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Title: Putting you in the picture: The use of visual imagery in social work supervision

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The literature on social work supervision has consistently documented the impact of the work on the health and wellbeing of individual practitioners and the tensions they experience when mediating organisational demands with the needs of service users. Simultaneously, the quality and content of social work supervision has become increasingly vulnerable to both local and global systemic issues impacting on the profession. It is timely to explore effective short term, self-regulatory methods of support based on short/simple training for professionals. These can be used as a means of complementing and enriching their current supervision experiences and practice. We describe such a method involving an arts-based intervention in which five groups of social work professionals in England (n=30) were invited to explore guided imagery as a tool for reflecting on a challenge or dilemma arising in their everyday practice. Evaluation data was captured from the participants' pre-workshop questionnaire; visual analyses of the images generated and the social workers narratives and post-workshop evaluation. We discuss the potential application of using visual imagery as a tool to bridge gaps in supervision practice and as a simple pedagogic tool for promoting contemplative processes of learning. Visual imagery can be used to strengthen social workers integration of different demands with their emotional supports and coping strategies.

Keywords: Social work supervision; visual imagery; arts-based research; social work support; coping strategies.

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Introduction

The status, purpose and epistemology of social work supervision in the literature has constantly been reviewed and assessed within the context of shifting global socio-political influences, economic agendas and expectations (Hair, 2015). In the last decade, in-depth reviews and syntheses of the research evidence on social work supervision (Bogo and McKnight, 2006; Carpenter, Webb & Bostock, 2013; O'Donoghue and Tsui, 2013; Beddoe, Karvinen-Niinikoski, Ruch, & Ming-sum, 2015; Manthorpe, Moriarty, Hussein, Stevens, & Endellion Sharpe, 2015) have provided rich insights into both what we understand by supervision and how this is practiced across professional, cultural, political, geographic boundaries. The traditional four areas of supervision (supportive, administrative, performance and educational) have also been written about repeatedly without resolution (Hair, 2013). Social work supervision remains a site of contested practice. It lacks a firm empirical basis (Carpenter et al, 2013) and the embedding of innovation in practice also remains challenging. Beddoe et al's (2015) Delphi study of research priorities also suggests that supervision has become increasingly more vulnerable within the context of global austerity. Whilst social work supervision is essential to the profession, Beddoe et al. call for an international programme of research to establish evidence of effectiveness and improvement.

This paper explores the issue of social work practitioners' self-management potential within this complex environment. In the context of the literature on the supportive functions and relationship-based practice within supervision, we report findings from a small study on the introduction of an arts-based intervention to practitioners and its effectiveness in facilitating their support needs. Research concerned with practitioners' direct experiences has been relatively limited. Empirical research into their support needs in supervision can be ethically challenging, particularly given the hierarchical power issues within supervision relationships.

By drawing on findings from a structured evaluation, we reflect on the potential of using visual imagery as a simple tool for promoting contemplative processes. Visual imagery was used to integrate different demands and coping strategies of social workers and they were encouraged to consider its application for enhancing processes present in supervision relationships.

Supportive functions of supervision

It is generally recognised that the content of social work supervision has become more action oriented and managerial than focused on welfare or support (Beddoe, 2010). Supervision also provides a conduit for mediating organisational culture (Bourn and Hafford-Letchfield, 2011) where tacit or taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs in every-day practice can be challenged or allowed to surface. Supervision is also important for increasing staff participation and engagement in delivering quality services. Carpenter et al (2013) found correlations between good supervision and perceived worker effectiveness. Their review suggested that supervision works best where equal attention is given to the social work task and social and emotional support. Developing positive relationship with supervisees and providing opportunities for reflective supervision are important given the emotional content of the work (Smith, 2000; Munro, 2011). According to Beddoe (2010), concomitant scrutiny of practice decisions can also become a constant source of stress and if carried to extremes, such anxieties can stifle practice.

Social workers should be able to identify and work through their own emotional responses and those of others to achieve positive relationships and in developing resilience (Smith 2000; Munro, 2011; Ingram, 2013). If repressed and left un-explored, emotion can also impact on the actions and behaviours of social workers in practice. Ingram (2013) highlights both emotional attunement and empathy as foundations of establishing an open and trusting

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relationship that allows for a significant degree of reflection about practice. Ingram links the need for space and permissions to explore unconscious emotional drives and responses through the lens of relationship-based social work to effective social work decision making.

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This places his model of relationship-based practice within a wider context of processes, statutory responsibilities, professional knowledge and power. Ingram asserts that establishing a cultural shift in the role and models of supervision can ameliorate perceived tensions between technician approaches and relationship-based approaches to social work practice.

Paramount within discourses about supervision is the concept that social workers need to develop resilience in order to cope or 'bounce-back from exposure to significant psychological or environmental adversity inherent to their role (Grant & Kinman, 2011).

Resilience is a complex and multi-faceted construct which refers to the capacity for navigating change in demanding and often unstable, highly pressured environments without succumbing to negative effects. Social workers are expected to be proactive in accessing opportunities and resource in their wider network and to adapt to internal and external stressors in resourceful ways (Klohen, 1996, p.1068). Becoming or being 'resilient' is also said to offer protective factors that enhance the ability to manage emotion and stress. The ways in which social workers become resilient, however, the resources that they find most helpful, and the connection of these to professional support are not as well researched.

Further enquiry is needed into the development and effectiveness of specific work-related interventions capable of enhancing resilience and the wellbeing of social workers (Author 2 & author 1, in review). This is of importance during both a social workers early career and at significant points later on when they are more vulnerable to compassion fatigue and burnout (Carpenter et al, 2012). Garrett (2015) has however contested the literature on resilience for its lack of critique. He suggests that the term is rhetorical and framed by neo-liberal policy

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that minimizes other ‘societal and political milieu’ impacting on social work (p.10). Garrett calls for a reworking and reappraisal of approaches to social workers’ coping strategies that recognizes their sense of agency and places a high value on their collaborative ways of working within the realities of the macro societal structures currently impacting on practice. It is within this controversial context that we explore what the arts might offer as a resource for managing these dilemmas in the provision of more effective supervision.

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The arts as a resource for social work supervision

The growing dominance of technical-rational approaches to professional practice have highlighted the need for transformative or critical epistemologies (Preston & Aslett, 2014) which facilitate wider opportunities for practitioners to foster different ways of knowing and understanding (Simon & Hicks, 2006). Citing the work of England (1986), Cornish (2016) suggests that artistic and critical skills enhance practice evaluation and reflexivity. Similarly, Huss (2013) has researched the importance of the arts for combining conflicted visual and verbal information and has used metaphors and symbols as a mechanism for distancing and counteracting stress. Leonard et al’s (2016) systematic review of the impact of the arts in social work education articulated its role in positioning practice through linking micro and macro level practice perspectives. This included understanding of social structures, power, oppression, social justice and social issues and implications for the workers well-being.

Leonard et al. identified examples of how engagement with the arts facilitated a paradigmatic shift in knowledge and attitudes and skills when applied to social work. The arts involve a process of disruption – one that involves ‘getting it (all) out’ (Savin-Baden and Wimpenny, 2014, p.198) and ‘inhabiting others worlds’ and ‘breaking habits of seeing/knowing’ (Sinding et al’s, 2014, p.190). The arts have been cited as providing a political vehicle for transforming troubles by healing, solving, reframing, politicising, advocating and mobilising

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(Savin-Baden and Wimpenny). This may mitigate managerialist and task-oriented processes which prevent social workers from accessing their own tacit knowledge, blind theories, or inner experience (Kaufman, Huss, & Segal-Engelchin, 2009). Narhi (2001) on the other hand stresses the importance of social workers relying on knowledge created from their experience, by doing and in action (Narhi, 2001). Tacit knowledge is often symbolic, narrative, and visual rather than based on abstract verbal concepts (Tuhawi-Smith, 1999) and the exteriorization of difficult feelings and thoughts of experiences that do not lend themselves to easy verbalization may need to be actively facilitated. Freire and Macedo (1987, p.86) writing about transformative education, further assert that utilizing the arts enable personal interpretation and the engagement of the imagination in relation to social reality.

The use of visual imagery is a useful mechanism for making this inner, hereto invisible or neglected experience and theory more visible and implicit for the social worker (Narhi, 2000), particularly through an analysis of content. Arts based methods are cited as being at the intersection of subjective and objective or psychological, personal and social states typical of social work and can provide an integrative tool in otherwise highly structured environments (Author 2, 2013). Finally the use of the arts in social work has been suggested as a method for exploring problem solving and coping strategies, thus providing a new and potentially creative perspective for working with familiar problems. A compelling conclusion from the above range of studies is that individuals and their communities naturally demonstrate their resilience through the arts, even under the most brutal conditions. The evidence as to why this works does however still need strengthening (Author 2 et al, 2013; Ospina-Kammerer & Dixon, 2001; Author 2 & Author 1, in review).

Study design and methodology

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This exploratory study utilised a structured approach based on an art protocol developed by one of the authors (Author 2 & colleague, 2014). Participating social workers were actively guided to use visual imagery which was used as a narrative trigger to facilitate imagined and projective spaces which in turn provided a safe space for processing and sharing a current practice issue. The study took place in England, UK and participation was voluntary. Social workers from local services were invited to attend an arts-enrichment workshop lasting 1-2 hours in exchange for data collection. Workshops took place in the workplace or the university depending on ease of access and the sample comprised five small groups of social workers (n=30).

Participants completed a pre-workshop online survey. This facilitated the collection of demographic information about the participants. The sample comprised of 23 male and 7 females; 11 had less than 5 years post qualifying social work experience and 19 had 6 years or more. The majority of participants worked in social work with adults (n=23) and out of those, 14 worked in mental health. Almost half (n=14) worked in statutory social work, 12 worked in the National Health Service and the remainder in independent community settings. Fourteen of the participants were supervisees with no experience or role as supervisors. Two participants were training to be supervisors and the remaining 14 were split equally between having less than or more than 5 years' experience as supervisors.

Workshop activities

Following an ice breaking activity, the first phase of the workshop invited the social worker to draw a situation currently challenging them in practice. Plain paper and oil pastels were provided to enable participants to introduce lines and colour. This process encouraged the social worker to situate their personal experience as the main subject in the context of their own practice. On completion of their drawing, they provided a short explanatory one line

narrative on the reverse of the image and rated how challenging the situation was; with 1 being 'not at all challenging' and 10 being 'extremely challenging'. Participants then shared and explained their image within a pair or to the larger group. This stage enabled the individual social worker to explore and define the issue through their own personal narrative and to contextualize it within their current reality. The workshop facilitator took brief notes on these verbal explanations and key points arising from the group discussion.

In the second phase, the social worker returned to their image and focused on their personal response to the situation. They were encouraged to consider the symbolic, metaphorical and compositional elements of the image they created such as the colour, placement, size, symbols, and overall composition. They then identified potential sources of coping and resilience within the situation represented and included these recourses into the image by adding, changing, re-drawing or re-conceptualizing the image's contents, size or boundaries. Again, they wrote a second short explanatory one line narrative on the back of the image and assessed and noted any change in how they now perceived their situation. A reassessment of their original rating scale of 1-10 was also documented. These narratives were shared in the group and any subsequent dialogue noted by the facilitator.

The third phase involved a structured debriefing with the whole group on their responses to using the method and how they might utilise imagery in their supervision and other practice. This discussion was noted and the facilitator highlighted themes to the participants as a means of giving feedback and closing the session.

Finally the participants completed a brief post-workshop evaluation survey capturing open commentary in response to three questions about the value of the activity; any problematic aspects and application within supervision practice. The aim was to explore how this process

might be used as a tool within supervision practice to promote and manage the social work practitioners own voices and wellbeing in the broadest sense.

Ethical issues

Ethical approval was obtained through x university (Ref: SWESC1363) and all participants gave informed consent. Social workers were invited to attend the workshop regardless of whether they consented to be included in data collection. In the event, they all consented to take part in the study and for any material generated to be used. Participants left their image with the researcher. For those wishing to take away their image permission was sought by the researcher to photograph it beforehand. Any identifying features of the participant were removed from images before analysis. The pre and post workshop surveys were also anonymised during data collation. The facilitator closed the session with a short relaxation exercise to re-orientate participants following the activity and made herself available for any participants who wanted to discuss any aspects of the activity further.

Data analysis

From the five workshops, we obtained 30 transformed images from the social workers including their own written explanations during the process and a pre and post numerical rating of the challenge perceived. We collated written notes of the group discussion arising from the participants' generation and explanation of images. The data also included 30 individual evaluations of the intervention from a final brief round robin from each participant in the five groups as well as the post workshop written survey.

The first stage of analysis was based on the social workers own written explanations of their images as the basis for interpretation. These explanations were thematically categorized.

This method drew on individual participants' phenomenological understanding of both the situation and the way they conceptualised any challenges and utilised ways of responding and coping. In other words, the image was used to trigger a embodied hermeneutic narrative of the participant who remained the central interpreter of the image. This social arts-based method differs from projective arts tests which use analytical meta-theory, as in psychology, and also differs from an aesthetic analysis of the image in fine art (Author 2, 2014). The two short explanatory one line narratives written by the participants on the back of their image were collated and clustered into themes according to each of the two before and after phases. The rating scales were considered in this context.

The second analyses took place by looking at the images themselves. With only 30 images, we firstly identified some of the most frequently occurring compositional elements, symbols, and contents and secondly analysed some of the original and diverse descriptions given by social workers of how they represented issues impacting on them in practice including sources of coping and resilience identified and how these were represented. The final analyses explored the relationship between the images, social workers narratives and workshop evaluation in the context of supervision literature.

Our findings suggest that the dual level of drawing the content, and then explaining it, intensified the interpretive voice of the participants within the analysis. The individual nature of each drawing does however make this difficult to verify. Additionally, the thematic analyses were separately and jointly analysed between the authors, one of which is located in a different country and was not involved in the direct data collection in this case study.

Findings

Themes from the social workers images and personal narratives

Unrealistic expectations and loss of control

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Approximately half of the images created by the participants were literal representations of their day-to-day reality. For example, eighteen of the images contained stick figures representing either themselves, their managers, service users or colleagues within a contained and/or crowded space. These would be represented in disproportionate sizes symbolising the different relationships experienced, for example with managers or service users being drawn much larger in size than themselves or looming over the 'social worker' who was sometimes positioned lower down, in the middle or in the corner of the page. There were clear recognisable visual representations of participants practice environments; e.g. desks with high piles of paper, numerous and enlarged clock faces or oversized doors in a closed position. The participants described these as representing issues such as super-bureaucracy, being time-poor and unrealistic expectations about what they could achieve in the actual time available. They portrayed a snapshot of attempts to access support, often not available because supervisors or managers themselves were overwhelmed. The participants also made various images of themselves which included faces with wide staring eyes, with tears sometimes streaming, deep frowns or with hair standing on end. Their narration portrayed feelings of being overwhelmed, feeling numbed and repressing inner emotions of distress, anxiety and anger which were literally spilling out over the page.

Some participants also added common shapes or symbols such as big question marks at the top of the page; heavy weights or dumbbells, numerous currency symbols, hearts that were broken or bleeding, dark heavy clouds, as well as ladders and pathways. These latter symbols were both leading them to a brick wall, edge of the page or to home. These symbols were

narrated as representing some of the environmental challenges, of being weighed down by responsibilities or feeling blocked in some way.

In about a third of the compositions, participants completely filled the paper with bold strong lines and colours representing their own over commitment to work for example. They used dark colours such as purple, brown and black to colour in virtually all the spaces. One supervisor stated:

“Everyone is constantly ‘at me’ about this child and the team is just not helping as they don’t give me any space to think, so I never get anywhere, how can I be child-centred, it’s just all rhetoric”.

During the second stage of the activity, this participant went on to add richer warmer colours to all of the spaces to “fill in the gaps between me and the team; who are an untapped source of support, so perhaps I need to ask them more openly for help even if the demands don’t change, I am sure if I let them know how I was feeling, they would respond warmly”.

Chaotic environments

Only 10 of the participants directly used metaphor in their generated images such as rockets; nuclear explosion; jagged glass; a mountain precipice, a forest and skull and crossbones.

“I drew a difficult member of staff who is going towards the precipice and is about to fall off into the abyss and she doesn’t see it, if she continues to alienate everyone, there will be no one there to catch her and it’s a long way down”.

When asked to add resources in the second stage, this manager added trees which reached up into the side of the mountain to break the fall of the member of staff and outreached hands holding a heart to represent the empathy that the supervisor felt she did not always show to

the member of staff. The supervisor described how the environment was impacting on this person and how easy it was to blame and scapegoat individuals who were struggling.

Work-life balance and wider support networks

Another common theme in the images was the tensions that participants felt between their work and home life. Many images contained a representation of their home as a small house positioned far away or in the distance, at the end of a road or being separated from their home by a barrier such as a brick wall or big open space. Work life balance was a key concern within the social workers' narratives, and many described feeling torn when their professional responsibilities ate into their holiday time or made it difficult to make plans outside of work.

"I just came back from holidays and still in a holiday mood. I already want to drive straight back home because the traffic is so stressful"

They also narrated a story of feeling guilty and having insufficient quality time for their own personal relationships. When adding resources in the second stage, they added sunshine representing the love or optimism shared with their loved ones and the support given including colleagues who were also described in filial terms. No less than 17 people added the colour yellow or sunshine to their images representing light and warmth that they felt was always present.

Repositioning challenges in the second stage

Overall, whilst the majority of social workers described some distressing and challenging situations in their practice, they were able to identify and represent the different contributing elements which enabled them to glimpse the reality and situate this within a wider context.

Having articulated their feelings both through composition and description, the second stage of the process enabled most to reposition challenges and problems as social, economic or political, rather than personal. At the stage when the social workers presented their image, the social workers were not asked to formally diagnose what was going on, but were encouraged to think about the issue through its constituent parts and then about how s/he might be reacting through engaging with “how” rather “what” was drawn and the context of practice. The assumption behind this stage is that they cannot always change the reality of the situation (demands from the organisation; increasing bureaucracy; time allocated) but they could perhaps change the way that that they reacted, understood or responded to it. These new insights and reactions were then concretized in an image. This shifting of meaning through adding and changing are illustrated in two examples from this study:

Example – Figure 1



The social worker drew a spiral in bold red lines representing how he felt about the constant change in the organisation going on around him and leaving him with little sense of direction or control. He placed barbs in the spiral describing these as places that can catch him out if he didn't keep up. He was taking a family through court proceedings and trying to complete a major report with his student at the end of placement. This had an adverse impact on him trying to take leave which in turn was impacting on his family life. Three large red blobs represented danger in all three current challenges that he was trying to balance. When asked to add recourses, the social worker recognised that the accumulation of these feelings was potentially affecting his health and effectiveness as a supervisor. This meant he felt unable to take much needed leave, which in turn meant that his stress was not only less visible to the team, but because of gender expectations, he also did not allow himself to be vulnerable or ask for help. The social worker added a body to his spiral and balanced the red blobs by adding lighter coloured blobs. The image was transformed into a snail signifying a slower pace with space for critical reflection. He acknowledged his potential for humour by giving the snail a half smile. He talked about stepping out of the spiral and sticking close to the ground to make sure he looked for opportunities to participate or lead in change rather than getting caught up in it. He talked about the snail leaving a trail which was the history of the organisation and the culture which he was in a position to model through his solid experience and expertise, particularly for his student who had experienced a positive learning experience despite the demands.

Example - Figure 2



This social worker conveyed a similar sense of chaos and incoherence by initially drawing a nuclear bomb which she said represented a violent situation that had erupted with a service user. The strong lines and texture filling either side of the page represented the fuzziness she felt in separating the violent incident from the contributing factors, mainly lack of resources leading up to it. Her service user had become frustrated because of threatened homelessness and she felt very guilty because she was unable to help in what was clearly a situation of great need and desperation. When adding resources, the social worker transformed the image into a tree and recognised that her expertise, knowledge and skills would provide her with strong roots that would enable her to work more collaboratively with the service users and other organisations in order to make a good argument for providing support. She added fruit as a metaphor for this: ‘I am the tree and I added apples that are threatening to drop. I will speak up and show how the apples representing my experience ripen so that my manager listens to me’’. She added yellow which represented her optimism for the service user and green grass and flowers symbolising new beginnings and the importance of nurturing people after the incident so that both the service user and the team would reflect, learn and be allowed to flourish.

Our calculation of the average rating (on a scale of 1-10) for how challenging the participants found their situation before and after the guided imagery activity demonstrated a mean score of 6.8 and 4.8 respectively. All but two participants reduced their scores after adding resources to their images. One person however stated that they felt even more anxious having done the exercise as it made them realise the extent and range of issues that they were dealing with over a period of time but recognised that they needed to ‘get a grip and take action to prevent any further escalation’.

Themes from the reflective discussion and post workshop survey

When asked about the potential application of the activity to their supervision relationships and practice contexts, the participants were able to envisage situations where simple imagery, both spoken and drawn, could be utilised. This was also seen as potentially transferable to situations beyond supervision, for example with service users and in their own personal lives.

Those in supervisory roles commented on elements of the process that could be used very briefly or quickly to trigger increased dialogue with difficult or stuck situations. One spoke about ‘giving the student a voice through asking them to describe a colour to symbolise mood’ which would give them insight into what the student had grasped about the home environment after a visit or more generally to encourage them to be more open about their learning or progress on placement. Visual imagery was seen as useful for both supervisors and supervisees who were struggling to discuss a difficult issue and the use of a simple drawing activity was seen as a stepping stone to breaking down and improving communication. Almost without exception, all of the participants recognised the value of reconnecting with the power of non-verbal communication which they felt could become lost in their day-to-day practice or marginalised within the business of their working relationships. Nineteen of the participants mentioned the value of gaining insight through symbolism or merely by taking time to represent situations visually. This, they said could assist them in being able to exercise more control over their situation and helping them ‘to stay calm and reflective’. One talked about ‘addressing stress emotionally’ and ‘emotion’ was a word used frequently in the feedback given. Some of the other language used expressed optimism for example ‘to look at coping from a brighter side’. One supervisor stated:

“ This is an alternative way of lightening, refreshing and checking greater understanding and makes me think more about what I can do when presented with certain feelings, and how not to transfer your own (feelings) back”

Sixteen participants said they would use visual imagery with service users who may not be a position to articulate their situation well particularly within mental health or with people who lacked motivation or 'to build a therapeutic relationship'. This included its use to explain complex and confusing issues for service users. Three people thought it would be useful as a creative method within team meetings or group supervision given its capacity to stimulate listening in a person focused way but which also had the capacity to generate collegial support resulting in a richer discussion of issues that people might otherwise remain silent about. One of the main themes from the post activity discussion was learning about others through visually representing their relationships. This was seen as helpful in understanding themselves and in demonstrating willingness to trust emotional and bodily experiences to improve communication and to be in a position to make changes to communication habits.

Inevitably, some participants struggled with the activity and found that engagement with drawing and expressing themselves non-verbally did not sit well with their learning style and one said that it actually increased her level of anxiety. Two participants expressed the view that it was a 'bit specialist', 'not applicable' to or 'too abstract'. One person said that they felt physically limited by insufficient drawing skills. Three people wanted more detailed guidance that a time limited workshop could not offer and one practice educator was very keen to know of further strategies they could use to relieve negative feelings as a result of the activity.

Limitations

This was a small qualitative study involving a one-off activity with 5 groups and building on the authors' own and others existing work about using visual imagery in research and practice with the caring professions (Author 2 & 1, in review; Author 2). The study could be developed further to evaluate implementation in day-to-day practice perhaps combined with

pre and post measures of self-efficacy or stress over longer periods of time. Qualitative explanations of drawings are also time consuming and also not always culturally compatible.

The analysis did not consider the differences between supervisors and supervisees. We did

not have disabled people in our sample but the method could be adapted for those with visual and other impairments.

Discussion

This literature on social work supervision has consistently documented the potential impact of the work on the health and wellbeing of individual practitioners and the tensions they experience in mediating organisational demands with the needs of service users.

Simultaneously, the quality and content of social work supervision has become increasingly vulnerable to both local and global systemic issues impacting on practice. This was evident in the common issues that the participants in this study raised through their individual drawings and narratives which illustrated clearly the impact of managerial and technicist demands on individual social workers' stress and coping strategies. These findings suggest that introducing effective short term, self-regulatory methods of support which require short/simple training for professionals could be used as a means of complementing and enriching social workers supervision experiences and practice in a range of settings. The activity reinforced the value of being given the opportunity to respond to the realities of macro pressures impacting on their practice and to exteriorise both the thoughts and feelings this evokes. Stanford (2011, p.1514) discusses how the progressive politics of social work has been threatened as social workers confront the widening gulf between professional ideals and the realities of their practice. This requires making space and accessing a range of tools to help make sense of the feelings that such a climate evokes and being able to connect with an increased sense of personal and professional agency. This requires moving away from

action oriented supervision and making its support functions more explicit. Using imagery in the practice setting could be employed in the short term, even immediately, within a challenging situation when the image is still not consolidated within the memory (Author 2 & colleague, 2014). This may be of particular relevance to social workers who do not have time or resources to verbally elaborate on the continuous high demands and accountability that they experience within their day-to-day practice. From the evaluation of the experiences of social workers who explored the use of visual imagery in this study, the exposure to embodied experience that demands the use of all of their senses led them to produce some difficult and potentially emotionally expressive visual images. By facilitating their narratives with dialogue and collegial support, the retrieval and interpretation of these experiences were then subject to reframing and re-interpretation with mostly positive effect in many cases. One interpretation of the findings might point to the therapeutic nature of transforming an image without extensive verbalization. Previous research by Author 2 (2014) with health professionals using imagery alongside quantitative measures of subjective units of distress suggested that a possible explanation for the reduction of feelings through transforming an image may be due to the sense of control achieved just by being active in this process. This is in comparison with the lack of control that working in an environment of continuous upheaval, demands and stress evokes. She further suggests that the sense of control and resourcefulness in transforming an image does not necessarily need verbal elaboration. The transformed image may constitute a concrete prompt for a calmer emotional state that can be self-activated rather than ruminating on the negative image. Further research could help to elucidate these proposed processes.

Further, the use of metaphors like those shown in examples 1 and 2 earlier, generated new dimensions of understanding and capacity for explanation for those individuals about every

day challenges which had become embedded, routine and unchallenged. These opportunities are essential to the development of resilience and to enhance social workers collaborative tendencies (Garrett, 2015). It also adds to the literature which shows that accessibility of arts within every day practice is already being used to enrich more traditional ways in which social workers use critical reflection or enhance emotional support (Leonard et al, 2016).

Foster (2016) discusses the negotiation of ethics within arts-based research which need to be situated to ensure that the research and process is done in a way that benefits the individual or group who are the focus of the research and in constant dialogue with them. She cites Clarke (2013, p.77) who emphasises the need to 'recognise participants as active, ethically reflexive agents who negotiate the ethical conundrums of everyday life'. Emotion and affective responses to arts-based research can also be understood as assisting in producing knowledge. Foster (2016) reminds us that emotions have usually been considered 'potentially or actually subversive of knowledge' (p.63) and in opposition to rational thought and reason. One of the strengths of this approach was the way in which participants were able to add resources to their image that connected with reason and tangible structural support.

For some, incorporating visual imagery into conventional supervision practice may assist the accessing of harder to reach emotions which might not be shared within power relationships such as those referred to by participants here. If used selectively and sensitively, it could enable a degree of self-management as well as aiding collaboration in exploring a difficult issue and contextualising it. In his discussion about the experiences of fear in social work, Smith (2000) suggests that it might not always be possible for social workers to regain their confidence but that opportunities to reflect on the experience and thoughtful consideration of the repercussions can aid supervisees in finding a re-assurance in and of themselves and their abilities. Arts based activities like the one reported here can be of vital assistance if they

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offer a supportive process of restoring balance. Winnicott writing about supervision in the 1960s' stressed the importance of allowing the person to find their own meaning in their own way and in their own time. Visual imagery in this study was used to help social workers integrate the content, direction and experience of practice which, according to Ingram (2013) can impact negatively on the actions and behaviours of social workers if repressed and left unexplored. Ingram asserts that a cultural shift in the role and models of supervision can ameliorate perceived tensions between technician approaches and relationship-based approaches to practice. More bold approaches and methods are needed to address these enduring and challenging issues in contemporary social work practice.

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