What is the relationship between supervision and practice in child and family social work? An analysis of 12 case studies

Lucy Treby 1470101

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Abstract

The home visit and supervision are fundamental practices of statutory social work with children and families, yet the interaction and influence of one on the other has seldom been researched, and never in Wales. This thesis attempts to lessen that gap. It used a case study approach in two Local Authorities to explore the influence of supervision on practice with children and families. The 12 case studies comprised 12 supervision observations, 12 interviews with seven supervisors who supervised 12 social workers who were all interviewed, and seven of their home visits observed. Data from all these sources were then reviewed using thematic analysis, which enabled the depth of data to be fully explored, generating themes related to the direct and indirect relationship of supervision to practice, but also highlighted the impact of organisational and societal influences on statutory child and families social work.

All participants were aware of pervasive societal concerns of serious harm to the children they supported, which they shared, but were also acutely aware of risks to themselves as well. This resulted in a system dominated by anxiety and fear, with the response from organisations, supervisors and social workers being surveillance and proceduralisation.

The dominance of process led supervision and practice enabled participants to feel that they were being effective, which they believed mitigated risk and therefore lessened their anxiety. This shared responsibility for the safety of children meant the job felt more manageable for all involved, and for some, families seemed to be helped. When considering the effectiveness of visits, supervision and the relationship between the two, this study concludes that practitioners, supervisors, policy makers, and researchers must consider the endurance of surveillance as a way that the system manages fear and anxiety.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1 Background and origins of this thesis

This thesis emerges from reflections on the practice of children and families'
statutory social work. All Local Authorities in England and Wales have a *'duty'*
(Section 47, Children Act 1989) to safeguard and protect children who are at risk
of harm. Social workers play a key role in this work, being drivers in the
development and delivery of support to children who find themselves at risk in any
number of ways (Care Act 2014, Social Services and Well-Being (Wales) Act
2014; Wales Safeguarding Procedures, undated). There are set expectations that
workers use appropriate legislation, processes and procedures in their work with
families. They must justify any intervention, work within a multi-agency context
and ensure that children and families are fully participating, seen as experts in
their own experience. This part of social work generally happens on home visits,
which are a routine and normal part of any social worker's activities. The
challenge in making *'future predictions about abusive behaviours'* (Munro, 2011,
pp. 14) is significant with the endeavours of workers largely unseen by society
(Pithouse, 1989; Winter and Cree, 2016; Ferguson 2018; Leigh et al., 2020 b).

The term supervision describes a range of activities that will be discussed later in
this thesis, but here largely refers to a regular one-to-one session where a worker
sits down with their direct line manager to review their work. Supervision is a
routine part of the way that organisations approach statutory work with children
and families, and a routine aspect of the day-to-day activities of organisations
engaged in the business of statutory children's social work.

> *'Supervision is part of the intervention process … supervision's*
> *overriding priority is to promote and protect the interests of service*
> *users … supervision is critical to quality of service delivery and the*
> *experience of users' (Morrison, 2005, pp. 5).*

These foundations of statutory social work practice with children and families are
such a normal part of the regular activities of social work, that, as will be seen
later, they are rarely questioned. The care and investment of time in supervision
although positively received by workers has not often been evidenced to impact
children, their outcomes and neither is the relationship between the two well

documented. Essentially, we just do not know what the relationship is between supervision and practice with children and families.

1.1.1 Researcher and Social Worker

The motivation for this thesis came from the researcher's many years of working within statutory children's services, as a qualified social worker and supervisor, supervising a team of professionals in a therapeutic edge-of-care team. This work led to a curiosity as to whether the nature of the interactions between team members, supervisors and managers corresponded in any way with how workers then interacted with families, and consequently whether this made any difference to the children's outcomes. It seemed obvious that if workers were supervised in reflective, purposeful ways this would of course be mirrored in their practice. This interest has resulted in this study.

1.2 Thesis structure

The thesis takes a qualitative case study approach to consider the central research question:

What is the relationship between supervision and practice with families?

To help explore this question, it has been broken down to the following subsidiary questions:

1. How do supervisors and social workers discuss direct practice in supervision sessions?
2. What do supervisors say about supervision and its relationship to practice?
3. What do social workers do when visiting families that they have discussed in supervision?
4. What do workers say about the influence of supervision on direct practice?

Twelve case studies form the basis of this study, all including a direct observation of a supervision session, and an interview with both the supervisor and then the social worker. Additionally, seven of the 12 comprise the direct observation of a home visit, following the supervision session. Observations looked at what

happened in sessions, and then supervisors and workers were interviewed about their experiences of supervision and the relationship to practice. As data were collected it became clear that influences were wider-ranging than initially anticipated and a systemic thematic analysis approach enabled full exploration of these emerging concepts.

1.2.1 Chapter summaries

Following this brief introductory chapter, chapter two begins to set the scene, reviewing the theoretical literature and policy guidance that describes what supervision is, and how it is routinely offered. It explores the definition of supervision in social work and discusses the functions of supervision. The chapter concludes with a review of how these functions might be delivered, considering the range of methods that are beginning to be explored in the research community for fulfilling all the functions of supervision.

Chapter three expands the review of the literature regarding social work supervision and considers the evidence as to what influence it has, moving to consider why it has become a fundamental part of social work practice. It reviews how it helps workers, and looks at how supervision influences or impacts families, introducing the idea that there is a *'three-link chain' (Shulman, 1982 in Harkness and Hensley, pp. 506)* between supervision, worker and children and families. It reviews recent emerging research into the triangulation of what influence supervision has on families, specifically in social work.   It concludes by establishing the justification for this study and highlights the unique contribution it makes.

Chapter four considers the methodology behind the research presented in this thesis, outlines the rationale for the choice of a multiple case study design, and the methods of data collection used. It discusses the researcher's positioning as an insider in one research site, considers the pitfalls and benefits of being a qualified social worker researching into their own area of work, and describes methods used to create reflective and reflexive opportunities. The chapter concludes with a summary of the twelve case studies and a description of how thematic analysis was used to develop themes from the data collected in the case studies.

Chapters five, six, and seven present the thematic analysis of the information collected in this research. Chapter five focusses on the patterns and routines of home visits based on observational data, and considers how workers described what they were doing, why and how they thought that it helped families. Chapter six follows a similar structure, first presenting observational data originating from supervision sessions and then considering what workers and supervisors said about supervision. It draws out conclusions about the relationship between supervision and practice. The chapter discusses how participants were acutely aware of the risks within the system they are in, how that impacted them personally and how they were helped to work in this context.

Chapter seven presents themes relating to how organisations, supervisors and teams seek to manage their power in the system while fulfilling the statutory duty of risk management. The social context of statutory children and families work is discussed, and how the system and individuals protect themselves within an awareness of the possibility of harm. There is a shift from care to control, and more overt forms of power emerge as the discussion expands to consider how decisions are made in supervision and in organisations, including what is expected in the performance of social workers within these confines. The chapter ends with a consideration of how wider governmental policy influences ideas of what social work should be and shows that this impacts on individual practice permeating the entire system, finding complex manifestations of power.

Chapter eight concludes by considering what contribution this thesis makes, and the limitations and strengths of the research. It contributes to the expanding body of knowledge about supervision and home visits in several ways, including observations of direct practice as well as the wider consideration of what influences practice with families, and how workers are supported in child and family social work. It re-considers the *'three-link chain' (*Shulman, 1982 in Harkness and Hensley, pp. 506) and considers the myriad of multidirectional and nuanced influences on the relationship between supervision and practice. It explores why it is overly simple and reductionist to suggest that supervision has a linear impact on practice, considering why people practice in the way that they do. The thesis concludes with suggestions for further research which may bring more

understanding of what helps and influences social work practice with children and families, leading to better outcomes for all in the system.

Chapter 2 – What is social work supervision?

The first two chapters of this thesis review the literature pertaining to social work supervision and any relationship that it has to practice. To begin this exploration this chapter considers theoretical ideas of the definition, function and delivery of social work supervision. Kadushin's (1976) proposed functions of supervision - administration, education and support - form the basis of discussion. Using these theoretical concepts as a backdrop, the chapter moves on to review empirical studies of supervision practice in social work in the UK concluding with a presentation of what theorists suggest effective supervision is and how it should be delivered. It considers competing ideas of effectiveness, and begins to contemplate whether it is possible to fulfil all the demands of supervision through one delivery method.   The following chapter will take this further, by considering what difference supervision makes and to whom, and what evidence there is to support a need for it.

2.1 Definition of social work supervision

There is an assumption within the social work profession that supervision is a relevant and effective way to ensure high standards of work, making professionals accountable for their actions, and ensuring individuals that are supported by social workers are safe and their rights are promoted. The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) states:

> *'Good quality, regular social work supervision by people who have the necessary experience and qualifications in social work practice is an essential tool to ensure accountable and ethical practice. Research has confirmed that supervision is an important vehicle for supporting the management function in promoting creative and reflective practice, supporting staff resilience and well-being and continuous professional development' (IFSW, 2012).*

Most regulatory bodies of social work across the world mandate that effective supervision should be regularly provided to social workers (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2013; National Association of Social Workers, 2013; Social Workers Registration Board, 2016), an expectation that is replicated within all four

of the UK nations (Care Council for Wales, 2015; Northern Ireland Social Care Council, 2015; Scottish Social Services Council, 2016; Health Care Professions Council, 2017).

Definitions of social work supervision vary (Morrison, 2005; Coulshed and Mullender, 2006; British Association of Social Workers, 2011; Wonnacott, 2012; Howe and Gray, 2013; NASW, 2013), and none of the UK social work professional registration bodies yield clear statements on what constitutes effective social work supervision (website search of Social Care Wales (and Care Council Wales); Scottish Social Services Council; Northern Ireland Social Care Council; Health Care Professions Council; conducted on 14/04/2017). The British Association of Social Workers offers a definition within their UK supervision policy:

> *'Supervision is a regular, planned, accountable process, which must provide a supportive environment for reflecting on practice and making well-informed decisions using professional judgement and discretion.' (BASW, 2011, pp. 7).*

However, this does not tell us what exactly is needed, nor why it is important. Similarly in Wales, it is incumbent on employers

> *'to promote best practice and good conduct and support workers to improve their performance … [and employers must] provide effective, regular supervision to workers to support them to develop and improve through reflective practice' (Social Care Wales, 2018 b, pp. 7 and 8).*

However, this does not state how supervision can improve performance, and a definition of supervision, reflective or otherwise, is not provided. Without a

> *'clear and shared understanding of what it is … we will struggle to understand when and how it is being implemented effectively and how it helps improve practice and outcomes.' (Wilkins, 2017 b, pp. 165).*

Consequently there is a need for the social work profession to reach agreement on what supervision is and how it should be offered, in order to evidence the need for supervision, why it is so important and what impact it has on both workers and individuals who use social work services.

2.2 Functions of supervision

In good practice guidance, the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) states:

> *'supervision is a process by which one worker is given responsibility by the organisation to work with another worker in order to meet certain organisational, professional and personal objectives which together promote best outcomes for service users' (SCIE, 2013, pp. 6).*

Which begins to highlight the functions and competing demands of supervision. Guttman argues that:

> *'The manifest goal of supervision in social work generally has become associated with the promotion of competence' (Guttman et al., 1988, pp. 279).*

A key element of social work supervision must be about helping the individual worker meet the demands of the job. However, a key issue here then is that effectiveness in social work practice is also difficult to measure and the characteristics of a competent worker can be contested (Guttman et al. 1988; Ruch, 2005; Whittaker et al., 2016; Van Der Gaag et al, 2017). A capable social worker needs to meet the demands of the organisation, be accountable for their actions, and manage this with the sometimes conflicting demands of individual users of services.

> *'Effective child welfare services require caseworkers to be responsive to a variety of legal, emotional, and service delivery problems that arise in serving maltreated youth, while also being attentive to the unique needs of each child, tenacious in navigating the complex bureaucratic maze of state and federal regulations and adept at winning the trust and confidence of a diverse group of children and families.' (Glisson and Green, 2011, pp. 583).*

The complexities of delivering effective social work therefore are manifold, and offering effective supervision reflects the same challenges.

Considering what the functions of supervision are would be helpful when considering what effective supervision is. There are a variety of functions that theorists suggest need to be included in supervision to achieve its purpose. Alfred Kadushin argues:

'the principal cluster of functions discharged by the supervisor [are] – administrative, educational and supportive. Other characteristics of the position also help define it. The supervisor is an administrative officer … who is given authority to direct, regulate and evaluate the work of others and who is accountable for the work performed'. (1976, pp. 21).

However, as the profession has developed and changed in the UK, so have the demands of supervision. Tony Morrison offers a different way of looking at these functions, suggesting the following objectives for supervision:

'1. Competent, accountable performance/practice (managerial or normative function)

2. Continuing professional development (development/formative function)

3. Personal support (supportive/restorative function)

4. Engaging the individual with the organisation (mediation function)' (Morrison, 2005, pp. 32).

SCIE argues that these objectives are *'widely used in social care' (2013, pp. 19)* within the UK. It could be suggested that Morrison's objectives are a development of Kadushin's suggested functions of supervision, rather than completely new ideas, and there is *'general agreement about the three main functional elements of supervision'* (Beddoe, 2010*)* as being those suggested by Kadushin. His work, as an explanation of what social work supervision should encompass, has resonated with social workers internationally, and reflected in texts about social work and supervision (Siddle and Wilson, 1984; Clare, 1988; Lishman, 2002; Marks, 2002; Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2004; Coulshed and Mullender, 2006; Milne, 2007; Baglow, 2009; Beddoe, 2010; Wonnacott, 2012; Caras and Sandu, 2014; Nancarrow et al, 2014). Kadushin has continued to develop these ideas and themes of supervision as recently as 2014 in the fifth edition of his book (Kadushin and Harkness, 2014), and given the widespread acceptance of these ideas they will form the basis of ongoing discussions regarding the functions of supervision in this thesis.

2.2.1 Administrative/management function

Kadushin defines the administrative function of supervision as *'work assignment and planning … work review and evaluation … co-ordinating facilitating and sanctioning of work.'* (pp. 41 – 56) and that the supervisor's role is as *'a channel of communication …. an administrative buffer … 'placing' the worker' … [and] policy formation and community liaison'* (Kadushin, 1979, pp. 65 – 89). These areas reflect the case or process-based supervision that many social workers are familiar with and corresponds with Morrison's management function within his model of supervision. Others have argued there is a further function of supervision – mediation (Shulman, 1982; Morrison, 2005) - which links the worker to the organisation and arguably reflects the role of supervisor as discussed by Kadushin above.   It is suggested this function is an extension of the administrative function as the supervisor acts as a conduit of the organisation and ensures that *'supervision will have a positive impact on an organisation's performance'* (SCIE, 2013, pp. 14), also known as performance management. The supervisor's mandate to offer management direction and support would seem to be inextricably linked to the interest of the organisation. Therefore, it is suggested that mediation is not best understood as a separate function to management and thus Kadushin's description of administrative supervision is more helpful for our purposes.

2.2.2 Educational/developmental function

Kadushin argued that *'educational supervision is concerned with teaching the worker what he needs to know in order to do his job and helping him learn it'* (1976, pp 125; Kadushin and Harkness, 2014)*.* This is mirrored in Morrison's description of the developmental function of supervision, focussing on the need for the worker to have the best possible skills and expertise to meet the demands of the social work role with supervision inevitably developing and changing as workers gain experience and knowledge (Turner-Daly and Jack, 2017). Trevithick suggests that learning *'is inhibited when standardised, tick box forms of information gathering and other prescribed tasks and targets take precedence over an emotionally meaningful encounter',* and that within a learning environment every interaction is an opportunity for learning, which does not happen when

organisations are defensive (2014, pp. 306). In some ways this function conflicts with the administrative function of supervision in that, arguably, the organisation is always going to take priority in terms of supervision as it needs to ensure that social workers are offering the best possible service to individuals in order to protect the organisation's reputation.

SCIE found that *'supervisees value supervisors who have expertise in their field'* (SCIE, 2013 pp. 31), suggesting that credibility, practice knowledge and experience are important to workers. This leads us to consider how supervisors can act as teachers and role models, giving both overt and covert messages to their teams about the expectations and standards of social workers. If we are expecting supervisors to teach social workers about practice, then supervisors must keep their knowledge and skills up to date, and maintain expertise in their field. Supervisors accessing training and good supervision themselves to develop their own practice and management skills must be important here, and the need for supervisors to receive good educative opportunities themselves is recognised (BASW, 2011) but has been found not to be the reality for many social work supervisors (Wilkins et al, 2017). The educative/development function of supervision reflects a move away from technical rationalist approaches (Schon, 1991) to considering social work practice as a complex activity. Already we can see the potential competing functions of social work supervision, who it should help and what it should look like.

2.2.3 Supportive function

Additionally, Kadushin and Morrison agree that a supportive element of supervision is crucial. Essentially this provides the time and space for a worker to explore their own feelings about their work, how this influences them personally and the way they conduct their work creating *'a safe climate for the worker to look at her/his practice and its impact on him/her as a person'* (Morrison, 2005 pp. 45). Toasland suggests this safety is *'containment'* (2007 pp. 197) in their reflection of their experience as a manager in therapeutic social work, although this is a specialised role with functions of supervision that may not be easily transferred to statutory social work teams. In any event, the idea that supervision provides an *'opportunity for containment of practitioner's anxieties resulting from the raw*

experience of the work' (Harvey and Henderson, 2014, pp. 345) specifically reflects child protection services, and the 'emotional labour' (Winter et al., 2019, pp. 217) of this type of work is apparent.

The need for supervision to support the worker emotionally seems obvious, and is represented in international research on the subject. Supported staff are more content in their jobs and more likely to offer better interventions thereby supporting the organisation in a positive way (Cearley, 2004; Mor Barak, 2009; Beddoe, 2010). This is true also of British research in this area (Baginsky et al., 2010, Munro, 2011; McFadden et al, 2014; Ravalier, 2018). This emotional safety net, as an element of effective supervision, recognises the challenges and sometimes traumatic work experience of social workers. However, perhaps it is difficult for all supervisors to offer all three functions of supervision, in a way that meets all expectations, leading to the development of other models or ideas of how support can be offered. Nonetheless, we see that emotional safety is a key component of effective supervisory support in statutory children and families social work.

2.3 How is supervision delivered?

Traditionally in social work, supervision is offered by a manager, or a senior member of staff to a member of their team. Sessions are normally monthly and are one-to-one interactions between supervisor and supervisee (Baginsky et al., 2010). This remains the predominant model of supervision where one supervisor is expected to ensure that all functions of supervision are met. It is noted in several studies that supervisors are designated through promotion and experience, not necessarily through innate management ability and training in supervision has been found wanting, with supervisors ill-prepared for a move to management (Baginsky et al., 2010; Cousins, 2010; Kraemer Tebes et al., 2011). This way of offering supervision reflects the traditional way that social workers practise. A lead worker will work with individuals or families to help them address their needs:

> 'Relationship based practice is at the heart of work in social care, yet recently there has been a concern that focus on tasks and compliance has reduced the value placed on this aspect of the

> *work. … reaffirmed the importance of relationships within supervision'. (SCIE, 2013 pp. 27).*

However, as the profession reflects on what it does, why and how, supervision inevitably becomes part of this introspection.

The difficulties in balancing the differing needs of individuals, and providing effective supervision that meets all three functions are evident throughout social work literature; for example, surveys of social workers have shown that many social workers were not receiving supervision at all and others found it unhelpful (MacGregor, 2013; Ravalier, 2018). This was also seen in a time and motion study of 1153 social workers working in England:

> *'There were managers who were said to provide the necessary level of emotional support and professional development, but there was a significant minority [of social workers] in all settings who felt they were missing out on this' (Baginsky et al, 2010, pp. 40).*

This report of a significant survey of social workers and managers illustrates the challenges in providing effective supervision within the pressurised environments in which social workers function.

Wilkins and colleagues (2017) noted that accounts of supervision practice in literature were often based on retrospective accounts given by supervisors or supervisees. These, whilst useful, had a lack of detail in exploring what happened in sessions, and specific outcomes of supervision for workers or families. Therefore they obtained 30 recordings of supervisions sessions, and four individual case discussions, featuring 12 different managers in one London Children's Services. Analysis of these recording found *'a remarkable degree of consistency'* (pp. 944) with a *'verbal deluge'* (pp. 944) where workers gave information to their supervisor, who then identified an issue and gave a direction for action.

> *'A particular feature of this approach is the short conceptual step between the identification of 'the problem' and the provision of a solution and the tendency for the advice to concern procedural actions, such as completing paperwork or arranging a meeting.' (Wilkins et al., 2017, pp. 946).*

They found that clear perceptions or discussions of risk were not a feature, nor were emotions of workers or families seen as important, excepting a very quick *'check in' (pp. 946)* at the start of the session. They conclude that managers *'do not seem to be doing what they say they want to …. child-focused, reflective, analytical, emotionally supportive and helpful'* (pp. 948) supervision. The challenge in providing supervision that fulfils all the functions described above is noted, and they go one step further by suggesting that good supervision will impact on practice, but note a need for further research into those outcomes.

The struggle to meet all the functions of supervision effectively mirrors key difficulties that the social work profession has faced in recent years. The barrage of criticism directed at the profession as well as individual social workers and their managers, following high profile incidents of harm to service users, seems to have become relentless (Butler and Drakeford, 2005; Jack and Donnellan, 2010; Gibson, 2019). Social workers can be agents of *'street-level bureaucracy'* (Lipsky, 2010)*,* working to exercise state control, meeting targets and following processes and procedures, which can result in a separation between worker and vulnerable individual (Munro, 2011; Romeo, 2014). Ideas of performance management look for deficits in social workers and their practice; families are helped to fix the deficits in their interactions and similarly supervision is about how workers are helped to fill the shortfalls in their practice and knowledge (Peach and Horner, 2007; Wilkins, 2017).

Cousins suggests that:

> *'social work managers are potentially susceptible to certain supervisory games due to their anxieties about the use of power in practice'* (Cousins, 2010, pp. 281).

'Games' are played out in social work and supervision repeatedly, with each individual striving to get their needs met; maybe reflecting normal human behaviour. However, they go on to argue that as long as these games are acknowledged and client outcomes are continually discussed in supervision (this could be described as a part of reflective supervision), then the effects of these games are mitigated. This view is also held by Guttman (1988) who considers the competing expectations of competence in social work, and suggests that to be

effective, client outcomes must be part of explicit and regular discussions. As opposed to just going through the motions and blindly following processes, a continual focus on outcomes and what clients want to achieve for themselves is what is needed.

In a 15 month ethnographic study of two English Local Authorities child protection services, researchers observed 54 supervision sessions, as well as informal interactions in social work offices. In reviewing other studies, and best practice guidance they suggest supervision should provide

> *'both sanctuary from the seemingly ceaseless demands of busy practice environments and the freedom to hold 'not-knowing', uncertainty, creativity and a safe space where one can be one's authentic self and imagine better practice. (Beddoe, et al., 2021 pp. 4)'.*

However, they go on to describe their observations of reflective discussions that took place *'on the move'* (pp. 4), but

> *Supervision sessions were often very long, held in confined and stuffy spaces, with a narrow and enervating focus on case management' (pp. 5)*

These formal supervision sessions were *'a gruelling endurance exercise'* (pp. 8) that in themselves could cause workers anxiety driven by a *'compliance-driven audit culture'* (pp. 9). They conclude that the complexity of supervision mirrored that of practice, in that *'the demands of compliant recording and meeting timescales'* (pp. 11) took precedence over any other function of supervision. This was despite supervisors and workers in this study recognising that this was not best practice, and that all functions should be present in supervisory interchanges.

These studies contribute to an ongoing debate as to whether the functions of the supervision session can be provided by one person within the traditional format (Rankine, 2017; Wilkins et al., 2020). Baglow (2009) contrasts the functions of traditional social work supervision and found that one supervisor who is able to address the holistic needs of their teams and individuals can be effective in balancing all the functions of supervision.

As discussed above, the high profile tragedies that have hit the headlines have contributed to public and political interest in the practice of social workers, with

increasing recognition of the need for reflective supervision to look at how individuals impact the work with children and their families.

> *'Reflective practice was felt to be important as it increased a worker's awareness of self in relation to the quality and impact of their practice' (SCIE, 2013, pp. 6).*

Reflection is widely accepted as a bastion of effective, safe social work practice. It is taught in universities, on student practice placements, and there is a clear expectation that qualified workers continue to reflect as part of their continued professional development. Supervision should include reflective and reflexive discussion and practice. However, *'reflection is a term which can be overused and under-defined'* (Wonnacott, 2012, pp. 29), and there are a variety of suggestions of what reflective supervision should look like (Kadushin and Harkness, 2014; Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2004; Howe, 2008; Howe and Grey, 2013; Wonnacott, 2012).

> *'The supervision cycle involves working with the supervisee to understand both the experience of the service user and his own experience of the case as a social worker. It then encourages reflection on this experience through considering the emotional responses of the supervisee to the case, and allows for exploration of intuitive responses and 'gut feelings' about what is happening'. (Howe and Grey, 2013, pp. 55).*

This takes us back to the question of whether a lone social work manager can meet these requirements of good social work practice, or whether this is an unrealistic expectation as supervisors that can provide all functions of effective supervision are the exception rather than the rule, with most only meeting the administrative functions of supervision (Morrison, 2005; Noble and Irwin, 2009; O'Donoghue and Tsui, 2015).

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter has explored social work supervision, and considered the theoretical ideas behind what it is and how it is offered.

The functions of supervision have been described, in terms of the administrative, that is how supervision meets organisational demands; educational, how supervision helps workers be better at social work; and supportive, how supervision navigates the personal needs of workers within a trauma-rich

environment. We have started to see the potential for conflict between these functions and the consideration of the use of power within these relationships, and the potentially competing demands of organisations, workers and service users has begun to be highlighted. Discussion has focussed on what effective supervision is described to be and how all the functions are best met, with no definitive conclusion in this regard. Some consideration has been given to the changing nature of social work and the complexities of the social work task, particularly regarding the challenges in working with families whose children are at risk of harm. The next chapter will move these theoretical considerations on and consider the practical application of the ideas presented in this chapter. It will review some of the empirical research surrounding supervision and practice outcomes for workers, and for children and families, and will seek to understand more about how supervision influences individuals, in terms of both workers and families.

Chapter 3 – What difference does supervision make to social workers, their practice and outcomes for children and families?

This chapter builds on the last chapter's exploration of the theoretical ideas of what supervision is, and should be, to consider what empirical evidence exists about the benefits of supervision. It considers the links between supervision and practice with children and their families, including how it impacts workers and families. It links the hypothesised benefits of supervision on individuals with the theoretical functions considered previously. Initially, it considers how supervision helps workers, then considers what the impact on their practice may be. The chapter concludes by considering how supervision may help families, by considering how experimental approaches explicitly link supervision to outcomes for families.   Throughout, it considers what these studies tell us about overt connections between social work supervision, and practice, but also indirect influences between supervision, worker outcomes and practice outcomes.

When considering the relationship between supervision and social work practice, in this thesis it is envisioned as a

> *'three-link chain of social work practice. The first link was the supervisor; the second was the social worker; the third was the client' (Shulman, 1982 in Harkness and Hensley, 1991, pp. 506).*

What this suggests is that these individuals all impact one another and are inextricably connected. This thesis explores these links, and will consider the systemic impact of each of these links on each other. That is, consideration is given to how supervision impacts practice and then outcomes for workers and families.

3.1 Searching for literature

These three areas were a helpful starting point when considering where to begin the literature search.   The primary areas of enquiry and basis for search terms were:

- The outcomes of supervision for social workers
- The impact of supervision on practice with children and families
- The impact of supervision on child and family outcomes

Throughout the course of this thesis (which began in 2014), there have been increasing numbers of studies that combine these areas, however, at the beginning there were very few, so each topic was searched individually, using a range of synonyms, as well as the range of combinations of each part of the chain. Known social work organisations websites were also searched for grey literature, for example British Association of Social Workers, Research in Practice and Social Work regulatory bodies.

Cardiff University library was searched for texts and its Social Sciences Information Resources webpage was used to access databases, with Boolean terms used to search for peer-reviewed, English language material. Assia, Scopus, Social Care Online, Social Science Research Network and Web of Science were used, as well as Google Scholar. Additionally known journals were consulted directly, for example, British Journal of Social Work, Child and Family Social Work and others. The literature search began looking at international research, but then focussed on pertinent empirical articles originating in the UK. There was a large body of research that considered what social workers and supervisors said about supervision, and there were commonalities that became evident. Similarly, in the research community, considerable attention has been given to the experience of social work students in supervision and practice, but it was largely retrospective and interview based.

Initially, there was little child and family social work specific research that observed direct practice on visits or supervision so what there was, was always included, as was any material that considered outcomes or links between supervision and practice. Specific email alerts were set up, and citation lists scrutinised. Identified studies were read and citations scrutinised and read if relevant. Ultimately the resources used to search for literature began to return the same citations and concept saturation was reached.

In the previous chapter we saw the value that the social work profession places on supervision. With this in mind, one would expect to see a positive impact on workers, their practice and outcomes for families, the three links in the chain having an influence on one another. In recent years there have been several studies that have looked at how supervision impacts on workers (Baginsky et al., 2010; Beddoe 2017; Benton et al., 2017; Beddoe et al., 2021) and systematic reviews of research into supervision (Carpenter, 2013; McFadden et al., 2015). It is notable that these largely focus on outcomes for workers with only a limited number of recent studies looking at what influence supervision has on family outcomes (Bostock, 2019; Wilkins et al., 2020). This chapter explores each of the areas in turn, as this reflects the bulk of the literature, and then considers recent studies that have altered methods and delivery of supervision, thereby building insight into the nature and task of supervision.

3.2 How does supervision help workers?

When considering how supervision impacts or helps workers, a helpful starting point is a meta-analysis of 27 articles specifically focussed on workers in child welfare settings dated between 1990 and 2007,

> *'this article attempts to systematically assemble and analyze the disparate research on the role that supervision plays in affecting worker outcomes.' (Mor Barak et al., 2009, pp. 4).*

This creates a useful summary of research in this area at that time, which is why it begins this section. This study looked at quantitative English language research articles, and combines the experience of 10,867 workers in child welfare. The American study does not state what geographical areas were included, rather *'all available studies'* (Mor Barak et al., 2009, pp. 9) were reviewed. The meta-analysis states that *'supervisors can offer valuable educational, administrative and social support'* (pp. 4) reflecting the functions of supervision discussed previously. It also finds that

> *'all the supervisory dimensions (task assistance, social and emotional supervisory support, and supervisory interpersonal interaction) are found to be positively and statistically significantly related to beneficial outcomes for workers' (pp. 21).*

It notes that supervision impacts on worker's own sense of competence and well-being but finds a limited number of studies reviewing the impacts of *'task assistance'* (pp. 25) so is unable to reach any conclusions on whether or how supervision impacts on practice.

The meta-analysis of quantitative social work research reflects other qualitative studies which also find that supervision impacts strongly on worker outcomes. A survey of 1153 social workers in the UK found that where supervision was valued, it had a supportive element and workers had strong relationships with good supervisors, which workers then believed impacted on practice. The supportive function of social work supervision led to these self-reported personal outcomes for social workers, although exactly how and what supervisors did to effectively balance the three functions of supervision was less clear (Baginsky et al., 2010)

Similarly, a systematic review of English language papers relating to child protection social workers found both individual and organisational characteristics which led to resilience in workers (McFadden et al., 2015). This synthesis of 65 studies found that workers were less likely to burn out for a number of reasons, including the attachment or the relationship with their supervisor which was a key factor in retaining staff, and minimising sickness levels. The need for relationships with supervisors that provide emotional safety is repeated in literature from across the world, but also acknowledges the difficulties in providing this. The way in which supervision is researched and explored is generally retrospective and subjective in that most studies ask participants about their experiences (Collings and Murray, 1996; Gibbs, 2001; Cearley, 2004; Toasland, 2007; Collins-Camargo and Millar, 2010; Bostock et al., 2017; Wilkins and Antonopoulou, 2018). Arguably, there is an implicit suggestion in these studies that supervisors within the system ensure that workers are supported in a way that protects them, enabling them to perform their highly complex and challenging roles effectively, but this has not been empirically considered in most studies.

To illustrate the importance of selecting appropriate methods to research supervision, a study that explored the transition from student to newly qualified social worker (NQSW), used surveys and interviews with 13 NQSWs and 10 supervisors, in three English local authorities to consider experiences.

Supervision was seen to be key to a newly qualified Social Worker (NQSW) making the transition successfully, however:

> *'Although it is evident from the interviews that line managers considered they made space on the supervision agenda for NQSW's to reflect on their practice experiences and personal development it was equally clear that the majority of NQSWs did not experience supervision in this way.' (Jack and Donnellan, 2010, pp. 315).*

Although complicated by the point that we do not know if NQSWs' supervisors were participants in this study, this mismatch between supervisor and supervisee's perceptions highlights the need to independently examine what happens in social work supervision in real time. Interviews and surveys that take place afterwards can only reflect the perception of the person being interviewed, here the NQSWs and the supervisors, it is their perception of the truth and inevitably will be subjective. The retrospective subjectivity of the bulk of the research into supervision could be argued to be lacking a robust empirical base to supervision and how it is practised.

This theme of how social workers are best supported within the complex and difficult functions of their role, and their effectiveness continues, as does the prominence that supervision is given within social work. In 2013, Carpenter and others, found extraordinarily little evidence to prove or disprove the cost-effectiveness of supervision in child welfare services:

> *'If this systematic review has been conducted according to the standards of the Cochrane Library … There was no evidence to support supervision as an intervention in child welfare' (Carpenter et al., 2013, pp. 1851).*

Carpenter's analysis of 21 English language papers found little hard evidence to support the investment and commitment of social work to supervision, albeit the studies did not evidence a lack of impact, but rather there was lack of evidence of impact. This flies in the face of practice wisdom. As we have seen social workers generally describe the importance of good supervision, and its positive impact on workers who value the emotional support that they say supervision should bring. However, Carpenter et al's findings that that there is little evidence to support this

impacting on outcomes for families is shocking to the social work community, and needs further exploration and consideration.

An international empirical study of social work supervision, Beddoe and colleagues took Carpenter's demands for better research into the effectiveness of supervision seriously. They conducted a Delphi study into supervision using 53 participants with *'expert users, such as those involved in supervision as expert practitioners, practice teachers and trainers'* (pp. 1573) across 15 countries, a method that they hoped would contribute to an international research agenda into social work supervision. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the respondents as experts in supervision, 75% of participants believed that all social workers should receive supervision, reflecting the expectations of social work organisations that regular supervision is offered (discussed in chapter two). This paper also found that participants said that supervision had strong outcomes for social workers, but noted these were not related to outcomes for service users (Beddoe et al, 2016). Their findings reflect what we have seen about the often conflicted and contentious nature of the purpose and functions of supervision, but also how it is best offered. They also agreed with Carpenter's findings of a weak evidence base for supervision impacting on individuals and families but did echo the overwhelming evidence that says how much social workers value good supervision.

We can see that if a worker feels safe and supported within the work environment, they say they are less stressed and happier, with the implication that this will impact positively on workers practice. In a Northern Irish study of seven focus groups, including 36 social workers and supervisors, whose *'skills/expertise … [led to] an ability to create and sustain an atmosphere of trust and safety'* (Benton et al., 2017 pp. 296). Participants also described that *'the quality of supervision supports or inhibits competent client services'* (pp. 299), although does not provide detail as to how that may happen.   In any case, although interesting this study mirrors others in that it focusses on workers and supervisors providing accounts of what they think about supervision, rather than empirical evidence that shows how supervision helps workers (Jaquet et al., 2008; Baginsky et al., 2010; Graham and Shier, 2010; Hair, 2013; Harvey and Henderson, 2014)*.* However, as reflected previously, there is not a clear understanding of what effective social work or

supervision is and while we understand here that supervision is important for workers, there is not an empirical explanation of why that is, nor how that impacts on the practice of social workers with children and families. Nonetheless, what is evident is the strong connection of workers to supervision and their descriptions of the importance of support comes through in the research discussed. We will move on to consider how and in what ways this then influences, or does not, workers' practice with families.

3.3 How does supervision help workers practice with families?

As we have seen the links between supervision and direct practice do not have a robust empirical base. Common sense suggests that good supervision that fulfils the functions discussed in chapter two, will lead to effective expert workers delivering more effective practice and ultimately families will experience better outcomes. However, the international systematic reviews and meta–analyses of social work research previously discussed, all agree that there is little evidence supporting the impact of supervision on practice or outcomes for service users (Mor Barak et al, 2009; Carpenter et al, 2013; O' Donoghue and Tsui, 2015; Beddoe et al, 2016; Turney and Ruch, 2016).

Harvey and Henderson (2014) make a link between the supervision of workers and the experience that families then have with those workers, claiming the need for a *'strong and applicable theory base to underpin social work practice'* (pp. 344), which could be said to link to the educative function of supervision. They argue that a predominant requirement of supervision is to enable workers to have ideas about what might support families and share goals with families, but before this is possible, supervisors must ensure workers feel secure within their system resonating with ideas of relationship-based practice and shared endeavours. If supervisees feel safe and supported by their supervisor and the organisation, inevitably they will be happier, more stable and secure, leading to better outcomes for the organisation in terms of retention, staff sickness etc, which in turn will lead to successful outcomes with service users (Ruch, 2012; Ingram, 2013; Reimer, 2013; McFadden et al., 2015; Parr, 2016). Horwath takes this idea further, arguing

that social workers *'require quality supervision ... to secure effective practice'* (2016, pp. 1604)*,* and if their needs for robust support are not met *'this can have consequences for the way in which they establish relationships and engage with service users'* (pp. 1609). Turney argues that supervision has the *'potential to affect practice more directly'* (2001, pp. 201)*,* but this is not backed up by any reference or evidence and appears to be an assumption. This view of the impact of social work supervision is supported by Bogo and McKnight who suggest links between *'the supervisor, the social worker, and the client'* (2006, pp. 60)*,* echoes of our *'three-link chain'* (Shulman, 1982 in Harkness and Hensley, pp. 506) but again do not include evidence regarding this.

Therefore, whilst we know that supervision is linked with worker satisfaction, we also know that ensuing links between practice or outcomes for families are complex and not routinely researched in the UK and therefore what about worker satisfaction that might influence practice are assumed, rather than definitively proved (Wilkins, 2017b). In summary, the implication is that social workers not receiving supervision with either a supportive or educative function will be neglected, resulting in poor quality of work with families.

3.4 How does supervision help children and families?

Logically we feel that there must be links between supervision practice and practice with families, however empirical evidence for this is limited. As we have seen there is an acceptance in some research that when individual workers are satisfied and settled, then they will practice effectively. If a social worker is encouraged to think, in supervision, about how and why an individual may be behaving in a certain way they are more likely to explore this with the family. Here consideration is given to experimental and evaluative studies that consider how supervision methods influence the system and the individuals in the *'three-link chain'* (Shulman, 1982 in Harkness and Hensley, pp. 506)*.*

Social workers interact with children and their families in a range of ways, although usually through face-to-face encounters which are mandated by legislation and procedure in England and Wales (Children Act, 1989; London Safeguarding

Children Partnership, 2020; Social Services and Wellbeing Act Code of Practice: Part 4; Wales Safeguarding Procedures, undated). These are seen as a cornerstone of social work with the home visit being *'what children and families'* *social workers do more than any other single activity (except for recording)'* (Winter and Cree, 2016 pp. 1175)*,* yet is *'virtually ignored'* (Ferguson, 2009, pp. 471) and so we have little understanding of what happens on home visits, or what social workers do during a visit to help families. If we agree that *'supervision should be about helping staff develop their skills . . . so that they can pass this on in their own work with their clients'* (Hair, 2013, pp. 1573) it follows that we need to understand what skills are needed to offer effective help and how workers can or should interact with families to help them achieve good outcomes.

As chapter two began to consider, there are challenges to the idea that one person can meet all the functions of supervision, and new ideas and studies about how supervision can fulfil all three functions have begun to emerge. These recognise the skills and expertise of the entire workforce, strengthening practice and interventions offered to individuals and families (Coulshed and Mullender, 2006; Wonnacott, 2012; Howe and Grey, 2013; Benton et al., 2017; Rankine, 2019).

One of the first social work studies, originating in the USA, to consider the direct links between supervision and practice with service users, describes the:

> *'three-link chain ... [and] practice research depends on the correlation of supervisory actions with client outcomes thus connecting the first and third links of the chain' (Harkness and Hensley, 1991, pp. 506).*

This study built on the idea that the success of supervision should be judged on outcomes for service users, suggesting that this is who supervision should ultimately help (Harkness and Hensley, 1991). The American study took an experimental approach over 16 weeks to look at these links with six therapeutic social workers in mental health who volunteered to be participants in the study. Initially the group were offered two hours a week of mixed focus supervision and then for the last 16 weeks received client focussed supervision, including explorations of the clients' experience, replicating ideas of reflective supervision. Client outcomes were self-measured and based on depression and goal

attainment scales. This study found that the workers receiving client focussed supervision achieved better outcomes with happier clients.

However, there is more that needs to be done to understand this; the statements that clear links between supervision and outcomes were found are debatable. We do not know what may have caused the service users' improved health as Harkness and Hensley do not tell us how or if they controlled other variables so the mechanisms that led to improved mental health are not understood here. Furthermore, the experimental group of workers had more supervision than the workers in the control group and any findings need to be caveated as extra time may have been the significant factor here, not the model used. Two hours a week of supervision is not comparable with the traditional delivery of supervision in the UK, being significantly more time than is normally offered in social work, so it may be that the improved outcomes were linked to this because workers kept their clients in mind more effectively. Equally we do not know if the same finding would have been made if mixed supervision had continued to be offered.

Harkness updated and reframed his work in 1997, examining *'Interactional Social Work theory'* and found:

> *'Agency administration can improve client outcomes by shifting the focus of supervision from institutional maintenance to helping clients, and supervisors can empower the helping mission by using supervision to ask questions about client problems and staff practice in the context of consumer goal and outcomes.'*
> *(Harkness, 1997, pp. 48).*

While on the surface this looks like a helpful repetition and reinforcement of the empirical evidence that supervision does impact on social work practice and outcomes for clients, in fact what Harkness did was use the original data.   Spence (2001) comments that Harkness' findings were not generalisable as the numbers of participants were too few and Harkness and Hensley had not proved causal effect of improved wellbeing so *'one is left wondering what can be inferred'* (Freitas, 2002, pp. 361; Edwards Watkins, 2011). This study took place in America and was over 25 years ago, so whilst they said there were links between social work and outcomes, any relevance to children and families social work in the UK today suggested extremely cautiously.

While not clearly linking supervision to practice outcomes a survey of 597 workers and supervisors in America (Collins-Camargo and Garstka, 2014) looked at the use of evidence-informed practices (EIP) with children and families, and whether this changed with a focus in supervision. It recognises an assumption that EIP has positive impacts on outcomes for families in child welfare practice, although notes the lack of robust evidence in some of these practices. The evidence of a link between supervision and the implementation by workers of EIPs is helpful, although again conclusions must be made cautiously, as this study was based on self-reported survey data. However, the concept of connecting social work managers to practice and outcomes for children and families, could be said to be taking a systemic or ecological approach, and it may be reasonable to assume it is impossible for the three not to influence each other in some way.

An evaluation of social work methods, including supervision approaches, was conducted following the development of the Reclaiming Social Work (RSW) model (Forrester et al., 2013). This approach was developed in the London Borough of Hackney, as a direct response to recent child deaths within the area which led to a radical re-design of services. It moves away from traditional social work structures of team manager, senior practitioner/deputy team manager, and social worker; RSW developed a multi-agency team with qualified and unqualified workers as well as a clinical psychologist. Each small pod was led by a Consultant Social Worker, and individuals in each pod worked with all the families known to the 'pod', taking a systemic family therapy approach. This model used the group supervision approach which deviates from the traditional method of delivery in that the pod comes together to reflect on practice with children and families, not relying on one person to provide all functions of supervision. The evaluation of this model in three English local authorities looked at the way each organisation implemented the model and approached practice, including supervision. Two of those authorities retained a traditional method of supervision and one used the RSW approach. Researchers observed practice for 40 weeks, surveyed 67 families, and 425 social workers, and simulated 34 practice sessions.

When looking at the areas of the review focussed on supervision, and family outcomes, where fidelity to the model was high, it was found to be highly effective. Numbers of children who were looked after by the Local Authority reduced and

staff retention and satisfaction increased (Munro, 2011). This model is delivered by skilled, experienced professionals in pods, who maintain strict adherence to it.   In evaluating the RSW model, what is clear is that pods attract significant resources, echoing the extra time given to supervision in Harkness and Hensley's study. Without this level of resource, model fidelity is compromised and it is evident that fundamentally changing approaches to supervision and practice is challenging. The positive effects of RSW, characterised by increased time, resources and attention being given to practice via group supervision, have not been replicated successfully in other areas, and we can see a challenge in embedding alternative approaches to practice across a range of organisations (Jones, 2015). It can still be argued not enough is known about the various models of supervision in social work (Bogo and McKnight, 2006).

Similarly, Dugmore looked at the experience of an English local authority that reshaped its systems to develop;

- *'a shared language*

- *systemic principles*

- *a shift from 1:1 to group supervision*

- *shared ownership of cases*

- *increased morale*

- *mutual support' (Dugmore et al., 2018, pp. 403).*

Quite simply,

> *'Group supervision involves the use of a group setting to implement part or all of the responsibilities of supervision' (Brown and Bourne, 1996, cited in Morrison, 2005, pp. 246).*

This does not tell us what or how group supervision is best offered. Nonetheless, this local authority offered workers group reflective supervision, and found that where workers were involved in this type of supervision, they valued the support that it offered them, and changed what type of questions were asked about the families they were working with. However, workers found it difficult on occasion to make time for these sessions as it was *'not possible to replace all one-to-one supervision with reflective group supervision'* (pp. 411) as the administrative or

accountability function of supervision was not sufficiently addressed in group sessions. This strengthens the argument that there needs to be a balance between all three functions to enable supervision to be said to be effective, and highlights the challenges in providing effective supervision.   Dugmore et al. did not explicitly discuss the families' experience of workers, their evaluation ended with workers retrospective accounts of their practice and this was not triangulated with any other research methods, which, as we have seen previously, is a limitation when considering how supervision impacts and on whom.

Others have taken steps to address this gap, observed visits to families that had been discussed in group supervision, and interviewed the families to explore their perceptions of the service and the relationship they had with workers (Wilkins et al., 2018). This English study worked with a local authority who had reconfigured services to 12 hubs that followed a group supervision model, in a similar way to the RSW model (Forrester et al., 2013) and the Dugmore study above (Dugmore 2018). Three hubs took part in this study, 33 workers were involved in 22 group supervisions. 22 questionnaires were completed by social workers prior to home visits and 21 home visits observed with 19 families interviewed. This study is a substantial contribution to this area in that it seeks to triangulate observations with interviews and questionnaires with families and with workers. It took a quantitative approach with coding frameworks for supervision and for practice that were then statistically analysed.

> *'Where supervision was practice-focused, there was a positive association with more skilful social work practice, particularly the use of good authority (purposefulness, clarity about risk, and child focus)' (Wilkins et al., 2018, pp. 7).*

They also note that exploring links in this way is a complex task, but do find a *'golden thread'* (Wilkins et al., 2018 pp. 8) that suggests that supervision can influence practice with families, and outcomes for families.

Comparable results were found in a study that was carried out in five Local Authorities in England who were reshaping their services to mirror the RSW model discussed above. The authors had also recognised the challenges evident in identifying the impact of supervision on workers and in families, and also took an observational approach to supervision data by comparing it with the quality of

practice using a framework based on ideas of systemic or group supervision. They observed *'29 unit meetings and 67 observations of home visits'* (Bostock at al., 2019, pp. 105), 14 of these meetings discussed families directly linked to 18 home visits. They found *'that high quality supervision has a fairly large impact on practice' (pp. 7),* strengthening the suggestion that there is a consistency between supervision that focuses on practice, that is the *'what, why and how' (pp. 2)* leading to shared aims and improved engagement with families. As the authors themselves acknowledge *'a correlation does not demonstrate causation'* (pp. 7), and so other possible causes cannot be ruled out. In essence, they found that this method of systemic supervision made a difference in local authorities that were reviewing practice, and care needs to be taken in generalising conclusions as often supervision still follows a traditional format.

Mirroring the study described above (Harkness and Hensley, 1991) Wilkins and colleagues usefully continued their explorations of how supervision might influence or impact families by using a pilot experimental study that compared traditional supervision with outcome focussed supervision (Wilkins et al., 2020). This study took place in two safeguarding teams in a children's trust that had been created following poor inspections. Similar to Bostock et al.'s work discussed above, this trust was understandably paying attention to what their workers did, and how they did it, arguably being not an organisation that was operating business as usual. The two teams took two approaches to supervision, one a more traditional approach, and the other took an outcomes approach which prescribed questions that must be asked in formal supervision sessions. Supervisors in the outcomes focussed group were trained and offered monthly action learning sets throughout the process, in that more time was afforded this group, albeit in this study supervisors reported finding that time in their working day difficult. A mixed methods approach was taken to analysing recordings of supervision, questionnaires and interviews with supervisors, workers and parents. Baseline data found that supervision was largely focussed on the administrative function, neglecting the supportive function with workers feeling *'you can do one or the other, not both'* (pp. 15)*.* At the end of the study, there were not significant differences in how either group viewed the quality of their supervision arrangements, but found supervision had more outcome focussed questions in the

outcome focussed group. This finding highlights it is possible to change supervision practice by working with supervisors to reflect on their own practice. However, there was no particular difference between workers reported concerns for families either at the start or at the end for either group, so the impact on outcomes for families was negligible and one wonders whether it was worth the effort. However, more positively it did find a slight increase in levels of satisfaction from the parent to the worker, and that workers reported thinking more about what they were trying to achieve in the outcome focussed group. The authors themselves recognise there is more to be done in this area, but this pilot study is a helpful exploration that highlights how complex the interactions are in the *'three-link chain'* (Shulman, 1982 in Harkness and Hensley, pp. 506).

3.5 Conclusion

The chapters in this literature review have shown that social work as a profession invests significant effort and resources into supervision, perpetuating the idea that this enhances the expertise and work of practitioners, and helps the vulnerable in society. We talk about supervision, we think about supervision, we write about supervision and spend a significant part of our working lives practising supervision. We have seen that there is little empirical evidence supporting any impact on individuals and families, and separating correlation from causation is extremely challenging in these complex systems.   Inevitably one must question why social work values supervision so highly when the benefits of it on workers and ultimately families are not fully known or understood, with, at best, nebulous observable links between supervision and outcomes for children and families. This brings us back, full circle to an unresolved debate of what effective social work supervision is and how it can be offered.

We have seen the challenges in changing the method of delivery, and with this in mind, it is reasonable to consider why social work doggedly sticks to the traditional way of supervising workers, and one can only conclude that it must hold some purpose or use within the system they are in. However, as shown there is *'little evidence about what happens when managers and child and family social workers meet to discuss casework and less about how supervision influences practice.'* (Wilkins et al., 2017, pp 942). We see a mismatch between the rhetoric of quality

reflective supervision, traditional or otherwise, that influences workers and families positively, and a lack of robust evidence that indicates what, if any, positive impact supervision has on practice with children and families or their outcomes. That is not to say it does not, just that at this point we do not know what or how it helps.

In conclusion, these chapters have shown a need for research into what influence supervision has on children, families and individuals, particularly where social work organisations, governments, individuals and families are asking questions about what works within social work and how children can be kept safe and positive outcomes promoted. We assume that supervision has a positive impact on practice outcomes because workers say they value good supervision, but we are unable to explain how this effect influences practice or outcomes for families. As we have seen there are few studies that examine supervision directly, as opposed to retrospective accounts given by participants and there is little empirical evidence linking supervision to practice, although we have discussed key studies that have emerged in recent years, and there seems to be an increasing level of attention being paid to this area. This thesis will consider how the *'three-link chain'* (Shulman, 1982 in Harkness and Hensley, pp. 506) interacts individually and systemically, exploring what social work as a profession can learn about supervision in this context.

Chapter 4 – Methodology and methods

Having shown why this research is needed, this chapter moves on to discuss and reflect on the theoretical frameworks, methodologies and methods used when planning this project. The chapter begins with a description of the design and epistemological basis of the project. Links are drawn between the philosophies behind qualitative research to the values of social work, in that both are exploratory and aim to find out about the perspectives of participants/families. Considerations as to the position and influence the researcher has on the project are interwoven throughout, as are reflections on the concept of being both an insider and familiar with the subject matter and context of the research.   The design for the project is explored and presented, with the chapter concluding with an overview of what was done and why, and describes the twelve case studies that were completed.

When designing a study, one should begin with research questions (White 2009; Bryman, 2012; Shaw and Holland, 2014; Robson, 2016). In this study to explore any relationship that there may be between supervision and practice the main research question is:

> What is the relationship between supervision and practice with families?

Supplementary questions to help answer the main question are:

1. How do supervisors and social workers discuss direct practice in supervision sessions?
2. What do supervisors say about supervision and its relationship to practice?
3. What do social workers do when visiting families that they have discussed in supervision?
4. What do social workers say about the influence of supervision on direct practice?

In this study, practice is talked about and how it is carried out by social workers is of interest. However, as stated and emphasised by Pawson and Tilley we should *'never expect to know what works, just keep trying to find out'* (2001, pp. 323). As reflected in the last chapter, the primary new knowledge that this small scale study will bring is intended to contribute to the understanding of what influence

supervision has on social work practice with families. It also appears to be the first research directly observing either practice in Wales.

4.1 Multiple case study design

As seen in chapter three, there are a limited number of comparable studies that could be looked at to help consider what sort of design this study should have.

Unusually, Collins-Camargo and Millar, in 2010, took a mixed methods approach in this area, initially employing surveys to look at the impact of clinical supervision on patients receiving therapy, and used focus groups to further explore supervisors' experiences of offering clinical supervision. This study found that clinical supervision did impact on outcomes for patients. However, it is notable in this study that the qualitative element was based solely on the focus groups. It could be suggested then that this is a retrospective account of a supervisor's experience, and as such, was a presentation of what the respondents wanted the researchers to hear (Chew-Graham, 2002; Bryman, 2012; Robson 2016). Nonetheless, one can see that interviews can be used when looking at this subject matter.

As explored in the previous chapter, Wilkins and others (Wilkins et al, 2017; Wilkins et al, 2018; Wilkins et al, 2018 b; Bostock et al., 2019) also took a mixed method approach to looking for a relationship between supervision and practice. This reflects a growing interest in using observation as one of a range of methods, but it still used coding frameworks, and statistical analysis to explore data. In 2018 Wilkins et al., observed and audio recorded supervision sessions and home visits, then interviewed families, then coded and analysed all the data. This triangulation of data and reporting has a strength and reliability in using observations of actual supervision sessions and home visits in that findings are not reliant on self-reporting. The multiple case study approach was selected as it enabled the *'understanding [of] complex social phenomena'* (Ridder, 2012, pp. 93), and multiple methods of data collection could be used within each case study (Brandell and Varkas, 2010; Yin, 2018).

Criticisms of this approach have held that anecdotal, singular case studies are no more than storytelling, with *'a lack of rigor and an excess of bias' (Hough, 1996, pp. 47).* However, there has been much debate in social science and social work academia about what constitutes research and what counts as acceptable evidence (Flyvberg, 2001; Glasby and Beresford, 2006). This movement regards qualitative and experiential type evidence to be as important as more traditional quantitative approaches commonly held as the *'gold standard'* of research *(Cartwright, 2007, pp. 11).*

The multiple case study design here allowed exploration of the relationship between supervision and practice; the detailed information that is needed about the variables, and individual experiences being gathered within the case study approach (Thomas, 2011; Anastas, 2012; Gorard, 2013; Shaw and Holland, 2014; Nowell, et al. 2017; Yin, 2018). This study was designed to generate theory or ideas and, as such this design allowed examination of any possible commonalities or similarities within supervision, and home visits, but also allowed for there to be no such comparisons, enabling a range of possible conclusions or theories to be generated (Mason, 2002; Brandell and Varkas, 2010; Thomas, 2011).

The multiple case study design meant that commonalities and differences across the 12 could be explored, leading to robust, trustworthy findings (Flyvberg, 2001; Nowell et al., 2017; Yin, 2018), an opportunity not offered by a single case study approach. At the beginning of the data collection it was hoped that each of the 12 case studies would consist of the following stages linked to the questions above, and illustrated in figure 1. Each stage was designed to specifically answer one of the research questions, however, it was only possible to complete all four stages in seven case studies, the remaining five comprised stage one, two and four (see section 4.6).
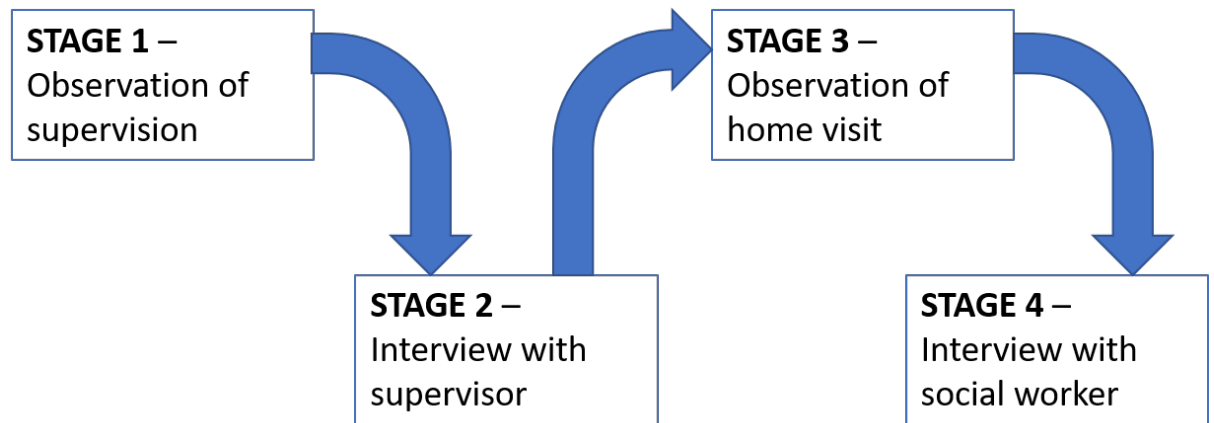
Figure 1 Methods of data collection for case studies

This method also contributes to finding out exactly what is said, and how, by social workers to families; an area neglected in much social work research (Forrester et al, 2008). In contributing to filling this gap and also addressing the lack of research into the relationship between social work supervision and practice, the multiple case study approach allowed adaptability as the study progressed to make the most of the data collated, as reflexivity took place as described above.

4.2 Methodology and methods - researcher values and beliefs

When considering which approach is the most helpful in any research proposition, one must include an

> *'explicit discussion of the theories that frame our work [which] shows participants, colleagues, and readers "how we know the world" and allows them to interact with us and evaluate our work.' (Gringeri et al., 2013, pp. 55).*

So, to ensure that research is reliable we need to explore our own assumptions about the world, knowledge, what is important and understand our blind spots. We need to be able to notice 'it' to discuss 'it'; ontology considers what is knowable, that is ideas about what exists, and epistemology is the way that we view knowledge and how knowledge around this subject is created (Bryman, 2012; James 2015). Case study design *'can embrace different epistemological orientations'* (Yin, 2018, pp. 16) but one must be aware of one's own positioning within that research. Research is always

> *'based in an epistemology, implicit or explicit, which is crucial to what will "count" as scientific or as knowledge' (Anastas, 2014, pp. 572).*

Without considering our unconscious and conscious acceptance of how we think about the world, human nature, knowledge and science, we run the risk of ignoring the influence of our beliefs and values on our research and failing to be transparent in our approaches.

If knowledge is a truth resulting from observable facts and information (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995), following inductive principles, the researcher must believe that there are phenomena to be observed, and theory or ideas can be generated from this (Robson, 2016). The nature of the phenomena that is being observed can be understood differently, with these considerations similar to the practice of social work:

> *'debates surrounding values and philosophical positions in social work are often conducted in similar ways to debates about paradigms and pragmatism in research. This should not be surprising. At their philosophical and moral roots they are more or less the same problems.' (Shaw and Holland, 2014, pp. 12).*

A social worker actively considers what constitutes human nature, is influenced by their individual beliefs and values, which underpin their work with families. The explicit understanding of what shapes their practice and how they interact and make decisions is crucial to ensure they are offering the best help to the people they support.

> *'It may be that those attracted to social work in the first instance have what might be termed a more qualitative orientation. An emphasis on holism, on the capacity for empathy and divining meaning, lies at the heart of much of the service user–social worker interaction, requiring the kind of flexibility and depth of understanding often seen as characteristic of qualitative research.' (Mills and Birks, 2014 IN Sheppard, 2017, pp. 3).*

Social workers will never be value free but can take steps (including the use of supervision) to reflect on and mitigate the effects of their personal values and beliefs on their practice. This is also true of a researcher who needs to consider the debate about what knowledge is and the epistemological basis for their project.

Carter and Little argue that a dogged focus or *'methodological fundamentalism'* *(2007, pp. 1319)* is unhelpful, and in many ways the idea of 'getting on with it' acknowledges that *'no research process can be perfect … and the findings from research can be true only till further notice' (Kazi, 2000, pp 757).* We must accept some degree of uncertainty and avoid paralysis in theoretical debates; we will never truly know what knowledge is nor how the social world can be observed. Sooner or later, this debate must become freeing as without being able to move on, we may become *'paralysed'* (Shaw et al, 2014, pp. 13) and unable to accept any degree of uncertainty about the nature or knowledge and how it is sought.

Despite the philosophical tangle that social work and research can be rooted in, what these debates and considerations have led to here is a thesis that has followed a qualitative interpretivist methodology. The *'subjective meaning of social interaction'* (Bryman, 2012, pp. 712) led to observations of the interactions of participants and interviews in which they explained how they understood their actions. The characteristics of an interpretivist methodology are:

> *'A clear research question… effective use of theory and prior research … Specification of the relationship between the researcher and the researched … ethical standards in research …Documentation of the methods … Trustworthiness of data … Effective communication of the findings' (Anastas, 2004, pp. 59 – 63).*

The depth of analysis and the study of meaning that this type of research allows is consistent with this methodological context within practitioner research, as well as being consistent with the researcher's social work stance of understanding the individual experience (Sherman and Reid, 1994; Hardwick and Worsley, 2011; Shaw and Holland, 2014).

In line with an interpretivist approach, there were several steps, at various stages of the research to increase trustworthiness throughout the case studies (Lincoln and Guba In Nowell et al., 2017);

- Credibility
- Transferability
- Dependability
- Confirmability.

In order to build credibility one seeks to use a range of sources for data collection, as well as using recognised methods. Transferability was achieved as the depth of each case study allowed rich descriptions and as such, findings were able to be generalised, with consistency in the themes developed in each. Dependability by including a clear rationale and description of data collection and analysis meant that a different researcher would likely make similar findings and conclusions when faced with the same data. Confirmability comes from an explicit description of one's own stance and positioning within the project. At its most basic, trustworthiness was achieved by 12 case studies being completed, including 19 participants across two research sites, with at least three sources of data in each case study (Pawson and Tilley, 2001; Travers, 2001; Shenton, 2004; Anastas, 2012; Robson, 2016; Yin, 2018) It is apparent that a richness and variety of data and research methods are crucial when using case studies to investigate humans and their functioning. We cannot adequately explore any intervention using just one method although each has their advantages. Overall, the case study design of this study enabled data to be collected and then findings made in a flexible, yet rigorous way, enabling the exploration of the relationship between supervision and practice.

As discussed when reviewing the literature, there remains limited data pertaining to the *'three-link chain'* (Shulman, 1982 in Harkness and Hensley, pp. 506) of family, worker and supervisor. Consequently, the qualitative, interpretivist approach underpinning this project enabled exploration of the relationship between supervision and practice and collected data to see if theories or ideas could be generated from the data; this follows inductive principles and is common in social work practitioner research, however, is rare in Wales when looking at this specific topic.

4.3 Researcher or Social Worker? Familiarity and insider status

As an experienced qualified social worker with considerable skills and knowledge, the researcher had *'insider understanding'* (Pawson et al., 2005, pp. 32) that led to *'the acquisition of rich and detailed knowledge'* (Wendt, 2020, pp. 242). This

inherent understanding of statutory children and families social work in terms of what, how and why things are done, when combined with the efforts described below to maintain researcher status meant that analysis of the data enabled deeper insight only available to one with expert knowledge.

Additionally, the researcher's status as a qualified social worker, who had connections to both research sites, one more so than the other, meant that during the process of data collection in this study, there were a number of occasions when as a familiar figure to some participants, the researcher was allowed to be present in ways that a stranger would not be. Locked doors to offices were opened and access given when waiting for supervision or interviews to begin, or where sessions were cancelled, the researcher was allowed to wait for further sessions, to freely walk around the offices and talk to workers generally or to re-arrange sessions.

This insider status enabled an extra element of observation, and the unusually high level of access privileged to the researcher provided a unique insight of the context of social work practice today. For example, on one occasion an observation was postponed due to an emerging family crisis that needed attention. Whilst there, the researcher's presence was not seen as unusual and some forthright discussions between two senior members of staff were witnessed when they were talking about the family where the crisis had emerged. Although not specifically referenced to answering the research questions, the observations made from this level of access provided a valuable context to this study and are inextricably linked to the findings.

As discussed above, *'the researcher generates and constructs knowledge'* (D'Cruz, 2004, pp. 15)*;* their own influence on the research must be thoroughly understood and explored in order to minimise the risks of assumption and information being missed within the data collection and analysis. There is a need for case study research to minimise any potential methodology challenge by being trustworthy and can be achieved by the researcher explicitly developing clear procedures to collect and analyse data, and linking to issues of being an insider or familiar researcher. To truly notice as much as is possible in a familiar

environment, one must take steps to ensure that everything there is to be noticed and observed, is noticed and observed. Without consideration we run the risk of

> *'fail[ing] to notice what we fail to notice. And because we fail to notice that we fail to notice, there is little we can do to change; until we notice how failing to notice shapes our thoughts and deeds' (Laing IN Witkin, 2000, pp 101).*

The need to address the familiarity problem is well accepted (Delamont and Atkinson, 1995; Labaree, 2002; Delamont et al., 2010; Leigh, 2014; Morriss, 2015; Rossing and Scott, 2016); this means that instead of accepting norms within social work, the researcher needs to think about and consider ways to recognise what is every day, thereby ensuring that they are able to see the unseen. Coffey argues that we need to *'cultivate strangeness and distance'* (1999, pp. 22*)* and Mannay (2010) suggests methods to make the familiar *'strange'* (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995) as in actuality it is unrealistic to pretend that a practitioner researcher is not familiar with the environment or context and as such, we do not need to deny this, but rather explicitly employ techniques to address this. As the research progressed methods were reflexively altered in order to ensure that the best use of research opportunities was made. For example, as interviews took place, more was learnt about what questions to ask and how to ask them, as a result the interview schedule was tweaked to get the full potential for data collection from the interviews. Similarly, during observations, I slightly altered the approach, where initially I attempted to remain neutral and silent, for some participants this didn't work, so my stance slightly changed to suit the observation.

As a practitioner and a researcher being an insider and familiar with social work and supervision was a very real threat to the transparency of this project and needed constant reflexivity throughout, consequently field notes were made every time an office was visited, and an observation or interview took place. For example, the researcher has completed hundreds of home visits in her career and so field notes helped to ensure that the familiar was noticed (sights, sounds, smells, feelings). This meant care was taken to notice as much as possible was observed during data collection, a challenge on occasion as this was very familiar territory. The need to explicitly address familiarity and employ techniques to address this will be discussed further as each data collection method is discussed.

4.4 Methods of data collection

4.4.1 Observations

Observations of practice are a relatively unusual method of data collection in social work (Forrester, 2008; Ferguson, 2009; Ruch, 2015; Wilkins 2017), however, they are a well-known feature of ethnographic research, a method that immerses itself in the environment being researched, often for very protracted periods of time (Bell, 1999). Whilst this study is not an ethnography, some elements of data collection and analysis are ethnographic in nature, in this case, primarily the combination of observations and interviews reflecting on the observations.

As well as links with ethnographic research, it can also be said that observation is an essential part of the social work task. Observations are more than just watching, observers notice smells, sounds, feelings etc and they are constant; on the way up the path and outside the house, observations are made as to the repair of the property and what is going on in the street (Bryman, 2012; Ferguson, 2018). This vigilance continues within the home and the social worker pays attention to children and family's presentation and interactions, the children's development, and also has an awareness of their own safety within that home. Where social workers are not sufficiently considering what they have observed and noticed, or indeed not noticed, mistakes can be made, and children have come to serious harm or death in the past. This has been seen in recent years with the tragic deaths of Victoria Climbie, and Peter Connelly where social workers have failed to notice abuse (Laming, 2003; Jones, 2010).

In research, Hardwick and Worsley suggest

> *'Observation is simply a process of watching (or sometimes engaging) with a research arena in a structured way [and gives the] opportunity to see what people actually do, rather than say they do'. (2011, pp. 100).*

They go on to argue that observation works well when combined with other methods of data collection, which enables contrasts and comparisons to be made across the data sources. Different methods of data collection reflect ideas of

trustworthiness discussed above, alongside the need to collate data in different ways. Furthermore, field notes were used as well as transcripts of observations to help to address familiarity and notice everything that there was to notice (Robson, 2016).

Siddle and Wilson found behaviour in supervision to be *'inaccessible to many research procedures'* (1984, pp. 6)*,* and used observations to examine interactions in supervision. This view was also held by White (1999) who suggest that this way of collecting data brings a different understanding to the task of social work, and observation of teams and workers gives an individual understanding not afforded to other methods of data collection. Observation of direct work with families allows us to develop our understanding of social work practice and *'enables some things to be seen and experienced that would otherwise be missed' (Ferguson, 2016 a, pp. 156).* The observation stages of this research design give access to what would otherwise not be seen, and it is somewhat puzzling that this method is not used more extensively within social work research.

Observations of social work sessions are common when students are being taught how to interact with families, but much rarer once a worker qualifies. Recent developments in terms of students qualifying and their now mandatory assessed year in practice (Social Care Wales, 2018) have extended the use of observation as a teaching tool beyond graduation. However, the use of observation of social workers (as opposed to families) within the routine daily functioning of social work is unusual (Ruch, 2015), which may contribute to the relatively rare use of the method in social work research. In a self-reflective piece, Wilkins and Antonopoulou (2017) describe the difficulties they faced when conducting observations of social workers.   They had aimed to complete 288 observations, but only managed to complete eight.

> *'Observing social workers in practice means negotiating a complex set of ethical and practical demands [and there are] concerns about the family, concerns about being observed and concerns about the observer'. (pp. 839).*

The difficulties and ultimate failure to secure observations of social workers gives some indication as to why observations of practice in social work research may be rare. Social workers' reluctance to be observed, as well as requesting families

consent to observation may be factors, as there could be concerns around the use of power and coercion to agree. Wilkins and Antonopoulou considered that social workers were reluctant to ask families resulting from concerns that this may be a misuse of power, they did not want families to feel compelled to participate. It should be noted that these social workers were participating in a coaching and mentoring project to embed systemic social work, so it is likely that social workers were concerned about their own practice being judged. The candid reflections that the authors make on this project are helpful and their warnings were heeded when considering ways to progress with this project. However, there are other social work researchers who have completed observations, and so their use of this as a method of data collection does indicate that observations of social work practice are possible (Forrester et al., 2008; Forrester et al., 2013; Ferguson, 2016 a; Wilkins et al., 2017; Bostock et al., 2017; Wilkins, 2018).

4.4.1.i How observations were used in this study

Ethical approval for this project was granted with the condition that there was a recognition that any activity that puts another in danger would be dealt with appropriately and in line with the requirements of both Cardiff University's Ethics Committee and Social Care Wales, the social work regulator in Wales. This meant that when observing social work practice consideration was needed in case of observation of dangerous or poor practice. In the application for ethical approval for this project, a difference was drawn between poor practice and dangerous practice. National procedures state;

> 'It is important to differentiate between cases involving issues
> such as poor professional practice and cases that give rise to child
> protection concerns (including cases involving abuse of trust)'.
> (Welsh Assembly Government, 2006, pp. 271).

The distinction between dangerous or risky and poor practice is important. Within professional codes of practice there are clear duties on social workers not to cause harm (Social Care Wales, 2017), however, the debate is what is harmful practice in comparison to poor practice. Poor practice is a subjective observation; what one social worker thinks an effective method, another may not, and styles of interaction may vary considerably. A researcher is in no position to judge, and in these case studies ethically it was clear that judgements of the standard of

practice were not being made. The exception being that the observation of dangerous or harmful practice as defined by the Children Act 1989, would lead to the researcher taking steps to safeguard individuals experiencing harm in this manner. The difference between social work and research observations needed consideration in this project to ensure that boundaries and professional lines were not crossed. As an experienced social worker and supervisor, the researcher has carried out numerous observations in her career. However, not one of these was in the role of researcher, and one must be mindful of the potential pitfalls when feeling familiar with the social work environment.

Being an insider in social work has its advantages and disadvantages. It is an inevitability that researchers will conduct observations and be unable to leave their own values and experiences at the door (Labaree, 2002; Helm, 2013; Berger, 2015; Morriss, 2015; Rossing and Scott, 2016). In this project the researcher is both an insider and is familiar with the context, so steps must be taken to see the unseen and to challenge oneself within a comfortable setting (Leigh, 2014). In this study, in order to take steps to notice all there is to be observed, field notes (Bryman and Becker, 2012) were used to note the non-verbal aspects of observations, as well as transcripts of what was said, creating themes which were reflected in interviews. For further rigour and to allow reflexivity, the observations were audio recorded and transcribed, ensuring that where something was not noted in the observation, data could still be collected afterwards. Observation, and not just audio recording enabled the researcher to observe unspoken behaviours and other things that were taking place at the time of the observations ensuring that all was noticed. Once the familiar has been seen, hypotheses and data can be explored, ensuring that everything there is to be noticed is noticed and examined (Delamont et al, 2010). It can be suggested that despite a researcher's best effort it is impossible for them to fully leave their identity behind in order to be *'objective'* in research (Lofland et al, 2006). Reflexivity is key within this; the constant challenging of oneself *'in order to gain insight and understanding of the cultural setting'* (Coffey, 1999, pp. 22).

By the nature of observations, one can never be sure how the presence of an observer impacts on the activity being observed. This is particularly relevant where the researcher had a prior relationship with participants and so was an

insider.   The observations in this study are of two different types of social work activity; however, in both, the researcher had an awareness of the impact of her presence (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). It was interesting that a social worker who was not a participant said that observations would be '*fake'* because supervisors would change their behaviour. Subsequently and attesting to the reflexive nature of this project, at the end of observations and in interviews, all participants were asked how being observed had impacted their sessions.   In general *'it was not as different as I thought it was going to be' (Paula, Supervision Observation 3),* although one person felt it did impact *'because you know somebody's there, you know you're being recorded, I suppose it does have an impact in terms of the honesty of how emotional you would be you know if I'm completely honest I suppose it does have an impact (Aleesha, Supervision Observation 9)'.* Three participants said small talk or gossip had been restricted, and that swearing was reduced. Again, this reflects in some form the comments that people will change their behaviour when observed, but in essence the content and process of supervision had not been changed by my presence. However, the overwhelming feedback from 10 observations was after an initial period of awareness, people quickly forgot they were being observed, and acted entirely normally.

Ferguson reflects on observing a social worker on a family visit and sitting *'on the floor literally shrinking myself to try and be as non-intrusive as possible'* (2016, pp. 163) and this resonates with the feeling of invading another's territory. Whilst observation in the task of social work is common, observations of others doing social work, supervision or home visits, is not, so the idea to be as invisible as possible seems like a good one. However, *'an essentially non-interacting observer may be of more continuing interest and disturbance than one who gives a friendly smile or nod from time to time'* (Robson, pp. 334). This is particularly relevant where curious children may be involved in a visit, or parents are worried and tense, so the researcher tried to present a reassuring amicability rather than a stony faced detachment, not as someone who was interesting in any way, so the supervision or visit could proceed as normally as possible.

In using principles of reflexivity in social work research, and observations particularly, where issues of familiarity are rife, active conscious steps need to be taken to challenge what one is seeing.   Delamont and Atkinson (1995) argue that

familiarity is likely to mean that observable data is missed; and Delamont et al. (2010) go further and suggest specific strategies to combat this, including using contrasting environments or disciplines, unusual methods of data collection, and re-visiting past works in the area. Reflexivity needs to be become a *'state of being'* (Bolton, 2014), and when combined with specific actions that can be taken to challenge familiarity then research is more likely to be comprehensive.   When an insider researcher uses reflexive principles to conduct observations, whether they have left their self behind is irrelevant. It is possible to produce comprehensive research, whilst being an insider without compromise, and in fact may lead to more in depth research findings as the researcher is intimate with the subject matter (Mannay, 2010; Taylor, 2011).

4.4.2 Interviews

Interviewing in social work research is a common technique employed by practitioner researchers because it is suggested that:

> *'There is no task more fundamental to social work than asking questions, no more universal process for social workers than interviewing.' (Hardwick and Worsley, 2011, pp. 68)*

The familiarity of interviewing and making sense of responses is a comfortable method for social workers. Social workers are well versed in creating rapport, forming empathetic relationships, and have an inherent curiosity about people's functioning all of which enable them to ask questions to shape interventions. Most social workers would consider these key qualities, although it cannot be assumed that the skills needed for a social worker interviewing a family are the same as that of a researcher (Shaw and Holland, 2014). Shaw and Holland suggest that the purposes of interviewing are different and the researcher needs to take care to distinguish between the various types of interviewing, and consider issues of power.

If, for a moment, we consider how a family may experience power in social work; a worker comes to your home, interviews you, your children and maybe other family members, with or without your agreement and knowledge, with a view to helping your family. This type of interview, familiar to social workers, is vastly different to

the type of interview one is trying to create in research where the interviewer is arguably taking a neutral stance where in essence, the participant is helping the researcher. The balance of power here is different, and if the researcher is working with social workers and children and families, distinctions need to be clear to ensure that participants are not coerced or pressured into participation (Shaw and Holland, 2014). Equally, the practitioner researcher needs to be mindful of not crossing lines, and beginning to practise, particularly if it is a field in which they are expert and know well (Chew-Graham et al., 2002).

When considering the use of interviews as a method of data collection, as with all research one needs to consider how one hears and interprets information (Robson, 2016). It has been argued that all research should be neutral and value free or *'scientific'* (Kuhn, 2012), however, it is also argued that we can never achieve total neutrality in interviewing, nor should we try. Similarly to observing, as long as we are clear what our position is in relation to the research (Coffey, 1999) there can be advantages, as well as disadvantages to taking a non-neutral stance.

> *'Respondents who feel they are being judged will be likely to be cautious in the conversation they have with any interviewer, but particularly a fellow professional' (Chew-Graham et al., 2002, pp. 288).*

Whilst this potentially negative consequence to being a practitioner researcher needs to be held in mind, overall, *'interviews [can be] broader in scope and provided richer more personal accounts of attitude and behaviour'* (Chew-Graham et. al, pp. 285).

Robson argues:

> *'Interview results can only be understood as products of the contingencies of the interview situation and not, as is usually assumed, the unmediated expressions of respondents' real opinions' (2016, pp. 285).*

Again, this leads us back to the idea that no one is truly neutral and when interviewing we need to be clear about this. We can mitigate the impact we have on the interview, by adopting several techniques; for example, using interview schedules, asking easily understandable questions, checking our understanding of the observations we have made, and the answers that have been given

throughout (Hardwick and Worsley, 2011; Bryman, 2012; Shaw and Holland, 2014).

Interviewing supervisors was a method employed by Beddoe (2010), a well-known social work researcher, in her exploration of whether risk management in social work has impacted on reflective supervision as a technique. It is inconceivable that she would be able to maintain a neutral stance as practitioners would have heard of her. She suggests:

> *'The author's extensive involvement in supervision teaching and research signals many shared understandings with the participants. The interviews were, however, designed to illuminate the issues and seek the participants' ideas about how they practised supervision in the current climate.' (Beddoe, 2010, pp. 1284).*

In summary then, whilst interviewing has been seen to be best carried out from a neutral, uninformed standpoint, this would often not seem to be realistic when translating to the reality of research interviews in practice.

4.4.2.i How interviews were used in this study

As in all methods of data collection, before selecting interviews as a method, consideration needs to be given as to which of the research questions any selected method will answer (White, 2009). Here research questions two and four (what do supervisors/workers say about supervision and its relationship to practice?) lend themselves to interviewing as a method because this project is *'looking for process, steps over time, sequences of causation'* (Rubin and Rubin, 2012, pp. 50)*.* This project looked at what might impact a social worker's practice and whether supervision affects this in any way, therefore interviewing to find out what a participant thinks shapes practice is an appropriate method to select. Interviewing as a way to collect data within a qualitative case study design is well evidenced (Travers, 2001; Shelton, 2004; Anastas, 2012; Yin, 2014; Nowell et al., 2017), with

> *'qualitative interviewing* [having] *much greater interest in the interviewee's point of view; in quantitative research the interview reflects the researcher's concerns'. (Bryman, 2012, pp. 470).*

Evidently then, semi-structured interviewing was likely to produce a richness of data allowing full exploration of participants experiences of *'facts … behaviour … beliefs [and] attitudes* (Robson, 2016, pp. 286). Interviews within the case study design enabled triangulation and comparison between the different data collection methods, and created a robust, trustworthy study.

Shaw and Holland (2014) discuss various methods of conducting interviews, and the idea of conducting interviews with two participants who are known to each other. In the analysis of a complex health intervention in Wales, group interviews were used to provide part of the evaluation of a complex intervention (Moore et al., 2013), as supervision in social work with children and families is argued to be. Group interviewing was used in a study in Sweden that looked at relationships between significant professionals (sometimes social workers) and how parents described being helped by these professionals (Neander and Skott, 2008).

> *'Parents acted as both informants and co-researchers. The approach used in these interviews can be described as an 'investigative partnership' (Wennberg and Hane, 2000 IN Neander and Skott, 2008 pp. 293).*

This method is transferable to that of supervisors and social workers in this study, and would likely have led to some intriguing and fascinating interactions.   Equally attractive is the re-balancing of power in these relationships and Neander and Skott's partnership approach to parents, therapists and themselves as researchers. However, they also found that *'in the interviews, the voices of the parents take priority over those of the therapists.'* (pp. 303), reflecting the therapeutic process itself. Equally in this study, power in the supervisory relationship was considered and if interviewing both supervisor and social worker together, there would likely have been a mirroring of power differential in their relationship, which was evident in observations. The research questions to be explored in interviews were not as likely to be well answered by joint interviewing so this method was ruled out.

Semi-structured one-to-one interviews with supervisors, post-supervision, and social workers, post-visit, were conducted. This method, as said, was selected as the most appropriate to answer the research questions (Lofland et al., 2006), and the case study design of this project supported the need for some structure in all

interviews (Bryman, 2012; Yin, 2014). As such interview guides (with similar themes for supervisors and social workers) were drawn up, including warm-up questions, main questions, prompts, probes and cool down questions (Hardwick and Worsley, 2011; Bryman, 2012, Rubin and Rubin, 2012); the guides were a flexible way of approaching each interview, and participants were encouraged to elaborate on their responses. Supervisors and social workers were both asked some introductory questions that were largely demographic i.e. how long they had been qualified for. Then supervisors were asked a range of themed questions pertaining to the following areas (see Appendix two for interview schedules)

- What influences your supervision?
- What influenced this specific session?
- What does practice look like?

Social workers were invited to consider questions linked to

- What is your experience of being supervised?
- What influences your practice?
- What is your perception of what happened on the visit?
  If there was no visit
- Can you describe your practice with families?

Both groups were then asked to reflect on their perception of the relationship between supervision and practice.

In this process, the researcher was mindful of Shaw and Holland's warning:

> *'the apparent assumption among social worker researchers and practitioners that they know how to interview and therefore can easily conduct research interviews' (2014, pp. 122).*

To mitigate the possibility that the researcher might make assumptions about their ability to interview, pilot interviews were carried out with a social worker and supervisor and changes made to the interview guide e.g. including asking about the impact of the researcher's presence, to maximise the opportunity for rich data to be gathered. Once participants had agreed to take part, interviews were booked and carried out, and were held as promptly as possible after the observation.

4.5 Sampling

4.5.1 Local Authority selection

In order to recruit participants for this study, the researcher used professional networks to try to gauge interest and willingness for local authorities in both England and Wales to participate. A number of friends and ex-colleagues volunteered to introduce the research to Children's Services that they either worked in or had links to, and several of these expressed further interest in the project. This was assisted by a general interest in how social workers were supported to perform in a highly challenging child protection environment. The researcher then followed up those links and had more formal conversations with decision makers in those authorities. This resulted in three possible research sites; two in Wales and one in England. The decision to include a number of research sites was to address the familiarity problem; one of the sites was very familiar to the researcher and as such others needed to be included specifically to fulfil the requirement to select an unusual site to help make the familiar strange (Delamont and Atkinson, 1995; Delamont et al., 2010; Mannay 2010). In selecting the research sites, travel to England for data collection was not possible, so the two Welsh research sites were selected.   When discussing the topic of this research with possible participants, all felt there should be a link, and each authority informally agreed to allow access to supervisors, social workers and families, pending formal approval from Cardiff University School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. Consequently Irontown and Bridgepark were selected, and the recruitment of direct participants began. Throughout this study to preserve anonymity, pseudonyms are used for both local authorities and all participants.

4.5.2 Social Workers and supervisors' participation

Once ethical approval had been granted, each Local Authority was re-approached and a formal request was made for access to supervisors, social workers and

families within their services. Senior managers in both authorities agreed for the researcher to directly contact managers, and formally ask for their consent to participate. This overture was initially completed via an email explaining what the project was, including information sheets and consent forms (see Appendices 3, 4 and 5 for information sheets). There were then further conversations with eight team managers ultimately agreeing that they would be willing to participate and that the researcher could approach social workers and other supervisors at their own team meetings to ask for consent. At these meetings it was explicit that individual workers did not have to agree just because their supervisor had. This approach was vindicated and shown to be effective as there were three supervisors that had initially agreed, but ultimately did not participate as none of their workers volunteered.

In recruiting workers to participate, a similar process was followed of explaining what the research was about, with the hope that some of them would agree to participate. This included sharing information sheets again, and those who agreed were asked to consider which of the families they were currently working with would be appropriate to observe, and then ask the families if they were willing to participate, again sharing information sheets. As a result of attending team meetings in both Local Authorities, 12 workers in seven teams agreed to participate.

4.5.3 Family participation

Great care was needed when thinking about asking families to allow home visits to be observed. There was a risk that families might feel that they had to agree to please their children's social worker, a concern shared by other researchers in this area (Wilkins et al., 2020), and it was imperative that any consent was freely given without families feeling pressured to take part. Cardiff University's Ethics Committee asked for further information about how this would be achieved before granting permission for this project to go ahead, indicating the significance of this risk.

Consequently, to be sure that consent was freely given, only families who did not have any form of learning disability or capacity issues were approached. This was

because capacity and understanding can fluctuate, depending on context, environment and other factors, and if a parent was considered to be facing difficulties of this nature it would be difficult to be completely satisfied that they had not been coerced to participate. Additionally, families were not considered if they needed an interpreter for practical reasons. Simply that having three people visit a family home seemed excessive and, equally, it would have been difficult to transcribe and analyse social work interactions which were being translated.

At all stages it was expressly and repeatedly highlighted verbally and in writing that families did not have to agree to participate and could withdraw at any time. To the researcher's knowledge no family that was asked refused although as social workers and supervisors decided who would be asked, any inference about this should be cautiously made.

Where families were willing to participate, observation of a supervision session and the interview with the supervisor was arranged. Arrangements were made for the observation of the home visit and the interview with the social worker as soon as was practical after the supervision session. Thus participants for each case study were selected.   This approach built until there were seven case studies involving a family, social worker and supervisor, and five where visits had either not been able to be arranged in the first place, or had been cancelled and it was no longer appropriate, or workers were unable to re-book these. Consent forms (see appendix six) were signed at the time of the observations, and the researchers always reminded participants of their right to withdraw at any stage, without any inferences being made by anybody in the system, families, social workers or supervisors. At this time, all participants were given a printed copy of the consent form they had signed as well as information sheets.

In seeking participants the researcher used *'convenience sampling'* (Bryman, 2012, pp. 201) in that the population of supervisors, workers and families was accessible.   This was done in this way merely for ease of access and was not in any way purposive.   Ideally random sampling of families with children who were on the Child Protection Register would have been used for selection, so social workers and managers were not so in control of who was observed. However, this was not possible or realistic in this project. The issue with convenience sampling

here was that there was every possibility that prior relationships, either with the researcher or with social workers would unduly influence participants. It is possible that families were asked when workers felt them more likely to agree, and those with more challenging relationships were not approached.   Therefore supervisors, workers or families without strong relationships with each other may not have been included, while the research could be argued to be skewed from the outset, nonetheless the sample still shed light on the relationship between supervision and practice. Equally, this research was never aiming to make value judgements about practice, but merely to explore the relationships with supervision and practice so in many ways the quality of relationship between the workers and families is although interesting, irrelevant to the research questions. Therefore, no matter what the relationship between the researcher, supervisor, worker and family, these links can still be explored and the data collected remains credible.

4.6 The case studies

All of the case studies involved workers and families who were known to statutory children's services, and as 72% of social workers in Wales are employed by Local Authorities (Social Care Wales, 2019), it is worth considering the types of Local Authorities and environments in which social workers are performing their duties and what potential impact this may have on their practice. In all the case studies the teams that people were based in consisted of a team manager, a deputy or senior worker, and then approximately six to eight qualified and unqualified workers. Table 1 provides a summary, and appendix 7 contains full details of participants in the case studies.

Case study	Supervisor	Social worker	Home visit
Irontown City Council			
CS1 Family Support Team SO1	Mark SI1	Sam SWI1	HV1 - family with mother seen alone
CS2 Family Support Team SO2	Mark SI2	Chris SWI2	No – unable to be arranged
CS3 Family Support Team SO3	Sally SI3	Paula SWI3	HV3 – family with mother and son (briefly involved in visit)
CS4 Family Support Team SO4	Sally SI4	Emma SWI4	HV4 – family with 2 children, mother pregnant and father of the unborn baby
CS5 Family Support Team SO5	Oscar SI5	Rebecca SWI5	No – level of risk changed and was deemed too high.
CS6 Family Support Team SO6	Oscar SI6	Melody SWI6	HV6 – family with 4 children and mother
CS7 Family Support Team SO7	Jane SI7	Rachel SWI7	HV8 – grandfather with young baby
CS8 Family Support Team SO8	Jane SI8	Jo SWI8	HV8 – family with 3 children, mother and aunt
CS9 Children Looked After Team SO9	Rita SI9	Aleesha SWI9	No – not right time for young person
CS10 Children with Disabilities Team SO10	Graham SI10	Carole SWI10	HV10 – mother with teenage son
Bridgepark County Council			
CS11 Children with Disabilities Team SO11	Glenna SI11	Maria SWI11	No – unable to be arranged
CS12 Children with Disabilities Team SO12	Glenna SI12	Michael SWI12	No – unable to be arranged

Table 1 - Table of case study participants and method identifiers

4.6.1 Irontown City Council – children's services

Irontown is largely an industrial urban area in Wales with a large population, where the majority of its residents report as white British, but also with an increasing proportion of residents of a range of nationalities, religions and ethnicities. There are a number of large social housing estates, employment is below the national average, and workless households are above the national average, leading to some extremely deprived areas in Irontown.

Data collection took place before the COVID 19 pandemic where workers were largely and routinely office based.

Irontown had recently moved some workers to a large, shared office space which reflects a shift in the office environment of social work services conforming with a neo-liberalist agenda focussing on the need for efficiency in the public sector and applying business principles to social work. Empty desks when social workers are out at visits or meetings may not be seen as an efficient use of space and shifts have been made to streamline office environments in the public sector (Jeyasingham, 2016). This move to use office space efficiently offering value for money has been linked to the austerity agenda, and the emergence of new technologies supporting mobile working has been seen to reduce the need for physical office space across the public sector (National Audit Office, 2006). This is mentioned as for some supervisors and workers this had impacted on their daily experience of office based work.

Case study 1 – Family Support Team - Mark and Sam

Mark had been a social worker for over 10 years and had supervised in several different authorities. The Senior Social Worker in Mark's team, Sam, qualified some years ago and had always worked in this authority. In Irontown senior social workers worked with the most complex families, and provided informal mentoring to other members of staff, deputising when the manager was unavailable. Mark had supervised Sam monthly for several years.

Sam's home visit was to a family that had been through court proceedings where the father had been found, in court, to have hurt the baby, but an agreement had been made for the father to gradually return home to live under a supervision order, which places a duty on the Local Authority to 'assist, advise and befriend' a child. (Section 35, Children Act 1989).

Case study 2 - Family Support Team – Mark and Chris

Mark had supervised Chris for longer than he had Sam, and Chris had one supervisor before Mark. Chris has been working in the Family Support Team for less than five years. The expectation of workers in the Family Support Team (FST) was that they worked directly with children and their families, who were open to statutory children's services and oversaw their care and support plans to ensure that children's emotional wellbeing and safeguarding needs were met. Chris was unable to arrange a home visit observation.

Case study 3 - Family Support Team – Sally and Paula

Sally had been qualified for many years, supervising for most of them, in a range of roles and local authorities. Paula was the Senior Social Worker in Sally's team, she had been qualified for some years, and had been supervised by two other people before this. Sally and Paula's supervision relationship had been established for some years.

The family that Paula was working with had been known to her for two and a half years on a voluntary basis. The mother had been a victim of domestic abuse from her nine-year-old son's father, from whom she had separated. Her son found it hard to go to school, and his behaviour challenged others around him, which were the main reasons for Paula's involvement.

Case study 4 – Family Support Team – Sally and Emma

Emma had qualified the year after Paula, and had worked elsewhere before joining the team. She was considered an established, experienced worker and Sally had supervised her for the duration of her employment in the FST.

Emma's role with her family was to conduct an assessment and consider risk, as the mother had two children from a previous relationship, an eight-year-old boy, and two-year-old girl, and now was pregnant by her new partner who had been found in the past to have caused harm to his oldest son (not living with him). Before the pregnancy, both had agreed that he would not have unsupervised access to either of the older children, and this agreement now needed reviewing.

Case study 5 – Family Support Team – Oscar and Rebecca

Oscar had been qualified for over 10 years, and had recently begun supervising in Irontown. This was Oscar's first experience of delivering formal supervision, he had not had any formal supervision training, but had offered coaching and mentoring to a range of staff in a range of local authorities.

Rebecca was a newly qualified member of staff, but had been working for long enough to be established. She had one supervisor before Oscar, had just had an interview in another local authority and was about to resign her post. There had been a planned visit which was cancelled due to an escalation of risk, and Rebecca was unable to arrange another visit.

Case study 6 – Family Support Team – Oscar and Melody

Melody was qualified longer than any of the other social workers observed in Irontown and had two supervisors before Oscar.

Melody's home visit was to a single mother with four children aged between 12 to eight who were the subject of ongoing court proceedings. Melody had known this family for six months. Mother's mental health, drug use and neglect had led to Melody assessing that the mother was not able to care for them long term but had not told the family this. Melody was visiting this family twice weekly.

Case study 7 – Family Support Team – Jane and Rachel

Jane had been qualified for over 10 years. She had been a supervisor in other authorities but had not had any formal supervision training. She had supervised

Jo and Rachel since she was employed as an FST manager, and while the beginning of the supervisory relationships were recent enough to be remembered, they were now more established. Rachel was a Senior Social Worker and had been qualified for about the same length of time as Paula and Sam, but had been promoted to senior more recently than they had. She had had three supervisors in total and had worked in other authorities.

The family that Rachel visited had just been awarded a Special Guardianship Order (SGO) from the courts for their grandson.

Case study 8 – Family Support Team – Jane and Jo

Jo was the most recently qualified social worker who still had newly qualified status, where she had to engage with a specific programme of ongoing training and development to be able to re-register after three years of practice. It is common early in this period for social workers to have a reduced caseload, with "less complex" families. Jane had supervised her since she qualified.

Jo visited a family who lived in the same estate as the family Paula was working with (case study three). The family were three children, a baby, a boy toddler, and a teenage girl, the mother had been a victim of domestic abuse in previous relationships. Her new baby's father had been abusive to previous partners, consequently the children were thought to be at risk and their names were on the Child Protection (CP) Register, where local authorities have a duty to 'safeguard and promote a child's welfare' where there they 'are suffering or likely to suffer significant harm.' (Children Act 1989).

Case study 9 – Children who are Looked After Team (CLAT) - Rita and Aleesha

Rita and Aleesha worked in CLAT, supporting children who were the subjects of full care orders, or accommodated on a long term basis.

Rita had been qualified for less time than her counterparts but was still an established supervisor with experience of working in other authorities. Aleesha qualified four years ago, always worked in Irontown, but had been in a different

role moving to CLAT several months ago. Aleesha had two supervisors in her previous role, and three in this. Aleesha had been unable to arrange a visit to a young person *'they're really up and down at the moment' (Aleesha, SWl9)*, and she did not feel that it was the right time to ask for consent for a visit to be observed.

Case study 10 - Disabled Children's Team (DCT) - Graham and Carole

Graham had been a manager in previous careers, but had been qualified about the same length of time as most of the other supervisors.   He had been in this role for a number of years. Carole had been qualified for a similar length of time as Sam, Paula, Emma and Rachel and had a total of eight supervisors in that time, in this and other authorities.

Carole had known the family she visited for six weeks. They were accessing support under their 16-year-old son's right to help as a young person with autism. Carole was assessing his support needs as he moved from school to college.

4.6.2 Bridgepark County Council – Disabled Children's Team (DCT)

This authority has a smaller population than Irontown. There is an element of heavy industry in one area of Bridgepark but it also has more rural areas.   There are a smaller proportion of non-white British residents and residents are comparatively richer than others in Wales. However, there are small areas of deprivation but overall more people are in work and more affluent than the national average in Wales.

Workers in this team were in a more traditional environment in that they had individual rooms, in a maze of corridors and had access to a free car park.

Case study 11 – Glenna and Maria

Glenna had begun her career in Bridgepark as an administrator, starting at the same time as Maria. She qualified some years ago, and was an established

supervisor. In her role she continued to work with a small number of families. No home visits were observed in Bridgepark as it was the Christmas period, plans were difficult to make and were changed at the last minute.

Maria was the second longest qualified participant and had always worked in Bridgepark's Disabled Children's Team (DCT). She had been supervised by Glenna for several years and had two previous supervisors.

Case study 12 – Glenna and Michael

Michael had been qualified for a number of years, had worked in other local authorities but was a long-standing member of the DCT. Glenna said she had supervised Michael for one year, but his perception was that the supervision relationship had been about three or four years long.

All 12 case studies reflect diversity of participants in terms of demographic details, and their range of experience. The longest qualified had been a social worker for decades and the shortest 1 year. Similarly, some supervisory relationships were extremely established and others not so, the longest being five years and the shortest four months. Some workers had worked in other authorities or in different teams and had many supervisors, others had not. A characteristic that was also evident in the range of supervisors participating, some had many years' experience of delivering supervision, for others this was their first formal supervisory role. This diversity carried through to the range of experiences of families seen, some were at the highest level of concern being involved with the Family Court, others had children on the Child Protection Register or voluntarily choosing to access support from statutory services.   The diversity in the sample meant that a range of perceptions and observations were made, leading to a wealth of complex data being collected.

4.7 Data analysis

Each case study had a significant amount of data to analyse from a range of sources commensurate with suggestions that data can be collected, played with and themes or patterns allowed to develop as data collection and ongoing analysis

progresses (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Nowell, et al., 2017). The case approach used here allowed the data to be collected and themes to be developed*:*

> *'The researcher begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data' (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, pp. 12 IN Thomas, 2006).*

Thomas argues

> *'inductive analysis refers to approaches that primarily use detailed readings of raw data to derive concepts [and] themes' (Thomas, 2006, pp. 238).*

These ideas again link qualitative research approaches with social work in that data (or information) is collected, and then analysed to see what sense can be made of it.   This reflects pragmatic ideas that specific rigid methods of analysis do not need to be agreed or decided upon before data collection begins. However, others have argued that the idea that themes emerge somehow from the data discounts the active role the researcher plays, so it is perhaps more accurate to say that themes are generated from the data (Braun and Clarke, 2018; Lainson et al., 2019) reinforcing the active role that researchers take in data analysis.

When considering how to analyse the data in this study, there was no obvious answer as to the best way to compare the 12 case studies. So while ethnographic and grounded theory ideas and principles have been useful in developing ideas of how to analyse the data, in reviewing these methods, it was apparent that data needed to be looked at by using inductive thematic analysis*,*

> *'a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, pp 79).*

This method enabled data analysis to focus exactly on the research questions, and identify any patterns or themes that could be developed from any of the data collection techniques, and enabled comparison between them.

This reflects Hammersley and Atkinson's (1995) ideas that ethnography, and ethnographic methods are necessarily unclear and unboundaried in order to enable the best use of data collected when immersed in the research. Data analysis taking place whilst conducting the research is part of ethnography and grounded theory and the more immersed the researcher becomes the more the

findings are shaped by what the researcher is seeing and ideas are formed as the research progresses.   However, the difference here was that this study was not looking to develop theory (Mason, 2010; Corbin and Strauss, 2015) nor was data saturation sought so although considered, grounded theory was used as a method of data analysis.

Some have argued that thematic analysis is not a clear method, and a number of authors describe the need for researchers to be clear about their methods of thematic analysis in order to ensure rigour in their qualitative studies, reducing the potential for criticism (Anataki et al., 2002; Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Barusch et al., 2011; Nowell et al., 2017). When considering how to go about data analysis in this study;

> *'The primary purpose of the inductive approach is to allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies.'* (Thomas, 2006, pp. 238).

This method also enabled *'triangulation'* across the case studies building trustworthiness of the project (Shenton, 2004, pp. 65) when themes emerged from the data types. In using inductive thematic analysis in case studies familiarity with the data is crucial to ensure going *'beyond the semantic content … to identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumption, and conceptualisations'* (Braun and Clarke, 2006, pp. 84). In this study this began with transcription of the data, and then moved on to develop themes and concepts as data collection ran concurrently with analysis.

4.7.1 How data analysis was completed in this study

Home visit observations, and interviews were transcribed in their totality by the researcher. However, the supervision sessions were generally long with seven sessions being over 1.5 hours including content about families not involved in this study. Therefore, to be transcribed in full was prohibitive and unnecessary, as a result, excerpts were transcribed as needed. Because the sessions were observed as well as recorded, the researcher was able to understand the context

of the interactions more deeply, bringing home the advantage of the different methods used in this study. Self-transcription coupled with the observational information enabled the researcher to build an intimate knowledge of the data.

Once all the data had been transcribed, it was reviewed and coded using N-Vivo, and themes developed accordingly. This was a free flowing reflexive process that used thematic analysis as described above, leading to 106 nodes being created. For example, where workers were describing their work with families this was classified as information giving, similarly when supervisors asked specific questions (i.e. 'when did you visit?') to gain more information, this was ultimately grouped together as fulfilling the administrative functions of supervision which were linked to the power of the organisation to influence the content of supervision sessions.

However, the data was repeatedly reviewed and the nodes refined and grouped together according to theme. The themes that were developed from these nodes were linked to the research questions and the areas of inquiry for the interviews. Consequently the findings began to shape themes in the following areas:

- Content of home visits, and people's perception of what they thought practice should look like (chapter five).
- Content of the supervision session, and people's perception of what they though supervision should be (chapter six)

- The general experience of working as social worker and the systemic influences on practice (chapter seven).

The range of data sources (24 interviews, 12 supervision observations, seven visit observations and field notes) generated an enormous amount of data and information relating to the research questions, but also a significant level of unexpected themes were developed. For example, workers personal safety, both emotional and physical, was mentioned repeatedly with threats in some form being a regular occurrence.

Consequently, the task of writing up the findings was lengthy and intricate, with continual revisions as sense was made of the data which held a considerable amount of information that, on occasion, was overwhelming. What became quickly apparent when collecting the data and beginning the process of analysis

was just how complex interactions within the system of statutory children's social work were. The naïve, somewhat reductionist, initial ideas of the researcher that exchanges on home visits would share obvious characteristics with those of supervision were very quickly discarded. This led to a recognition that to do justice to the data, findings needed to consider wider systematic and organisational influences. The constant refining of these ideas in chapters, which as part of the process were written and edited, then re-edited, then started again was part of the ongoing analysis of the data. As ideas were formed and constructed the findings became more refined, leading to developed themes that were representative of the range and depth of data in the case studies.

4.8 Conclusion

Chapter four has investigated and explored the epistemological, ontological and methodological basis of this project and explained why the methods used were selected. It has linked social work practice to research practice and suggested that the value base of inductive exploration mirrors that of social work with children and families, in that one seeks to find things out, rather than test existing theories. These principles have been used to explain the research design and the methods of observation and interview were triangulated within the 12 case studies which have been described to generate a substantial body of data. Similarly, the researcher as an insider and familiar to the context of social work has also featured throughout and reflexivity continued in data collection and analysis.

Taking a reflexive view at the data collection stage led to a wide understanding of the systemic influences on social worker and their practice, including the awareness of the range of influences on the social work task, being far greater than just interactions in supervision. The challenges in analysing the data have been discussed but led to a depth of understanding of systemic impacts that was not anticipated. Consequently, in order to best present the findings of this study, Chapter five largely focusses on what happens in social work visits, and how it helps families, Chapter six considers supervision sessions, including how it helps workers to work with families. Chapter seven presents the findings regarding wider systemic influences on work with families and the content of supervision sessions.

Chapter 5 – The patterns and routines of social work visits

This chapter is the first of three findings chapters and presents the patterns and routines originating from observations of home visits and then what participants said about what they thought helped families in interviews. What was apparent from the data was that there were wide influences on the relationship between practice and supervision, with families, workers and supervisors impacted by societal systems.

This chapter describes what was seen on home visits and what workers said about them and their practice. It sets the scene for chapter six that follows the same structure, but presents the findings from interviews about and observations of supervision, and then the final findings chapter seven considers the systemic response to the social context of social work practice with children and families.

5.1 The observed patterns and routines of home visits

The home visit is a foundation of children and families' social work. This direct contact is often how intervention and support is offered, and the content of the visit crucial to progressing any plans and facilitating change (Winter and Cree, 2016).

> *'Pithouse (1987) memorably described social work as an 'invisible trade'. The SLBs [street-level bureaucrats] are the main link between the client and the organisation, and they are rarely observed in their work.' (Wastell et al, pp. 313).*

A total of seven visits were observed, in which the patterns of practice that emerged reflected the expectations of social workers, what they do, how and why. This led to the observation of a range of methods that some workers used in home visits, as they sought to balance the intrusion into family life and their state-sponsored role of ensuring the ongoing safety of children.

5.1.1 Preparation for visits

The pattern and routine of preparation for visits was evident and similar in all case studies; gather belongings from the desk, take a notepad and diary, and walk to the car.   Parking was a consistent challenge for workers in Irontown, with some workers parking on double yellow lines as they were less likely to get a parking ticket than if they parked in an unmarked bay in the public car park down the road.   Workers drove to family homes that were largely in areas of social housing similar to the area that Paula and Jo drove into which was an estate surrounded by countryside, close to a motorway, with homes configured around a one-way circle leading to a feeling of insularity.   The houses were arranged in cul-de-sacs and mostly semi-detached. Other homes were in more urban areas, and there was often a sense of being watched; for example, on Emma's arrival there was a man standing alone in the dead-end street, and the terraced street that Melody visited had people coming and going as she arrived.

There was no observable preparation to speak or interact with children. The only worker who commented on this was Emma who explained that the purpose of her visit was to introduce herself to the children, but afterwards she reflected that the nervousness she felt about being observed impacted on her preparation *'I didn't have anything with me, and that doesn't help, I've usually got props and things' (SWI4),* and consequently how she interacted with the children. Sam's plan for the visit had developed

> *'from supervision, there were a number of tasks that Mark asked me to do in the build-up to the legal meeting. … I even checked back didn't I, to my list from supervision'. (Sam, SWI1).*

Sam also reflected after the visit that because they were alone she had taken the opportunity to discuss the possibility of the mother having another baby.

> *Sam: Did you think about how you would feel again if you had a new baby or?*
>
> *Mother: To be honest I haven't given it [any thought] any thought whatsoever.*
>
> *Sam: You can tell I'm a social worker thinking about it.*

Mother: … umm yeah I don't think either of us have thought

Sam: about it?

Mother: about that I'm definitely not thinking of another child [awkward laughter] (HV1)

She knew she had wanted to have this discussion at some point but had not expected this on this visit, as she had not known beforehand who would be present.   Paula also had:

'a bit of an agenda, part of my agenda was to go out talk about school applications'. (SWI3).

Like Sam, Paula said she had prepared for the visit by thinking about what needed doing to move the plan forward.

In observations, the routine was that if preparation was completed, it was intellectual, and visits largely focussed on what the social workers wanted to talk to parents about. Most workers when asked why they were visiting and what the plan for the visit had been, gave a variation of Jo's answer:

'CP visit [mandated by policy – happens every 10 working days] more than anything, just to check-in … [Interviewer: how do you decide what to ask?] it just comes off the top of my head … I think with them again because I've been working with them for quite a while there's nothing that needs to be done with them, really it's just checking.' (Jo, SWI8).

5.1.2 Content of home visits

On Jo's arrival at the home, the mother answered the door carrying a baby, where an aunt was straightening her hair and later in the visit, there was a conversation about the aunt's recent cancer diagnosis. Mother was clean and wearing a tracksuit, a teenage girl sat eating curry on the sofa, with a face pack and pyjamas on, and a toddler was walking around wearing a t-shirt and nappy. There was curry on a plate on a small table in front of the TV. There was music on the TV which was quite loud and stayed on during the visit. The baby was awake and looking around, mother fed the baby from a bottle and the toddler walked in and out and with cuddly toys, approaching Jo from time to time with them, and she responded *'he was trying to pick it up when he was still sat on it. Try again, oh oh*

oh oh, good boy, he's a funny little thing isn't he'. Periodically the aunt and teenager joined the conversation and Jo talked to each of them as they contributed.

This checking up translated to an exchange of information which formed the basis of the conversation on the visit, as the mother updated Jo about the help she could access through another service and Jo also gave advice to mother about her son's reflux:

> *Jo: it might be worth taking him back [to the GP]*
>
> *Mother: … they do say it doesn't last forever*
>
> *Jo: OK but I suppose you don't really want to stop any medication without the doctors' (HV8).*

Jo's insistence that the baby be taken back to the GP, puts her in a position of power in that she can ask this of the mother, as opposed to the mother making the decision independently. Mother's response to this unasked for advice was non-committal and it is reasonable to wonder how this landed with her, particularly given Jo was noticeably younger than mother. Perhaps because Jo's purpose for the visit was solely to meet a timescale, this visit was the shortest at 18 minutes long, reflecting the 'checking' that she described as the purpose of the visit, although the information exchange and giving of unasked for advice was common.

Melody was visiting the family she worked with twice weekly with the purpose being to observe the family and their home, which represented the 'checking' mentioned by Jo, and both visits involved this type of surveillance of families:

> *'I needed to make sure that she's got the [substance misuse agency] message. I always go out to this house to see the fridge and the home conditions, because that's been a concern, then talk to Mum about her mental health and see where she's at with that, and just following up from previous visits really'. (Melody, SW16)*

As Melody arrived, the mother was outside and started to talk before Melody got out of the car, launching into a discussion about the meeting that had taken place that week.   In the house, a dog was barking, but the dog was not seen at all during the visit (there were often dogs, seen or unseen, in homes).

During this visit, the children were in and out of the house, upstairs and down, talking and arguing with each other and the mother spent much of the visit unsuccessfully trying to get all four children in the room at the same *time 'I'll phone her and see where she is … come on you lot … come on girls'.* One of the girls changed out of her school uniform when her mother told her to but did not put on what she was asked and got changed several times. When the eldest daughter came home later she took off her knee-high socks and pulled a scab off her leg. The blood ran down her leg and the child walked around with her leg bleeding for a while until the mother said, *'get a tissue'.*

This felt like a busy, chaotic environment with Melody trying to manage the comings and goings and keep the conversation going mirroring Jo listening to each of the family members she visited. However, conversation with Melody was stilted and did not flow easily:

> *'Melody: how was school today? [child did not reply]*
>
> *Melody: earth to Ivor. How was school today? [good] did you do anything nice? [yep] what did you do nice?*
>
> *Child: this morning I got these. (showing toy binoculars)*
>
> *Melody: got them in school?*
>
> *Child: no*
>
> *Melody: mum got them? [no] who got them? [Grampy]*
>
> *Mother: (Outside) oh stroppy pants (coming in) stroppy pants*
>
> *Melody: Grampy which Grampy*
>
> *Mother: Grampy Jones' (HV6).*

There was an information exchange representing observation and checking:

> *'Melody: fridge sorted?*
>
> *Mother: I turned it back on, but I haven't risked the freezer yet.'*
> *(HV6).*

Melody was initially told that they were having cheese and potato pie for dinner, but later that this would be tacos, but although Melody was checking that children had enough to eat, she didn't delve any deeper into this discrepancy. There was

little structure to this visit, and at 20 minutes the children had all left *'sorry Melody, they've lost interest, they've gone'.* The mother was also in and out of the room talking to the children and at 26 minutes, Melody asked to look round the house and in the fridge, achieving the monitoring aim of the visit. Notably, she was the only social worker to physically move around the home in any of the visits. Melody summarised the next actions that were taking place at the end of the visits, including *'if you don't get a date for [substance misuse agency] chase them up'*, which was another reason for the visit. Her summary and setting another date to visit was an ending pattern evident in all the observations.

The subtleties between telling a family what to do and instilling a sense of confidence that workers could help them were more apparent where workers gave the impression of knowing what they were talking about, as well as showing empathy for families:

> *'yeah, and when it gets to that point you find yourself getting frustrated and wanting to tell him to go away, I'm going to put you in care, all those things that are unhelpful … But if you can try and build up lots of those positives it will help yours and Billy's relationship and might help him feel a little bit more settled and secure and reassured that you're not going anywhere'. (Paula, HV3).*

Paula conveying a sense of usefulness to the mother may have contributed to her continued engagement, even when it felt hopeless as described below. This was also evident in Carole's visit where she and the mother were discussing strategies to help her son keep focussed on his goal to complete his college course:

> *'Carole: maybe if something happens where it doesn't happen this year maybe he could have some kind of physical thing … like a board with lots of different things on saying this is what I want to do, something that he could make.*
>
> *Mother: yeah that's an idea.' (HV10).*

This air of credibility that workers brought to visits, not merely telling a family what to do but working with them to pull ideas out and showing themselves to be useful with expertise, led to positive interactions with families.

The observations of home visits also demonstrated the range of different threads and priorities that workers appeared to be managing at one time, for example as

Melody tried to respond to the chaos of the family home. This led to complex interactions with social workers not really knowing what was coming or what to expect as they entered homes and spoke to families. In summary observations of visits showed that workers rarely had clear plans for the visits, the main function appearing to be one of information exchange, the purpose of which not always being clear. However, the act of knocking on families doors (who may or may not have a choice about whether they let in a worker or not), not knowing who or what is behind it and the feelings that evokes, is challenging, and what is apparent is that this is a complex task.

5.1.3 Facing the unknown – the unpredictability and complexity of home visits

As families are compelled to work with social workers in statutory work where families have harmed their children, the power of Children's Services is immense, even when steps are taken to mitigate this, which itself is a complex task. This power is pervasive, and social workers have a key role in interpreting the power of the state to intervene in family life:

> *'the SLB [street level bureaucrat] is obliged to make sense of the directives, rules and procedures as they apply to the individual case.' (Wastell et al., 2010, pp. 313).*

Workers are entering family homes, talking to children and passing judgement on the way they are cared for. This means they need to use:

> *'authority purposefully; … being transparent; … attending to the interaction; …seeing clients as human; … judging impartially (Oliver and Charles, 2015, pp. 1016 - 1019).*

For some workers, this was very practical in not having unrealistic expectations of families:

> *'I'm aware you're self-employed you need to earn a living, you know, so if you're in the middle of a job and you're like I need to stay, then just let me know and I'll just try and fit around you'. (Emma, HV4).*

The power the individual social worker holds leads them to seek to manage this and all participants had a belief, which they reflected in interviews, that the development of positive relationships with families' re-balances this power.

The ability of social workers to respond to whatever they were presented with both verbally and sensorially was most strongly seen on Paula's visit. The family home had one open window upstairs (on an extremely hot day), there were flowers in the garden and it looked well kept. A dog was barking in the house and the mother answered the door with a wire mesh in front of her, she didn't speak but held the door open and the dog back to let Paula into the house. Immediately one was struck by a musty old smell and in the lounge where the visit took place the sofa was threadbare, the window that looked on to the back garden was grubby and the floor dark and tiled. There were family photos on the wall, and flypapers were hanging off the ceiling near the kitchen. The dog stopped barking and settled down. There was a general air of being run down, and the smell, heat and darkness aggravated the feeling of a heavy atmosphere. The mother sat in a chair in the lounge, and Paula sat close to her on the corner of the sofa, she was sitting forward with her pad and pen on her lap and her bag in front of her. Paula asked if the son was at home, was told he was upstairs, and throughout the visit can be heard walking around.

The mother cried for most of the visit, and when asked:

> *'Paula: I haven't heard from you in like a week. … Everything been OK?'*

She immediately described feeling low and flat, and this mood continued for the duration of the visit, leading to Paula's reaction to mother's presentation at that time:

> *'The second I got there. It was like I've had enough, I'm going to end it … so the focus almost immediately changed to about her, because that's what she wanted to talk about. I think that she set the agenda there so I went with that, and I still managed to feed in the bits that I needed to get from her'. (Paula, SWI3).*

The mother's low mood impacted the visit, with Paula seeking to engage her more positively, but mother continually came back to a sense of *'what's the point?'* and blocking any suggestion that Paula made:

'Paula: come on

Mother: no

Paula: you need to get yourself and your son out of the house …

Mother: no

Paula: … If I leave that as a task for you why don't you plan something to do on Wednesday?

Mother: he's [mother's partner] going out with his sister Wednesday.

Paula: what about Thursday?

Mother: he'll probably be doing stuff for her again … I do Friday

Paula: yeah, so when I see you tomorrow now at 12, I want you to be able to tell me what you've got planned for Friday deal?

Mother: I won't have anything planned that quick [why?] because it takes me ages to sort something out. (HV3)'

Paula's skills in moving mother from a flat refusal to starting to think about planning a trip was evident, her reluctance to engage with Paula's suggestions initially illustrates the power that social workers have to influence and set expectations with families. It also echoed a feeling of being stuck and not knowing what to do that had been evident in the supervision discussion, which will be shown later.

Mother told her son to come downstairs after Paula asked, *'will he come down and say hello?'* He did come down and put his head around the corner of the door, still standing on the stairs.

'Paula: what are you doing upstairs, computer games?

YP: don't know

Paula: phone games

YP: mmm

Paula: is that on your phone, what you got on there at the moment?

YP: don't know

Paula: something's keeping you busy

YP: yeah

Paula: what have you been doing all week ?

YP: dunno

Paula: ok. [PAUSE] you don't want to join us?

YP: no

Paula: do you want to go back upstairs? You can if you want, I don't have to make you come down here you know

Mother: yeah you can come in the room, you can get out your bedroom for once

Paula: you can come and join us if you want

YP: no [goes back upstairs]' (HV3).

The similarities between mother and son's minimal responses to Paula, and her reactions to them, highlighted how hard she was working on this visit. At one point a cat came through the top window by mother's chair, which was an unexpected occurrence where it would be reasonable to expect Paula to jump, but she did not. It may be that she did not notice as she was concentrating on what she was doing, perhaps being a physical representation of how hard Paula was working to manage the complexity of the visit. The environment was oppressive and heavy, the dog was walking about and barking, the mother was very tearful and low throughout the visit, and Paula not flinching when the cat came through the window illustrated just how many threads she was managing at that time. The case studies all showed the complexity of visits, in that no one visit is the same as another, and social workers regularly walk into the unknown.

Paula had known the family that was visited for two and a half years, and issues had not really been resolved in any sustainable way:

> *'I think that the way to crack the case is to get mum in the right place to deliver the right parenting, so Billy feels more secure, happier, safer and able to go to school but that is easier said than done'. (SWI3).*

The determination and persistent holding on to hope were not shared by mother:

> *'Mother: I can't see nothing getting done so there's just no point.*
>
> *Paula: I think you've got to have a little bit of hope, maybe today is not that day, maybe it's not the day you're seeing it but think about all the positive times that you have had, you know that you can do it'. (HV3).*

It was interesting to note, however, that despite mother saying nothing had changed, and Paula's experience of working for some time with the family, there was some hope as the mother had not asked for her son to be removed from her care, she continued to let Paula visit and agreed to attend appointments and meetings about her family. This continued engagement, despite her statements that it was all pointless and nothing was working, was possibly testament to Paula's ability to hold the family strengths and convey a sense of affection, positive regard and hope for the future to them.

Similarly, this strengths-based approach was evident in Sam's work with the family she worked with. Workers need to see beyond the cause of a family's involvement with Children's Services:

> *'Sam: Actually that's really important isn't it if you think about society in general, but also there's a very specific to you. …Something really bad has happened and he did do something awful [yeah] and it was wrong [yeah] but it doesn't necessarily define him' (HV1).*

This family had been through the court process and the father had been found to have caused physical harm to his baby son. It is worth considering the stigma and shame this induces in families, not only from the perpetrators, but also from other family members involved, and typical reactions to shame are to try to hide the cause (Brown, 2010). When the expectations of social workers are that you are open and honest to prove that you can safely parent your children are introduced, the challenges in offering this strengths-based approach, and positive regard are multiple (Gibson, 2019).

The content of all the visits showed workers seeing a purpose in surveillance and checking up on families, and no worker used a specific activity or tool or appeared to base their work on any formal theories or models of intervention. In entering family homes workers carry out a state prescribed role, when workers translate the power given to them by the state to intervene in family life.

Workers wanted to know a lot of detail about families, but it was not always clear why this surveillance was important.   Visits were also rather free-flowing with social workers and families seeming to react to whatever came up at that time, rather than working to a specific purpose, leading one to question the purpose or use of visits of this type. It was not always apparent what workers did to help families, but it should be remembered that these were one-off snapshots of practice that perhaps did not reflect a full picture. Nonetheless, the content often seemed to be shaped by workers asking families questions, workers were busy gathering information, with it not always clear how families were helped by this process.

5.2 What workers and supervisors said about what helps families?

All workers and supervisors reported that helping relationships were formed by creating a therapeutic alliance, a positive association between worker and individual that offers therapeutic benefits (Akerman and Hilsenroth, 2003; McCarthy, 2013). In interviews workers were asked what the plan of work with the families was, and these interviews generated a number of themes that workers thought helped the families they supported, largely focussed on their own characteristics and having positive relationships with the children and families they supported, which they thought led to a therapeutic alliance.

5.2.1 Trust

The first step in this formation of a partnership with the family for many workers was to be open and honest about the reasons for Children's Services' involvement with families and what work plans are.

> *'I always think well if that was me, I wouldn't want somebody going right this is a process, this is what we have to follow. I'd rather somebody go listen, I know this is a really tough time I get it, but let's have a look to see where we can go together so we can help.'* (Rachel, SWI7).

This was exemplified in an exchange during Sam's home visit where she explained the process of discharging a care order (a Family Court process)

explaining to the family the process they were involved with, helping them to understand their rights. Being honest with families about possible consequences of any action was considered important by supervisors and social workers.

All the social workers described the importance of building trust with families and how they went about it, to respond to the power imbalance described above. We know that partnership working is challenging when families do not trust their workers, and equally, for workers that do not trust families, they are much more likely to practise in a punitive way that does 'to' families not 'with' families, impacting on outcomes (Sims-Schouten et al., 2019). Participants described a process that was based on honesty and reliability, building the components of a relationship that led to a shared purpose, redressing power imbalances:

> *'I think it's partly about remembering the things that they've said to you before, and like making those things important for them, … So they don't just feel like they're just some job because it's not'.*
> *(Carole, SWI10).*

In seeking to work in this way Carole was conveying empathy to the family and her authenticity. Her comments that social work is not *'just some job'* indicate a commitment to families, and by showing interest in the young person she was visiting, remembering things about him, Carole's description of her focus on relationship building matched what she did.

This importance of a partnership approach to balance power was held across the system, and highlighted by Oscar:

> *'people will often try and get out of things by pretending that actually, a good relationship is a relationship that doesn't have any conflict in it and actually a lot of social work relationships that are good have a level of conflict that people are able to work through'.*
> *(SI6).*

For others, the need to engage on an informal basis and show a part of themselves helped form relationships. If a worker is inscrutable and detached, families do not get a sense of who they are, and it is unlikely that positive relationships will form.

5.2.2 'He's so lush' – social workers' affection for children

Similarly, all the social workers expressed in some way liking children and families. Although this varied with no apparent patterns, in supervision, they talked about some with emotional warmth and affection:

> 'they're lovely kids, like so nice and so funny, I really like them, I've got a soft spot for them' (Paula, SO3);
>
> 'he's so lush, he's amazing' (Rachel, SO7);
>
> 'she's a funny little bunny' (Maria, SO11).

The positive regard that social workers were using to describe children, for some, led to clear recognition of positive characteristics in families, both within home visits and in interviews. Workers were able to maintain a sense of hope and recognise family strengths even when they might not themselves, for example, as described Paula's continued holding of hope for change despite challenges from mother. As described above, this was seen in observations of visits where Sam (HV1), Paula (HV3) and Carole (HV10) all conveyed a sense of emotional care, even where visits seemed challenging. Workers described the need to show affection, positive regard and empathy to families, which they said impacted positively on relationships and balanced the power of the worker with a sense of partnership with the family.

5.2.3 Usefulness and credibility – belief in workers' ability to help

The need for workers to be credible and useful was also talked about and workers considered that relationships were also built, in part, if the family had a sense of confidence that the worker could help them.

> Carole: 'I said today I'm going to do this this and this, like if I go back next time and am like, 'ooh sorry I forgot about that' that's not good …[it's about being reliable?] yeah, it's about not being useless' (SWI10).

However, as described above, there were also occasions during home visits when social workers offered unasked for advice and could be prescriptive in their approach. For example, Jo's conversations about the baby's reflux, and whether he should see a GP, similarly, Melody advising the child on her visit whose leg was bleeding *'have you got a plaster or anything to put on it?' (HV6)* felt like they were overtly telling families what to do, exhibiting a form of control. Others, namely Sam, Paula and Carole showed, in the observations presented above, that they managed this in a more subtle way. They did have authority and were clear about the confines of their role, but their continued engagement with the families on a long-term basis seemed to have a sense that the family had been helped. However, exactly how this happened was not obvious.

5.3 Summary and conclusion

This first findings chapter has presented the themes that were apparent following the observations of seven home visits, and interviews with 12 social workers to establish what happened on visits, and what they said about why they did what they did. We have seen that workers have a defined role expectation of keeping children safe by helping their families. However the observations of visits highlighted extraordinarily complex interactions, which largely consisted of workers talking to parents, sometimes when children were present, sometimes not. These conversations often centred on workers asking families questions and gathering information, not always with a clear purpose.

Workers subscribed to the idea that their role helped people, which was largely achieved through having positive relationships with families which were formed by having trust, credibility and conveying an affection for families.

> *'People are more likely to lower or loosen their defences when they feel safe – a situation that becomes more possible when we provide an appropriate setting or a 'holding environment' (Winnicott, 1965) that gives confidence, and when we present ourselves as trustworthy, reliable and caring human beings'. (Trevethick, P, 2011, pp. 401).*

They were aware of the need to balance care for the families, but were also aware of the need for control, as their main job was to keep children safe (a theme that

will be further explored in chapter seven).   The challenges in achieving this are manifold and supervision, as seen in chapters two and three, is viewed as being an essential element of this work.   The next chapter follows the same structure as this one as parallels are drawn between the visits and supervision, and we move on to the part of the *'three-link chain'* (Shulman, 1982 in Harkness and Hensley, pp. 506)*,* that concerns interactions between workers and their supervisors.

Chapter 6 - The patterns and routines of supervision

This chapter builds on the findings of the last, by following a similar structure to present the patterns and routines that were evident in the 12 observations of supervision sessions and then explores what workers and supervisors said about what was helpful in supervision. Observations showed

> *'the tip of the iceberg (the practice performance) may be visible,*
> *[but] the submerged elements of the iceberg (the practice entities)*
> *are harder to observe'. (MacDonald et al., 2018, pp. 781)*

Although originating from an examination of how families interact with food, the analogy works well here. Initially this chapter describes the observations, the tip of the iceberg, and then will explore interview data, which sheds some light on the subtleties of practice.

The challenges in the role of the worker that came through in the last chapter, are considered further in terms of the interactions between workers and supervisors with some characteristics of a helping relationship mirroring those of the worker/family dyad.   The chapter concludes with a consideration of what happens in supervision sessions that directly influences practice with families. This begins an exploration of the relationship between supervision and practice, ideas that are taken forward in chapter seven, which considers the systemic response to the social context of statutory children and families' social work.

6.1 The observed patterns and routines of supervision sessions

It has been seen, in chapter two, that the definition of supervision remains debated but

> *'supervision is a process by which one worker is given*
> *responsibility by the organisation to work with another worker in*
> *order to meet certain organisational, professional and personal*
> *objectives which together promote best outcomes for service*
> *users' (SCIE, 2013, pp. 6).*

The functions of which are theoretically confined to three areas:

- administrative - meeting the organisation's needs,
- educational - teaching and developing expertise,
- supportive - meeting the health and well-being needs of the worker (Kadushin and Harkness, 2014).

It is suggested here that interactions between surveillance, relationships and complexity seen in home visits were mirrored in supervision sessions, where supervisors are given a role of oversight of the worker, with theoretical expectations that they meet the three functions described. The power of the supervisor is to set expectations which are transmitted via interactions between social workers and their supervisors, echoing the description of the street level bureaucrat in their expectations in their work with families.

6.1.1 Preparation for supervision

The practice performance of supervision sessions began in the preparation, and patterns and similarities emerged across all sessions. All sessions were pre-booked and followed the same pattern as home visits, of worker and supervisor gathering belongings and walking toward a private room, which had sometimes been booked in advance and other times not.

All supervisors' preparations were similar to Sally's, in that she had printed off the following:

- A list of the families that Paula was working with
- A blank template of the supervision agenda which was mandated by policy in both Irontown and Bridgepark

All supervisors had some form of agenda with them, whether that was on a computer or in paper form. Oscar was the only supervisor that explicitly described his preparation in the session itself:

> 'So I've got a few things that we sort of talked about, which I've written down to prep because otherwise, I spend all my time writing, rather than looking at you and talking.' (Oscar and Melody, SO6).

Social workers were less likely to have prepared, with only Rebecca describing preparing in writing in the past, but stopping *'as I have been that bit busier' (SW Interview 5)*. Chris was the only social worker who currently used written preparation for supervision:

> *'I take my laptop in and I type out my little to-do list, … [next time] I … have a look at what the to-do list was, and then kind of just comment on whether I've achieved that and if there have been any changes'. (SWI2).*

Chris would then send his written updated list to Mark, so much of the background information was known before supervision, deliberately freeing up time in the session. The lack of preparation replicated the lack of preparation for home visits which echoes the reactivity of social worker to whatever they were presented with during home visits.

6.1.2 Content of supervision session

Contradictory to guidance and advised best practice (BASW, 2011), the reality was that the session was not a completely private and protected space, with nine out of the 12 supervisions interrupted. This included people opening doors and then leaving again, workers coming in to speak to supervisors, supervisors or workers answering their phones, people coming in for chairs or to look for other meetings. In all sessions other people could be heard, either in the next room or in the corridor outside. As one supervisor commented, it was *'quite noisy out there' (Sally, SO3).*

Mark cancelled two sessions at the last minute as he had urgent child protection matters to attend to, and Jane had also re-arranged a session that was planned with Jo. There were three late starts, and Jo's re-arranged session ended before they had finished the agenda as Jane had to go to a meeting. They agreed to re-book this, but that did not happen. These interruptions, late starts and changes were usually ignored and not commented on, leading to an impression that these were expected and part of the routine of the sessions.

All sessions followed a similar agenda which was prescribed by the organisation within a supervision policy, reflecting the systemic impact that the organisation

has. The agenda reflects what is important in social work practice reinforcing expectations of workers. The structural patterns that emerged were illustrated in Rita and Aleesha's supervision:

> *'Previous minutes agreed … how do you feel you're getting on? … Any positives since you returned from annual leave? … Aleesha currently has an infection … Anything else about your well-being? … team issues? Anything going on out there that I should be aware of? … health and safety issues … training, personal development … annual leave, TOIL [workers keep a record of whether they are owed time back or owe time to the organisation] , work-life balance' (Rita, SO9).*

After five and a half minutes they began talking about families, the supervision lasting one hour 58 minutes. All sessions started in a similar way; Mark asked Chris *'where are you at?',* Sally asked Paula *'How's Paula doing at the moment?' (SO3)* with ensuing conversations then noticeably short, quickly moving to speaking about families. Glenna and Maria's session reflected this familiar pattern

> *'Glenna: So, start off with what we usually start off with, … How are you feeling?*
>
> *Maria: Fine'. (SO11).*

The words *'usually start off with'* indicate a mutually understood pattern to supervision that had been seen in other sessions, and it was apparent that Glenna, in Bridgepark, followed an established structure similar to that of Irontown. This commonality in practice may suggest a wider range of influences on social workers than that of the practices of discrete organisations or workers.

Jane and Rachel's session was the exception to this pattern, in that they did start with an emotional check-in, but it lasted considerably longer than the others at 26 minutes. Rachel had recently been the victim of physical threats and verbal abuse which had been reported to the police. They explored Rachel's emotional well-being and self-care strategies:

> *'Rachel: I just needed to say I'm feeling really anxious about it*
>
> *Jane: yeah now I see*
>
> *Rachel: really shitty …*

*Jane: well when you didn't feel that you have that time perhaps or
as much as you should have, what did you do instead of speaking
to somebody?*

*Rachel: I waited till the end of work. I went to the gym and then
had nightmares at night and then forgot it [Rachel laughing]*

Jane: oh no no no'. (SO7).

These threats were at the top of Rachel's mind, she seemed upset and emotional
as she was telling Jane about how she felt and about being frightened. The value
placed on emotional wellbeing and supervisory relationships was described by all
and will be revisited later, but for the most part, the emotional check-in was brief
and superficial, belying the importance that all participants tied to it.

Training as an agenda item was discussed, and was in reality a list of training
courses that the worker had been on or was due to attend.

*'Paula: I did one that wasn't fantastic. … I went on the life journey
one last, a couple of weeks ago it was all right' (SO3).*

When asked, Paula's supervisor, Sally did not detail how this training fitted in with
Paula's development. More generally there was no discussion or reflection in any
session about how the worker used the training, which perhaps would have partly
demonstrated the educational function of supervision. Furthermore none of the
discussions indicated the overall plan of development for the worker that some
supervisors had described in interviews

*'I don't feel that she has really got the experience that I would
have liked to have had … I've wanted her to have the experience
of police interviewing, I've wanted her to have experience of
mentoring' (Jane, SI7),*

*'I'm just trying to make her think a little bit more about her
decision making' (Rita, SI9).*

Training was arbitrarily selected based on what was available at that time, and did
not relate to the plans that supervisors had for their workers.

When talking about the child that Paula visited, Sally ticked items off her list, and
started the conversation with *'talking about not moving forward' (SO3).* This was
notable as this family had been known to Children's Services for some time, and in
their discussion, Sally and Paula searched for solutions to the family issues,

including the child getting a school place. Paula would give detailed information about the progress of the Care and Support Plan, and Sally would respond with suggestions, comments or further questions, which Paula would answer perhaps indicating a move or shift in the family.

> *'Sally: Is it always related to school?*
>
> *Paula: Always. It's started slightly more being related to Mum leaving.' …*

Paula would then provide information and expand on Sally's question, which was then responded to with another question, where Sally sought further information:

> *… 'Paula: some of his behaviours look like he's angry, but actually he's feeling a little bit insecure and give her some advice on parenting him in a different way.*
>
> *Sally: Who in primary mental health is doing that? …*
>
> *Paula: if we can try and rebuild that a little bit maybe he'll feel a bit more confident about going to school, which will try and address the school issues.*
>
> *Sally: Is mum still with her partner?' (SO3).*

Much of the time spent discussing families was spent in this type of interchange, which focussed on what had been done, when and asking questions. There was an element to this that felt like going around in circles and that not much progress was made in this conversation about how to help this family, reflecting Sally's first comment about not *'moving forward'*.

Rita and Aleesha's supervision was also an opportunity to exchange information and tasks:

> *'Rita: Child was very settled in her placement [TYPING] prior to her sister's placement breaking down and subsequent agreement for her sister to be at her stepmother's. Since that happened the child has been missing,*
>
> *Aleesha: quite a few nights. Overnight.*
>
> *Rita: [TYPING] missing overnight ... on two occasions. I think it was it was only two occasions, wasn't it?*
>
> *Aleesha: Yeah*

Rita: and has disengaged a little with her foster carers.
[TYPING]' (SO9)

This pattern of Rita repeating most of what Aleesha said, while typing it, continued throughout the session and the conversation would pause whilst this was taking place. This highlights the importance, to Rita, to record the session and was a principle that was repeated in all the other observations.

At one point, when talking about a child, Rita stopped typing and looked at Aleesha, lending a seriousness to the discussion they are having. This pause of the normal pattern was also seen when Jane advised Rachel on strategies to prepare to present evidence in court illustrating the educative function of supervision:

> *'Jane: Read over your parenting assessment … because that's what they'll question you on OK, it might be bad now, but what if it's OK in six months' time and what would you say to that? … so you can just say something like current risk and maybe continuing risks because that's what they'll ask you because I think that works for you kind of writing down*

> *Rachel: I get it in my head then.' (SO7).*

Jane did consider information exchange and task allocation in the session, but the support for the development of self-care strategies and preparation to attend court brought another dimension to supervision and was unusual. This took time, *'she's allowed me that time to express what I think' (Rachel, SWI7)* perhaps explaining why Jane and Rachel's was the longest supervision observed.

In the family discussions, Glenna and Maria also followed a routine of information exchange and task allocation, which was seen in all observations. For example, they talked about the direct payments a young person was getting, (regular financial payment made to parents or individuals with the aim of enabling flexible care to be purchased by families) and whether this was justified:

> *'Glenna: Where are the direct payments taking him? What are you doing with him?*

> *Maria: So, they're using it, she's taking him out for the day …*

> *Glenna: Where is the learning in that for him? This is the bit that I'm struggling with.*

> *Maria: Yeah ok, but Mum has been really well since it started, she was depressed before.*
>
> *Glenna: That's a positive, but I think you need to review it again … So it's about him going somewhere to achieve something … [WRITING] Maria will review again. … There's got to be some sort of outcome focus with it, yeah? … Some sort of plan of how that's going to benefit him and enable him'. (SO11).*

There was an element of challenge to this discussion in that Glenna was helping Maria identify the reasons for the support being provided, and whether this contributed to the care and support plan for the child (Part 4 of the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014 places a duty on local authorities to provide care and support to individuals to support them to achieve their personal outcomes). Throughout the supervision, both appeared comfortable with this challenge and there was no contention in it, rather they were having a discussion on what they were hoping to achieve. This was the mood and content of all the discussions they had about families in the session, which concluded after one hour 25 minutes.

6.1.3 Writing up of supervision sessions

Supervision notes were important for all:

> *'Jane: let's bring up the last one, did you ask [for the last ones] to sign*
>
> *Jo: I did a load at once … I did three at once maybe' (SO8)*

The need to sign the notes brought a formality to all the supervisions and highlights the perceived need for accurate notes, reflecting the monitoring and surveillance of home visits. What was written down communicated what was important and was a subtle transmission of practice entities and expectations of the role.   Jane commented that the notes she received from a previous supervisor bore no resemblance to what had been said and the lack of eye contact throughout sessions impacted on Jane's perception of how useful the sessions were to her. Based on this she had altered her practice *'I won't write on my laptop when I'm doing the notes because I just feel it's impersonal' (Jane, SI7).* Jane was the only person to comment on the recording of sessions, which may suggest the routine of typing or writing as the sessions were happening were accepted patterns of practice as it was not questioned or acknowledged in any way.

All sessions were recorded in some form by supervisors, some workers made lists of things to do as they went along, and the notes made by supervisors provided a formal record of the session that were then uploaded to family files to reflect decisions made and discussions held. Again, what is written down conveys to the worker what is important in their practice but the way these sessions were recorded varied; some supervisors typed as they talked, sometimes leading to gaps in the conversations as they caught up with the typing, for example, in case study nine, Rita repeated most of what Aleesha said, while typing it, and the conversation would pause whilst this was taking place. Others hand wrote notes and explained in interviews that business support staff would type and upload them to the case recording system. Some used them at the next session to check that the agreed actions had been carried out. Aside from the verbal attention paid to it, the centrality of the recording to the process and the importance of it was reinforced by the physical presence of the computer or notebook that was often between the supervisor and worker.

6.2 What workers and supervisors said about what helps them in supervision

As explored in chapter three social workers greatly value good supervision relationships, with social work research telling us that relationships are central to effective social work with families (Noble and Irwin, 2009; Trevethick, 2011; Ruch, 2012; Morrison, 2016). We will now consider how workers and supervisors in this study described what was important to them in supervision, and how it helped them in their work. Where there were similarities between the visits and supervision, these will be drawn out and considered.

All participants in this study, when interviewed, had an idea of what they thought supervision should involve, and how it should be done. Rita's team spoke about monthly supervision being the formal decision making space with many conversations about how to carry out tasks happening outside of supervision. The division of purpose of the formal supervision session and what happens outside of that was echoed in all case studies:

> *'I mean supervision, I suppose it's just a small part of it. When you're in the office you go back and forth, you'll say this happened or that has happened, and I suppose that together probably forms a bigger picture.'* (Rebecca, SWI5).

Managers talked about having *'open door'* policies and Rita reflected on the importance of regular discussions and supervision being a process, not an event, which brought *'depth'* to the work *(SI9),* and the idea that supervision is much more than the monthly session came through strongly in all the case studies.

All workers and supervisors moved beyond this, reflecting on the need for organisational and personal accountability:

> *'I've got well over 100 - 140 children which I am responsible for so I want to spend time thinking about each of those children and the only way I can do that is through face-to-face discussion with the social worker'* (Mark, SI2)

Graham also thought part of supervision was to help him *'monitor performance'* (SI10) and considered that formal supervision was useful when workers did not *'drop by your desk'* referring to the informal discussions that were described to be constantly taking place in teams. For workers who were in regular contact with their supervisor, Graham felt the formal session was held to meet an organisational need for accountability, reflecting ideas of surveillance and checking up, not significantly impacting on the worker or their practice.

Rebecca commented that supervision for her had always been *'not really a good experience, it's quite a neutral experience really supervision'* (SWI5). Rebecca felt that discussions about families and their work should be more in-depth but time did not allow. In looking at how long sessions were, the shortest were about one hour as this was, however, Rebecca was not speaking in this context specifically about Oscar, but generally about her experience of formal supervision. She attributed value to informal discussions with Oscar, deliberately sitting close to his desk in an office of hot-desking.

> *Rebecca: I mean supervision. I suppose it's just a small part of it, … I just like the fact that he's just nearby, so I wouldn't even feel like I was really bothering him, if it was something that was minor. So this is just happened or that has just happened you know and I never feel like as if I'm really annoying him with that information (SWI5).*

The knowledge that Oscar was available for consultation freely was indicative of other comments about the importance of this. It was also apparent in the informal observations of the office space, where there was a constant hum of conversation as workers spoke to each other and their supervisors about the families they were working with.

All the supervision sessions took place in a private room and Chris reflected on the importance of this separate one-on-one time:

> 'this is in the diary we are doing it, and this takes priority above anything else because you take priority. It's not just about the cases it's about you' (SWI2)

However, despite this rhetoric, or *'practice entity'* (Maller, 2015, pp. 56; Macdonald et al., 2018.) about the importance of protected time for the worker, the interruptions, late starts, the agenda set by policy and the predominant focus on families indicated that in reality the *'practice performance'* (Maller, 2015, pp. 58; Macdonald et al., 2018) was different. Nonetheless, the perception that supervision was a priority was described as helping, and the interactions that took place between the worker and their supervisors that they characterised as positive relationships were valued.

6.2.1 Trust

In this regard trust between the worker and supervisor was seen to be essential, reflecting the need to balance the differential of the supervisor having power over the worker, with trust enabling a feeling of safety and security in the supervision relationship. Jane described the importance of supervisors trusting their workers to tell them what they needed to know, and referenced an occasion where a worker's recording had been out of date, but she had not been aware of it.

> 'There's a level of trust and there was an incident where somebody was behind about six weeks and had I perhaps prepared … I would have known that'. (SI7).

A successful rebalancing of power and the establishment of trust contributed to workers being able to challenge or disagree with supervisors about planning and decisions, with some workers describing the importance of this:

Carole: I think he needs to take action and I've told him that he does because you know I'm not very good at keeping my mouth shut [laughter] and I'm also not very good at respecting hierarchies' (SWI10)

The commonality in these relationships where there was mutual challenge, was a combination of length of relationship, and experience of workers. Differences in opinion was thought to be helpful and healthy:

'Rachel: we always disagree Jane, always

Jane: we always get there in the end though' (SO7).

But where explicit challenge had been present in the early stages of these relationships, supervisors and workers had not felt so comfortable with this. Shortly after she had joined the organisation, Jane described attending a decision-making panel with Rachel where they did not agree on Rachel's preferred course of action *'it was one of the most difficult meetings I've been to' (SI7).* Oscar had supervised Rebecca and Melody for a short time and both described some challenges in their supervisory relationships that were in the process of being established:

'I'm still adjusting to his supervision so yeah his supervision was more focussed on like my documents and things like that … it's kind of sort of starting again' (Melody, SWI6).

Melody had several supervisors in her career, and where workers and supervisors had changed relationships this impacted on all. Aleesha also noticed the impact of different supervisors:

'I had him for about three supervisions [OK] probably not that helpful in terms of it was just more task-focussed, that's what needs to happen off you go. Whereas I don't like that, I like to be able to talk about things and figure out why this happened and things like that. So it wasn't really suited to me, so I would then use my Senior and we would have kind of supervision quite often. She was good for me because she would allow me to think about it and reflect on it' (SWI9).

As discussed, supervision is acknowledged to be theoretically essential in supporting workers to manage the challenges of the work they are involved in, addressing any personal matters that may be impacting the worker, and a safe

stable relationship was commonly believed to be important, reflecting the importance of workers' relationships with families.

Chris thought that the main purpose of supervision for the organisation was one of accountability and recording, but an element of support was especially important to him:

> *'I think it can become quite a tick box thing, but I try not to let it become a tick box thing … I think supervision is that space where you can be personal, where you can kind of talk about things that are very close to your heart, … reflecting on your own professional and personal values really unpicking that'. (SWI2).*

Chris felt strongly that supervision was his space to say anything that he wanted to say, and that it needed to be safe to do so, but the observation did not deviate from the typical pattern and routine: agenda, and then family discussion focussed on dates and directions.

6.2.2 'A cup of tea?' Social workers' and supervisors' affection for each other

As with the families, there were signs that supervisors and workers liked each other on a personal level, and they said that helped build a robust relationship. Some supervisors took pains to emphasise the strengths of workers in supervision, some about the work they are involved in, but others showing mutual care:

> *'Graham: I'm just conscious that the team's a bit chaotic at the moment and I am grateful because I know you're always one of the first people to put your hand up I do mean*
>
> *Carole: no problem dude*
>
> *Graham: and you're the only person that keeps asking me if I want a cup of tea or coffee and I appreciate that very much' (SO10).*

Carole recognised that there were particular pressures on Graham and described wanting to support him *'with all the things that's going on in the team … it's weighing on him' (SWI10).*

In some observations, strengths or what has gone well was an agenda item, and workers liked this less, feeling that it was not necessarily authentic when dictated by the agenda and that praise was better received when given spontaneously. Rita's team felt what worked better was when she noticed positives outside of supervision, for example commenting a report read well. Supervisors also communicated strengths to their staff in their actions:

> 'he promotes me, not promotes me position-wise, he promotes me by developing my learning'. (Sam, SWI1)

The inherent trust that there is in an effective relationship includes the ability of the supervisor and the worker to understand one another and hold mutual positive regard and care for each other. In observations this was conveyed in subtle ways, Carole offering Graham a cup of tea when he was stressed, Oscar expressing empathy for the change in supervisor that his team had experienced:

> 'I think it's there's a lot of change for them you know [previous supervisor] had been in place and had a particular style of supervision and obviously, I've come in and [have] a different one' (SI5).

Liking one another, both in the home visit and supervision session was an important factor in the development and maintenance of relationships, but was sometimes very subtle, and woven throughout the relationship between supervisors and workers in all their communications not just the formal supervision session.

6.2.3 Usefulness and credibility – belief in supervisors' ability to help

Similar to the home visit, a supervisor's credibility and experience was particularly important in building and maintaining supervisory relationships. Where supervisors were seen to be experienced, this helped workers trust their judgement:

> 'One of the things that I always do, I kind of think if I'm stuck in a situation or like I don't know what to do if something came in, I think what would Sally tell me to do. I can answer that now because she's supervised me for long enough. … she's moulded

me well either she's moulded me or I've moulded to her'. (Paula, SWI3).

People learn from one another and this was true here, the length of some relationships meant that some supervisors and managers knew each other well with these relationships and *'the processes of ritual behaviour …reproduc[ing] the system'* (Ortner, 1984, pp 154). That is in following familiar patterns, supervision transmits the expectations of social work from supervisors to workers, and consequently to families, being a covert way of educating workers about what they should do.

Glenna and Maria had worked in the same team for 18 years, her experience and therefore credibility also came through with both Maria and Michael talking about how well she personally knew the work and the families they were working with. Maria also commented on Glenna's ability to put aside her own personal or professional needs to concentrate on supervision:

> *'Glenna has had a really stressful week last week … but she'll just go into mode and say right let's get on with it, … but other people just can't do that and they will bring all their problems in with them.' (SWI11).*

Carole felt Graham's practice skills built his credibility:

> *'Some managers can be so far removed from practice, … but because he still keeps his hand in a little bit like he still knows how to speak to people, then when he asks you to do something you kind of respect that a little bit more' (SWI10).*

There were times in the observations that supervisors could be seen to be using their power and experience to direct work, building a sense of credibility and that the worker could learn from them. For example, Jane and Rachel discussed strategies to prepare to present evidence in court:

> *Jane: I know what you'll be like giving evidence, you kind of reached that point of OK, I know what I'm doing, I know my decision is correct … So you feel confident now, you sound it?*
>
> *Rachel: home conditions. I think they will hone in on that.*
>
> *Jane: What kind of, are you going to do any prep before?*

> *Rachel: I'm going to reread everything. I'm going to read my parenting assessment there's nothing … that I don't think is relevant, you know they still haven't worked with support services. (SO7)*

Similarly, Jane talking with Jo about how she might go about collecting information from a parenting assessment:

> *Jane: and you know use those examples from contact about during this session this is what we felt was positive, and almost literally rip it apart you know, cuddling talk to us about how you feel about cuddling. Do you get the urge to cuddle them? Were you cuddled? You know is it that he wasn't cuddled in his childhood so actually the emotional warmth that he didn't have he thinks is acceptable? We need to get to the root of that because if he doesn't know how to do it and actually his level of expectation is what he gives because we can almost educate him on that. We can teach him on that, what do you think?' (SO8)*

These discussions of 'how' rather than 'what' to do were notable as there was little of this type of interaction, although much more evident in Jane's supervision of Rachel and Jo, than others.

Supervisors walking the line of being credible and sharing their own experiences was not always easily managed:

> *'I've had supervision where people talk about themselves a lot, talk about their own issues a lot, so you may bring up your case and they'll want to tell you about some terrible case that they've had.' (Glenna, SI11).*

Maria talked about a previous supervisor discussing their own personal issues in supervision inhibiting any discussion of Maria's personal and emotional wellbeing.

Supervisors saw a role for themselves in the development of the worker, with all describing their hopes for the social worker's future. Sally commented on the opportunity for her workers to learn:

> *'there's a bit of teaching element in there and sometimes you go off on tangents about topics about adoption law, life story work or something like that, I think you tell them something they don't know' (SI3).*

However, the observations without exception contained little focus on the worker's development. Equally important for supervisors' own feelings of credibility was 'earning their stripes', and experience in the job:

> *'I know what it's like to be there and I know what to expect …I [can] actually do what I'm telling them to do'. (Mark, SI2).*

This also gave him confidence and therein lay the foundations for a trusted supervisory relationship. Rita talked about moving teams from FST, to CLAT, and this meant that she was no longer the longest qualified member of staff in her team, commenting that one of the workers she supervised had been qualified *'since I was six years old'*. At first concerned about her ability to supervise more experienced workers *'I was initially worried about that actually they would think who this is jumped up upstart?'* she quickly found that her range of experience in different teams and different authorities meant *'they've responded quite well' (SI9).* Rita's team spoke about liking her as a supervisor and felt that she was secure and self-aware so able to make them feel safe as practitioners. Others talked about their own experiences of supervision impacting how they supervised, as well as how they viewed supervision:

> *'I hadn't had it for four months, it's hard when you don't know what you're doing'. (Rita, SI9).*

Mark talked about peer support being important in a period where he had not had formal supervision, and Jane talked about learning how to do supervision by not doing what her supervisors had done:

> *'I just thought well if I'm going to be a senior and a manager at some point I want to do everything she hasn't done [OK yeah] so this experience is the reason why I do it the way I do, not because I've had brilliant supervision because I've had shit supervision'. (SI11).*

It is interesting to note that neither Oscar nor Jane had had any formal supervision training, but other supervisors had a range of children's services specific training, either as stand-alone or as part of wider management training programmes, with mixed reports of the effectiveness of this.   However, supervisors appeared to largely rely on their practice experience which was seen to give them credibility which workers said helped them in their work. They listened to and questioned the

information given to them by to workers, simultaneously writing it down and then allocated tasks to the worker. A theme in all case studies, workers described the practice experience leading to credibility as being important to the formation of a trusted relationship with their supervisors, which was important to all participants.

6.2.4 'Help each other out' – supervisors determining team culture and values

Additional to the supervision relationship, individuals' relationships with their immediate teams were considered important to the wellbeing of workers and supervisors, which was being shaped by team culture impacting on practice. *'Workers … draw their occupational identity and inspiration from immediate colleagues'* (Pithouse, 1998, pp 15). The idea that workers learn from each other has been seen repeatedly (Ruch, 2012; Broadhurst and Mason, 2014; Winter and Cree, 2016; Ferguson et al., 2019). This shared understanding of what social work and occupational identity is, in itself carries inherent power within the organisational ecosystem.

Individual team cultures were found to be powerful in all the case studies and significantly impacted workers individually in that teams offered a level of case reflection and emotional support to one another:

> *'Rita is pretty good in you know saying if you need to go to [a colleague] for this or go to me for this … I got to be honest other teams I think they could use each other a bit more'. (Aleesha, SWI9).*

In Bridgepark, Glenna's team noticed how emotional support impacted on their work, and recognised *'the importance of team and someone noticing if you come back from a visit not quite right' (Field Notes, 03/10/2018).* They also described the impact of a shared culture of reflection on practice*, 'one thing that happens away from supervision which is good is that we have a case discussion once a month' (Michael, SWI12),* offering a form of group supervision but also the educative function of supervision as workers learn from each other. Some managers had actively considered team culture and as Glenna's team had noticed, considered the peer support element of team working to be important:

> *'Social workers do come back from their visits and they talk to each other … Is that about checking whether they did the right thing or the wrong thing or just offloading because it was stressful?' (Graham, SI10)*

For some teams, culture seemed to emerge organically with neither social workers nor supervisors explicitly mentioning it in interviews, but others saw this as a crucial influence and deliberately sought to create a supportive team culture:

> *'Jane: I will ask them to do it because something I've tried to create in the team is that we all help each other*
>
> *Interviewer: So you make it safe enough or OK in your team to say I'm overwhelmed?*
>
> *Jane: without a doubt' (SI7).*

Mark had also worked to create a culture where workers were not solely focussed on him as a means of support or advice:

> *'I rely on social workers to inform each other and help each other out rather than just think that I'm the ego and knowing it all … because you want them to recognise that they all bring something different to the pot' (SI1).*

Mark's efforts in this regard were noticed:

> *'Chris: We support each other you know emotionally and physically within our roles, we know what's going on with each other's cases, we try to help pick up the pieces when the other one's down and we are able to do that because of the direction that we have and what supervision offers us'. (SWI2).*

Mark's description of his personal value of recognising the talents of workers and how these can contribute to team and individual cultures and practices, reflects a wider context of the importance given to this in social work policy and literature. The importance of personal and professional values has been discussed (BASW, 2014) with Sally, Oscar, Jane and Glenna all paying attention to team culture as they thought this impacted on practice but no one could be explicit in describing the specific mechanisms of this, reflecting other findings (Forrester et al. 2013). Moving on from this, it may not matter exactly how cultures influence people, merely the belief held by workers that positive team cultures made them more effective is what is important.

6.3 The direct influence of supervision on practice

Moving on from considering home visits and supervision sessions as isolated events, there were times when a relationship between the two became obvious. This is where the influence of wider systems, in terms of policies, procedures and the organisational context began to be seen, where children were subject of statutory intervention plans, either Care and Support or Care and Support Protection Plans, or court orders.   This chapter concludes by presenting the themes that were found in terms of individual decision making in supervision and then the specific impact of organisational practices on the workers and families in these case studies .

6.3.1 'Shared responsibility' - collaborative decision making and planning

Decisions and plans that were made in supervision, reflected the influence or power that a supervisor had on workers and families. The supervisor and worker's interpretation of organisational policies and procedures dictates actions and tasks gives them the *'ability to control others… [and] the perceived and ascribed right to do so'* (Peach and Horner, 2007, pp. 420). It was up to them if a family received a service and at what level. *'Studies of social work practice show decision making to be a complex and uncertain business'* (Saltiel, 2015, pp. 2) and *'supervision helps primarily with management oversight and accountability'* (Wilkins and Antonopoulou, 2018, pp. 1) *which incorporates planning wo*rk with families to minimise risk. This was reflected in the *'information exchange'*, where workers described visits in detail in supervision; if workers told their supervisors everything, they achieved a shared responsibility for plans and decisions that were made about families, and tasks were duly allocated.

Oscar supervised both Melody and Rebecca. Melody was a worker of some years' experience in different teams, but had performance issues in recent months, impacting Oscar's decision-making process:

> *'it depends with different people. Sometimes it's through a discussion you know, with quite experienced workers and they will say this is my solution and I will agree with them. I think with Melody sometimes it's much more directive, it's about saying you need to do this you need to do that'* (SI6).

Oscar's need to be prescriptive with Melody was unusual, as the tendency was that more experienced workers needed less direction. Oscar also found himself occasionally being directive with Rebecca although was starting to see this shift:

> *'she's two years qualified, so she still looks for direction at times, or quite often she'll come up with a solution and say I'd like to do this and talk it through with me.'* (SI5).

The subtleties of being told what to do, as opposed to knowing what to do, was evident in the case studies involving senior social workers; Mark and Sam, SO1; Sally and Paula, SO3; Jane and Rachel, SO7, where mutual challenge in supervision led to collaborative decisions being made, and there was felt to be a more even distribution of power in the relationship.

Paula talked about making decisions but then using supervision to validate the decisions and direction she had taken with families:

> *'I've taken it to Sally and said am I wrong here? Like what do you think? What's your view on things?'* (SWI3).

The development of autonomy and confidence to decide the case direction in working with families was also felt by Sam and Rachel, who both commented that this had developed as they evolved from wanting direction and being told what to do, to not needing specific directions, but needing space to think and work things out together:

> *'I think when you offload and then discuss and then reflect and kind of Mark reinforces that then you're on the right track'* (Sam, SWI1);

> *'I feel valued when I give my opinion'* (Rachel, SWI7).

Chris talked about what happened if a decision was made that he did not agree with, and with the power not resting completely with his supervisor, Mark, but was not entirely shared either:

> *'Supervision is helpful in that way because if Mark's told me to do something, he's made a note of that, and I've said I don't agree with this it's been noted. … I will go out and do what I've been told, and if that decision was incorrect then I can just say actually it wasn't a decision that I agreed with in the first place'. (SWI2).*

This recording of any disagreements reflects Chris's feeling that he was protected if the decision made was incorrect and whether he agreed or not he recognised the need for some form of structural backup and accountability either from his supervisor or the organisation.

Working within the confines of these clearly set parameters and allocated tasks that the supervisor gave on behalf of the organisation, highlighted the influence of wider organisational practices on families. All workers described the recording, planning and decision-making aspects of supervision as being helpful as it led to a joint responsibility for the work that was being done with families. This provided workers with a safety net when they knew they were part of a shared endeavour. However, this reassurance was slightly countered by an awareness of the wider organisation in which they worked and the influence that others outside of supervision, most often senior managers, had on their work and practice with families.

6.3.2 Unseen decision makers - wider organisational influence on practice

As described above, in some observations there was an obvious and immediate impact of decision making in supervision directly impacting work with the family showing the influence of the supervisor. In considering systemic power interactions, it was notable that people who have never met children or families were able to directly impact work with them, in terms of decisions that are made about how to proceed. Initially this is the supervisor, Graham, as the supervisor, had asked Carole what the young person wanted and this was reflected in her interactions on the home visit:

> *'I'm not allowed to just agree, so I have to say that something might be a good idea or speak to the young person who thinks something might be a good idea, and then I have to write all about why it would be a good idea, and I have to tell my manager that*

> *it's a good idea and then he has to agree because it obviously*
> *costs money'. (HV10)*

In this observation, Carole was discussing potentially helpful services that the young person may have wanted, and despite the family never having met Graham, his influence on the decision being made, and power over the family was obvious, not least because of his budget holding responsibilities.

Taking the power of the supervisor one step further, the influence of Children's Services policies, procedures and structures on families was seen on the visit that Rachel completed. As the baby's legal status had changed following court processes, accordingly Irontown's policy was that the work be taken over by a long term children looked after team (CLAT). Rachel liked this family and was reluctant to complete the transfer:

> *'I'll be honest, I've been trying to keep hold of this case, I did ask*
> *my manager to keep it, I really did. So I've done the transfer*
> *summary yesterday and a social worker called XXX has been*
> *allocated' (HV7)*

This conversation originated directly in supervision where Jane directed Rachel to

> *'discuss with them, which she hasn't done yet, that the case will*
> *be transferring … she doesn't want that conversation because*
> *she doesn't want it to transfer' (Jane, SI7).*

Jane's expectations of Rachel and her actions during the visit characterised the power of unseen managers and structures on planning and decision making, with these types of transfer common as teams specialise in a particular aspect of children and families social work (i.e. both Irontown and Bridgepark had a specific team that worked with children with disabilities).

For most families, the most obvious impact of senior managers in the organisation and wider structure was when they were involved in formal decision-making forums, usually connected with Family Court processes or requests for financial support. This was observed when Sam (HV1) described the process of discharging a care order to the mother she was working with (a child can cease to be 'Looked After' if court decides that a care order is no longer required and a local authority no longer needs to share Parental Responsibility) . She described the various stages of the process, including meetings with the legal department,

senior managers and other service leads, which would culminate in a decision of whether a return to the court was appropriate. The parents had no way of having control or direct input into this process. Sam presented their thoughts and opinions to decision making panels. We have already seen Jane's comments on a difficult meeting that she and Rachel had with senior managers, and Sally also commented on the sometimes challenging nature of these forums:

> *'It was all to do with financial stuff and I'm like you know well people were being quite rude to each other … I don't really think that's necessary. … especially at the moment where it's busy and people I think people sometimes need to sit back and realise what people are going through'. (SI3)*

These formal processes could lead to workers not feeling supported within their roles, if decisions were made that they did not agree with, which they believed would impact on their interventions with families.

In Bridgepark, the influence of senior managers, unseen by the family was noted by Michael:

> *'Placement panel [is] where you go to get a placement from senior management … you can say a year ago I came here and said they need respite and you didn't give me respite so they struggle with that because usually we are the ones saying … which was bizarre because you knew the family best' (SWI12)*

The unseen decision makers in both areas were supervisors and more senior members of the organisation, and it was apparent that they had influence on both workers and families. This was a representation of both overt and covert power (Bernstein, 1977 IN O'Connell and Brannen, 2014) which they had despite there being little or no contact between them. As Michael noted, workers had most contact with families, yet the plans regularly made in supervision and in other formal decision making forums had significant influence on practice, so people who had no contact with families had power and influence on interactions. The relationship between supervision and practice here was obvious, as the worker's task was to carry out the instructions of senior management, and their skill was to balance the complex interaction of care and control in carrying out these instructions when working with families.

6.4 Summary and conclusion

The observations of supervisions showed them to have parallels with home visits with the exchange of information being central. There was a *'verbal deluge'* (Wilkins, et al., 2017, pp 947) where social workers spent considerable periods of time describing families present in all sessions. Discussions focussed on what had been done and when, with little consideration as to how or why interventions were taking place, or what people's motivation for behaviour might be. In the same way that home visits seemed to be merely about surveillance and watching what was going on, these interactions with supervisors and workers were similar.

All supervisors and workers described positive relationships being absolutely crucial in their work with families and with each other. However, neither supportive nor educative functions were overtly routinised in the same way as the administrative function of the supervision session. Data from interviews and observations showed a consensus that the purpose of the formal supervision session is about meeting administrative demands for accountability. However, mirroring workers descriptions of their relationships with families as helping children, they talked about their relationships with supervisors as helping them to do the job. So despite information exchange and recording being observed to be the main purpose of the sessions, these were characterised as being supportive and helpful. Supervisors, whether formally or otherwise, were said to help, and the provision of specific tasks suggested that workers were able to make sense of their complex, often chaotic encounters with families.

When considering the *'three-link chain'* (Shulman, 1982 in Harkness and Hensley, pp. 506)*,* and the positive descriptions of how workers found supervision helpful in their work, we must consider what about the surveillance or information exchange was helpful to them. Reflection on how the personal and professional combined was not routinely discussed, apparently contradicting best practice guidance, and the question of why this did not appear to be routine begins to emerge. If workers told supervisors every detail in lengthy descriptions of family circumstances, and then the content of sessions were written down, a shared responsibility for the work was achieved. This expanded to include people within the wider organisation in terms of teams and senior managers having an influence on practice, in terms

of workers feeling supported as decisions were made about what should happen next.   Why this shared responsibility was important will be discussed in the following chapter as we consider how the system responds to the social context of statutory children's social work, particularly where children are thought to be at risk.

Chapter 7 – The systemic response to society's perception of risk

This chapter continues the previous discussion, considers why surveillance and shared responsibility for the work where children are thought to be at risk of harm might be important, and then how this is shown to be important to workers and supervisors. The previous chapters described the patterns that emerged in the interplay between families, workers and supervisors as *'practice performances'* (MacDonald et al, 2018, pp. 781) which were based in power exchanges and present in the individual interactions of both the home visits and supervision sessions. The thesis started as there was a curiosity about how supervision might influence practice with families, but it was found that influences were much broader than those of just the supervisor and the supervision session. This chapter explores some of these wider influences. The chapter starts by outlining the ways in which external powerful perceptions influence the system, and agency responses to these influences in supervision and practice. The final sections of the chapter outline ways in which supervisors and workers respond to these powerful influences, seeking ways that they think mitigates risk, and it identifies ways in which supervision and practice are responses to fears created externally.

Supervision was not just about care of the workers but was also about how workers interacted with families within the expectations of society. As we widen our view from the individual and relational systems of social work, we begin to see a shift in the balance of relationships and care, to power and control over individuals as workers function within the requirements of their organisation, government and society:

> *'although surveillance rests on individuals … this network 'holds' the whole together and traverses it in its entirety with effects of power that derive from one another; supervisors perpetually supervised'. (Foucault, 1977, pp. 176).*

This was visible in all case studies as workers and supervisors sought to work within the policies, procedures and expectations of government and their organisation. The role of the supervisor was, in part, to help the worker mediate

between these systems and the more intimate familial systems they were interacting with.

7.1 The social context of statutory practice with children and families

Society has a view of the abusive parent and how they function, often wanting to demonise families who cause harm to their children. In all the case studies the concept of blame in some form was raised as a direct influence on social workers and all workers and supervisors referred to a worry about children that they were working with. All were aware that social workers are subject to a level of blame both when they have acted, and when they have not (Pithouse, 1998; Beddoe, 2010; Munro, 2011, Jones, 2018).

7.1.1 'One day they're going to be camped out on your front door' – awareness of blame in social work practice

The high stakes and fear of making a mistake potentially leading to a child death was linked to a negative media perception of social work:

> *'You are carrying a huge burden aren't you in terms of responsibility when the shit hits the fan it is you, it was Baby P's social worker that could never go home … the Head of Service as well' (Sam, SWI1).*

Baby P, Peter Connolly, was a toddler whose mother, her partner and their friend in Haringey in London were found guilty of causing or allowing his death.

Carole also mentioned Peter Connolly:

> *'one day they're [media] going to be camped out on your front door. I think all social workers live with that feeling don't they? That one day it's going to be one of their kids that's died … and there's going to be newspaper reporters and you're going to be the next Sharon Shoesmith'. (SWI10).*

Sharon Shoesmith was then Director of Social Services, who was sacked by the Secretary of State for Children and Families, following a public outcry. She experienced personal threats and was later found to be unfairly dismissed. There was a torrent of media attention and a public outcry, blaming the social work team who had been working with the family for Peter's death which resulted in a public inquiry and policy changes, significantly impacting on social work practice with children and families (Jones, 2014; McNichol, 2017). This continued the impact of previous scandals by creating a system that shames workers and organisations when things go wrong (Butler and Drakeford, 2005; Gibson, 2019). The death of Peter particularly, and how he was not helped or protected by individuals within his networks, became part of the public narrative about social work, which entered all participants' consciousness, leading to an anxiety about being blamed when mistakes were made.

Sally reflected on the supervisor's role in helping workers contextualise and moderate the *'frenzy of fear'* (Ferguson et al., 2020, pp. 15), that is despite the pervasive awareness of child death and the ensuing blame, in actuality this is a rare occurrence.

> *'I had a social worker, not in my team, but running around the team last week sort of going 'they're gonna die they're going to die these children are going to die'. Right OK, fortunately not one of mine, but you know that's not helpful really'. (SI3).*

Aleesha felt that the high stakes attached to making a mistake made it important to consider a range of possibilities that might be impacting on the family and used supervision to formulate an approach to help her understand the purpose of any family work. In that way she felt that she knew her families, minimising risk:

> *'I just wanted to be able to do the job safely. Oh God, I hope that everything goes OK, so I suppose you do, you know, change in that sense and I suppose … it can be quite worrying if somebody's not being given that chance to reflect and you're not understanding what you're doing it's quite dangerous'. (SWI9).*

Rebecca felt that the informal support that Oscar offered contributed to her feeling supported and safe to work with *'a shared responsibility' (SWI5).* Supervisors and social workers described a sense of collective responsibility for managing risk, both individually and within the organisation. The pervasiveness of all

participants' awareness that they were working with children and families who could be at extremely high levels of risk was significant and cannot be ignored.

> *'where a situation was considered to explicitly pose a risk to a child's safety, it was also considered to implicitly pose a risk to the social worker' (Gibson, 2019, pp. 150).*

In this study this was a very real fear of what might happen in the future, with all feeling close to frightening situations, but continuing in their careers despite this fear.

7.1.2 'Burn the house down' – fear and threats to workers

Not only was the emotional wellbeing of workers linked to the awareness of the risk of serious harm to children and the blame that emerges from such incidents, but there was also an explicit presence of the physical risk to workers and their own families in 10 of the 12 case studies. Workers can come to serious harm at the hands of families and there is an acceptance of the widespread exposure of workers to threats and violence.

> *'Given social workers engage with people who are often vulnerable, fearful or distressed, it is unrealistic to believe they will ever operate in an environment where there is no risk of intimidation, threat or violence. However, it is reasonable to ensure the risk to staff is minimised and steps to achieve this must be taken'. (BASW, 2018, p. 20).*

Where children are considered at risk, and subject to safeguarding procedures, the local authority is mandated to intervene (Children Act, 1989). In reality this means that often families are the unwilling recipients of social work interventions, and coupled with their own experiences may express hostility to social workers. Linked to the fear of a child is harmed, and the blame which leads to individual social workers and the profession being vilified and attacked, what an appropriate intervention is for families that have no choice is a challenging starting point. *'Many of the parents in the study began by disliking, fearing and even hating social workers'* (Ferguson, et al., 2020 b, pp. 12). Given relationships may start in this hostile place, if that does not improve or indeed deteriorates, as workers take

action that families do not agree with, it perhaps is no surprise that workers experience direct threats of harm.

The normalisation of threats of serious harm was discussed by Rachel who had been the subject of death threats following a court hearing. The family had become extremely verbally abusive in the courtroom, the judge had pushed the panic button and police were called. Rachel then heard the mother saying *'where the fuck is she? I am waiting for her' (SO7)*. She talked about having to walk to the car park knowing the family had seen her car on several occasions, and driving around for half an hour to reduce the risk of her being followed home. Several days later, threats resumed and Rachel felt frightened when at home. She called the police to report the threats:

> *'Rachel: I had the police round the night before obviously to give my statement you know, and it's not even a traumatic experience. Do you know what I mean?*
>
> *Interviewer: What makes you say that's not a traumatic experience?*
>
> *Rachel: Well you know, it's just, dunno, someone just said some horrible things to me and threatened to kill me.*
>
> *Interviewer: That's not traumatic?*
>
> *Rachel: I don't feel like it should be when you compare it to people like who suffer from PTSD or go to war, and you know go through divorce or lose someone, bereavement, it's just so trivial.' (SWI7).*

Rachel minimising the threats that she had been exposed to reflects a social work identity of this being part of the job, and the acceptance of threats of violence and physical harm to workers. Oscar also discussed threats that had been made to Rebecca:

> *'Oscar: someone is actually saying they are going to hunt you down and burn your house down then that's a bit different really*
>
> *Interviewer: that's quite scary*
>
> *Oscar: yeah [but] Rebecca never seems to get bothered by a lot, she doesn't get phased by a huge amount' (SI5).*

These comments show that the acceptance of a degree of personal harm to workers is routinised, but for some this did move on to the implementation of specific safety strategies when the professional began to impact the personal.

The significance of threats to workers and the cross-over of the professional to personal was evident with Sam, Rebecca and Rachel having formal safety strategies being put in place in their family homes. Rebecca had to lock her letterbox as a response to threats of arson from a family (Supervision 5), as did Sam who explained

> *'I did have to sit down with my girls and show a picture of a man and say if this man approaches you call the police, and I did have to explain to them why we had CCTV, and you know that we need to put a lock on our letterbox so someone can't pour petrol through. Umm, and someone did threaten to burn the house down.' (SWI1).*

Equally, there were organisational challenges in responding to threats to workers. Graham talked about workers being *'full of bravado'* and downplaying risk, but also some overstating threats *'because she was actually trying to get out of doing any work with this person'*. The power play that emerged in this challenge and in the analysis of the level of perceived and actual risk was apparent and reflects the tensions in supervisors balancing the level of care they can provide. The need to get on with the work despite this fear and *'rescue children [leading to] a siege mentality' emerged* (Smith et al, 2017 pp. 974), was part of the professional identity of all.

What we can see is that in terms of both direct harm to children and threats to workers, fear is rife in the system. Society demands that children are kept safe, and social workers walk the tightrope balancing that fear of harm, with their own safety and that of children. If social workers did not have those difficult conversations and challenge parents who are not looking after their children well, there would be no one to do this, with children possibly coming to more harm, a situation which it is argued would be unacceptable to society. However, the anxiety of something going wrong permeates the societal context leading to a dominant awareness that workers and organisations must protect children, as well as themselves. The next section will explore how workers and supervisors strive

to do this and linked to the conclusions of the last chapter, that shared responsibility for safety was important and thought to help workers carry out an unpalatable role.

7.2 'The iron cage of performance management' – organisational expectations of surveillance and accountability

The observations of supervision show that the process of supervision holds power in that it conveys expectations of workers from the organisation, which in essence was surveillance of workers echoing their surveillance of families. This surveillance was felt necessary to mitigate the risk of harm and protect organisations from blame and derision should something go wrong. The pathologising of unpalatable practices and sections of society (Rose, 1985) and reflecting work in prisons (Foucault, 1977), and the systemic need for surveillance was evident and could be an *'iron cage of performance management'* (Wastell et al., 2010, pp. 310).

This surveillance of workers from their supervisors and organisations, was about checking workers were doing their job, ostensibly to keep children safe from harm. In terms of meeting process demands, this type of performance management was a pervasive feature of all supervision sessions.

> *'A means of enabling and delivering the best possible service through processes such as: setting outcomes, goals, and expectations, monitoring progress, measuring outcomes'. (Care Council for Wales, 2012).*

Where workers or supervisors talked about performance management this was always and only linked to written records and reports, i.e. the administrative function of supervision. This often led to a need for workers to work longer than their contracted hours and was linked to the need to keep up to date with recording. A worker who was up to date with their recording was doing their job well. The importance of this also emerged from supervisors when considering preparation for supervision, in that supervisors described wanting to look at family

files to check case notes and recordings but were unable to find the time, or had computer systems that impeded this.

Supervisors had to balance the needs of their workers with the needs of the organisation, again showing varying degrees of power distribution in the form of care and/or control. Where a worker was not achieving acceptable standards, support was needed, as were clear expectations about performance. None of the people observed were subject to formal performance or capability plans. These were formal Human Resources processes to follow if a worker is not doing their job effectively. However, some had been in the past and some supervisors were trying to work out performance issues to avoid invoking formal capability procedures. Both local authorities had policies regarding this, and workers were well aware that formal steps could be taken at any point:

> *'I think a lot of us probably dread going into supervision because we haven't ticked off everything from our action list and we'll be late oh god. … I found it to be handy if I am struggling or I haven't been able to do something or I can say to Mark look I can't do this … [but] it can be quite scary as well'. (Chris, SWI2).*

The action list that Chris refers to was carried over from the last supervision and could be either family or recording related tasks. The power balance between care and control in the form of support and being clear about expectations was apparent in Oscar and Melody's supervision:

> *'Oscar: we would normally think about these documents taking, they took a lot longer than for a lot of people. You have to work out your TOIL hours and look at taking some of this back, but in addition to that it's about, it can actually take quite a long time to produce documents, sometimes maybe nearly twice the length, [maybe yeah] twice the length of other people and so I'm just going to ask you to reflect on some of that and just to think about the next supervision about why that might be the case, what some of the barriers might be'. (SO6).*

In addition to Oscar's clarity around the length of time it took Melody to produce documents, he offered her dyslexia and dyspraxia assessments, and also raised concerns about her timekeeping. Melody reflected on this in her interview, acknowledging that there were concerns, but these had not been raised in her career before and was not convinced she did take longer than others to produce work:

> *'I don't know how long anyone else is taking in comparison to me so yeah I don't know whether he's correct. I suppose I'll have to speak to the other team members and see how long they take.'* (Melody, SWI6).

Conversely, she did recognise and appreciate the idea of dyslexia and dyspraxia assessments, again highlighting the challenges for supervisors in assertively but supportively managing performance:

> *'I'm trying to be fair and supportive with people I'm supervising, but I do understand that there's a boundary and a line, and so in some ways my relationship with the people I supervise, I'd like it to be pleasant, but I understand that at times it's not going to be.'* (Oscar, SI6).

Reflecting the balance that supervisors were trying to achieve in managing performance, Glenna described Michael needing the formal boundaries of knowing that his work was being checked:

> *'the only thing that does work if I do an audit, but actually that involves me doing work as well rather than just him … if I do an audit he does it all'* (Glenna, SI12).

The audit that Glenna refers to, means she formally reviewed families files to check all recording was up to date was a more explicit display of the power of the supervisor over the worker, whereas Oscar's seemed a bit more was a bit more subtle, however, they both had the same end. Glenna knew that Michael found her formal audits of his files helpful, reflective of the way that supervisors used a range of techniques to manage performance and ensure demands were met, which could be either helpful or oppressive. The differences in the way that power was conveyed in the supervision relationship echoed that of the way social workers held power in the home visits; some were more collaborative than others. The need for a supervision relationship where power was used effectively in which challenge and support could be offered was central to the effectiveness of supervision, in terms of adhering to the demands of the organisation.

The need for up to date recording seemed to be about protecting the organisation, and when action and recording were up to date, there was clear accountability and proof that what should have been done had been done. The perception of failing workers was not based directly on their practice with families, but someone who

was not up to date with recording. Workers internalised the need to write things down regularly describing the significance of this part of their work to the organisation, a self-perpetuating cycle of importance. All participants said it was important so it was important.

7.2.3 'She won't switch off' – overworking to protect against blame

In all case studies, workers and supervisors were routinely working over the demands of their job descriptions and contractual obligations. Social workers in the UK (no matter what work area or type of employer) work approximately 10 hours a week over their contracted hours (Ravalier, 2018), and there appears to be an acceptance of social workers having to go above and beyond in order to meet expectations of themselves, their supervisors and their organisations (Pithouse, 1998). Power here was linked to the organisation's need to protect itself and its reputation, should something go wrong, and was enacted through the shared understanding of the importance of recording and accountability discussed above. This was linked to a blame culture as described above, but also for some, this originated from an explicit kindness and empathy with the families they worked with.

In this study, this was an inherent acceptance that overworking was sometimes necessary, although with some acknowledgement that this should not be the norm:

> *'The difficulty with [another team member] is umm she won't stop she won't switch off and so she feels she has to work every hour and then create more hours in the day'. (Mark, SO1).*

This often meant people routinely working through lunch breaks, early in the morning or late at night, checking emails on holiday, working at weekends or changing their personal plans (holidays/days off etc) to meet expectations. The prioritisation of work over supervisors' and workers' own needs and commitments was illustrated by Chris:

> *'I'll get work done this weekend because I need to get it done. I just couldn't [last weekend].' (SO2)*

Going above and beyond was most often explicitly linked to the expectations of keeping on top of paperwork linked to the administrative and performance demands of the organisation, reflecting the need for checking up and surveillance that was seen in home visits and supervision sessions:

> 'I work loads of additional hours that I never take back, we all do. Like I said, way of life.' (Sam, SWI1).

This often resulted from the lack of capacity of the participant to do their job in their allotted hours, meaning keeping paperwork up to date, and an acceptance of the need to routinely work extra hours to stay on top of the paperwork:

> 'Jane: I don't know where you get the time to always be on time and up to date with everything
>
> Rachel: my golden hour in the morning I start at 6:45' (SO7).

Jane went on to say in her interview that Rachel is *'an over worker … she seems to be able to do what other people can't' (SI7).* The need to work over hours was discussed in all case studies:

> 'It's amazing how quickly it becomes normalised like you recognise you're a real cog in a machine' (Emma, CS4, SWI4).
>
> 'Some social workers will actually do so much in their spare time that you don't realise how much they've done' (Graham, SI10).

The idea that individuals were *'worker ants'* (Pithouse, 1998, pp 123), reflects a sense of powerlessness related to the influence of senior management on the work discussed previously. In fact, they were the people with the power over families, not workers.

The idea that there was a need to work longer and harder to meet the demands of the job as defined by the organisation, did not seem to be impacted by the length of service or experience. The only exception to the blanket acceptance of this came from Mark in his reflection of the need for workers to develop resilience and coping strategies to avoid burnout and ensure longevity of careers:

> 'We are not super people [laughter] we have to recognise that there's only so many hours in the day. … you will only burn yourself out [yes] and working all hours in the sun. I don't do that I'm a team manager and I oversee all your cases and I do all your

> *supervisions I don't do that. … That that's something that they should expect for themselves … that's the only way they're going to manage and survive'. (SI1).*

This need for self-care strategies translated into Chris's supervision where Mark discouraged him from working weekends and encouraged him to take his annual leave and time off in lieu.

Oscar commented that Rebecca had developed robust self-care strategies:

> *'I think different people have different strategies for surviving social work. I think she's able to achieve what she achieves in terms of her case management, progressing families because she has found strategies that work for her … so she does use the support networks quite well'. (SI5).*

Workers and supervisors were largely emotionally fluent and relaxed talking about their feelings;

> *'I've known her a long time, I worked with her and I am really genuinely worried [yeah] about her' (Sam, SO1):*

> *'It was final contact so I was like we'll hand it all over and see what they say and but she just yeah, she really didn't want to leave it was quite sad' (Paula, SO3).*

Similarly, as said, Jane explored Rachel's self-care strategies with her, and the understanding that workers needed to be emotionally cared for to do the job and develop resilience to the challenges that exist in statutory children's work is evidenced in all case studies.

Sometimes workers went above and beyond motivated by consideration and care for the workers or families they were working with. Glenna and Maria talked about putting money together, when a charitable organisation had let them down, to buy a birthday cake for a family, again reflecting thoughtful attentiveness in their work. Sam, in her interview, described supervising some family time of children who were looked after, despite this meaning she was leaving her own children on Mother's Day. She described wanting to work in a *'kind and compassionate'* *(SWI1)* way and talked about her own life experience leading to empathy for the families she works with.

It was recognised by workers and supervisors that the need to continually go above and beyond had the potential to impact on their emotional well-being and personal life, but this was accepted as necessary to enable individuals to meet the expectations of their role, generally in terms of keeping recording up to date.

What was seen, and discussed in this section, was the ubiquitous anxiety and fear across all areas of the system which led to a need to protect against this fear. Checking up, surveillance and writing things down led workers, supervisors and organisations being able to account for their actions to wider society should something go wrong, and provided an element of shared responsibility for the largely invisible work of statutory children's social work. The effectiveness of surveillance in mitigating this fear of harm and blame was less obvious, although the importance given to this, indicates it does have a function in helping workers and supervisors to carry out their role, although quite how it helps and why is not clear.

7.3 The influence of wider systems and structures on day-to-day practice

As seen, the organisation in which supervisors and social workers function, carries considerable systemic power which is used to mitigate against the risk of harm, and protect all within the system. By establishing policies, procedures and process that set out expectations of workers, and supervisors, the organisation is translating wider governmental expectations, which ultimately influences the relationship between supervision and practice.

> *'The culture within many social work organisations has been increasingly shaped by successive governments, which set out a legislative framework, establish national targets and require inspection agencies to ensure that quality standards are being met'. (Peach and Horner, 2007, pp. 423).*

The societal context *'describes what the service is for'* (Pithouse, 1998 pp. 15) which, as discussed, reacts to fear of children coming to harm which influences social workers and the families they work with both positively and negatively (Ferguson, 2016).

Workers referenced the need for the organisation to prove they had done all they could to keep children safe, notably always focussing on the importance of recording systems providing a *'visible track record'* (Pollack, 2010, pp. 1274*)* that accurately reflects the current position of work with the family:

> *'They need to know what's going on, or you know, there's always the whole if something really bad happens you've got to cover yourself a lot, which I don't really like that culture'. (Michael, SWI12).*

Furthermore, Jane worried about being inspected, Emma, the conditions of her registration and potential career loss, both of which reflect the further impact policies and the wider system has on individuals. Oscar commented *'we're terrified maybe of being Rotherham or Manchester (SI6),* both high profile examples of systematic and repeated failings to protect children from sexual abuse outside their homes and felt that practice is often driven by this fear, which was not said to be helpful.

Rita commented on the impact that different procedures could have on practice

> *'in this longer-term kind of world where you don't need that, this needs to be done, that needs to be done, you get it done by this date, and then this needs to be done by that date, you know which is more the case in CP [Child Protection Registration carries specific demands and expectations of work with families], like over here it is more about, you need to explore this'. (SI9).*

These policies and procedures did not always positively impact on families. The life experiences of the single father that Rebecca had been working with were discussed in the supervision session. He was recovering from substance abuse and had a history, with housing, of antisocial behaviour and evictions. However, he was doing well and needed individualised support in terms of finding and maintaining a tenancy for him and his child, but housing policy would not allow this.

The power of government policy was made explicit by Mark:

> *'I've related back to what our top boss wants in terms of trying to manage risk, so I've now fed that into the [supervision] conversation so this isn't just Mark speaking. This is us trying to*

see if we can do things better in terms of managing risk as an authority' (Mark, SI1)

Mark was referring to a Welsh Government directive to local authorities to reduce the numbers of children in care (Welsh Government, 2019). He also reflected that child social care services were functioning in a context of austerity and cuts, with national dialogue about what can or should be reasonably provided in terms of prevention or early intervention services (Bywaters et al., 2018; Elliott, M, 2019), *'we don't have time for comfort blankets' (Mark, SI2).* Mark was reflecting on the number of families that were allocated to Chris, and his sometime reluctance to move families along the process and conclude support in a timely way. This reflected the challenges, but also the power that governmental and societal expectations of families had when supervisors and workers practically applied policies and procedures to their daily work (Glisson and Green, 2011).

Locally policies and procedures aim to translate governmental demands into practice and oversee work with children and families, giving permission for intervention and, in some instances, tell workers what to do and when, which provides reassurance and protection for workers. Participants justified their actions within a statutory framework which had clear expectations of workers and families and there was a sense from workers that if they followed processes they were doing their job. The inherent power that these policies and procedures hold lead to complex interactions in supervision, and in social workers' practice with families. In summary, all case studies showed the influence that organisations and wider societal systems have on actions and plans both in family work and supervision.

7.4 Summary and conclusion

This chapter has used a wide lens to consider the interaction between society, organisations, supervision and social work practice. Findings here have illustrated the impact of legislation and policy on practice, and how this is shaped by public opinion responding to individual tragedies in social work practice. The concept of workers being blamed by families, the public, and media, and the prevalence of threats to workers and their families was found to permeate a system that holds a sense of anxiety about children's safety. We have seen how this develops into a

constant sense and awareness of risk, with concern about making a mistake resulting in blaming of children's services and workers, highlighting a need for workers and organisations to be protected from this blame and fear. The challenge of organisational responses to such risk was explored, and indeed the complexity of workers' and supervisors' reactions to such threats has been highlighted.

The information exchange, surveillance and the organisation's need for accountability in supervision, that we have seen in all the case studies appeared to create a sense of shared endeavour and protection helping workers to feel able to carry the fear of blame in their work continuing with a role that can be both personally and professionally frightening. We have seen workers *'act in ways that are practical and appropriate'* (Delormier et al., 2009, pp. 218) that are dictated and shaped by the organisation and societal systems in which they are functioning. The role of supervision and the organisation in creating these *'socially structured conditions'* (Delormier et al., 2009, pp 219)*,* as a response to societal discourse about social work practice was discussed. All workers were aware of the need to protect the children they worked with, themselves, and the organisations from harm or blame, which led to workers and supervisors accepting, on occasion, not only a high level of personal physical and emotional risk to themselves and their own families, but also a need to work harder and longer to address these risks.

Participants used supervision to justify their actions and surveillance of families within this statutory framework and to say they were managing risk. It helped workers make sense of encounters with families and dictated the ongoing expectations of social work interventions, most obviously in the form of planning and decision making (Wilkins et al., 2017). The expectations of workers and families are set by wider societal systems, and there was a sense from workers and supervisors that if they followed processes they were doing all that was expected of them. Perhaps, statutory children's social workers and supervisors displayed characteristics of *'oppressed, distressed professionals'* (Power, 2008, pp. 150) specifically because they are strongly compelled, both internally and externally, to justify and demonstrate expertise in their work. Social workers and supervisors felt that they needed to make a difference to families, and be shown to

protect children, a sense which is reinforced throughout the wider systems in which they are functioning and moving between.

Organisations through supervision checked for risk to children, but also helped workers to feel that they were supported in managing risk of harm to children and themselves. Supervision led to

> *'professional understanding of the 'problems' they identified, organising the presentation of knowledge, and, most importantly, providing the parameters within which 'solutions' could be sought'.* *(Winter and Cree, 2016, pp. 1183).*

This ensued a strong shared systemic and professional identity of holding risk, which gave workers, supervisors and organisations the power to intervene in family life, with a narrative of helping children and families.

There are some that suggest supervision in the way it is currently offered, and the focus on the administrative function is superfluous to requirements (Frontline et al., undated), and is an undesirable development that has emerged as societal expectations, and consequently management practices and organisational policies and procedures have changed. However, as discussed, it may be that the accountability and surveillance that was seen holds a positive function, and the reason it endures, despite some policy and research advising otherwise, is that it is needed to enable workers, supervisors and organisations to feel safe, and share anxiety in an emotionally challenging, isolated and often frightening area of work.

Chapter 8 - Discussion - what is the relationship between supervision and practice in child and family social work?

This chapter draws together the findings and themes that have been identified in this research. It starts by briefly returning to the literature that informed the choice of topic, the research questions and the methods used and then considers the strengths and limitations of the study. The chapter then moves on to discuss the findings, considers the observed functions of the home visit and supervision and discusses how and why the two mirror each other. It draws out the rhetoric of research, policy and practice that surround statutory children and families social work and considers the reality of the relationship of supervision to direct practice. The *'three-link chain'* (Shulman, 1982 in Harkness and Hensley, pp. 506) is used here in that the discussion initially considers the complexity and even chaos that was seen on home visits, the family in the chain. It then examines how supervision makes sense of these encounters between workers and families, which reflects the impact on workers in the chain. The conclusion focuses on the role that that surveillance plays across the system, via the supervisor, the first link in the chain. The chapter reflects on the findings of the study using this structure, what they mean for supervision, and concludes with consideration of the implications for current and future research and practice.

8.1 The aims of the study

This study set out to explore the relationship between supervision and direct practice with families. Despite a body of research that examines how social workers experience supervision (Baginsky et al., 2010; Beddoe, 2010; O'Donoghue and Tsui, 2015; Davys et al., 2017; Egan et al., 2017; Turner-Daly and Jack, 2017), research looking at how social work supervision influences work with children and families is limited, with no studies of this type in Wales. This study seeks to address that knowledge gap.

Chapters two and three explored the purpose and functions of supervision, the various methods that are used when supervising social workers, and what research suggests the outcomes are or should be when working with families. The evidence showed that supervision has some impact on workers, generally around their personal outcomes, such as wellbeing and health, but exploration into how supervision impacts on outcomes for and work with children and families was limited. Where there has been research in this area, studies are largely quantitative and have analysed the skills and characteristics of workers, that is the impact on workers' practice (Wilkins et al., 2018; Bostock et al., 2019).   However, what we do not know is whether or how this then influences children and families' outcomes (Mor Barak et al, 2009; Carpenter et al, 2013; O' Donoghue and Tsui, 2015; Beddoe et al, 2016; Turney and Ruch, 2016; Wilkins et al., 2020).

Furthermore, we do not really know what effective social work is in the real world and as a consequence, supervisors and social workers are doing what feels right within the system that they are working in, rather than what has been tested to work. Similarly, there is limited research that directly observes real-life social work practice or supervision (Pithouse, 1998; Broadhurst and Mason, 2014; Ferguson 2018), a gap which this study contributes to filling. It contributes qualitative case study evidence which explores the influence supervision has on direct practice with children and families in statutory social work. It includes both supervisors' and social workers' perspectives on practice, as well as observational data, an approach not often found in international literature and unique in Wales.

8.2 Limitations and strengths

This study took a qualitative and case study approach, methodologies which can be criticised as being biased with researchers only seeing what they want to see. This critique could be directed at this piece of research, particularly accentuated by the researcher's position as a qualified, practising social worker. This insider status was not mitigated by a team of researchers and the lone social worker as researcher could have led to observations and interviews only showing what was expected, or hoped for, and not noticing the familiar. The researcher cannot avoid relating what was seen and said, to herself and her own practice, and then framing findings within personal and professional values. Equally, the researcher has a

vested interest in social work as a profession, and consciously or otherwise this would inevitably lead to confirmation bias, compromised objectivity and *'theoretical assumptions'* (Braun & Clarke, 2020 pp. 10) being made. In this instance the researcher employed accepted techniques to avoid such pitfalls, including the use of two research sites, the use of field notes and audio recording of all interviews and observations which enabled ongoing reflexivity throughout, helping to notice and question what is routine and familiar, both in the fieldwork and in analysis.

In this study families were not asked their views on the practice of the worker and indirectly, the organisation. To neglect to interview families in this way could be interpreted as furthering paternalistic agendas, and not recognising that families have rights to contribute, as experts who would have shaped and influenced this study. Had this taken place there may well have been an added element that would have enhanced this study. Moreover, written records of home visits and supervision sessions were discussed, but not reviewed in this study. Policies and procedures were not reviewed, and inclusion of these documents in the study would have added another layer. Similarly, this was a snapshot of isolated supervision sessions and home visits, and a longitudinal approach where the settings were observed over a longer-term, may have led to a deeper understanding of how wider systems, including informal supervision and team cultures, impact.

However, the study also had some important strengths. The 12 case studies enabled a deep insight into social work practice to be developed, with motivations behind actions being revealed in the interviews:

> *'More discoveries have arisen from intense observation of very*
> *limited material than from statistics applied to large groups'*
> *(Beveridge, 1951 in Flyvbjerg, 2001, pp. 75).*

The range of data sources here enabled comparison in considering the intricacies of interactions in both practice observations and interviews, enabled the relationships and influences on practice to be considered from different perspectives. Although familiar with the context, the researcher was not known well at one of the research sites, *'taking the standpoint of the researcher who is*

'other'' (Delamont, et al, 2010, pp. 5) enabling comparisons to be made, and making the familiar strange.

There was a diversity in the range of practitioners, supervisors and teams who chose to take part, and participants were volunteers in this study. As two sides of the same coin, while there were downsides to the familiarity of the researcher, in terms of accessing research sites and participants, the researcher was able to exploit personal connections which lent a trusted status to the research, and as such, participants were more willing to participate:

> *'I think if it was anyone else I think I would have been quite reluctant to do so, but because we know who you are, and I think everyone has a lot of respect for you from a professional point of view and a personal, that helps really.' (Chris, SWI2).*

This study comprises a considerable amount of data and the inclusion of direct observation of real practice, both in terms of supervision and practice, contrasts with some other studies of supervision which have focussed on retrospective interviews or surveys. Furthermore, by relying on volunteers it may be only more confident workers agreed, and the results might be skewed accordingly. Nonetheless a considerable strength of this study was the diversity of participants, (from newly qualified to many decades of experience), a level of access that was achieved as a result of the researcher's trusted status. Additionally as direct practice either in the form of supervision or home visits is so rarely observed, that while the sample may have included only more confident workers and supervisors, the study meaningfully contributes to the understanding of both areas of practice.

The researcher as a practitioner bringing credence and originality to the research and the *'insider understanding'* (Pawson, 2005, pp. 32) and expert knowledge led to rich data being collected. The recording of interviews and observations, coupled with the use of field notes and ongoing reflexivity enabled the interaction with the data to evolve. That is questions that were asked or observations made, came from a place of insight that was only available to someone with insider knowledge. The ensuing analysis continued in the same vein, and enabled themes and findings to be formulated, using a reflexive questioning approach to the data to maintain a distance.

This insider understanding brought benefits in that the findings were not what was expected at the start of this project, which had been a much more defined and restricted impact of supervision on practice. That is if a supervisor behaved in a trusted, empathetic way, then workers would behave this way with families thus impacting on outcomes. In fact, the relationship between supervision and practice with children and families was much more complex, and related to surveillance of individuals in the system, driven by societal influences on practice that were much wider than anticipated. Here, the distancing and the expert knowledge involved in making the familiar strange, when combined with the enhanced understanding brought to the process by an experienced practitioner, resulted in resonance and profundity in the findings and analysis of this research.

8.3 Discussion: What is the relationship between supervision and practice?

This study set out to explore the relationship between supervision and practice, by considering the following research questions.

1. How do supervisors and social workers discuss direct practice in supervision sessions?
2. What do supervisors say about supervision and its relationship to practice?
3. What do social workers do when visiting families that they have discussed in supervision?
4. What do social workers say about the influence of supervision on direct practice?

To address these questions we have used the concept of the *'three-link chain'* (Shulman, 1982 in Harkness and Hensley, pp. 506)*,* constituents of which are the supervisor, worker, and child and their family. These three segments combine through links in the way that they impact one another. That is the supervisor, as the first link between the organisation and family, can directly or indirectly influence the worker, their outcomes and their work with families. As the middle link in the chain, workers had a direct impact on the families that they worked with, in the way that they approached their practice with them on home visits. Whilst theoretically there is a possibility of an effect the other way, this was not seen directly in this study.

We have seen complex interactions in both home visits and supervision sessions, chapter five presented the findings related to the influence of formal supervision sessions on direct practice, the child and family, the third link in the chain. Chapter six discussed the direct observations of supervision sessions, the first and second link in the chain, supervisor and worker, and highlighted that there were wider influences on social work practice deserving consideration. To consider the individual interactions alone, without looking at the wider picture would not portray an accurate representation of the influences on and the relationship between supervision and practice. Consequently, chapter seven presented a view of the societal and organisational context of statutory children and families work, the wider system surrounding and shaping all elements and links in the chain, the supervisor and worker, and consequently the family.

The rest of this chapter will consider what reflections can made about home visits, supervision sessions and what drives supervisors and workers to practice in the way that they do. The chapter concludes with implications and suggestions for the findings of this study to influence future practice and research.

8.3.1 Helping and/or watching? Surveillance of the home visit

The home visit is a fundamental part of statutory children's social work (Ferguson, 2018), *'a key social work activity'* (Broadhurst and Mason, 2014), yet it is rarely observed by researchers or others. What was seen here was that visits were a

> *'journey into the unknown … The moment at the doorstep, before crossing the threshold, was a moment when workers mustered their courage and marshalled their emotional resources' (Cook, 2020, pp. 20).*

Workers navigated the unexpected

> *'by skilfully enacting a series of transitions from the office to the doorstep, and into the house, where complex interactions with service users and their domestic space and other objects occur' (Ferguson, 2018, pp. 65).*

As seen by others, visits were not considered, predictable events that fitted into an overall plan, which worked towards specific outcomes with the family (Whincup, 2017). Observations showed that social workers sought information and reacted to whatever happened on the day, being *'messy'* (Morrison et al, 2019, pp. 22) interactions*.* However, they were also multifaceted, complex exchanges in a range of ways; physically, for instance, on the visit that Paula did, which overwhelmed the senses; the visits that Melody, Emma and Jo did which were chaotic with the comings and goings of family members throughout; the visits of Sam, Carole and Rachel were less busy, but were no less complex as they sought to form relationships with families, discuss the children's needs, and balance the demands of their organisation all in one visit.

The *'courage and resilience'* (Cook, 2020, pp. 24) of workers to deal with the unknown and unexpected and their *'empathy and sensitivity towards families'* (Cook, 2020, pp. 24) was observed and the management of the complexity and chaos of visits was skilled in itself. Workers were conscious of the need to balance risk to children and families' rights to privacy but told themselves *"'you've got to do it" (be intrusive) because "it's the welfare and safety of the children that's important"'* (Cook, 2020 pp 21). However, few of the workers described purposeful plans of work designed to help families, which the home visit formed part of.

It is notable that most workers did not see children alone, nor look around family homes despite policy demands (Wales Safeguarding Procedures, undated; Welsh Government, 2018). Children's interactions were welcomed if they were present, but were not a central part of the visits observed, nor discussed at length in supervision sessions. The only exception to this was Carole's interaction, with the 16-year-old she spoke to where she explored his hopes for starting college. Only Melody moved around the home, thus providing physical surveillance, contrasting with other studies (Broadhurst and Mason, 2014; Morrison et al., 2019; Cook, 2020) that found *'looking around houses and working with children alone in their bedrooms were common'* (Ferguson, 2018 pp. 65). It may be that this was impacted by the presence of the researcher but surveillance that was observed was generally the focus of the visit being a conversation with adults, children's views being almost supplementary. Relationships between workers and families can be, but are not always, fraught, and work has been characterised as

persecutory invoking negative emotions in all involved in statutory children and families social work (Warner, 2014; Gibson, 2019; Ferguson et al, 2020; Wilkins and Forrester, 2021). A recent Scottish study found:

> *'despite barriers, direct work which is characterised as meaningful by children and professionals happens; and that the relationships formed between children and social workers are an important precursor to, and an outcome of direct work'. (Whincup, 2017, pp. 972).*

Relationships of this nature were not a dominant observation of practice or commented on in supervision and without this focus, one wonders how children are at the heart of practice (SSWBA 2014) in Wales and contrasts with others who have placed an importance on talking and listening to children (Winter at al., 2019; Ferguson et al., 2020).

Workers thought that they had positive relationships with the children and families they visited, which they felt mitigated the power they carried as agents of the state, intruding into family life with families having little authority or choice. However, the observations showed something different, and conceivably left *'families feeling 'processed' by a system that does not have their best interests at heart'* (Wilkins, 2017, pp. 1138). The observations showed that for some, the worker's presence in the home appeared tolerated rather than valued, possibly linked to the mandatory nature of most of the visits observed, families have no choice other than to let workers in and answer their questions. If they don't, they are viewed as hostile or resistant (Littlechild, 2005; Gibson, 2019; Ferguson et al, 2020), resulting in troubled relationships. Here we have seen this significantly manifested with some workers, and their own families being threatened, echoing a danger that families may feel from the presence of a social worker. Families are anxious about having social workers involved with them, and workers are anxious about the risk of harm to children, as well as a presence of risk to themselves. Already we can see the context where individuals are interacting with a backdrop of fear and worry, with workers continuing to do their jobs regardless, which here did not seem to impact on family outcomes.

However, despite not always welcoming the intrusion of statutory involvement, some families do ultimately report being helped by social workers (Trevithick,

2011; Reimer, 2013; Oliver and Charlies, 2015; Gibson, 2020; Wilkins and Forrester, 2020).   Empathy, shared goals and good authority have been found to be core social work skills associated with workers who were able to engage positively with families leading to better outcomes for them (Forrester, 2008; Bostock et al., 2017; Forrester et al., 2019). The helping relationship, with these characteristics as elements of a therapeutic alliance, is often cited as being the key ingredient in successful social work (Littlechild, 2003; Broadhurst and Mason, 2014; Ferguson et al, 2020; Gibson, 2020; Leigh et al, 2020).   For example, the family Sam had supported were coming to the end of the work, where concerns had been clear in that the child was hurt by the father. At the point of the observation the father was moving back home safely, which had been a shared goal representing collaboration and purpose, hence Sam thought she had helped that family live together safely. Similarly, Carole spoke to the young person she was working with, and his mother, about what support could be offered to him to help him make the transition from school to college, which they indicated was helpful. Emma's intentions about what the social work intervention was going to do evidenced a purposefulness and clarity of concern that was not present in all the observations of visits.

Despite Sam, Carole, and Emma's visits all being unique and *showing 'no blueprint for home visiting'* (Ferguson, 2018, pp. 8), their presence was accepted and shared a sense of collaboration with families working towards a mutual purpose. These relationships managed to achieve some characteristics of a therapeutic alliance. Trust, positive regard and credibility, were thought by workers to be helpful to families. These visits reflected the characteristics of effective social work mentioned above, and reinforced *'the value of face to face practice* (Broadhurst and Mason, 2014 pp. 578).

Whilst elements of helping were seen - with none of the workers describing their practice using the term of surveillance - the overwhelming feature of all the visits was the uniformity of workers 'checking up' or 'checking in' with families. Despite some saying they were doing otherwise in research interviews, observations showed workers watching families, gathering as much information as possible and they then said they wrote down, which they felt provided a reassurance that children were safe. This was a core element of good social work. There was

blanket acceptance that surveillance in some form was necessary (Cooner et al, 2019), although not characterised by workers or supervisors in this way. Assuming social workers are not deliberately setting out to ignore ideas of good practice, then the surveillance seen in these home visits must hold a purpose, albeit one that is not entirely clear. It is suggested that this is a practice that has developed as workers have absorbed what is valued, with messages conveyed to them through the organisation they work for about what is important. One route for this is via supervision, which brings us back to the concept of the *'three-link chain* (Shulman, 1982 in Harkness and Hensley, pp. 506). The necessity of the social worker intervening in family life came from an organisational power imbued by systemic principles that visiting families and gathering information helped keep children safe. How and what messages are transmitted to workers about the expectations of their role, initially through supervision, will now be considered.

8.3.2 Supervision: Helping and/or 'watching the watchers'

The formal supervision session is the first layer of the community of practice where workers rehearse and learn what they need to do and know to be a social worker. What was evident in this study was that the way the patterns and routines emerged, although often unspoken or unacknowledged, showed a shared understanding between workers and supervisors of what supervision and practice was and should be. These patterns and routines mirrored a commonality with the home visit in that accountability, here characterised as surveillance and recording, was a strong thread throughout. Workers were watching and gathering information about families, and supervisors were doing the same, they were *'watching the watchers'* (Egan et al., 2016).

Chapter two described the literature and research that underpins the practice of supervision in children and families' statutory social work. It suggested three functions of supervision

- Administrative
- Educative

- Supportive

which have then influenced the expectations and delivery of supervision in the UK (Kadushin, 1976). The word 'accountable', is found in both the IFSW and BASW definition of supervision, and is an expectation that is reinforced via regulatory organisations in Wales (Kadushin, 1976, pp. 21; Morrison, 2005, pp. 32, BASW, 2011, pp. 7; IFSW, 2012, Social Care Wales, 2018; Care Inspectorate Wales, 2019). A survey of 315 workers in the UK found that *'supervision helps primarily with management oversight and accountability'* (Wilkins and Antonopoulou, 2018, pp. 1). This administrative function of accountability was observed in this study, with the majority of time spent by workers giving their supervisors information about the families they had visited, a *'verbal deluge'* (Wilkins et al., 2017, pp. 944). Workers and supervisors needed and expected to justify and explain their actions, a *'narrow and enervating focus on case management'* (Beddoe et al., 2021, pp. 5).

Some theorists connect the information exchange of supervision to the demand for accountability, linked to the emergence of new public management and inspection cultures. Some describe a need to *'resist'* (Hair 2013, pp. 1565*)* the idea that all risk can be eliminated by following bureaucratic processes (Johns, 2001; Peach and Horner, 2007; Beddoe; 2010 Munro, 2011; Hair, 2013; Manthorpe et al., 2015; Wilkins, 2017b), which in large part the *'verbal deluge'* (Wilkins, 2017b) was attempting to do. Workers and supervisors demonstrated a need to gather and share information that meant that they were doing all they could to manage risk to children. This was taken further as it was of crucial importance that the content of visits and supervision session was written down. This deserves consideration as to why it was so important to write things down and what that represented for workers and supervisors. Written records were not for the worker or the family (who rarely see them), but nonetheless, the time and effort devoted to them suggested that they were hugely important. The main reason seemed to be that records protected workers and organisations. Wilkins (2017) in reviewing 244 records of supervision discovered a focus on information gathering for the purposes of accountability, the old adage 'if it's not written down it didn't happen' was also true here.   In fact, if workers were up to date with recording all was well and they were considered to be performing effectively.

The need to record was not directly about the safety of children and it is notable that work specifically with children was not a particular line of enquiry from supervisors.   Although performance management came up in the form of case recording in all the case studies, not once was performance questioned concerning direct practice with families. All the participants in the study described safe work with families being a priority, however, this did not match the observations with workers telling their supervisors everything that they had done and seen, and the supervisors writing it down. This proved that they adhered to organisational policies and procedure and information was not missed. The shared expectation of recording and following process was the marker of effective social work, not how the workers directly interacted with children and families.   In this study, workers knew writing things down did not keep children safe, and superficially this surveillance was about accountability, an organisational need representing the administrative function of supervision. However, it also held a supportive element in that surveillance made workers and supervisors feel safe in their work. This finding is seldom reported in a positive light but has been found before (Pitt et al., 2021).

The need to prove processes were followed was also seen in terms of decision making and planning, which was usually about being compliant with organisational policies and procedures (Virgil, 2017; Wilkins & Antonopoulou, 2018). Supervisors listened to the wealth of information that workers provided to them, considered it and then extracted meaning by allocating tasks, for example, have a meeting, complete a visit, talk to so and so, which they then negotiated as the next steps with the workers. This allocation of specific tasks as an observable phenomenon in supervision directly contrasts to the home visits which could be rambling and apparently purposeless. Reflecting others' findings, apart from Jane's supervision of Jo and Rachel, there were few discussions of 'how' rather than 'what' to do (Wilkins D. et al., 2017).   Workers and managers talked about support and informal supervision being important, but the administrative function of supervision far outweighed the supportive or educative functions in the formal monthly supervision sessions observed.

Nevertheless, there was acknowledgment that workers need help to manage the emotional challenges in working with children and families, the supportive function

of supervision has been described by many others (Collings & Murray, 1996; Gibbs, 2001; Cearley, 2004; Littlechild, 2005; Toasland, 2007; Collins-Camargo & Millar, 2010; Ruch, 2012; Forrester et al., 2013; Wilkins, 2017 a; Wilkins, 2017 b; Morrison et al, 2019; Beddoe et al., 2021). Participants in this study all agreed that supervision relationships *'can have consequences for the way in which they establish relationships and engage with service users'* (Howarth, 2016, pp. 1609) although they were not always clear about what the consequences could be. All workers were aware of the risk of a child coming to serious harm and, either consciously or otherwise, seemed to have a *'deep anxiety'* (Ferguson, 2020, pp. 15) about the work they were involved in, striving to do the best they could. Linked to telling them everything, and writing it down, the relationship with supervisors here, with their experience and oversight, helped workers in direct contact with families continue to work in this system, and put this fear into perspective.

The support that supervisors offered to workers was spoken about as an importance of having positive relationships, which mirrored some of the characteristics of the therapeutic alliance (Ackerman and Hilsenroth, 2003), trust, positive regard and credibility, similar to that seen with workers and families. As others have found *'a good connection between the supervisor and supervisee was also viewed as essential by participants'* (Rankine, 2019, pp. 41). Workers valued relationships with supervisors which made them feel safe and which led to a shared responsibility which represented a form of containment:

> *'containment refers to the ability of an individual – the container – to emotionally manage - contain - difficult unbearable feelings in another person.'* (Morrison et al., 2019, pp. 100).

This is a psycho-dynamic concept that has a long tradition that it is argued is applicable in social work (Toasland, 2007; Ruch, 2012; Harvey and Henderson, 2014; Parr 2016; Winter et al, 2019).

8.3.3 Containment: a social defence against anxiety

At this point it is helpful to consider what we mean by containment and what is being contained. Literature suggests that typology of emotions (Bion, 1970;

Szykierski, 2010; Salmela, 2014; Gross, 2020) can be biological reactions to stimuli or social constructions resulting from normalised behaviour in our society. For our purposes, this debate is a red herring in that the experience of these emotions was very real to the participants and so, no matter what the origin of these emotions, we must think about what impact they have and how they are dealt with. As we have seen fear, anxiety and shame are emotions that imbue children and families social work, and, as such these emotions, although not always overtly discussed, were a consistent backdrop to practice.

The concept of containment has psycho-dynamic origins with emotional security being provided in relationships between the contained and the container (Bion, 1970). This relationship helps to manage the *'way in which emotion is experienced or avoided, managed or denied, kept in or passed on'* (Lawlor, 2009, pp. 525). This concept originates in the parent (mother) – child relationship, in that there is a process that occurs that enables the contained to regulate their emotions (APA, 2022).

Fear is a basic emotion, the function of which is to *'detect threats and dangers to the subject'* (Salmela, 2014, pp. 13), and there is an ensuing fight, flight or freeze response that appears to have some basis in evolutionary biology. However, when one cannot or does not escape the threat that has triggered fear, one must find a way to function in this fearful environment which we have seen led to a pervasive anxiety in this system (Birch, 2015), and the coping mechanism for this was surveillance, watching and writing.

For some workers fear was linked to knowledge that if they made a mistake there was a risk of being publicly shamed (see Chapter 7) and the impact this shame and scapegoating would have on them (Shoesmith, 2016). Shame is a physical and psychological reaction to *'a negative evaluation of the self, …[for] failing to live up to a standard … that the person believes they are responsible for'* (Gibson, 2019 pp. 35). Shame can be a particularly destructive emotion in that it is typically internalised and the negativity of the emotion is turned on oneself (Scheff, 2000; Brown, 2010). No wonder then that when fear and shame are coupled we have a system that is functioning with explicit and implicit anxiety throughout. This was most obviously illustrated in Sally's observation of a social worker voicing their

worries about child death, but also in other's comments in interviews about the awareness of this as a possibility in their work.

Anxiety originates *'when we are worried, tense or afraid – particularly about things that are about to happen, or which we think could happen in the future'* (Mind, 2022). This definition works for our purposes as it sums up the findings of this study, in that all participants referenced the awareness of fear and shame could result from their work in some way at some point in their career. Supervision helped to manage this anxiety and when done well was a protection against fear and shame.

Here is argued that, although not containment in the classic sense as described above, effective supervisors acted as *'containers for unmanageable feelings, thereby enabling individuals and groups to address the situation facing them'.* (Ruch, 2007, pp. 662). This was not the purely dyadic containment described above, in that while the supervisor was the container, they represented a wider system and so containment of the ever-present anxiety was achieved organisationally (Ruch, 2007). This enabled workers and supervisors to function where a solution to the anxiety is not forthcoming and describes how the system that supervision took place in, focussing on surveillance, was a defence against, or a container for, the anxiety held by all. The worker was a container for families anxieties, supervisors for workers, the supervisors for organisations, the organisations for society and defended against all worries about the unpalatable but necessary nature of statutory social work.

How organisations can provide social defences against anxiety was first discussed regarding hospitals in the 1950's. Here *'the core of the anxiety situation for the nurse lies in her relation with the patient'* (Menzies, 1960, pp. 101) and there is *'constant sense of impending crisis'* (Menzies ibid., pp. 110). Arguably, we have seen a shift in social work from relationships and autonomy of practice being central to proceduralisation with a need for conformity (Trevethick, 2011; Ruch, 2012). This denial of the importance of relationships and feelings, the consequent depersonalisation and need for a shared sense of responsibility was observed in this study

> *'a social defence system develops over time as the result of collusive interaction and agreement, often unconscious, between*

members of the organisation as to what form it shall take' (Menzies ibid., pp. 101)

There is need for organisations '*to be designed in a way that offered staff effective containment of their anxieties'* (Lawlor, 2009, pp. 528; Whittaker, 2011).

Workers and supervisors described the strength of the supervisory relationship as crucial in supporting them to work with families, a view shared by their supervisors. This was described as most successful when workers felt that they were cared for and supported in the *'emotional labour'* (Winter et al., 2019) of statutory children's social work, a highly charged environment that often impacts them personally. Although not traditionally seen as containing as discussed above, as said, some workers found the surveillance observed in supervision in this study containing. Where this was coupled with a positive supervision relationship, this enabled workers, despite their worries and anxieties, to share responsibility for their work and provided *'organizational containment'* (Ruch, 2007, pp. 675).

If *'good' supervision has come to be seen as a precondition for effective managerial practice'* (Peach and Horner, 2007 pp. 411), then we must consider whether it is realistic to expect one supervisor to engage in the *'complex work'* (Noble and Irwin, 2009, pp 347) of balancing the functions of supervision in one monthly session. It has been said that supervisors are:

> *'the 'piggy-in-the-middle' … between management and the personal and professional interests of the supervisee' (Noble and Jones, 2009, pp. 351).*

This description resonates with the findings of this study in that all three functions were not seen to be consistently offered in any one session, although we have seen that there were elements of support in the administrative function. In any event workers valued the supervisor's ability to help them feel safe, supported and not alone. Information exchange and surveillance enabled supervisors to make decisions which developed a shared perception of risk. Here this offered emotional support to workers enabling them to continue in their day-to-day work, albeit not always with a clear purpose. The reassurance that responsibility for children's safety was shared with supervisors, and indirectly the organisation, provided a form of containment to workers and helped them carry on in their role, which society believes important. That is, surveillance being a central function in

supervision meant the worker was not alone in carrying the emotional burden of the work, which workers and supervisors found useful.

8.3.4 'Super-vision' or 'snooper-vision'? Systemic power and surveillance

This study showed, in all links of the chain, elements of *'super-vision'* (Noble and Irwin, 2009, pp. 346)*,* a process that was highly valued, and *'snooper-vision'* (Egan et al., 2016, pp. 1629)*,* which was fulfilling an organisational requirement. It mirrored the need that others have found for workers and supervisors to conform to the expectations of their organisations and in turn a wider social context, on occasion becoming a *'marathon of compliance'* (Beddoe, et al., 2021). This third function of supervision, education, was seen as workers developed expertise by being immersed in that community of practice which enabled the development of *'specialist tacit knowledge'* (Collins and Evans, 2002). These expectations were transmitted and rooted in the team and the system in which the worker was immersed and reflect cultures that are created from *'the bottom up'* (Ferguson et al., 2020, pp. 4). This was seen through feedback loops that explicitly and implicitly showed the worker what is expected of them and what good practice was. Supervisors, both by having more experience and being more senior, were thought to know what they were doing. Paula thinking about what Sally would do and Rachel, being a mentor to Jo, means that inevitably workers learn from each other and those with more experience or seniority.   Naturally, we learn from others and we want to conform; so we emulate what we see around us, and what is valued (Gibson, 2019). In this way the *'cultural circuits of value'* (Wetherall, 2012 pp. 16) systemically showed workers what was, and what as not, expected in their practice.

The debate about what a good job is, is ultimately defined by the societal context that the system functions in. What we have seen here is fear resonates throughout the system, which all individuals within it seek to mitigate. All are aware that if a child they are working with is seriously harmed, a chain of blame is begun:

> *'Journalists become outraged at children becoming harmed. The public become angry at the perceived failures of government*

> *agencies. Politicians become anxious about being involved in such perceived failures and ultimately losing their jobs'. (Gibson, 2019, pp. 196)*

Consequently as a human response to fear, people do what they can resolve these negative feelings (Gibson, 2019).

This study corresponds with others which have found ever-present anxiety and blame in statutory children and families' work (Beddoe, 2010; Harvey and Henderson, 2014; Gibson, 2019; Ferguson et al., 2020; Littlechild, 2020; Beddoe et al., 2021). However, despite individual poor performance time and time again not being found to be adequate explanation for child deaths or serious harm being caused through abuse, the notion of individual blame continues in social work practice (Laming, 2003; Brandon et al., 2008; Brandon et al., 2009; Brandon et al., 2010; Brandon et al., 2012; Jay, 2014), and resonated throughout this study.

This originated in the range of narratives in public consciousness that reinforces the blame and shame of individuals where harm has come to a child.

> *'[C]lustered around: 'the failing social worker'; 'the developmental child'; 'the failing and expensive corporate parent'; the 'undervalued birth parent'; and the 'rights-bearing child'. … These combined discourses … framed public and professional understanding of the 'problems' they identified, organising the presentation of knowledge, and, most importantly, providing the parameters within which 'solutions' could be sought' (Winter & Cree, 2016, pp. 1183).*

Within these perceptions of families and social workers,

> *'social workers fail not as soft, do-gooders, but as robotic bureaucrats who have become disconnected from humane responses to suffering. (Warner, 2014, pp. 1645).*

Therefore, where things do go wrong, this indicates systemic failings, as well as individuals making mistakes.

> *'Practitioners who are overwhelmed, not just by the volume of work but also by its nature, may not be able to do even the simple things well. Good support, supervision and a fully staffed workforce is crucial' (Brandon et al, 2009, pp. 1).*

Therefore, key to minimising risk of harm, are safe organisations, who support safe social workers, leading to safer individuals and families.

It has been suggested that social work has become *'ruled by technicist systems'* (Beddoe, pp. 1281) with the development of checklist and mechanistic approaches to practice emerging as solutions to managing and reducing risk (Peach and Horner, 2007; Ruch, 2012). Reflecting ideas of professional development and expertise, as workers develop their skills, they move away from a mechanistic approach to work (Schon, 1991; Collins and Evans, 2002; Dreyfus and Dreyfus 2004; Munro, 2011). Others (Winter et al, 2019; Ferguson 2020) have argued that workers have a range of methods to deal with the unpredictability of the home visit, and are seen here as demonstrators of professional artistry. Schön's descriptions of professions play out

> *'the practitioner who must choose among multiple approaches to practice or devise his own way of combining them' (Schön, 1991 pp. 17).*

Other studies (Beddoe, 2010; Weiss-Daggan et al, 2018, Wilkins, 2018) have also reflected the consistency of supervision and recording in statutory children and families social work that was seen here. On the surface this has the aim of *'the elimination of risk through micro-management and surveillance of practitioners'* (Peach and Horner, 2007, pp. 229) being where power interactions are evident, government and society have the power to regulate and to make demands of families, workers, and organisations, all of which had an influence on what happened in the interactions observed. Workers and supervisors were very aware, in the organisations they were in, doing a good job was closely linked to recording and monitoring of families and workers, both forms of surveillance. In considering the relationship between supervision and practice, it was not supervisors alone, but also the organisation's processes, that provided safety and support enabling workers to continue to function in a job that can be frightening.

What is focussed on in formal supervision, and in interactions outside of this, from supervisors, senior managers and wider teams, means social workers are constantly receiving hidden but unequivocal messages about what they should be doing with families; all participants were approaching their work with a perspective that they were helping families. There did appear to be elements of workers helping families, yet the mechanisms for this were not always obvious. It may be that there was knowledge that was *'out of view'* (Broadhurst and Mason, 2014, pp

591)*,* observations and interviews were isolated snapshots and there remains much that we don't know about how and what helps families.

The power of *'unstated organisational norms – implicit ways of being, doing and thinking'* (Winter et al., 2019, pp. 227) permeate throughout the system which is constantly explicitly and implicitly showing individuals what is expected from them and how they should behave, an example here being the acceptance that there was a need to overwork. All of these norms influence expectations of workers and what their idea of a good job was, which they felt enabled them to carry out their state-sponsored role. However, one wonders if ultimately workers watching families, and supervisors watching workers (and senior managers watching supervisors, cabinet watching children's services, governments and inspectorates watching organisations etc) is really the most effective way to keep children safe. Despite people's descriptions relating to humane practice, going above and beyond in their roles, and their hope of helping relationships, practice and supervision in this study largely meant the surveillance of workers and families: the narrative did not reflect the reality. This resulted from organisational demands of supervision that focus on accountability, so that everyone could prove they had done what they could in the event of serious harm coming to a child.

This study finds a gulf between the rhetoric of supervision policies and procedures, and realities of practice of the formal supervision session.

> *'In the literature there is an idealised type of supervision where the process is highly focused on the individual's professional and personal development needs.' (Beddoe et al., 2021, pp. 3)*

Similarly this study found the administrative functions, in the form of surveillance and accountability, far outweighed any other type of interaction, not living up to the theoretical function of supervision where the support and education needs of the worker were of equal importance. A difference was found between what people said was important (support and reflection) and what was observed (surveillance).

> *'Supervision is akin to the Emperor's New Clothes, scaffolding of a profession without adequate attention to how effective or essential supervision is as a distinct professional practice' (Falender, 2014 pp. 143).*

There were commonalities between the information gathering and surveillance on home visits and formal supervision sessions. Taking account of the many research studies and best practice guides that say social workers find reflective supervision helpful and is most effective, inevitably it is worth considering why, as a profession, this is not the type of supervision being offered, and what the barriers to this are.

The impact of the range of systems and the interactions between them was observed and noted as having a significant influence on what social workers are expected to do by their organisations and wider society. The influence that structural anxiety has been seen, with supervision being the *'safety net'* (Beddoe, 2010, pp. 1287), that mitigates the fear of harm that is held in the system. There was a dominance of systemic surveillance and need for accountability in terms of following processes, which has been described as unhelpful, yet somehow this persists as the prevailing context for child and family social work. Surveillance may heighten and reinforce the need to worry about children, and becoming self-perpetuating; an ever decreasing circle where the more there is a perceived need to watch and write, the more anxieties are heightened leading to increased demands of surveillance, without real understanding of whether this is protective or not. Equally, where workers have been subjected to personal threats, and/or are worried about missing information resulting in harm being caused either to a child or themselves, these worries will seep into their functioning and there are repeated discussions about how fear inhibits workers (Brandon et al., 2020).

Despite the idea of the *'three-link chain'* (Shulman, 1982 in Harkness and Hensley, pp. 506)*,* there remains limited research exploring how supervision and workers influence the outcomes of children and families, or the relationship between the two. Others have found few links in supervision research 'between supervisor, supervisee and clients' (O'Donoghue and Tsui, 2015, pp. 622). This calls for attention, despite likely being a complicated ask, without clear mechanisms for evaluating any relationships between practice and supervision (Lees, 2017; Wilkins et al., 2018 b; Bostock et al., 2019; Wilkins et al., 2020). Social work needs to be able to explain what and how it impacts and helps, we need to be clear about why we do what we do and exactly how families can be supported to keep their children safe.

Theoretically supervision should enable exploration about a worker's motivations, values and beliefs about families, but the reality of this in this study is that it was limited. However, there were functions in the version of supervision that was observed, in that it protected workers and organisations from the fear of blame and criticism. There is a need to develop clearer articulation and understanding about how the social context and systemic messages of society's perception of statutory children and families' social work influence the values and physical and emotional reactions of workers, to families, and vice versa, and how this affects their interactions.

8.4 Considerations for future research, policy and practice

When linking practice with families to supervision, and in thinking about how workers interact with families, consideration needs to be given to exploring whether a change to what a social worker does when working with children and families results in any discernible difference in outcomes for them. This research suggests that workers are often visiting families with no clear purpose, although again there is limited research that explores whether a clear purpose would make any difference to families.   One suggestion then, is that if everyone is just watching everyone else with no real purpose for most, then the whole system, as it is now, is not needed. However, there may be some benefits to statutory children social work in that rates of maltreatment have remained stable, and child deaths by abuse decreased over recent decades (Gilbert, et al., 2012; Sidebotham et al., 2014). Currently characteristics of effective social work have little consensus across the profession, and activity is largely based on what is thought to work, that is workers having the time and ability to form purposeful relationships, a therapeutic alliance with families (Whincup, 2017; Evans et al., 2020; Wilkins et al., 2020) rather than what is known to work. Equally societal context is that it would be unlikely to tolerate there being no system for child protection at all.

With this in mind, future research and policy needs to consider where social workers are locating themselves in terms of the realities of practice, rather than in a theoretical idea of good practice. That is, rather than continually telling social

workers what they should do, we need to take an exploratory stance that looks at what they actually do and what purpose it serves. Developing experimental studies with ideas of changing the way that supervision is delivered, may produce a better understanding of whether a surveillance culture effectively addresses or exacerbates systemic concerns about children's safety. As discussed in chapter two some theorists and researchers have proposed that the administrative and mediation functions of supervision need to be separate from the educative and supportive functions. Indeed Morrison (2005) considers that the supportive and educational elements of supervision must be distinct from the administrative aspects to be successful in meeting the needs of the individual worker, and thus the organisation. However, as observed here, the traditional model of one-to-one sessions that serves the administrative function endures, with workers often feeling supported by this model. Again we need to start here, to consider whether it is realistic to expect one supervisor or one session to meet all three functions, despite theoretical models and ideas saying that supervision must include education and support. Furthermore the recognition and examination of how the social system reinforces this need for surveillance and what function this carries would enable a meaningful debate of how supervision can be most effective, and how that can be provided.

8.5 Conclusion

As seen initially in this thesis the vast majority of research considers supervision through a theoretical lens of what supervision should be, rather than considering what is actually happening in supervision, and then looking at how that influences practice and the *'three-link chain'* (Shulman, 1982 in Harkness and Hensley, pp. 506)*.* However, research evidence is clear, and further reinforced in this study, supervision is considered crucial by social workers, linked to their emotional and professional well-being and feelings of competence. The debate about how 'good' social work is supported by supervision, and whether all the functions can be delivered by one supervisor, using one method, continues (Peach and Horner, 2007; Turner-Daly and Jack, 2017; Wilkins et al., 2018 b; Rankine, 2019). However we have evidenced the importance that social workers place on supervision, and the paucity of objective evidence supporting the impact of

supervision on social work practice does not matter, the feelings and perceptions of workers being able to continue to function in a system imbued with fear is what is important.

This study found complexity behind the diverse interactions between families, social workers, supervisors, organisations and society, at all levels of the social system they are in. The observations of visits showed unpredictability, which workers routinely managed, often skilfully juggling the different demands of practice; the smell, the barking dog, the child wandering about, the adult sister straightening her hair, the unknown and unseen person in the kitchen. We have seen that surveillance and power have a key role, with the idea that if we watch and pay enough attention everyone will be safe, and something is being done, whilst not doing very much at all. Perhaps that doesn't matter, while not having established what effective social work with children and families is, we have seen that predominantly there is a systemic need to observe and watch families, which is believed to keep children safe. Supervision mirrored this surveillance, and translated the information gathered into tasks for the worker to complete. This was the strongest link between supervision and practice in that the tasks allocated to workers in supervision then translated to the interactions they had with families. What was seen was that supervision, like home visits, was complex and unpredictable, in that supervisors were trying to balance the sometime conflicting loyalties of the need to be accountable to the organisation, to the families that are supported, and to the worker.

This study contributes original information to the debate about the influence of supervision on practice, and the observed relationship between supervision and social worker. We have seen workers being bombarded by implicit and explicit systemic worry and concern about children's safety, their own safety, and the resulting need for organisations to be accountable and prove effective work. The connection that was found here, was that of surveillance, and on the surface supervision and practice consisted of mundane processes, which conflicted with theoretical ideas of best practice. Nevertheless, it was apparent that some families and workers were helped and supported by practice which was dominated by information gathering. Therefore it is unwise to discount these practices as the evidence here suggests that these interactions carry an important function.

Rightly or wrongly, workers and supervisors felt a form of containment which enabled them to manage the anxiety inherent in the system. As we are still not clear about what effective social work is, or how to achieve this, it is impossible to understand how supervision might support this. Only by finding out exactly what works with children and families, if indeed that is possible, can we then go on to start to explore what good or effective supervision is, leading us to understand the relationship between the two.

Appendices

Appendix 1 Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee approval

School of Social Sciences
Ysgol Gwyddorau Cymdeithasol
Head of School, Pennaeth yr Ysgol
Dr Tom Hall

Cardiff University
Glamorgan Building
King Edward VII Avenue
Cardiff CF10 3WT
Wales UK

Tel +44(0)29 2087 5179
Fax +44(0)29 2087 4175

www.cardiff.ac.uk/social-sciences

12 February 2018

Our ref: SREC/2682

Lucy Treby
Professional Doctorate Programme
SOCSI

Prifysgol Caerdydd
Adeilad Morgannwg
Rhodfa'r Brenin Edward VII
Caerdydd CF10 3WT
Cymru, Y Deyrnas Unedig

Ffôn +44(0)29 2087 5179
Ffacs +44(0)29 2087 4175

www.caerdydd.ac.uk/social-sciences

Dear Lucy,

Your project entitled *'Exploring the relationship between social work supervision and practice: a small scale study'* has now been approved by the School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee of Cardiff University and you can now commence the project.

If you make any substantial changes with ethical implications to the project as it progresses you need to inform the SREC about the nature of these changes. Such changes could be: 1) changes in the type of participants recruited (e.g. inclusion of a group of potentially vulnerable participants), 2) changes to questionnaires, interview guides etc. (e.g. including new questions on sensitive issues), 3) changes to the way data are handled (e.g. sharing of non-anonymised data with other researchers).

In addition, if anything occurs in your project from which you think the SREC might usefully learn, then please do share this information with us.

All ongoing projects will be monitored and you will be obliged periodically to complete and return a SREC monitoring form.

Please inform the SREC when the project has ended.

Please use the SREC's project reference number above in any future correspondence.

Yours sincerely

Professor Alison Bullock
Chair of School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee
Cc: Donald Forrester, Sarah MacDonald, Adriano Neri da Silva

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Appendix 2 Interview schedules

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR SUPERVISORS

- **What do supervisors say/think about the influence of supervision on direct practice (stage 2)?**

  - **Introductory questions (For 1st & 2nd interviews)**

How long have you been a supervisor?

How long have you supervised this worker for?

How often is supervision?

What are you working towards for that social worker? Any specific goals or areas of development?

  - **What influences your supervision? (For 1st interviews)**

What influences how you supervise?

Can you describe your supervision style? What do you aim for in supervision? What is good or bad supervision? Do you change supervision style? How do you manage poor performance?

Can you describe any training you have had in supervision?

What do you think happens in other people's supervision sessions? How do they supervise?

How do you prepare for supervision?

Can you explain how you decide what to concentrate on?

Do you think there are links between supervision and practice? If so what?

  - **What influenced this specific session? (For 1st & 2nd interviews)**

What do you do to make a relationship with that worker? How do you think they view supervision?

How did you decide what to do in this supervision session? How do you decide to phrase questions or ask more questions about one thing and not another?

What do you think the social worker should do with this family?

How do you think they will carry out your directions?

What do you think they are doing with the family following this session? Describe what you think the home visit looks like?

What do you want them to discuss with the family on their next visit?

What did you do to help them do this in this session?

How do you think this will go with the family? What will be the topic of conversation and how will the S/W approach it?

How did you reach the decisions about what the social worker should do with the family?

What went well or less well in this session? Barriers?

- o **What does practice look like? (For 1st & 2nd interviews)**

What do you think they do to make a relationship with the family? What do you think is the quality of that relationship?

How should social workers make relationships with families in your opinion?

- o **Supervision and Practice (For 1st & 2nd interviews)**

What happens in a typical supervision session with that worker?

How typical was today's supervision? Did my presence impact on the supervision session? If so how?

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR SOCIAL WORKERS

- **What do workers say/think about the influence of supervision on direct practice (stage 4)?**

  - **Introductory questions**

How long have you been qualified?

How long have you been supervised by this supervisor?

Have you had any other supervisors?

How often is supervision?

How do you prepare for supervision?

Describe a supervision session. What happens in them?

What do you think of supervision?

What is helpful in supervision?

  - **Supervision and practice**

Was there anything in the supervision session that helped with this visit? If so, what did you use?

What went well or less well in this supervision session? Barriers to supervision?

Do you think there are links between supervision and practice? If so what?

If you have had different supervisors, how has your practice been different?

Do you think that being happy as a social worker or content with where you are at makes you practise differently?

Did my presence impact on the supervision session? If so how?

  - **What happened in today's practice session?**

What made you choose/ask that family to participate?

What do you do to make a relationship with the family?

What do you think is the quality of that relationship?

What do the family feel about you?

What is important in making relationships with families in your opinion? What do you do to make a relationship with that family?

What are you working towards with that family? Any specific goals or areas of development?

What do the family need to do?

How did you decide what to do in the visit?

What will the family take from today's visit? What do you think they made of it?

How did you help the family know what they needed to do?

How do you think the family will achieve this?

How do you reach the decisions about what to do with the family?

What went well or less well in this home visit? Barriers to practice?

How typical was today's visit?

Did my presence impact on the home visit? If so how?

Appendix 3 Information sheet for supervisors and Social Workers

Who am I and what am I doing?

My name is Lucy Treby.

I am a Registered Social Worker studying for a Professional Doctorate in Social Work. It is the research that I am doing for my doctorate that you will be contributing to.

This research looks at whether there is a relationship between social work supervision and direct practice with families. At this time there is a lot of research that talks about supervision being important to workers, and how it should be done. There are many research projects that talk about what supervision should cover, and how it helps social workers feel supported to do their job. There are few studies that explore about whether worker satisfaction impacts on practice, and there is very little that talk about whether supervision impacts direct practice with families. This project aims to partly fill this gap and explore whether there are any links or any relationship between supervision and practice to be found.

Why am I doing it?

Social workers and managers spend a significant portion of their time in supervision. I want to find out if this time is a useful way to use resources to help families. I may find out that there are specific ways (or not) that supervision can be offered that helps social workers work effectively with families, and this can then be shared.

Why have you been asked to be involved?

Because you are either a Children and Families social worker or a supervisor of a social worker. You are the people I need to help me with this study.

What is involved?

I would like to observe a supervision session and then interview the manager about what they think influences social work practice, and what they think is happening on home visits. I would like to then observe a home visit or direct practice session and interview the social worker about what they think influenced their practice and what they hoped to do in that session.

I would like to audio tape both observations and both interviews and I will then transcribe them. The transcriptions will then be analysed and a research report written.

This study is not judging supervision or direct practice. I am not looking at whether a supervisor or worker is doing a 'good' or 'bad' job, I am only interested in whether there are any indications of a relationship between supervision and practice.

Before the observations start I will support the supervisor and social worker to agree whether to the observations and interviews taking place, and to seek agreement from the family to be observed. I will ask the social worker to explain to the family that if they say no it will **not affect how Children's Services works with them.** If anybody says no, then observations and interviews will not go ahead, but this will be their choice to make and no consequences will come from anybody refusing to take part.

How long will it take?

The observations of supervision and practice will take as long as the supervisor or social workers decide. It will finish when they decide it is finished. The interviews I anticipate will take between 30 minutes and 1 hour. I will make sure that you have time on the day for the interview, and if not rearrange. I will also come to wherever

you find it easier to do the interview – this may be your office or somewhere else.

What will other people know about me?

Nothing. Cardiff University has only agreed for me to do this research if I follow certain rules. These are:

- Keeping all people taking part anonymous. This means only families, the social worker, their supervisor and I know who each other is. I might include what has been said in the final report but no one else will know who said it. This also means that I will remove anything that might mean people can guess who you are; for example, your job title or what team you are in, or even where you work.

- If anyone is in any danger that I see when I am doing the research I have to report it.

- Any information that I keep (tape recordings, written information) has to be kept according to the Data Protection Act 1998. This means that all of the information is kept securely, either in a locked box or encrypted electronically. Information will also be kept for 5 years and after this I will securely destroy all the information.

When I write the report, the anonymous information that has come from you may be shared in the report, or in some other way when I am sharing the findings (for example; presentations or articles). If you want any of these or a copy of the research report this will be given to you.

Further Information or Questions?

If you have any questions please get in touch or ask your social worker to contact me: Email: TrebyLC@cardiff.ac.uk

Appendix 4 Information sheet for families

Research project into how social workers are helped to work with families.

Who am I and what am I doing?

My name is Lucy Treby. I am a Registered Social Worker studying for a Professional Doctorate in Social Work. It is the research that I am doing for my doctorate that you will be contributing to. This is a picture of me.

This research looks at how your children's social worker has been managed while working with your family, and how they then work with you. Supervision is when your children's social worker meets with their manager to discuss and plan how they can help children and families. Supervision normally happens about once a month and is an important part of social work.

At the moment, there is not much research that says whether supervision affects how your children's social worker works with your family; for example, how they talk to you.   I will observe a supervision session between the social worker and their manager, where they will talk about your family, and then observe a visit to you from your children's social worker. I will ask the manager and the social worker what they thought had affected how the social worker worked with your family. I then want to see if there is any links between the way the social worker is managed and how they work with your family.

Why am I doing it?

I want to understand how social workers work with families, and how they are helped to be as good as they can at their job. This can then be used to help managers and social workers learn how to get better at helping families.

Why have you been asked to be involved?

You have been asked to help with the study because your children have a social worker and they will ask you if you would like to be part of this study. **Whether you say yes or no does not affect how the social worker works with your family or the plans that they make. The decision to take part or not is entirely up to you, and Children's Services will not treat your family any differently no matter what your decision is**.

What is involved?

A supervision session between your children's social worker and their manager will be observed, and tape recorded. This will then be written down and analysed. The manager will be asked what they think has affected how the social worker has worked with your family.

I will come on a visit with the social worker, watch, and tape record what happens. What is said on the tape recording will be written down and what the social worker has said will be analysed. What you say will be written down, but as this is not the focus of the study, I am not concerned about what you say. This means that you can say and do exactly as you would normally.

After the visit, I will ask your children's social worker about how they have worked with your family and what they think affected how they worked with you.

You might decide at any point before the visit, on the day, afterwards, or later that you do not want to take part anymore. This is fine, and if you do decide to withdraw, Children's Services will not treat you any differently and this will not affect any plans there may be about your children.

What will other people know about me?

Nothing. Cardiff University has only agreed for me to do this research if I follow certain rules. These are:

- Keeping all people taking part anonymous. This means only families, the social worker, their supervisor and I know who each other is. I might include what has been said in the final report but no one else will know who said it. I will also take out any information about your social worker's job title, where they work, who their manager is and others, so there is no way people can guess who they or you are.

- The only exception to this is if I see or hear about anyone in any danger when I am doing the research I have to report it.

- Any information that I keep (tape recordings, written information) has to be kept according to the Data Protection Act 1998. This means that all of the information is kept securely, either in a locked box or encrypted electronically. Information will also be kept for 5 years and after this I will securely destroy all the information.

When I write the report, the anonymous information that has come from you may be shared in the report, or in some other way when I am sharing the findings (for example; presentations or articles). If you want any of these or a copy of the research report this will be given to you.

Further Information or Questions?

If you have any questions please get in touch or ask your children's social worker to contact me: Email: <u>TrebyLC@cardiff.ac.uk</u>

Appendix 5 Information sheet for children and young people

What is this about?

I am trying to work out how social workers can be better at helping children and their families.

Who am I?

My name is Lucy Treby, I am a social worker, and I go to Cardiff University.   This is a picture of me.

What happens now?

Your social worker talks to their boss every month. They talk about how best to help your family and you. I want to know if this helps them when they come to see you.

Why have you been asked?

Because you have a social worker. That's the only reason.

What will I have to do?

Let me come and tape record a visit from the social worker. I do not mind what you say or do so it would be good if you are the same as normal. I will ask your social worker after about what they did and why.

Will people know who I am?

Only me, you, your family, social worker and their manager. No one else. I will change your name when I write down what people said, so people can not guess who you are. This will only be different if I see or hear about anything dangerous when I am in your house. Then I will have to tell someone to keep people safe.

Do I have to take part?

*No. You can decide if you want to or not. If you say no, that **will not change** the help you get from your social worker. If you say yes, and then change your mind, that is ok. Your social worker will tell me and I will delete all your information.*

 Want to know more?

Ask me on the visit, or ask your family or social worker to contact me. My email is TrebyLC@cardiff.ac.uk

Appendix 6 Consent forms

Consent Form for families

I understand and give consent to the following:

My participation is voluntary. If I do not wish to participate, **this will not affect my family's involvement with Children's Services**.	Initials:
Observations will be audio-taped and transcribed. Anything I say may be used in the final report and to share the findings of the study but anything that identifies me will be removed.	Initials:
I understand that apart from original tape recordings my identity will be removed and my involvement be anonymous.	Initials:
I understand that if anything is dangerous to myself or anyone else through the research this has to be reported to safeguarding agencies.	Initials:
If I decide to withdraw my consent to take part I can do this at any time and with no explanation.	Initials:
I agree to participate in the Research project into how social workers are helped to work with families.	Initials:

Signed: (Participant)   Signed:

Print: Print: Lucy Treby

Date: Date:

Consent Form for social workers and supervisors

I understand and give consent to the following:

My participation is voluntary. If I do not wish to participate, **this will not affect my professional work or the supervisory relationship** in Children's Services.	Initials:
Interviews and observations will be audio-taped and transcribed. Anything I say may be used in the final report and to share the findings of the study but anything that identifies me will be removed.	Initials:
I understand that apart from original tape recordings my identity will be removed and my involvement be anonymous.	Initials:
I understand that if anything is dangerous to myself or anyone else through the research this has to be reported to safeguarding agencies.	Initials:
If I decide to withdraw my consent to take part I can do this at any time and with no explanation.	Initials:
I agree to participate in the Research project into how social workers are helped to work with families.	Initials:

Signed: (Participant)   Signed:

Print: Print: Lucy Treby

Date: Date

Appendix 7 Case study summaries[1]

Case study	Supervisor	Social worker	Length of relationship	Supervision Session	Home visit observation
Irontown City Council					
CS1 – Family Support Team • Supervision Observation 1 • Supervisor Interview 1 • Home visit 1 • SW Interview 1	Mark Qualification date; 12 years Supervisory experience; 5 years different local authorities	Sam (senior) Qualification date; 5 years 4 previous supervisors in one earlier role in current Local Authority	3 years	1 hour 44 minutes	Family with mother seen alone – 45 minutes Length of relationship with family; 9 months Reason for social work support; Non – accidental injury; conclusion of court – placement with parents on a full care order.
CS2 – Family Support Team • Supervision Observation 2 • Supervisor Interview 2 • Social Worker Interview 2	Mark	Chris Qualification date; 5 years 1 previous supervisor in current role	4 years	1 hour 50 minutes	No – unable to be arranged

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[1] All names are pseudonyms and care has been taken to preserve anonymity

CS3 – Family Support Team • Supervision Observation 3 • Supervisor Interview 3 • Home visit Observation 3 • Social Worker Interview 3	Sally Qualification date; 32 years Supervisory experience; 30 years in a range of roles and authorities. In this Local Authority for 7 years, current role for 5 years	Paula (senior) Qualification date; 6 years 2 previous supervisors (1 previous role same authority)	5 years	2 hours 11 minutes	Family with mother and son – 42 minutes Length of relationship with family; 2.5 years Reason for social work support; Care and support plan – concerns around school attendance, child to parent violence, historical domestic abuse and neglect
CS4 – Family Support Team – • Supervision Observation 4 • Supervisor Interview 4 • Home visit Observation 4 • Social Worker Interview 4	Sally	Emma – Qualification date; 4 years 1 previous supervisor (different role and organisation)	3 years	1 hour 35 minutes	Family with 2 children, mother pregnant and father of the unborn baby – 62 minutes Length of relationship with family; 4 weeks Reason for social work support; Father has caused non – accidental injury to previous child. New partner pregnant
CS5 – Family Support Team • Supervision Observation 5 • Supervisor Interview 5	Oscar Qualification date; 12 years Supervisory experience; Current role in this Local Authority 4 months; range	Rebecca Qualification date; 2 years 1 previous supervisor	4 months	1 hour 4 minutes	No – level of risk changed and was deemed too high.

• Social Worker Interview 5	of coaching and mentoring experience in range of local authorities.				
CS6 – Family Support Team • Supervision Observation 6 • Supervisor Interview 6 • Home visit Observation 6 • Social Worker Interview 6	Oscar	Melody – part time Qualification date; 7 years 3 previous supervisors – 1 previous role, same Local Authority	4 months	47 minutes	Family with 4 children and mother – 30 minutes Length of relationship with family; 6 months Reason for social work support; Ongoing Family court proceedings – recommendation removal and full care order; neglect; children currently with parents
CS7 Family Support Team • Supervision Observation 7 • Supervisor Interview 7 • Home visit Observation 7 • Social Worker Interview 7	Jane Qualification date; 13 years Supervisory experience; 5 years. One Local Authority prior to this one; range of roles. Current Local Authority and role 1 year	Rachel (senior) Qualification date; 6 years (working for 4) 3 previous supervisors	1 year	2 hours 54 minutes	Grandfather with young baby – 20 minutes Length of relationship with family; 6 months Reason for social work support; Court proceedings concluded; placed with grandparents on an SGO and supervision order

CS8 Family Support Team • Supervision Observation 8 • Supervisor Interview 8 • Home visit Observation 8 • Social Worker Interview 8	Jane	Jo (newly qualified) Qualification date; 1 year 0 previous supervisors (2 in unqualified role in different organisation)	1 year	1 hour 4 minutes	Family with 3 children, mother and aunt – 18 minutes Length of relationship with family; 6 months Reason for social work support; Child Protection Register, history of 3 domestically abusive relationships.
CS9 Children Looked After Team • Supervision Observation 9 • Supervisor Interview 9 • Social Worker Interview 9	Rita Qualification date; 8 years Supervisory experience; 3 years, all in this Local Authority (3 different teams/roles)	Aleesha Qualification date; 4 years 4 previous supervisors; 1 in current role; 3 in previous role same Local Authority	8 months	1 hour 58 minutes	No – not right time for young person
CS10 Children with Disabilities Team • Supervision Observation 10 • Supervisor Interview 10 • Home visit Observation 10	Graham Qualification date; 9 years Supervisory experience; 4 years in same team - qualified in this team. Previous management experience in non-social work roles	Carole Qualification date; 6 years 2 previous supervisors in this Local Authority - in a different team; 4 in different authority	1 year	1 hour 43 minutes	Mother with teenage son – 53 minutes Length of relationship with family; 6 weeks Reason for social work support; young person with autism about to transition to college

• Social Worker Interview 10					
Bridgepark County Council					
• CS11 – Children with Disabilities Team Supervision Observation 11 • Supervisor Interview 11 • Social Worker Interview 11	Glenna Qualification date; 9 years Supervisory experience; 3 years current role.	Maria Qualification date; 18 years 2 previous supervisors	3 years	1 hour 9 minutes	No – unable to be arranged
CS12 - Children with Disabilities Team • Supervision Observation 12 • Supervisor Interview 12 • Social Worker Interview 12	Glenna	Michael Qualification date; 11 years 1 previous supervisors in current role 9 years. A range in 1 other local authority	1 year	1 hour 25 minutes	No – unable to be arranged

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