  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 to without a second person, because we *can* manage people and their behaviours... And I think  
4  
5 quite often we're very good at saying what we're *not* very good at and where we've failed. And  
6  
7 I get *really* frustrated, like the Rotherham Report, Baby P, you know, any serious case review at  
8  
9 any time, [we're] really good at berating ourselves, we're really not very good at looking at what  
10  
11 we do right –  
12

13  
14  
15 SW8: Our strengths!

16  
17  
18 SW6: Right! That's the social work way – let's reflect and improve, but sometimes I think actually  
19  
20 part of constructive reflection is looking at what *worked*, not just where we failed.  
21  
22

23  
24 Celebratory stories of effective, supportive work with children and families is generally absent from  
25  
26 wider societal narratives about the profession (LeGood *et al*, 2016), so collectively holding on to  
27  
28 positive messages about the importance of social work in society is important for morale and  
29  
30 potentially, for worker resilience. However, in foregrounding the role of the social worker in change,  
31  
32 these stories tended to minimise the role of children and families *themselves* as active participants in  
33  
34 the process of change.  
35  
36

### 37 38 39 40 41 **5. Partnership stories - *find common ground and promote choice*** 42

43  
44 In contrast, some social workers' accounts of practice included stories that illustrated the importance  
45  
46 of getting 'alongside' families. They spoke of the pressure, especially as an experienced worker, to feel  
47  
48 solely responsible for the outcome of an intervention with a family. It was therefore necessary to keep  
49  
50 in mind that the work was about *partnership*, with the family taking an active role in bringing about  
51  
52 positive change:  
53

54  
55  
56 It's about that partnership thing – it's about partnership working. It's not *me* telling *you*, it's  
57  
58 working together. When we're going to work together is if you're going to work with me. I... put  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 my cards on the table and I expect you to put your cards on the table... we start to pave a way  
4  
5 to work together. (SW7)  
6  
7

8  
9 Workers recounted cases where getting alongside parents was key to bringing about a positive  
10  
11 outcome. Key features of these partnership stories were a) establishing common ground and rapport  
12  
13 and b) promoting parental choice:  
14

15  
16 SW1: We have a common link which is the children. Even the most worrying of families *actually*  
17  
18 *want* their children to thrive, even if they're not necessarily to enable that. If you bring it back  
19  
20 to the kids much of the time that will help parents to come alongside. That's your common  
21  
22 ground isn't it?  
23  
24  
25

26 In these stories, working in partnership involved the social worker positioned as a promotor of choice:  
27

28  
29 What I always say to people is I'll advise you, I will give you the options but you make your  
30  
31 choice. And it's like, if you make the wrong choice, it could mean quite serious things happening  
32  
33 to your children, being removed, but it's *your choice*. (SW4)  
34  
35  
36

37 In their stories of working in partnership with families, workers positioned parents as rational agents  
38  
39 able to make choices. However, framing practice in this way de-emphasises the structural, and  
40  
41 ecological factors (e.g. poverty, discrimination, gender etc.) which may have a bearing on parents'  
42  
43 capacity to make choices in a meaningful way. Where partnership is more narrowly conceived as giving  
44  
45 parents choice (as opposed to working together in a sustained way) there could be a sense of the  
46  
47 social worker minimising their own professional role and responsibility in bringing about change  
48  
49 through offering support, resources and encouragement.  
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## 56 **6. Parables of persistence - *keep going, persistence pays off***

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3 A key feature of social workers' daily practice was working with, and managing, resistance. However,  
4  
5 repeated experiences of hostility from families could leave workers feeling dispirited and drained. A  
6  
7 key aspect of professional resilience is the ability to manage the emotional demands of being rejected  
8  
9 (see Author's Own, 2019) while resisting the temptation to 'shut down' or adopt a stance of  
10  
11 'detachment' (SW4). A parable is a 'succinct, didactic story, in prose or verse that illustrates one or  
12  
13 more instructive lessons or principles' (OED, 2019). Social workers recounted short instances of  
14  
15 practice where persistence and a willingness to tolerate initial rejection ultimately led to success. The  
16  
17 moral of these parables appeared to be *persistence pays off*. Crucially, these stories contained a  
18  
19 resolution, where the initial difficulty was overcome through persistence:  
20  
21

22  
23  
24 SW8: So I was sitting outside... a house... and we were being ranted at by a mother in the  
25  
26 driveway. And each rant I'd sort of let her get it out of her system. I'd answer a bit, and anyway  
27  
28 [she said] it's really late, you know, she's started changing you see. Anyway it's *really* late! Bla  
29  
30 bla, you want to go home! Bla bla, and you'll want to have your tea! I *would*, I said, do you want  
31  
32 to put the kettle on? And that was it! We completely laughed! So we went in, and *then* we could  
33  
34 carry out the assessment.  
35

36  
37  
38 In this instance, holding one's nerve and allowing service user to vent their anger is framed as a  
39  
40 necessary step in achieving a meaningful and respectful relationship, indicated in the resolution of the  
41  
42 story – going in for tea. The moral of this story seemed to be that persisting through initial rejection  
43  
44 can pave the way for positive working relationships. Other workers provided examples where  
45  
46 persistence was a professional virtue and could represent a powerful intervention in itself:  
47  
48

49  
50  
51 SW3: One of the ones that really got me the most was the ten-year-old boy – he hated me. He  
52  
53 threatened me down the phone, he threatened to punch me... He hated me so much because I  
54  
55 removed him from his home, *but* he hated me up until the day I said to him look I'm going to  
56  
57 hand this case over... He could say whatever he wanted to me, I mean he could do all sorts, he  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 could threaten me... and I'd *still* be round there saying to him well, how do you feel about  
4  
5 things?  
6  
7

8  
9 The function of these stories seemed to be to promote courage and resilience in the face of difficulty  
10 as well as transmitting learning to others, i.e. that situations which begin badly can end well. However,  
11 these parables of persistence appeared to represent a risk. As one worker pointed out, the pressure  
12 to feel that through hard work and persistence you can 'engage anyone' (SW5) can lead social workers  
13 to feel solely and personally culpable when intervention fails. The notion of persistence as a virtue  
14 may also mean that social workers feel pressure to tolerate unacceptable levels of risk to children or  
15 themselves in their attempts to engage service users. One worker, for instance, described how social  
16 workers frequently go into situations where all other professionals, including the police, would 'refuse'  
17 to attend.  
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### 33 **7. Stories of courageous practice - *it's scary, but we have the courage to protect children***

34  
35 As the first responder to a concern around abuse or neglect, workers often witnessed distressing sights  
36 involving children. When asked how they managed these painful experiences, some workers  
37 constructed narratives which depicted the social worker as hero with the capacity to protect and save  
38 the child:  
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42

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44  
45 SW1: We're there for one reason, we're looking after children. We're protecting children. You  
46 can almost... treat it like a fantasy... charging over the hills on a white horse! ... Ultimately it's  
47 about rescuing the child, because pretty much what we're doing is rescuing children from very  
48 difficult positions.  
49  
50  
51  
52

53  
54 These narratives depicted the social worker as a strong character, braving fraught and dangerous  
55 situations in a display of courage and heroism:  
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57  
58  
59  
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3 SW4: Especially in the cases where there's been lots of big, aggressive figures in the family.  
4  
5 You're the one that's gone in there showing I don't care! You can shout and throw punches...  
6  
7 whatever you want! I'm safeguarding this child! The child will see that and think well, I've been  
8  
9 scared of this person, but this person has come in and stood up to them.

10  
11  
12 The idea of the social worker as hero, going into 'battle' (SW4), 'charging' over the hills (SW1) and  
13  
14 'bravely soldiering on' (SW6) in the face of adversity is reminiscent of Beckett's (2003) study, where  
15  
16 practice was defined by the metaphor 'social work is war'. Thinking of social work as going into 'battle'  
17  
18 to save children helped workers to muster the courage and emotional resilience needed to manage  
19  
20 upsetting situations and support children at risk. However, the positioning of the worker as hero,  
21  
22 fighting for and rescuing the child foregrounds an adversarial approach to working with parents, which  
23  
24 could create a defensive or oppressive dynamic.  
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### 32 **8. Cautionary tales: *expect the unexpected and remain vigilant***

33  
34 In the context of high-volume, time-limited assessment work, workers spoke of the fear that they  
35  
36 would miss something, resulting in a vulnerable child being left at risk. Workers also repeatedly spoke  
37  
38 of the discomfort and anxiety that accompanied the need to intrude into the private aspects of  
39  
40 families' lives. In order to manage both this discomfort and to avoid complacency, workers needed to  
41  
42 strenuously call to mind the importance, and legitimacy, of being sometimes intrusive to protect  
43  
44 children. To do this, workers evoked 'cautionary tales' – instances of prior practice (their own or a  
45  
46 colleague's) which served to reiterate the necessity of their intrusion, remain vigilant and expect the  
47  
48 unexpected:  
49  
50  
51  
52

53  
54 SW3: We went into the house and it was an arranged visit, and the whole house was totally  
55  
56 spotless. He [the father] says 'Ah, I'll show you round, and these are the children's bedrooms'.  
57  
58 Beds were made lovely, and... I said 'what's that room there, where's your room?' And he said  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 'oh, you can't go in there!'... I was like 'We need to go into this room!' It took about five minutes  
4  
5 of negotiation... And he couldn't even open the door! He'd shoved everything in his house into  
6  
7 that room – just horrendous! And I said to my student, see! *That's* why you've got to check  
8  
9 every bedroom!  
10

11  
12 This story has two key functions. Firstly, it emphasises the need to remain vigilant to the possibility of  
13  
14 'hidden' risk and the need to sometimes be intrusive. Secondly, it distils a key piece of learning (you've  
15  
16 got to check every bedroom) for new workers within the team - remain vigilant to the possibility of  
17  
18 hidden risk. Other stories included instances where a worker 'looked in a cupboard and someone  
19  
20 jumped out' (SW4) and where a family member became unexpectedly aggressive. However, while  
21  
22 such cautionary tales might serve as a useful reminder to remain vigilant, there is also the risk that  
23  
24 they could represent a 'policing' attitude towards families and a 'cynical mistrust' of parents on the  
25  
26 part of workers (Woodhouse and Pengelly, 1991: 180). In the story above, for instance, there is an  
27  
28 implicit message about needing to 'catch parents out'. However, hiding everything in one room may  
29  
30 not necessarily be dangerous or indicate risk (it may, for instance, be more indicative of the parent's  
31  
32 anxiety about the social worker's visit and efforts to please). There is perhaps a distinction to be made  
33  
34 here between remaining legitimately vigilant and being mistrustful or suspicious of parents.  
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### 43 Discussion

44  
45 Child welfare social workers undertake emotive work, managing need and risk in the context of  
46  
47 reduced resources and increased caseloads (Travis *et al*, 2016; Mänttari-van der Kuip, 2014).  
48  
49 Organisational support (Antonopolou *et al*, 2017), particularly support from team colleagues (Biggart  
50  
51 *et al*, 2017), can help workers to manage these demands. The findings from this explorative study  
52  
53 provide insights into the formation of resilience – how shared 'team talk' and storytelling may help  
54  
55 social workers to construct a robust sense of role, helping them to navigate and manage the demands  
56  
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1  
2  
3 of the work. At the same time, the findings also shed light on the risks of defensive coping in child  
4  
5 welfare work.  
6

7  
8 Like the 'war stories' of Orr's (1991) photocopier technicians, the stories generated by social workers  
9  
10 can be regarded as promoting professional resilience, celebrating and reaffirming workers' sense of  
11  
12 their professional role while at the same time transmitting learning to colleagues in the team about  
13  
14 how manage difficult practice experiences. Orr (1996: 139) observed that listening to the stories of  
15  
16 experienced workers was 'part of the transformation of a new hire into a technician' providing  
17  
18 messages to new team members about the sort of person they need to be. Similarly, the stories told  
19  
20 in the focus groups were instructive, containing morals for practice such as the need for vigilance and  
21  
22 partnership working. Storytelling was also used to explore and articulate workers' sense of  
23  
24 professional role, such as what makes social work distinctive (solidarity stories) and the purpose of  
25  
26 the individual social worker in working for the good of society (professional affirmation stories).  
27  
28 Storying the work in certain ways appeared to allow the emotional challenges of the work to be  
29  
30 managed. Parables of persistence and stories of courageous practice, for instance, appeared to  
31  
32 support worker resilience by conveying optimistic messages about the ultimate value of the work,  
33  
34 even in the face of difficulty.  
35  
36  
37  
38

39  
40 However, some stories also appeared to represent a more defensive approach to coping with the  
41  
42 demands of the work. By providing us with a frame, stories foreground particular features of  
43  
44 experience while excluding and obscuring others. For this reason stories can block change within  
45  
46 organisations (Boje, 1991) or transmit potentially defensive or 'ritualised ways of working' (White and  
47  
48 Featherstone, 2005: 215). For instance, the metaphor of social work as war – evident in 'charging over  
49  
50 hills' and 'standing up' to abusers emphasises conflict, positioning parents as adversaries. Similarly,  
51  
52 cautionary tales employ a risk frame, foregrounding the tendency of parents to withhold the truth,  
53  
54 rather than emphasising their positive qualities and strengths. In foregrounding a specific feature of  
55  
56 the child protection work, each of the stories also exclude other features. Each way of seeing practice  
57  
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1  
2  
3 has practice has potential benefits as well as risks. In relation to each of the eight story types, the  
4  
5 following tensions can be distilled:  
6  
7

- 8 1. Being able to let out emotions within the team, without creating a derisory venting culture.
- 9  
10 2. Celebrating and recognising social workers' distinctive professional skills, while avoiding an  
11  
12 'us and them' culture in relation to other professionals and service users.
- 13  
14 3. Acknowledging the deep learning potential of 'career cases', while recognising the possibility  
15  
16 that one might adopt a defensive position as result of these experiences.
- 17  
18 4. Calling to mind the societal benefits and value of social work as profession, without losing  
19  
20 sight of parents as active participants in change.
- 21  
22 5. Building partnerships and promoting parental choice, while acknowledging the psychosocial  
23  
24 factors that might impact on parents' capacity to make such choices.
- 25  
26  
27 6. Persisting with families in the face of lack of engagement or hostility without putting the child  
28  
29 or oneself at risk.
- 30  
31 7. Retaining the professional courage needed to protect children, while avoiding an adversarial  
32  
33 stance towards parents.
- 34  
35  
36 8. Remaining vigilant in relation to hidden risk, without becoming cynical and 'policing' families.  
37  
38

39  
40 The tensions expressed in social workers' stories suggest there is a delicate balance to be maintained  
41  
42 in sustaining a robust, yet non-defensive, sense of role as a child welfare social worker. Social workers'  
43  
44 stories may also reflect the wider challenges of social work practice within a hybrid model, where  
45  
46 there is an often uneasy relationship between child protection and family support (Featherstone *et al*,  
47  
48 2014).  
49

50  
51 The findings from this study suggest that stories told within social work teams may build resilience  
52  
53 and promote effective coping strategies, but can also represent defensive, rather than constructive,  
54  
55 adaptation in response to the demands of the work. Defensive practice has been described as social  
56  
57 work's 'open secret', yet what it looks like in practice is seldom articulated (Whittaker and Havard,  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 2016: 1160). Attention to the language and structure of professional storytelling sheds light on  
4  
5 defensiveness - the way that practice is framed can help social workers to manage emotional  
6  
7 challenges, but can also lead to a sense of 'us and them' (Dingwall, 1977) in relation to both service  
8  
9 users and other professionals.  
10

## 16 **Implications**

17  
18 At an organisational level, attending to the stories told by workers could help managers to understand  
19  
20 organisational behaviour and learning (Brown *et al*, 2009). Listening to 'team tales' may provide a way  
21  
22 to make sense of, and potentially address, defensive team cultures. Since social workers share their  
23  
24 professional epiphanies, an incident experienced by one worker may have a ripple effect throughout  
25  
26 the team. There may therefore be a role for managers in helping workers to explore the collective  
27  
28 learning from critical incidents as a team. For supervisors, helping social workers to re-frame, or 're-  
29  
30 story' key instances of practices may be helpful in facilitating reflection as well as naming the pull  
31  
32 towards defensive practice. For individual workers, the different types of 'team tale' identified in this  
33  
34 study could provide a framework for thinking about their own sense of role and resilience. Questions  
35  
36 to consider could include: Which professional experiences have changed me as a worker? What are  
37  
38 the dominant stories that I hear in my team, which stories am I drawn to and why? What stories do I  
39  
40 tell myself to keep me going in the work, and how do these influence my practice in both positive and  
41  
42 negative ways?  
43  
44  
45

46  
47 The present study has some limitations. Given the highly localised nature of the professional stories  
48  
49 captured in the data study (such as the focus on high-volume assessment work) it is difficult to make  
50  
51 generalisations about the role of storytelling in child welfare teams more widely. Similarly, the study  
52  
53 cannot establish how workers' stories and sense of role directly impacted their daily, direct work with  
54  
55 service users. However, this in-depth analysis of micro-storytelling suggests that professional  
56  
57 storytelling has a crucial role to play in team culture and individual coping strategies; potentially  
58  
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60

1  
2  
3 reinforcing defensive frameworks for thinking, but also potentially establishing and maintaining much  
4  
5 needed professional resilience among child welfare social workers.  
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