The team as a secure base revisited: remote working and resilience among child and family social workers during COVID-19

Social work teams can provide a secure base for social workers, supporting them to manage the emotional demands of child and family social work (Biggart *et al,* 2017). The informal support available within teams can promote resilience, sustaining workers who undertake vital work with vulnerable children and families. As the Covid-19 pandemic has necessitated increased remote working, social workers have needed to maximise their use of virtual networks and navigate new ways of connecting with colleagues. This article draws on research with social workers undertaken between 19th March and 13th June, 2020. We outline social workers' and managers' perspectives on team support, examining the extent to which social work teams can function as a secure base in the context of remote working. We conclude with the implications of remote working and consider the legacy of Covid-19 for child and family social work.

Introduction

On the 23rd of March 2020, the UK began a period of lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. With the exception of limited essential home visits, social workers were directed to work from home. Since social work is a collaborative rather than individual activity, remote working has significant implications for practitioners, particularly in terms of their resilience.

Research has indicated that social work teams play a vital role in social worker resilience, retention and decision-making. Informal discussion between colleagues can provide emotional containment (Ruch, 2007) and positive co-worker relationships can act as a buffer to work stress, promoting resilience and retention (McFadden *et al,* 2019). 'Verbal reasoning' with colleagues can help workers to resolve challenging situations (Avby *et al,* 2015:58) while informal discussions within teams can provide a 'frame' for sensemaking (Helm, 2016: 29) and decision-making (Saltiel, 2016). These studies emphasise the importance of face-to-face interactions within teams, and the centrality of the office in providing a space for these vital, ad hoc discussions. There is a risk that working remotely may make it more difficult for social workers to access the support they need. Here, the concept of the team as a secure base (Biggart *et al,*

2017) is useful. Being able to hold in mind a representation of the team as a secure base may help workers to feel supported, even when they are physically distant from their colleagues.

The team as a secure base

The secure base concept comes from attachment theory, which identifies relationships as key to emotional regulation (Bowlby, 1988). A relationship with an attuned and available caregiver can provide a 'secure base' in times of stress, helping the child to manage their emotions, develop resilience and navigate the world with confidence (Schofield and Beek, 2014). As the child develops, they rely less on physical proximity to their secure base figure, and begin develop internalised representations of their caregivers which they are able to call to mind in time of anxiety when their caregiver may not be immediately available. This in turn helps the child to regulate their emotions and develop resilience. The secure base model is also relevant to emotional regulation in adulthood. It has been argued that the social work team can provide a secure base for social workers, helping them to manage the emotional challenges of practice (Biggart *et al,* 2017). Child and family social work is a rewarding, yet emotionally demanding, profession (Horwath, 2016). To practice effectively, workers require the opportunity to process their emotions, and the team environment can provide a safe space for this. Sharing experiences, discussing practice and feeling understood by one's colleagues can provide emotional containment, which restores the capacity for workers to think clearly about their work.

Social workers have reported that when their team embodies the secure base dimensions of availability, sensitivity, acceptance, cooperation and a sense of belonging, it can help them to manage stressors and feel more confident in their practice (Biggart *et al,* 2017). By contrast, where the team does not embody these dimensions, workers may be 'preoccupied with anxiety and fear about unresolved issues at the interface of self and work' (Biggart *et al,* 2017: 127). This has implications for their resilience and capacity to support children and families. In this study, we examined social workers' experiences of working remotely through the lens of the secure base.

The research

This research was carried out between 19th March and 13th June. In early March, the research team at *Name* University were interviewing social workers across England for a research project focusing on the retention of experienced practitioners. Following the announcement of lockdown in England, social workers began to describe changes to their work practices in response to social distancing measures. We began to capture these responses as part of a secondary research project focusing on the impact of COVID-19 on child and family social work. The study was granted ethical approval from the University Ethics Committee, the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) and additional ethical approvals were obtained from the research governance panels of the participating local authorities. Two researchers at *Name* University undertook 31 in-depth qualitative interviews with child and family social workers across 9 local authorities (LAs) in England. This included: 2 service managers, 10 team managers, 10 senior social workers and 9 social workers.

Participants were recruited via a gatekeeper in their organisation, usually the Principal Social Worker for the LA. Participants were drawn from a range of services, including family support, child protection, fostering and adoption. With the exception of two social workers who shared a team, each participant was drawn from a different team.

During the interviews, we captured social workers' and managers' perspectives on their practice as they adapted to remote working. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) model of thematic analysis. An inductive approach was used to identify themes in social workers' experiences of working from home. Social workers tended to focus on the impact of working away from colleagues, and how their teams provided virtual support. This led us to revisit the concept of the team as a secure base in social work (Biggart *et al,* 2017). A second stage of theoretical thematic analysis was therefore undertaken, using the secure base model as a sensitising concept to frame the emerging themes. In this short article, we focus on three key areas:

1. How social workers experienced the sudden shift to increased remote working.
2. The virtual social work team as a secure base.
3. The challenges for sustaining the team as a secure base when working remotely.

As an interview-based study, our research had some limitations. Our picture of team support and remote working is grounded in the perceptions of individual social workers. These views may not be representative of their team's functioning as a whole. Here, observational research on virtual team support would be useful, alongside triangulation of workers' perspectives within a shared team. However, in this study we were mindful of the ethical imperative to minimise the burden of research on social work teams at a time of unprecedented pressure and change. Despite this, the research enabled us to generate a vivid picture of social workers' experiences as the pandemic unfolded. It is likely that remote working will increasingly become a feature of social work as the pandemic continues. This research has enabled us to capture and anticipate some of the challenges that will need to be addressed.

1. The shift to increased remote working

Aside from urgent home visits and occasional trips to the office to access paper files, workers needed to adapt quickly to remote working. For those who already worked at home part of the week, this transition was easier. Others described hastily improvised workspaces in living rooms, on kitchen tables and beds. Some LAs offered a grant of approximately £200 to enable workers to purchase equipment such as desks, chairs and headsets. As well as assisting with working from home, this helped workers to feel valued by their organisation and more positive about working remotely. However, in the first week following lockdown, some workers expressed a sense of disconnectedness from their team. This stemmed from the loss of physical connection to the team (from not being in the office), but also the initial difficulties in forming a digital connection (due to IT issues, and unfamiliarity with new technology). This physical disconnect led to the loss of their team as secure base. Face-to-face contact was perceived to be crucial in sustaining secure base relationships:

> I think this is the kind of job where you need people around, you need the support, you need to talk through cases, you need to be able to go back to a haven where people are going to understand what you're doing. If you don't have that face-to-face contact with people you lose those relationships, and you lose that confidence…. (SW30)

Whilst the need to stay connected with their team was important, it was also vital for workers to create boundaries between private and professional spaces. Prior to lockdown, the separation between the office and home environment had provided an important psychological boundary. As one worker stated:

> My life is in sections... I've got a work section and a home section... (SW36)

However, working from home eroded this boundary, and work began to encroach on home-life:

> You have to adjust to turning your home into a professional environment. That has drawbacks, because that's the place where you wind down, and it was for me before, but now it's not quite the same… (SW52)

Compartmentalization is a psychological defence mechanism (Bekes *et al,* 2019) where the individual temporarily splits off, or 'compartmentalizes' something stressful, enabling them to move on to another task. Compartmentalization can help workers to separate work from home life. When working from home, many workers found it harder to compartmentalize, particularly when they had challenging interactions with families online:

> You're inviting families into your home… it makes your safe space feel less safe. (SW58)

Social workers with caring responsibilities had to cope with these alongside their work with families, which made work/home boundary management even more difficult. The erosion of boundaries negatively affected workers' resilience; some described working from home as more 'intense' (SW50) and 'tiring' (SW49) and 'unsustainable' (SW58). There was also a risk that wishing to protect themselves from work/life intrusion could make workers less available to families.

2. The virtual team as a secure base

During the first few days of lockdown, workers felt particularly disorientated by the loss of contact with their team. However, there was greater optimism among the workers we interviewed towards the end of lockdown. As new systems were created for staying in touch, the virtual team began to operate as a secure base.

Team members described using Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp and email to keep in touch. This typically consisted of a combination of video, audio call and text messaging. Teams had previously used some of these methods alongside face-to-face contact. Following lockdown, these became the main channel through which social workers accessed peer support. As workers became more familiar with remote working, their initial concerns began to dissipate as they adapted with support to new circumstances:

> I've had to learn about very quickly about technologies… I didn't think I'd ever have a supervision over computer! It's actually worked out okay, we're very well supported and we've got a lot of social networks going. I thought I was going to feel isolated… not being able to discuss things with people but I haven't felt like that at all. (SW42)

Cooperation is a key facet of the secure base team – in order to feel confident in one's ability to practice effectively (self-efficacy), practitioners need to feel that they can work with others to find solutions (Biggart *et al,* 2017). As SW42's comments illustrate, as workers found new ways to stay connected, they were more able to work cooperatively and felt more confident in their practice. As virtual connections were established, the team could fulfil some of its other secure base functions. A sense of team membership and belonging can help workers to feel less isolated, particularly when working away from the office (Biggart *et al,* 2017). Recognising this, team managers described making a conscious effort to create shared, virtual team spaces for collaboration and informal connection:

> I create a close, family atmosphere in the team… During Covid-19 we have a morning meeting every day at 8:45. Last week, we had a virtual breakfast. Next week, we've got a virtual lunch. The week after we've got a quiz one lunchtime. (PA41)

Most social workers described feeling 'very well supported' or 'more supported' than usual as a result of keeping in touch with colleagues virtually. Some reported that their relationships with colleagues were closer, and that their team had become more cohesive during the crisis. This sense of belonging could help social workers to feel valued within their teams, despite the physical distance.

The combination of increased check-ins with colleagues and a reduction in travel time meant that some workers felt less 'tired' and more 'energised' (SW51) in their

interactions with families. Typically, the formal team spaces such as weekly meetings, peer supervision and training workshops were set up first – this left an initial gap in terms of informal, peer support. An important dimension of the secure base team is acceptance - workers need to feel comfortable to express vulnerabilities and feel accepted when they do so (Biggart *et al,* 2017). When working remotely, these informal opportunities were initially lost. This created a sense of emotional 'build up', which couldn't be expressed in formal spaces, such as the virtual team meeting:

> The manager will always ask how we are all feeling and… people are a reluctant to talk about how they're really feeling in that sort of environment. Yesterday the team manager was off… it was like the barriers were down. We've got a fantastic relationship with our manager… but without that management element, the floodgates opened. ... Everybody was saying how stressed they were, how anxious, how we were working at capacity...
>
> (SW45)

This cathartic opening of the emotional floodgates during this video call was ultimately helpful. The team were able to acknowledge their anxieties and this led to a supportive and productive conversation with their manager. As lockdown continued, social workers themselves created informal spaces to express day-to-day concerns, such as team WhatsApp groups. In these informal spaces, workers could feel more confident to share their worries, frustrations, seek reassurance and discuss ideas about cases without fear of censure. In

A key aspect of the secure base team is availability – a sense of trust that 'people are there for me' (Biggart et al, 2017: 122). In the absence of face-to-face contact, workers signalled their availability to colleagues in various ways. One team set up a 'virtual water cooler meeting' (SW49) where social workers could simply dial-in, work together or talk with no fixed agenda. Even when they were not directly interacting, switching their online profile to 'available' could help foster a sense of availability. Managers and senior social workers made particular efforts to signal their availability, scheduling slots in their diary, which were visible to the team. Having a visibly available manager helped social workers to feel more supported and secure.

Sensitivity is a key quality of the secure base team. Feeling 'known and understood' by one's team (Biggart *et al,* 2017: 123) can, in turn, help workers to feel remain sensitive to the needs of colleagues and service users. Social workers particularly valued managers who understood their own personal situation during lockdown, for

instance offering them the flexibility to log-on after hours where they had caring responsibilities during the day. However, when working remotely, it could be difficult for team members to be as 'tuned in' (Biggart *et al,* 2017: 123) and sensitive to the needs of colleagues as they would be in the office – these challenges are explored below.

3. The virtual team as a secure base – challenges and risks for resilience

Remote working presented challenges for the team's functioning as a secure base. Informal ways of keeping in touch, whilst helpful for connecting, could emphasise difficult dynamics within the team. Some workers, particularly those that were newer to the team, felt marginalised in virtual interactions and spoke of in-groups and out-groups reflected in the team's WhatsApp interactions.

These informal ways of staying in touch could also further erode the work/home life boundary:

> It gave me anxiety because on a normal day, in normal life pre-COVID, my office phone would be switched off after working hours. I learnt a long time ago that I have to have my boundaries. So when you see sometimes 18 WhatsApp messages… It gave me anxiety… It's difficult when you're a larger group, you have the popular voices. It's almost like being back at school. The same old names pop up… the stronger people in the group tend respond to themselves, it's not inclusive. (SW46)

Despite attempts to signal their availability, remote working did create a loss of immediacy in terms of peer support. Rather than having a brief conversation in the office, workers now had to make a conscious choice to contact a colleague:

> Picking up the phone… and explaining the situation is very different to going back to the office and seeing a worker you can talk to about something… it comes naturally, whereas having to pick up the phone, you think twice… (SW30)

Knowing that their colleagues and managers were also busy and under pressure could dissuade workers from picking up the phone. As the weeks went by, this loss of immediate support from colleagues began to have an impact:

> You would normally just have a little chit chat to your friends while you're making a cup of tea, that kind of thing I do miss. I think it impacts on your emotional wellbeing (SW45)

After the initial adjustment period, teams that already provided a secure base tended to continue to do so during lockdown. For other teams, working remotely compounded existing difficulties. Teams that were less established, those with a higher proportion of temporary staff and newly-qualified social workers (NQSWs) tended to experience greater challenges. For these teams, the loss of the office space was particularly significant. When working in the office, a worker might readily offer advice to a NQSW, or naturally fall into conversation with a new colleague. However, lack of face-to-face contact could make it far more difficult to initiate supportive relationships. NQSWs were at particular risk, as they lost the important vicarious learning opportunities provided by the office environment. Lack of face-to-face interaction could make it difficult for colleagues to identify when they needed support. Sensitivity is a key dimension of the secure base team – attuned and attentive colleagues might notice a colleague having a difficult day and offer empathy, support and understanding (Biggart *et al,* 2017). When working remotely, this was more difficult:

> For NQSWS, it only takes a couple of cases to fall off a cliff. Without the right support, people just become isolated and the work drops off. Some people just don't talk about it – and it's only by observing people in an office situation that you realise they are getting into difficulties (SW54)

Collegial discussions in the office provide an important space for discussing cases, helping social workers to 'confirm or amend their judgements' (Biggart *et al,* 2017: 125). While case discussions could take place virtually, the range of perspectives workers would naturally receive in the office were limited. Some workers noticed that their perception of risk had begun to shift as a result. For instance, one worker said she could no longer tell if new referrals were more serious or whether 'they felt more heavy' because she was less able to share her thinking.

The future of remote working in child and family social work

The concept of the team as a secure base (Biggart *et al,* 2017) provides a useful way to conceptualise the challenges of remote working during Covid-19. The model

suggests that a positive mental representation of one's team can promote a sense of competence and resilience among workers, even where one might be temporarily physically distant from one's colleagues. While they differed in their views on how often it was necessary, the majority of social workers we spoke to identified the need for *some* form of in-person contact with colleagues to sustain them in their work. In Bowby's original (1988) model, the child's ability call to mind internalised representations of caregiver was dependent upon prior face-to-face, supportive interactions with their caregiver. Similarly, where social workers described feeling supported by their team they tended to also report having established these face-to-face supportive relationships with their team prior to lockdown. This suggests that social work teams can provide a secure base for virtual working, but there may be particular challenges for less-established teams, new workers and less experienced practitioners who may be less able to draw on established relationships within the team to sustain them.

After the initial adjustment period, many of the social workers in our sample described how their teams were able to successfully function as a secure base. Where their teams were able to create virtual spaces signalling availability, sensitivity, acceptance, cooperation and a sense of belonging, workers described being more able to manage the emotional demands of virtual practice. The dimensions of the secure base model (see Biggart *et al,* 2017) may provide a useful framework for managers to consider when creating virtual team spaces. Identifying the virtual team spaces for keeping in touch (such as the team WhatsApp group, 'watercooler' style virtual meetings, peer supervision etc.) and considering the extent to which each of these spaces embody the five secure base dimensions (Biggart *et al,* 2017) - and where there are gaps - could be a helpful exercise. Our research suggests that managers may need to pay particular attention to the secure base dimension of sensitivity. In the office, social workers could recognise subtle behavioural cues that might indicate that a colleague was struggling. When working remotely, social workers described this as much more difficult. This suggests that proactive and regular checking-in with individual workers is vitally important – particularly for new team members or those who may be reluctant to disclose that they are struggling.

This research supports Biggart *et al's* (2017) findings that supervisors and managers have a key role to play in the team's 'beliefs about the availability of support' (Biggart

et al, 2017: 127). Social workers who described their teams as successfully providing a secure base for remote working, generally identified a strong steer from the team manager in creating supportive spaces, signalling their availability and remaining sensitive to the individual needs of team members. It was beneficial for workers to have some spaces (such as Team WhatsApp groups) without management oversight, enabling them to speak more freely. However, managers needed to remain alert to difficult dynamics and situations where less-established team members might feel marginalised. It is therefore important that attention is paid to supporting those workers (such as NQSWs) who may not have established relationships with colleagues. This could include identifying opportunities for shadowing colleagues on virtual home visits and setting up mentoring, or 'buddying' opportunities.

Other issues facing workers were practical (no dedicated office space to work safely and confidentially) and psychological. Social workers described various helpful strategies for 'switching off' from work. This included muting work discussions on instant messaging services after a certain time, and putting their laptop away as a psychological way of 'clocking off'. These small, practical actions could have important psychological benefits.

Agile working practices have been a feature of social work for some time (Jeyasingham, 2016) and concerns have been raised about the impact of remote working on worker resilience (Horwath, 2016). Many workers were concerned that the fact they had 'coped' during lockdown would act as a justification to shift entirely to remote working as a cost-cutting measure. Some workers questioned whether they would stay in the profession if working exclusively from home became mandatory. In the future, it is likely that social work practice will continue to operate as a hybrid model, combining face-to-face and virtual practice. It is therefore vitally important that a thorough consultation is undertaken on the impact and sustainability of remote working. Before remote working becomes 'the new normal' an evidence base needs to be developed which identifies the specific risks of remote working for workers' resilience, reasoning and retention.

References

Avby, G., Nilsen, P., Ellstrom, P. (2015) Knowledge use and learning in everyday social work practice: a study in child investigation work. *Child and Family Social Work,* 22, 4, 51-61.

Békés V., Ferstenberg Y.A., Perry J.C. (2019) Compartmentalization. In: Zeigler-Hill V., Shackelford T. (eds) *Encyclopedia of Personality and Individual Differences*. Springer, Cham.

Bowlby, J. (1988). *A secure base: Clinical applications of attachment theory.* London: Routledge.

Braun, V. and Clarke. V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology,* 32, 7, 77-101.

Biggart, L., Ward, E., Cook, L. and Schofield, G. (2017) The team as a secure base: promoting resilience and competence in social work. *Children and Youth Services Review,* 83, 119-130.

Helm, D. (2016) Sense-making in a social work office: an ethnographic study of safeguarding judgements. *Child and Family Social Work,* 21, 1, 26-35.

Horwath, J. (2016) The toxic duo: the neglected practitioner and a parent who fails to meet the needs of their child. *British Journal of Social Work,* 46, 6, 1602-1616.

Jeyasingham, D. (2016) Open spaces, supple bodies? Considering the impact of agile working on social work practice. *Child and Family Social Work,* 21, 2, 209-217.

McFadden, P. Mallett, J., Campbell, A. and Taylor, B. (2019) Explaining self-reported resilience in child protection social work: the role of organisational factors, demographic information and job characteristics. *British Journal of Social Work,* 49, 198-216.

Ruch, G. (2007) Reflective practice in contemporary childcare social work: the role of containment. *British Journal of Social Work,* 37, 659-680.

Saltiel, D. (2016) Observing frontline decision making in child protection. *British Journal of Social Work,* 46, 7, 2104-2119.

Schofield, G., & Beek, M. (2014). The secure base model: Promoting attachment and resilience in foster care and adoption. London: BAAF