ORIGINAL ARTICLE

CHILD & FAMILY SOCIAL WORK | WILEY

Story-building and narrative in social workers' case-talk: A model of social work sensemaking

Dr Mark Gregory [ORCID]

School of Social Work and Centre for Research on Children and Families, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK

Correspondence
Mark Gregory, School of Social Work and Centre for Research on Children and Families, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK.
Email: mark.gregory@uea.ac.uk

Abstract

Despite the importance of decision-making in child and family social work, how social workers make sense of information in undertaking assessments and making decisions has received limited attention. Drawing on an ethnographic study of four child and family social work teams across two English local authorities, this article demonstrates how social workers make sense of the lives of children and families through a story-building process. Data comprise interviews with social workers and supervisors ($n = 22$), recordings of one-to-one supervision ($n = 17$) and observations of everyday case-talk ($n = 21$). A model of social work sensemaking is offered, consisting of three stages: (1) initial formulations, (2) developing the narrative and (3) adopted account. Across these stages, social workers engage in different forms of sensemaking activity, such as case framing, testing and weighing information, and generating hypotheses. Collegial and supervisory case-talk provide opportunities for social workers to scrutinize their developing narratives; however, some forms of case-talk can limit or short-cut sensemaking. This model has applications for practitioners and organizations as a tool to promote reflection on how social workers make sense of their cases. Further recommendations include social workers having access to formal and informal reflective spaces where sensemaking case-talk can take place.

KEYWORDS
children and families, decision-making, intuition, narrative, sensemaking, story-building

1 | INTRODUCTION

Concerns about the quality and variability of decision-making in relation to risk of harm to children frequently recur in international social work literature (Benbenishty et al., 2015; Gillingham & Humphreys, 2010; Lauritzen et al., 2018) and in reviews of practice that have followed high profile child deaths (CSPRP, 2022; Laming, 2003, 2009; MacAlister, 2022; Munro, 2011). This sharpened focus on social work decision-making has coincided with growing academic interest in how organizational processes (Broadhurst et al., 2010; Kirkman & Melrose, 2014) and culture (Leigh, 2016) influence individual decision-makers, and on the case-level factors that social workers consider when making decisions (Lauritzen et al., 2018). Research has also highlighted how individual factors – such as levels of experience (Leonard & O'Connor, 2018; Whittaker, 2018) and the dispositions of social workers (Benbenishty et al., 2015; Keddell, 2017) – influence decision-making.

However, *how* social workers interpret information to reach judgements and make decisions has been less well-explored. This sensemaking activity has received relatively little attention, and our understanding of how social workers go from gathering relevant data to formulating a judgement is tentative and provisional (Cook & Gregory, 2020). This article addresses this gap, drawing on findings from an ethnographic study of sensemaking across different forms of supervisory and collegial case-talk to explore how social workers make sense of information through a process of story-building or constructing a case narrative. Dialogue with supervisors and peers plays a key role in how social workers make sense of information, and a model is proposed to explain how social workers – through case-talk – move from initial formulations of cases to develop robust and plausible case narratives that can inform their decision-making.

2 | WHAT IS SENSEMAKING?

In their work with children and families, social workers have to weigh, interpret and make sense of partial, ambiguous and contradictory information (van de Luitgaarden, 2011). The way that social workers make sense of this complexity is often through narrative, with De Bortoli and Dolan (2015: 2152–2153), arguing that "social workers like to tell stories that explain the circumstances of individuals". This sensemaking activity precedes and informs decision-making and judgement (Platt & Turney, 2014). Whilst social work judgements can be seen as expressions of best working hypotheses and decisions as concrete choices between a set of discrete options (Helm, 2016), sensemaking is a process of *formulation* which involves attaching meaning and significance to information (Cook & Gregory, 2020).

Cook and Gregory (2020) identify three lenses for exploring sensemaking: intuition, emotion and social storytelling. These lenses are not distinct; intuitive gut feelings play a crucial role in social workers' sensemaking, and these gut feelings are both affective and cognitive (Topolinski, 2011). Emotions provide an important means through which experience is made sense of; however, whilst emotional responses can signal the need for further sensemaking and influence how meaning and significance are attached to information, social workers are often ambivalent about the value of emotions in their work (O'Connor, 2020) and we know comparatively little about *how* emotions contribute to sensemaking (Cook & Gregory, 2020). Drawing chiefly on theoretical work from the psychology of decision-making (Kahneman & Klein, 2009) and the field of organizational studies (Weick, 1995), and the limited empirical work on sensemaking in social work (Helm, 2016, 2017; Whittaker, 2018), sensemaking is conceptualized here as a psychosocial activity that involves the interplay of cognitive, affective and social processes.

2.1 | Sensemaking, intuition and analysis

Sensemaking often takes place when incongruence is encountered (Klein et al., 2007); for example, Cook (2017) describes a social worker

being struck by a parent's inability to recall recent conversations with another social worker during a home visit. These responses tend to be based on intuition, a cognitive process that is rapid, unconscious and hard to articulate (Kahneman & Klein, 2009). Frequently, individuals make sense of situations intuitively, through a process of pattern-matching or recognition-primed decision-making (Klein, 2015). Using existing mental frames based on accumulated knowledge and experience, individuals recognize salient situational cues and unconsciously match these to a repertoire of mental frames to make intuitive judgements (Klein, 2015). When there is a lack of coherence between existing frames and the situation at hand, this triggers a conscious sensemaking process (Klein et al., 2007). In Cook's (2017) example, the social worker went away and weighed up possible hypotheses – such as not wishing to recall information or deliberately withholding painful information – that could explain the incongruence in the parent's behaviour.

Sensemaking, therefore, involves movement between conscious and non-conscious cognition (Cook & Gregory, 2020). At times, social workers use existing frames to make sense of information intuitively; at other times, a more analytic process – involving deliberate, slow and conscious cognition (Kahneman, 2011) – will be triggered. Helm (2021), drawing on the work of Hammond (1996), argues that sensemaking takes place on a continuum, with pure unconscious intuition at one end of the spectrum and computational analytic cognition at the other, and it is useful to think of sensemaking as involving movement across this spectrum.

2.2 | Sensemaking and story-building

Sensemaking also involves story-building; individuals and organizations construct narratives to explain anomalous or uncertain circumstances (Weick, 1995). In doing so, they simultaneously construct and present a sense of their identity; sensemaking involves not only making sense of information but also making sense of who we are as organizational actors (Weick, 1995). The process of story-building begins with *enactment*, whereby cues and information are noticed and bracketed as requiring explanation (Weick et al., 2005). For a social worker, receiving a referral or a new piece of information triggers the process of enactment; research suggests that, even at this early stage, social workers begin to focus on the most pertinent situational cues (Whittaker, 2018). This is followed by *selection*, where relevant cues and information are compared with mental models – analogous to the repertoires of frames previously discussed (Klein et al., 2007) – to begin explaining the situation at hand (Weick et al., 2005). At this stage, social workers gather information – through home visits, speaking to other professionals and family members, and revisiting case files – and interpret it using their accumulated knowledge and experience. Finally, the stage of *retention* involves the story being adopted as explanatory; as information is made sense of and incorporated into the developing narrative, the story becomes more robust and plausible to the individual and others (Weick et al., 2005). At this stage, the social worker has drawn together the information gathered into a

coherent narrative that can explain the referral or new information and inform subsequent decision-making. In this way, sensemaking is both retrospective, in that it explains something that has happened, and prospective, in that it informs future action (Weick et al., 2005).

Sensemaking is often a collaborative activity (Weick et al., 2005); Helm's ethnographic work (2016) illustrates how sensemaking takes place through everyday interactions in the office space. Social workers use conversational frames – often expressing an emotional response or gut feeling – to initiate sensemaking dialogue with colleagues (Helm, 2016). The conversations that follow offer a space to make sense of uncertainty and test hypotheses (Helm, 2017). Helm's (2016, 2017) work highlights the interaction amongst intuitive, emotional and social processes in the way that social workers make sense of their work.

2.3 | Collegial case-talk and sensemaking

The relationship between intuition and analysis, and the role of collegial case-talk in social work sensemaking are under-researched (Helm, 2021). These two aspects of sensemaking are related; dialogue with colleagues provides a means for moving from more intuitive reasoning, which is employed in dynamic and unstructured environments such as home visits, to more analytic reasoning when the social worker returns to the more structured office space (Helm, 2021). Collegial case-talk helps social workers to slow down their thinking and engage in more deliberate sensemaking. Echoing the notion that sensemaking involves a process of story-building, Helm (2021: 2339) suggests that peer case discussion helps social works to shift from a 'set of complex data towards a coherent narrative structure'.

Drawing on Klein's (2015) theory of recognition-primed decision-making, Whittaker (2018) found that experienced social workers are able to use their repertoire of frames to intuitively identify and make sense of pertinent situational cues. Through dialogue with colleagues, social workers then move towards more analytic modes of reasoning to collaboratively work up a most plausible hypothesis (Whittaker, 2018). Though there are some parallels between Whittaker's (2018) observations and the story-building processes of *enactment* and *selection*, how social workers construct case narratives in their day-to-day practice has received limited empirical attention. This article seeks to address this gap by exploring how social workers construct narratives about the children and families they work with and the role that collegial dialogue plays in supporting this sensemaking activity.

3 | METHOD

This article is based on an ethnographic study of sensemaking across different forms of supervisory case discussion. Three types of data were gathered during the period of fieldwork: semi-structured interviews with social workers and supervisors, observations of case discussions and supervision recordings. A broad conception of

supervision was used, which included informal supervision, informal peer supervision and group case discussion. Whilst research highlights that much of what we think of as supervision takes place outside monthly one-to-one supervision sessions (Wilkins et al., 2017), little is known about how supervisory practice is enacted in everyday practice. Despite the literature arguing that supervision should provide a space for sensemaking (Patterson, 2019), there is little empirical work on how supervision, in all its forms, supports sensemaking.

Following approval from the university ethics committee, four social work teams across two local authority sites were identified to take part in the study. All four teams undertook social work assessments of children and families following acceptance of a referral, with two teams also holding cases long-term, whilst the other two teams held cases for up to 6 months following assessment. A total of 22 key participants – 5 supervisors and 17 social workers – took part in the study, with remaining team members consenting to participate in the observation element of the research. Key participants were interviewed and had a one-to-one supervision audio recorded (Table 1).

Approximately 3 months were spent in each site, observing everyday case-talk amongst social workers, their peers, and supervisors in the office space. At each site, one formal group case discussion was also observed. Handwritten fieldnotes were taken contemporaneously and observation reports were written up during a break in the middle of longer observations and immediately following observation visits. The fieldnotes were written descriptively with a focus on preserving dialogue; this is a common way of writing up fieldnotes in ethnographic research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Observation visits lasted between 3 and 6 hours, with a break in the middle of visits of 4 hours or more. An extensive reflexive journal was kept during the period of fieldwork to counteract the risk of overidentifying with participants (Ruch & Julkunen, 2016) and to reflect on how my own positioning may influence my observations (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Researcher subjectivity and credibility are key issues in ethnographic research; the use of a reflexive journal, alongside having multiple forms of data to enable triangulation in the analysis, helped to ensure rigour (Fetterman, 2010; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

The interviews took place after the period of observation and sought to elicit narrative responses about cases. Participants were invited to discuss a recent complex or challenging case and a second case where supervision had been especially useful. These cases were characterized by decision-making that was experienced as borderline or as evoking a strong emotional response. Open-ended questions were used, for example, 'Tell me about a case you've worked on in the last two months that you have found to be particularly complex or challenging.' Mindful of my own background as a practice supervisor, I sought to avoid 'supervising' participants, and thus more actively co-constructing narratives with them, by using generic follow-up questions – for example, 'How has your thinking about the case changed?' – as opposed to exploring aspects of the case that piqued my interest.

Data were analysed sequentially, beginning with the interview data, then moving on to supervision transcripts, and finally ethnographic fieldnotes. The interviews provided a useful baseline for how social workers talked about their cases when invited to do so;

TABLE 1 Data collected from the two sites.

Site	Observation visits	Supervision recordings	Interviews with supervisors	Interviews with supervisees
Site 1	11	9	3	9
Site 2	10	8	2	8
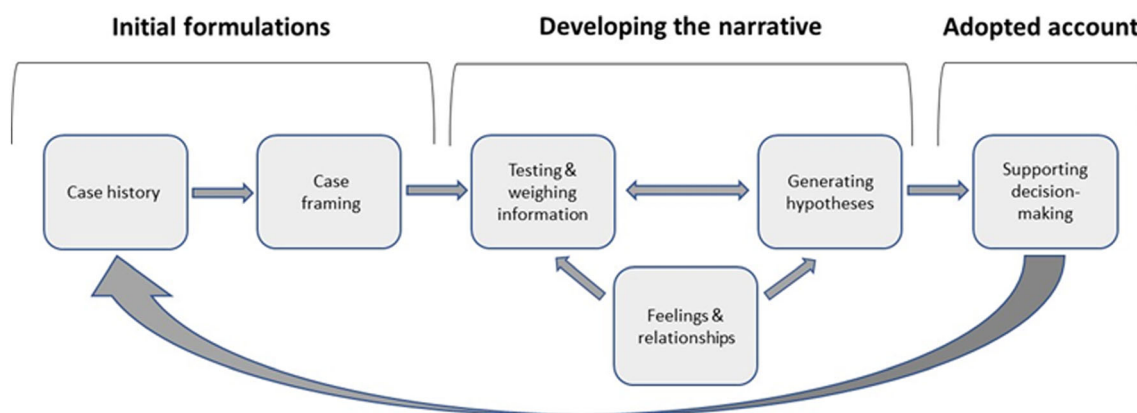
FIGURE 1 Constructing a case narrative.

subsequent analysis enabled identification of patterns, commonalities and differences across the three types of data. Each set of data was analysed thematically, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage process. Codes were generated inductively before being grouped thematically; themes were then refined and described through an iterative process of going between the data extracts and the themes generated to ensure congruence (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Further analysis took place by looking at case-talk from a narrative perspective to explore how social workers' case narratives were constructed and how they developed over time. Braun and Clarke (2021) note that thematic analysis can be usefully combined with other methods of analysis where this is done reflexively, transparently and with justification. Ultimately, this analytic method enabled cross-data themes to be located within a narrative framework that supported the development of the model of social work sensemaking presented in Figure 1.

4 | FINDINGS

The analysis of the data led to the identification of three stages of sensemaking: *initial formulations*, *developing the narrative* and *adopted account*. Six themes were identified across the stages and these themes will be explored below.

The themes of *case history* and *case framing* will be explored in relation to how social workers initially formulate cases. The themes of *testing and weighing information*, *feelings and relationships*, and *generating hypotheses* will then be looked at as means through which social workers develop their narratives. Once hypotheses have been generated, tested and worked up, alternative hypotheses fall away; this leaves a single, most plausible narrative that *supports decision-making* and becomes an adopted account. Figure 1 shows the relationship

between the different stages of sensemaking and between the themes identified at each stage.

These findings draw on extracts from the different forms of data to explore the identified themes. Individual cases will be followed across the stages to highlight how social workers develop case narratives across time and across different contexts.

4.1 | Stage one: Initial formulations

When receiving a new referral or when asked to undertake a new assessment, the participants offered initial formulations of cases that provisionally identified their key concern. Where a new period of assessment was to be undertaken on an ongoing case, the participants drew on the known *case history* to inform their initial formulation of the case, whereas new referrals tended to trigger an intuitive process of *case framing* to make sense of the referral information.

4.1.1 | Case history

When discussing cases where a new assessment – such as a parenting capacity assessment – needed to be undertaken on a family already known to the team, case history heavily influenced participants' initial formulations of cases:

> The relationship with the current father is characterized with domestic abuse, and that was the previous concerns when the first child was removed ... most of the concerns are around disguised compliance (Interview with Katie, SW)

This way of formulating cases served to identify certain 'givens' that needed to be tested within the new period of assessment. That the parents' relationship was 'characterized' by domestic abuse indicated that this had been adopted as a narrative about their relationship, whereas concerns about disguised compliance similarly occupied a prominent position in the social worker's initial formulation of the family's circumstances.

4.1.2 | Case framing

In contrast, where information was made sense of in response to a new referral, the participants offered brief framings that took the form of provisional judgements, including about the perceived level of risk:

> I originally looked at it and the concerns that came in I was like 'We can probably close this. It's dirty kids. It's kids that aren't being bathed. It's dirty clothes' (Interview with Jesse, SW)

The participants identified pertinent cues and used existing mental frames to make rapid intuitive judgements about cases (Klein, 2015), with the inclusion of implicit or explicit judgements about level of risk serving an important function in triaging incoming referrals. Within the office-space, framing of cases often took place collaboratively:

> Jackie says, looking at the chronology, 'This has all the hallmarks of fabricated illness.' Toni says it really does … there are so many medical professionals involved that she's not sure who to invite to the strategy discussion (Fieldnotes)

The two experienced social workers recognized salient cues within the referral information and, using mental frames based on their knowledge of fabricated illness, were able to offer a provisional intuitive judgement. Within supervision, it was notable that supervisors engaged in a similar process, first listening to their supervisee sharing information and then rapidly framing the case in response:

> Jan: Cos they have been open and shut quite a bit haven't they? Cos, is domestic violence a feature or is it…?
> Leigh: Home conditions this time.
> Jan: Oh home conditions.
> Leigh: And education, school. Non-attendance for S, it's quite poor, and home conditions were quite poor.
> Jan: Okay, so neglect possibly? (Supervision)

Cases were frequently framed using established professional categories of harm – such as neglect – or by parental behaviour, such as domestic violence or substance misuse, with this type of framing being especially evident within supervision. Supervisors often adopted the role of expert in one-to-one supervision, drawing on their practice knowledge to quickly make sense of the information presented to them by their supervisees.

Framing cases served a dual purpose: firstly, to offer a provisional judgement about case type and level of concern, and secondly, to prime social workers for how to proceed with gathering and making sense of information during the period of assessment.

4.2 | Stage two: Developing the narrative

As the assessment process continued, the participants gathered and made sense of information from a range of sources to inform their developing narrative. The participants sought to *test and weigh information* and discussed how *feelings and relationships* might influence their sensemaking. Collegial and supervisory dialogue enabled participants to *generate hypotheses* and test these against the evidence they had gathered.

4.2.1 | Testing and weighing information

First-hand information provided an important means for social workers to evidence or challenge their developing narrative:

> I think meeting the kids was the real 'Okay, something's off here' … I can smell him, when I left the room there was a smell on me and I hadn't touched him (Interview with Jesse, SW)

The visceral experience of being able to smell the child, even after the visit had concluded, signalled to Jesse that the child's circumstances may be more worrying than they had first thought. Jesse had initially framed the case as being about 'dirty kids' and likely to close. However, the first-hand experience of seeing one of the children in school began to prompt a shift in thinking. Kahneman (2011) notes that it is common for individuals to be biased towards first-hand information and, in particular, information that is vivid. As noted previously, analytic reasoning can act as a check on some the more intuitive understanding that is gained from immediate sensory experience (Kahneman, 2011). In this instance, Jesse tested the information that they were gathering – including putting together a chronology following the visit – against their professional knowledge of chronic neglect:

> Difficulty with relationships, difficulty with communicating, difficulty with weight gain, difficulty with general functioning as an adult, disengaged from school, not attending education – all of the classic stuff (Interview with Jesse, SW)

Congruence and coherence played an important role in how information was made sense of; the feeling of incongruence triggered by Jesse's first-hand experience prompted them to reconsider their initial intuitive formulation of the case and to seek further information. The

information gathered was interpreted as more congruent with a narrative that the children were experiencing chronic neglect; this narrative was worked up by testing and weighing further information against the developing narrative, and incorporating congruent information into the narrative to make it more robust. Ultimately, this led to Jesse adopting an account of the children as suffering chronic neglect that supported a recommendation to initiate a child protection conference.

In other instances, information was tested and weighed against a stronger adopted narrative about the family:

> At one point with her previous child she was on the child in need plan, and I thought that's really positive … But, talking it through in my team … you need to look deeper into that, and was that a stable period, or was that just bumbling along the bottom of child in need (Interview with Katie, SW)

Information that Katie had initially interpreted as being positive was recast in a more sceptical light; worries that the mother was untrustworthy meant that potentially positive information or signs of progress seemingly could not be fully trusted. These worries were reinforced by others at a group case discussion:

> Courtney (Supervisor) says, disguised compliance is a big issue for me … Robin (Supervisor) says, if she was honest and allowing unannounced visits and had everything else you've listed as a strength it'd be good. Robin adds, but disguised compliance just seems to be running through it all (Fieldnotes from group case discussion)

Courtney and Robin used the same language of 'disguised compliance' that Katie had used in her initial formulation of the case. This label can become self-reinforcing and create conditions where meaningful change becomes impossible to evidence (Leigh et al., 2020).

Within formal supervision, professional shortcuts were used to quickly move from the information being shared to making a judgement about the level of concern and prospective next steps. *Impact on the child* was one such shortcut:

> Ashley: [S]o M's dad, if he, even if he is using drugs, we're thinking maybe cocaine…?
> Brooke: Yes.
> Ashley: How's it impacting on his parenting of M?
> Brooke: Well, looking at his school report it looks like he is not supported with his learning at home … in terms of his presentation and basic care needs nobody has raised any concerns, including school. So his general care is good, he's always presented well (Supervision)

This kind of questioning enabled supervisors to rapidly test and weigh whether the information evidenced a negative impact on the child; reflecting on this conversation, Ashley acknowledged that this was something they did to focus their social workers on what they felt was most pertinent and to progress towards decision-making:

> [E]ven if he is doing drugs what is the impact on the little boy? Because actually he's going to school, he's doing alright, he's not like amazing, dad won't do homework with him but is that a child protection concern? We have to draw the line. We can't help all children (Interview with Ashley, Supervisor)

It was notable, however, that conversations about the impact on the child in supervision were often brief and rarely considered future impact. In this sense, the use of impact on the child offered supervisors a means of quickly establishing the likelihood of a child needing a service, providing a shortcut to decision-making and helping to manage workflow. Another method used by supervisors to make sense of information was to draw on the child protection threshold of *significant harm*:

> Sam: [W]hat's the significant harm?
> Casey: Well, they're not getting their medical needs met … why are [they] deliberately telling us things that we know aren't true? … They told us that they'd been told that they can bid [on a house] now. I don't think that they can … by November, baby will be due in 6 weeks. I'm just really concerned that we'd be looking at…
> Sam: But nothing in there about any of these children suffering significant harm (Supervision)

The imperative to manage workflow in a busy environment can lead to supervision becoming a forum for rapid decision-making (Saltiel, 2017), particularly in relation to thresholds at which cases may close or escalate. However, these kinds of interactions in supervision can leave the complexity of children's lives underexplored and the emotional experiences of social workers unreflected upon. In the above interaction, Casey appeared to be anxious about the family's circumstances, but this feeling was not named and its significance was not explored. Emotional experiences can, when reflected upon, be a valuable source of information (Turney & Ruch, 2018); however, within the recorded supervisions, there was little evidence of emotions being a source of information that could be tested and weighed to inform the developing narrative.

4.2.2 | Feelings and relationships

In the office space and in interview, the participants were cognisant of their emotional and relational experiences in working with children and families and how these may influence the narratives they develop about them. Relationships were sometimes seen as a vehicle for positive change to take place and, from a sensemaking

point of view, it was acknowledged that good relationships with families could lead to a more positive interpretation of their circumstances:

> [W]e'd kind of gone from her pushing me away and pushing me away to suddenly opening up … I suppose that that has had an impact on it cos then that's made me feel more positive for her new baby. Whereas if I didn't have that relationship with her, if she'd carried on pushing me away, I probably would have felt differently (Interview with Jo, SW)

Parental openness and cooperation have been found by other studies to influence perceptions of risk, with openness and cooperation leading to more optimistic appraisals of risk to the child (Cook, 2017). The participants were mindful that their feelings about parents might influence their sensemaking; as one social worker noted, there is a risk that emotional responses may distort how information is interpreted and so checking one's own emotional responses is a key:

> I'm having to check myself on it because I really want Mum to do well … [but] we can't just have confirmation bias on Mum (Interview with Chris, SW)

The possibility of bias when a positive or negative perception of a parent or family is held is one of the key reasons why emotional responses can act as both resource or risk in social work judgement (Cook, 2019). This ambivalence was evident in participants' talk about the emotionally-laden relationships that exist between social workers and families:

> Steph says that families will often tell you that you are the best social worker that they've ever had and says, 'They're grooming you' … before adding that it may not be deliberate grooming and that it could just be human nature trying to be pleasant and building a relationship (Fieldnotes)

Although social workers sometimes acknowledged the benefits of positive mutual engagement, scepticism about worker–family relationships often pervaded. This meant that, rather than being a sensemaking resource, feelings and relationships were frequently perceived as something to be wary of.

4.2.3 | Generating hypotheses

Conversations between colleagues played an important role in generating and scrutinizing hypotheses. The collaborative nature of selecting and working up a best hypothesis has been noted in other studies (Whittaker, 2018) and was evident in observations of everyday case-talk:

Toni says, the worries are that they are preventing A from meeting his milestones … Toni then says, just putting this out there, is she scared of parenting? … Chris says, 'Playing devil's advocate' if you've seen A have seizures and the doctor says no to a diagnosis, is it wrong to seek a second opinion? (Fieldnotes)

This discussion related to the previously mentioned 'fabricated illness' case and took place weeks after the initial triage discussion. At this stage, two hypotheses appeared to be held in mind and tested against the information gathered. By playing 'devil's advocate', Chris explored the hypothesis that this was a concerned mother who was advocating for her child's medical needs, whereas Toni adopted a more sceptical position. This type of dialogue enabled social workers to test emerging hypotheses and to consider alternative explanations.

Within supervision, the exploration of hypotheses often had a different flavour; hypotheses were more explicitly worked up between the supervisor and supervisee to agree a singular shared narrative:

Ashley: So what's our hypothesis? I think we had a few didn't we …

Jesse: I think she didn't protect them and H, so she absolutely failed to protect them in every way, there's no getting past that, but I think she report it because of, culturally, that's not how it's managed. It's very done within the family, dad's the breadwinner so without him how would they live? How'd they get money? Whereas before I guess there was question marks about whether she was complicit with it in allowing it to happen because there was a gain for her somewhere along the line.

Ashley: Yeah, so, I think also fear of deportation.

Jesse: All the immigration stuff (Supervision)

At this stage of the discussion, although Jesse expressed a favoured hypothesis, other hypotheses – including the mother's fear of deportation – were still being considered. As the conversation progressed, Ashley's suggested hypothesis became more central to the developing narrative:

Ashley: They never would have spoken out because of massive fear about all of them going back.

Jesse: Massive fear (Supervision)

The language used to describe the impact of the fear of deportation became more certain as the conversation progressed; both parties tacitly agreed that the hypothesis plausibly explained the mother's behaviour, whereas the earlier hypothesis faded from the discussion, representing a shift towards an adopted account being agreed.

4.3 | Stage 3: Adopted account

At this final stage, there was less evidence of ongoing sensemaking, instead the participants tended to offer singular, definitive accounts that served a function in *supporting decision-making*.

4.3.1 | Supporting decision-making

Adopted accounts often incorporated additional justifications – such as input from other services or a family's willingness to engage – for the decision being made:

> Brooke: That's why I have got the IDVA. In terms of parenting she done everything right. She is working with AJ, the health visitor, she is doing everything. In terms of her parenting even health visitor has no concerns, she is saying I recognise the issues, I'm not going back with him, I need to be out of this area, because she is trying to move out. She's working with (Organisation), police, to get all the help. They got her lock changed to make sure she's safe and she's feeling okay at the moment, you know, he's inside …
>
> Ashley: Yeah, if she's engaging with loads of support then we don't really need to get involved.
>
> Brooke: No (Supervision)

The presence of supportive professionals reinforced the decision to close the case; alongside the presence of support, Brooke's account also suggested a degree of exhaustion of options. In this instance, this was positive: everything that could be offered had been offered, enabling sufficient progress to be made to close the case. In other instances, exhausting options justified an escalation of concerns and a decision to initiate care proceedings:

> We've exhausted everything now, we can't just keep going at such a high level of intervention, so then obviously it went to court … we're still trying to be realistic that actually it's not gonna fill the deficits of being, for these parents to predict what these children need, not just now, but the older they get (Interview with Shelley, SW)

Shelley's narrative was underpinned by a judgement that the parents lacked the capacity to change to meet their children's needs long-term. Change and capacity for change often played a role in accounts presented to justify decision-making. At times, evidence of change was used to support stepping-down to lower-level interventions:

> Jo: Children were really good, it's been a very calm summer holiday and she said that it's been bearable. So quite often summer holidays she can't wait for them to go back to school but she's really enjoyed their time, they're doing lots together as a family. She's definitely in a better place than when I first met her (Supervision)

However, concerns about lack of change were used to justify recommendations for higher levels of intervention:

> Once we had supported them, and it was intensive support for accessing accommodation … it didn't have the impact on their personal hygiene, and they had facilities then. They still didn't have access to food despite mum actually having a full-time job and earning good money. So, by meeting that one basic need, it didn't help facilitate the changes that it could have, so my level about parents being able to facilitate and maintain change then became quite significant (Interview with Micky, SW)

The explanatory function of case narratives became less prominent at this stage of sensemaking; instead, narratives were more justificatory and focussed on supporting decision-making. This suggests that, whilst sensemaking is both retrospective and prospective (Weick et al., 2005), there is a shift in focus from retrospection to prospection as developing narratives move towards becoming adopted accounts.

5 | DISCUSSION

Central to developing social workers' decision-making is better understanding how decisions are made in day-to-day practice. Sensemaking, which underpins decision-making, is primarily a storied and collaborative process. Furthermore, sensemaking case-talk varies across contexts and spaces, and these variations influence how sensemaking takes place. The model for understanding sensemaking presented here has much in common with Weick's (1995) conception of sensemaking as a form of story-building, though it also builds upon it in ways that are specific to children and families social work.

In the first two stages of sensemaking, intuition plays a significant role in social workers rapidly making sense of new information via a form of pattern-matching (Klein et al., 2007) or recognition-primed decision-making (Klein, 2015). Intuitive judgement is central to social workers making sense of referral information to reach their initial formulation. There are risks, however, in how these provisional framings of cases come to influence subsequent sensemaking activity. The review of the deaths of Star Hobson and Arthur Labinjo–Hughes noted the propensity for early judgements to stick and not be sufficiently scrutinized, arguing that 'a difficulty challenging the early framing of Thomas as a protective father and Star as at the centre of a protective wider family' was a contributing factor to professionals missing warning signs of the abuse the children were experiencing (CSPRP, 2002: 101).

To mitigate this, social workers need opportunities to reflect on and unpick their initial framings of cases. It is notable that the deaths of Star Hobson and Arthur Labinjo–Hughes took place during the Covid-19 pandemic when much work was taking place remotely. Opportunities for in the moment case discussion promote reflection (Beddoe et al., 2021; Ferguson et al., 2020) and enable social workers to move from intuitive forms of sensemaking to more deliberate and analytical sensemaking (Helm, 2021; Whittaker, 2018). Moves towards hybrid working as social work emerges from the pandemic need to ensure that regular opportunities for impromptu case discussion are prioritized, particularly at the referral stage when initial framings of cases take place.

As social workers develop case narratives, they are further supported by interaction and dialogue with peers and supervisors. Helm (2021) and Whittaker (2018) suggest that collegial case discussion offers a means to move between intuitive and analytic modes of reasoning by enabling intuitive judgements to be expressed, tested and evidenced. Social workers use the office space – a more structured environment – to analyse their experiences in unstructured environments, such as home visits (Helm, 2021), where intuitive reasoning is employed (Cook, 2017). The findings presented here reinforce that collegial dialogue provides opportunities for social workers to make sense of information, to test and weigh its significance, and to generate hypotheses. This enables the construction of 'better stories' through sensemaking activity (Weick et al., 2005: 415). The importance of ensuring that social workers can access structured environments that promote analysis and deliberate sensemaking (Helm, 2021) is again evident.

There are, however, some limitations and drawbacks to collegial case discussion as a sensemaking resource. Teams hold shared narratives about families that can be hard to revise (Riemann, 2005), and collegial case discussion can then reinforce existing judgements rather than offering meaningful challenge (Helm, 2017; Jeyasingham, 2016). This can be further exacerbated by the role that congruence and coherence play in sensemaking (Cook, 2017); where there is a perception that information fits with an already held narrative, it is more likely to be accepted. Moreover, where explanatory hypotheses are jointly 'worked up' – particularly in the context of supervision – there is a risk that alternative narratives are too quickly excluded.

Whilst supervision should provide a space for shared sensemaking (Patterson, 2019), these findings echo other studies that have noted that case discussions in formal supervision often move rapidly from sharing information to agreeing actions (Wilkins et al., 2017). In developing case narratives in supervision, social workers and supervisors engage in negotiating a singular account that can be 'sold' to the organization and others in support of decision-making (Saltiel, 2017: 544). Where supervision is used to agree an adopted account that can support decision-making, scope for exploration of and curiosity about the circumstances of children and families is limited. The use of professional shortcuts – focussed on risk of harm and impact on the child – risks over-simplifying the complex lives of children and families. Given that sensemaking involves making sense of one's identity as well as information, these shortcuts may reflect a practice context in which the social work role is increasingly characterized as narrowly focussed on risk and the protection of children from harm (Featherstone et al., 2014; Walsh et al., 2019). However, the use of such professional shortcuts, alongside the absence of opportunities to unpick and reflect on emotional responses in supervision, diminishes, and may even bypass, meaningful sensemaking within that space.

Shifting supervision practice away from a focus on risk and compliance (Beddoe et al., 2021) is not a straightforward task. There are numerous tools and approaches that supervisors can use – for example, the Cognitive and Affective Supervisory Approach (Turney & Ruch, 2018), and tools for promoting safe uncertainty (Research in Practice, 2019) – to promote more reflective, curious conversations in supervision. The reflective ideal of supervision (Beddoe et al., 2021) can also be promoted in other settings, such as reflective case discussion groups (Lees & Cooper, 2021), which provide additional opportunities to promote sensemaking. Facilitators of case discussion groups need to be mindful of the propensity for individuals coalescing around shared narratives (Riemann, 2005) and the importance of maintaining curiosity. Where teams work in a hybrid way, team members having opportunities to come together – virtually or in person – to meaningfully reflect and promote better sensemaking is crucial.

5.1 | Limitations and future research

The teams involved in the study were situated in similar large local authorities and undertook similar work; the centrality of undertaking assessment work in both teams means that findings are most applicable to sensemaking in relation to assessment decision-making and may have limited application outside this context. However, there is evidence that this model may be applicable to more everyday judgements that social workers make. The participants made sense of practice episodes using a similar process to the model presented here, whereas in Cook's (2017) research, social workers moved from initial formulations about home visits to developing a narrative by exploring their gut feelings within the research interview.

Research on how social workers engage in sensemaking is scarce (Helm, 2021), and the impact of different forms of case-talk on sensemaking is a fruitful avenue for further inquiry. Based on findings from this study and others, it is possible to hypothesise that some forms of case-talk are more conducive to sensemaking than others; however, more empirical work is needed to test this hypothesis. Experimental studies using video clips or case vignettes may provide a means to explore the usefulness of different forms of case-talk for sensemaking. International comparative studies would also be useful; different practice systems and cultures can reflect in differences in how decision-making is supported (Falconer & Shardlow, 2018) and the kinds of decisions social workers make (Benbenishty et al., 2015). Understanding these differences opens the prospect for learning from different practice contexts.

6 | CONCLUSION

Sensemaking is a three stage process, in which social workers move from initial formulations of cases, through developing a case narrative, to offering an adopted account that can support decision-making. At each stage, there are barriers that may inhibit sensemaking and factors that can support sensemaking. In outlining potential shortcuts and biases that can arise at different stages of the sensemaking process, the model presented here can act as a tool for thinking about and reflecting on how social workers make sense of information. Within supervision and group case discussion, curious questions could be used to interrogate initial framing of cases, the hypotheses being generated, and the significance being attached to information that is being tested and weighed by social workers. The model can also be used to prompt self-reflection from social workers.

Given the central role that case discussion plays in sensemaking (Helm, 2021), creating working cultures that promote ongoing supervisory and collegial dialogue (Ferguson et al., 2020) is one way to promote robust sensemaking and mitigate the risk of confirmation bias and other cognitive shortcuts. These kinds of team cultures have become more challenging to create during the Covid-19 pandemic and post-pandemic; whilst there has been evidence of effective remote working, research has also suggested a sense of disconnect from teams because of a lack of physical co-location (Cook et al., 2020). As hybrid working appears to be here to stay, careful thought needs to be given to how formal and informal spaces for sensemaking can be prioritized and maintained.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

I have no conflict of interest to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

ORCID

Mark Gregory https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7428-9447

REFERENCES

Beddoe, L., Ferguson, H., Warwick, L., Disney, T., Leigh, J., & Cooner, T. S. (2021). Supervision in child protection: A space and place for reflection or an excruciating marathon of compliance? *European Journal of Social Work*, *25*, 525–537. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2021.1964443

Benbenishty, R., Davidson-Arad, B., Lopez, M., Devaney, J., Spratt, T., Coopmans, C., Knorth, E. J., Witteman, C. L. M., Del Valle, J. F., & Hayes, D. (2015). Decision-making in child protection: An international comparative study on maltreatment substantiation, risk assessment and interventions recommendations, and the role of professionals' child welfare attitudes. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, *49*, 63–75. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2015.03.015

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*, 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *18*(3), 328–352. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238

Broadhurst, K., Wastell, D., White, S., Hall, C., Peckover, S., Thompson, K., Pithouse, A., & Davey, D. (2010). Performing 'initial assessment': Identifying the latent conditions for error at the front-door of local authority children's services. *British Journal of Social Work*, *40*, 352–370. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcn162

Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel. (2022). Child Protection in England: National Review into the Murders of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson, accessed at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1078488/ALH_SH_National_Review_26-5-22.pdf

Cook, L. (2017). Making sense of the initial home visit: The role of intuition in child and family social workers' assessments of risk. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, *31*(4), 431–444. https://doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2017.1394826

Cook, L. (2019). The home visit in child protection social work: Emotion as resource and risk for professional judgement and practice. *Child and Family Social Work*, *25*(1), 18–26. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12647

Cook, L., & Gregory, M. (2020). Making sense of sensemaking: Conceptualising how child and family social workers process assessment information. *Child Care in Practice*, *26*(2), 182–195. https://doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2019.1685458

Cook, L., Zscholmer, D., Biggart, L., & Carder, S. (2020). The team as a secure base revisited: Remote working and resilience among child and family social workers during COVID-19. *Journal of Children's Services*, *15*(4), 259–266. https://doi.org/10.1108/JCS-07-2020-0031

De Bortoli, L., & Dolan, M. (2015). Decision making in social work with families and children: Developing decision-aids compatible with cognition. *British Journal of Social Work*, *45*, 2142–2160. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcu087

Falconer, R., & Shardlow, S. M. (2018). Comparing child protection decision-making in England and Finland: Supervised or supported judgement? *Journal of Social Work Practice*, *32*(2), 111–124. https://doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2018.1438996

Featherstone, B., White, S., & Morris, K. (2014). *Reimagining child protection*. Policy Press. https://doi.org/10.46692/9781447308034

Ferguson, H., Warwick, L., Cooner, T. S., Leigh, J., Disney, T., Beddoe, L., & Plumridge, G. (2020). The nature and culture of social work with children and families in long-term casework: Findings from a qualitative longitudinal study. *Child and Family Social Work*, *25*, 694–703. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12746

Fetterman, D. F. (2010). *Ethnography: Step-by-step* (3rd ed.). Sage.

Gillingham, P., & Humphreys, C. (2010). Child protection practitioners and decision-making tools: Observations and reflections from the front line. *British Journal of Social Work*, *40*(8), 2598–2616. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcp155

Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (2007). *Ethnography: Principles in practice* (3rd edition). Routledge.

Hammond, K. (1996). *Human judgement and social policy*. Oxford University Press.

Helm, D. (2016). Sensemaking in a social work office: An ethnographic study of safeguarding judgements. *Child and Family Social Work*, *21*(1), 26–35. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12101

Helm, D. (2017). Can I have a word? Social worker interaction and sensemaking. *Child Abuse Review*, *26*, 388–398. https://doi.org/10.1002/car.2463

Helm, D. (2021). Theorising social work sense-making: Developing a model of peer-aided judgement and decision making. *British Journal of Social Work*, *52*(4), 2329–2347. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcab178

Jeyasingham, D. (2016). Open spaces, supple bodies? Considering the impact of agile working on social work office practices. *Child and Family Social Work*, *21*(2), 209–217. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12130

Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking fast and slow*. Penguin Books.

Kahneman, D., & Klein, G. (2009). Conditions for intuitive expertise: A failure to disagree. *American Psychologist*, *64*, 515–526. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0016755

Keddell, E. (2017). Comparing risk-averse and risk-friendly practitioners in child welfare decision-making: A mixed methods study. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, *31*(4), 411–429. https://doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2017.1394822

Kirkman, E., & Melrose, K. (2014). *Decision-making in children's social work: An analysis of the 'front door' system*. Department for Education.

Klein, G. (2015). 'A naturalistic decision making perspective on studying intuitive decision-making. *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*, *4*, 164–168. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jarmac.2015.07.001

Klein, G., Philips, J. K., Rall, E. L., & Peluso, D. A. (2007). A data-frame theory of sensemaking. In R. R. Hoffman (Ed.), *Expertise out of context: Proceedings of the sixth international conference on naturalistic decision making* (pp. 113–155). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Laming, H. (2003). *The Victoria Climbié inquiry report*. The Stationery Office.

Laming, H. (2009). *The protection of children in England: A progress report*. The Stationery Office.

Lauritzen, C., Vis, S. A., & Fossum, S. (2018). Factors that determine decision making in child protection investigations: A review of the literature. *Child and Family Social Work*, *23*, 743–756. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12446

Lees, A., & Cooper, A. (2021). Reflective practice groups in a children's social work setting—What are the outcomes, how do they work and under what circumstances? A new theoretical model based on empirical findings. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, *35*(1), 93–109.

Leigh, J. (2016). The story of the PPO queen: The development and acceptance of a spoiled identity in child protection social work. *Child and Family Social Work*, *21*, 412–420. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12157

Leigh, J., Beddoe, L., & Keddell, E. (2020). Disguised compliance or undisguised nonsense? A critical discourse analysis of compliance and resistance in social work practice. *Families, Relationships and Societies*, *9*(2), 269–285. https://doi.org/10.1332/204674319X15536730156921

Leonard, K., & O'Connor, L. (2018). Transitioning from "outside observer" to "inside player" in social work: Practitioner and student perspectives on developing expertise in decision-making. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, *32*(2), 205–218. https://doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2018.1438998

MacAlister, J. (2022). *The Independent Review of Children's Social Care: Final Report*, available at: https://childrenssocialcare.independent-review.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/The-independent-review-of-childrens-social-care-Final-report.pdf

Munro, E. (2011). *The Munro review of child protection: Final report, a child-centred system*. The Stationery Office.

O'Connor, L. (2020). How social workers understand and use their emotions in practice: A thematic synthesis literature review. *Qualitative Social Work*, *19*(4), 645–662. https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325019843991

Patterson, F. (2019). Supervising the supervisors: What support do first-line supervisors need to be more effective in their supervisory role? *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work*, *31*(3), 46–57. https://doi.org/10.11157/anzswj-vol31iss3id647

Platt, D., & Turney, D. (2014). Making threshold decisions in child protection: A conceptual analysis. *British Journal of Social Work*, *44*, 1472–1490. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bct007

Research in Practice. (2019). *PSDP Resources and Tools: Safe Uncertainty*, accessed at: https://practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2019/11/Safe-uncertainty.pdf

Riemann, G. (2005). Trying to make sense of cases: Features and problems of social workers' case discussions. *Qualitative Social Work*, *4*(4), 413–430. https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325005058644

Ruch, G., & Julkunen, I. (Eds.). (2016). *Relationship-based research in social work*. Jessica Kingsley.

Saltiel, D. (2017). Supervision: A contested space for learning and decision-making. *Qualitative Social Work*, *16*(4), 533–549. https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325016633445

Topolinski, S. (2011). A process model of intuition. *European Review of Social Psychology*, *22*(1), 274–315. https://doi.org/10.1080/10463283.2011.640078

Turney, D., & Ruch, G. (2018). What makes it so hard to look and listen? Exploring the use of the cognitive and affective supervisory approach with children's social work managers. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, *32*(2), 125–138. https://doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2018.1439460

van de Luitgaarden, G. (2011). Contextualizing judgements and decisions in child protection practice at the point of first referral. *Journal of Social Intervention: Theory and Practice*, *20*(3), 24–40. https://doi.org/10.18352/jsi.255

Walsh, J., White, S., Morris, K., & Doherty, P. (2019). How do you solve a problem like Maria? Family complexity and institutional complications in UK social work. *European Journal of Social Work*, *22*(6), 1050–1061. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2018.1461068

Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in organisations*. Sage.

Weick, K. E., Sutcliffe, K. M., & Obstfeld, D. (2005). Organizing and the process of sensemaking. *Organization Science*, *16*(4), 409–421. https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1050.0133

Whittaker, A. (2018). How do child-protection practitioners make decisions in real-life situations? Lessons from the psychology of decision-making. *British Journal of Social Work*, *48*, 1967–1984. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcx145

Wilkins, D., Forrester, D., & Grant, L. (2017). What happens in child and family social work supervision? *Child and Family Social Work*, *22*, 942–951. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12314