

Sensemaking and supervision: an ethnographic study of children and families social workers' case-talk across formal and informal spaces

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Abstract

The way that children and families social workers make judgements and take decisions in their day-to-day practice has been an area of significant interest in the early part of the twenty-first century. However, the sensemaking process that underpins decision-making and judgement has received comparatively little scholarly attention. Social work supervision should offer a space where sensemaking can take place individually and collaboratively, yet little is known about what actually happens in supervision.

This study contributes to addressing these gaps; using an ethnographic approach it explores how one-to-one supervision, informal supervision and peer discussion, and group case discussion support social workers' sensemaking. Data are derived from semi-structured interviews ($n=22$), recordings of formal one-to-one supervision sessions ($n=17$), and from participant observation of office case-talk ($n=19$) and group supervision ($n=2$) across two local authorities. The analysis highlights that social work sensemaking involves the process of constructing a case narrative through three stages: initial formulations, developing the narrative, and adopted accounts. Five key themes, situated within the first two sensemaking stages, are explored in presenting the analysis: case framing, case history, testing and weighing information, generating hypotheses, and feelings and relationships.

In exploring key themes from the interview, supervision, and observation data, a key finding of the study is the context-dependence of how case narratives are presented and the role identity plays in these differing presentations. The way in which functions of supervision are dispersed across teams in day-to-day practice will also be highlighted as a key finding. Recommendations for practice are made, including the need for organisations to provide social workers and supervisors with spaces where they can engage with the emotional and relational aspects of their practice and explore their identity as social workers.

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Contents

Abstract.....	1
Contents.....	2
List of tables and figures	8
List of abbreviations.....	9
Acknowledgements.....	10
1. Introduction	11
1.1 Background and context	11
1.2 The rise of managerialism and technical-rational approaches to practice.....	15
1.3 Managerialism and the practice of supervision.....	18
1.4 Undertaking the literature review	20
2. Sensemaking, intuition, and emotion.....	23
2.1 Sensemaking, judgement, and decision-making.....	24
2.2 Sensemaking and intuition.....	25
2.2.1 Different perspectives on intuition.....	25
2.2.2 The use of intuition in social work	27
2.3 The interplay between intuition and analysis.....	30
2.3.1 How do intuition and analysis interact in C&F social work practice?.....	32
2.4 Sensemaking and emotion.....	37
2.4.1 How do emotions influence social workers in making sense of information in day-to-day practice?	39
2.5 Sensemaking, intuition, and emotion: a summary	44
3. Sensemaking, social storytelling, and identity.....	46
3.1 Sensemaking as social storytelling.....	46
3.2 How do social workers engage in sensemaking as social storytelling?	48
3.2.1 The contribution of teams and colleagues	48
3.2.2 Organisational contexts and sensemaking	52
3.2.3 Professional and societal narratives and sensemaking	54
3.3 Identity and sensemaking.....	56
3.3.1 Professional identity and the personal and professional “selves”	58
3.3.2 Professionalism and professional identity	59
3.3.3 Reconciling the personal and professional self.....	64
3.3.4 How might identity influence sensemaking?.....	66
3.4 Sensemaking, social storytelling, and identity: a summary.....	69
4. Social work supervision.....	71

4.1	What is supervision?	71
4.1.1	Supervision: formal meeting, relationship, or process?	73
4.2	What actually happens in supervision?	75
4.2.1	What do formal supervision sessions look like?	75
4.2.2	Researching the content of supervision	76
4.2.3	Simulating supervision	78
4.2.4	Links between effective supervision and practice outcomes	79
4.2.5	Challenges in evaluating the effectiveness of supervision	81
4.3	Social worker and supervisor experiences of supervision	82
4.3.1	How do social workers and supervisors perceive the quality of their supervision?	83
4.3.2	The role of the supervisor	85
4.3.3	The supervisory relationship.....	86
4.4	What is supervision used for in C&F social work practice?	88
4.4.1	Case direction and skill development	88
4.4.2	Containment and safety in supervision	89
4.4.3	Reflection within formal supervision	91
4.5	Supervision – a summary	92
5.	Sensemaking and supervision	94
5.1	Sensemaking, judgment, decision-making and supervision	94
5.2	Supervision and exploring emotion information	96
5.3	Reflection and supervision.....	97
5.3.1	What is reflection?	97
5.3.2	Supervision as a reflective space	99
5.3.3	Reflection, supervision, and sensemaking.....	100
5.4	Supervision, sensemaking, and uncertainty	102
5.4.1	Certainty in C&F social work	103
5.4.2	Certainty, uncertainty, and supervision.....	104
5.5	Emotional sharing and containment.....	106
5.5.1	Understanding containment	106
5.5.2	Social work and containment	107
5.5.3	Containing the container: the role of the supervisor, team, and organisation	108
5.5.4	Containing the supervisor	110
5.5.5	Containment and sensemaking	111
6.	Summary and research questions.....	113

7.	Methodology.....	116
7.1	Designing the study.....	116
7.1.1	The development of the research questions.....	116
7.1.2	Ontological and epistemological position.....	117
7.1.3	Research methodology	119
7.1.4	Psychosocial research and getting close to practice.....	121
7.1.5	Data collection methods	122
7.1.6	Use of self and reflexivity.....	126
7.2	Ethics, access, and sample	129
7.2.1	Sampling decisions.....	129
7.2.2	Ethics	130
7.2.3	Selecting and accessing the sites	132
7.3	Data collection	133
7.3.1	Data collection in the two sites.....	133
7.3.2	Situating myself in the site.....	135
7.4	Data analysis	137
7.4.1	Choosing a method of data analysis	137
7.4.2	The process of analysing the data.....	142
7.4.3	Reflexivity revisited.....	146
8.	Introduction to the analysis chapters	149
9.	Overview of the research sites	151
9.1	Summertown teams.....	152
9.1.1	Team working arrangements.....	152
9.1.2	Membership, relationships and containment	154
9.1.3	Risk and anxiety	157
9.1.4	Reflecting on decision-making and the propensity for individual bias.....	161
9.1.5	Space and the Summertown site	162
9.2	Springshire teams	164
9.2.1	Team structure and team membership	164
9.2.2	Membership, relationships, and containment	166
9.2.3	Perceptions of competence – insiders and outsiders.....	169
9.2.4	Springshire teams: triage and ongoing case discussion.....	170
9.2.5	The role and use of office space in Springshire	173
9.3	Contrasting the two sites – roles and focus.....	174
9.3.1	Shared challenges of being a supervisor.....	175
9.4	Summary	176

10.	Mapping the sensemaking process through interview case-talk	177
10.1	Initial formulations.....	178
10.1.1	Case framing and the role of intuitive judgement.....	178
10.1.2	Emotional responses in case framing	180
10.1.3	Case history.....	181
10.2	Developing the narrative: testing and weighing information.....	183
10.2.1	Corroboration and triangulation.....	183
10.2.2	Coherence and congruence in testing and weighing information.....	187
10.3	Developing the narrative: feelings and relationships	189
10.3.1	Engagement and relationships	190
10.3.2	Dissonance between the personal and professional in case-talk.....	191
10.3.3	Resolving dissonance between the personal and professional	194
10.3.4	Moral reasoning: parental culpability.....	195
10.4	Sensemaking and the influence of initial formulations	196
10.4.1	Initial formulations as cornerstones	196
10.4.2	Initial formulations as touchstones	198
10.4.3	Contrasting cornerstones and touchstones.....	200
10.5	Sensemaking in interview case-talk: the process of constructing a case narrative 201	
11.	Sensemaking in one-to-one supervision.....	203
11.1	Initial formulation: case framing in supervision	204
11.1.1	Case framing as informal agenda-setting	204
11.1.2	Case categorisation.....	205
11.2	Developing the narrative in supervision.....	207
11.2.1	Testing and weighing information in supervision: presenting information	208
11.2.2	Selectivity in presenting information.....	209
11.2.3	Testing and weighing information in relation to threshold.....	211
11.2.4	Testing and weighing information: impact on the child	213
11.2.5	Testing and weighing information: congruence	216
11.2.6	Developing or revising the case narrative: generating hypotheses.....	218
11.3	Adopted accounts: change, threshold, and role.....	223
11.4	Emotions and relationships in supervision case discussion.....	227
11.5	Power dynamics, disagreement, and creating an agreed account in supervision 229	
11.6	The construction of supervisory dialogue.....	231
11.7	Supervision and sensemaking: agreeing the narrative	234

12.	Sensemaking in the office and in group case discussion	236
12.1	Initial formulation: case framing.....	237
12.1.1	Case framing and pattern-matching	237
12.1.2	Case framing: incongruence and uncertainty in early sensemaking	239
12.1.3	Professional shortcuts in case framing	240
12.2	Developing the narrative	241
12.2.1	Generating hypotheses: “playing devil’s advocate”	241
12.2.2	Testing and weighing information: scepticism towards parental accounts	243
12.2.3	Congruence and triangulation in testing and weighing information.....	244
12.2.4	Testing and weighing information: signalling and holding on to uncertainty	246
12.2.5	Feelings and relationships: engagement and making sense of risk.....	248
12.2.6	Feelings and relationships: exploring the impact of relationships	250
12.3	Group case discussion.....	252
12.3.1	Developing the narrative: testing and weighing information.....	253
12.3.2	Testing and weighing information: the influence of shared narratives.....	254
12.3.3	Testing and weighing information: exploring intuitive responses.....	257
12.3.4	Feelings and relationships: exploring emotions	258
12.3.5	Power dynamics and narrative development.....	259
12.4	Contrasting sensemaking in informal and formal spaces	262
13.	Discussion.....	265
13.1	Mapping sensemaking: constructing a case narrative.....	266
13.2	Initial formulations.....	268
13.2.1	Use of intuition and the role of dialogue in initial formulations	269
13.3	Developing the narrative	270
13.3.1	Feelings and relationships.....	270
13.3.2	Testing and weighing information and developing hypotheses in the office space	271
13.3.3	Testing information and developing hypotheses in supervision	273
13.4	The adopted account	275
13.5	Exploring differences in case construction and presentation	275
13.5.1	Identity and audience	277
13.5.2	Identity and audience in one-to-one supervision.....	278
13.5.3	Identity and audience in other contexts.....	282
13.6	Supervision, support, and ‘better’ sensemaking	283
13.6.1	Limitations of informal spaces supplementing supervision.....	286

13.7	Implications for practice	288
13.7.1	Reflecting on initial formulations and exploring alternative narratives	290
13.7.2	Containment, talking about emotions, and exploring identity.....	293
13.7.3	Implications of Covid-19 and future practice.....	296
13.8	Strengths and limitations of the research	299
13.9	Implications for future research	301
14.	Conclusion.....	304
14.1	Sensemaking in social workers' case-talk	304
14.2	Sensemaking and formal one-to-one supervision	306
14.3	Informal supervision, group case discussion and peer interaction	307
14.4	Complexity and context in supervision and sensemaking	309
	References	311
	Appendices.....	358
	Appendix A: Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form (Observation Only).....	358
	Appendix B: Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form (Full Participants)	363
	Appendix C: Interview Schedule (Social Workers).....	372
	Appendix D: Interview Schedule (Supervisors).....	374
	Appendix E: Analytic writing example	376
	Appendix F: Data Matrix Example.....	381
	Appendix G: Extract from Research Journal	386
	Appendix H: Mapping of key themes and sub-themes.....	389

List of tables and figures

Table 1 – Key events and changes to legislation and policy.....	12-13
Table 2 – Case examples to illustrate potential flaws and biases in intuitive judgement.....	34-36
Table 3 – Research questions and data collection methods.....	124
Table 4 – Data collected across the research sites.....	135
Figure A – Influential political and professional paradigms since 1970...	15-16
Figure B – The three “selves” and the self in action.....	58
Figure C – Case example and related reflective questions to promote sensemaking.....	101
Figure D – Flow-chart of analytic process for interview data.....	143
Figure E – Flow-chart of analytic process for supervision data.....	144
Figure F – Flow-chart of analytic process for ethnographic fieldnotes.....	145
Figure G – Constructing a case narrative.....	266-267

List of abbreviations

C&F Children and families

CIN Child in need

CP Child protection

CSW Consultant social worker

DV Domestic violence

FFH Fast and frugal heuristics

HB Heuristics and biases

NDM Naturalistic decision-making

NQSW Newly-qualified social worker

RPD Recognition primed decision-making

SSW Senior social worker

SW Social worker

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1. Introduction

This thesis will explore the relationship between sensemaking and supervision in children and families (C&F) social work teams. This opening section of the thesis will introduce relevant contextual background to the topic, before moving on to review literature on sensemaking and supervision. The review will begin with an outline of the methodology used to find and select relevant literature. This will be followed by four chapters examining existing research and theory in relation to the topic: the first chapter will explore the relationship between sensemaking, intuition, and emotion; the following chapter will then look at sensemaking as a form of social storytelling and its relationship to identity; a review of relevant literature from the field of supervision will then follow; finally, links between sensemaking and supervision will be explored and research questions will be offered and justified.

Following on from the literature review will be an exposition of the methodology chosen to address the identified research questions. This chapter will progress in a roughly chronological fashion from exploring the epistemological and ontological positions underpinning the research, through the process of selecting data collection methods, gaining access, collecting the data, and undertaking analysis of the data. The analysis of the data will be presented across four chapters that will explore commonalities and differences across the different types of data presented in this thesis. This will be followed by a discussion of the analysis, revisiting key literature identified earlier in the thesis to contextualise and situate the analysis within the existing body of research on sensemaking and supervision. Implications for practice and research will be considered within the discussion.

1.1 Background and context

C&F social work in the United Kingdom (UK) has been significantly shaped by responses to serious cases, beginning with the inquiry into the death of Maria Colwell (Secretary of State for Social Services, 1974). Each of the four nations of the UK has their own process for carrying out reviews into the death or

serious injury of a child; in England these are known as child safeguarding practice reviews, in Scotland as learning reviews, in Wales as child practice reviews, and in Northern Ireland as case management reviews. Following the review into the death of Victoria Climbié (Laming, 2003) in England, policy guidance (DfES, 2006) was introduced to promote effective multi-agency CP practice. Meanwhile, Munro’s (2011) review of C&F social work in England, undertaken following the death of Peter Connelly, highlighted that previous responses to serious cases had led to practice becoming overly process-driven, reducing the amount of time that social workers could spend with children and their families. The below table highlights how key events and changes in legislation and policy have influenced C&F social work since the inception of social work departments at the start of the 1970s; it should be noted that changes to policy and legislation apply primarily to England and Wales, with Scotland and Northern Ireland having their own legislative frameworks:

Year	Event	Impact on Practice
1974	Inquiry into death of Maria Colwell published	Introduction of area child protection (CP) committees to promote effective multi-agency working. Public interest in and scrutiny of social work’s role in preventing intrafamilial abuse (Parton, 2004).
1989	Children Act 1989 enacted	Primary legislation outlining duties of local authorities and parents in relation to children. Provides definitions of children in need (s.17) and children in need of protection (s.47) that underpin contemporary frontline C&F social work. Children Act (Scotland) and Children’s Order (Northern Ireland) follow in 1995 as primary legislation for those nations, with similar language and processes relating to children in need and child protection.
2003	Inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié and <i>Every</i>	Introduction of new systems and structures to address service failures, e.g. integrated recording system, children’s commissioner, children’s trusts to coordinate multi-agency working, and local

	<i>Child Matters</i> green paper published	safeguarding children's boards. Changes enacted by Children Act 2004.
2006	<i>Working Together to Safeguard Children</i> first published	Comprehensive guidance for multi-agency CP working, including the conduct of investigations, assessments, and CP conferences.
2009	Laming (2009) report into the death of Peter Connelly published	Failings noted in relation to multi-agency working and recognising signs of abuse. Led to increased focus on safeguarding and public anger towards social work profession (Parton, 2014).
2011	Munro Report (2011) on children and families social work	Argued that bureaucratic processes introduced in response to serious cases have led to SWs having less time to spend with children.
2013	<i>Working Together to Safeguard Children</i> (2013) introduced	Removed requirement for initial assessment to be completed in ten working days, replacing this with a single forty-five day assessment. Guidance shortened by over two-hundred and fifty pages (DfE, 2010, 2013) signalled attempts to streamline CP practice.
2014	Children and Families Act (2014) enacted	Brought about changes to processes for care proceedings and adoption, introducing twenty-six week timescale for conclusion of care proceedings.

Table 1: Key events and changes to legislation and policy

The Laming report (2003) and Munro's (2011) review of C&F social work brought to attention the issue of social work decision-making, with a focus on how decisions are made and where things can go wrong. Reviews of social work practice following serious cases often lead to changes in policy and practice (Parton, 2004, 2011), however such changes are not always helpful and can inhibit good practice (Munro, 2011). Munro (2010, 2011) makes the case that it is important to understand how decisions are taken within the context of wider systems, and it is through understanding the complex interplay between individual and organisation and the affective as well as

cognitive aspects of practice that genuine learning can take place (Houston, 2015).

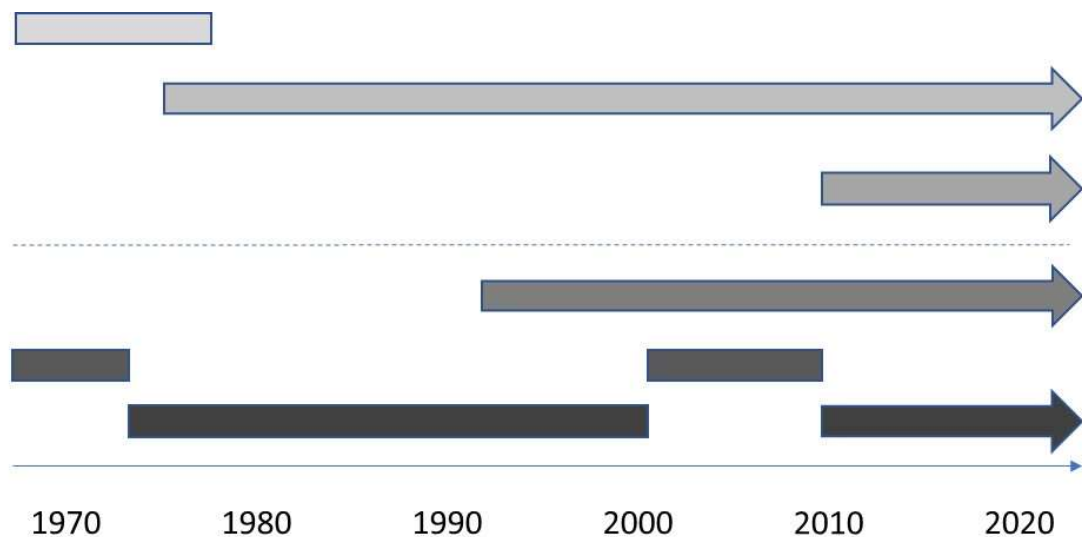
There has been increased interest amongst academics in how social workers make decisions and take judgements in context. In order to formulate judgements and take decisions, social workers engage in sensemaking, which is a process of attaching meaning and significance to experience (Cook, 2016) in order to create explanatory accounts that can inform future action (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking is central to decision-making and judgement, and a better understanding of how social workers engage in sensemaking ought to enable a better understanding of how social workers reach decisions in their day-to-day practice (Platt and Turney, 2014). Such an understanding should contribute to ensuring that social workers are equipped to make effective decisions about the lives of the children and families they work with.

As well as drawing attention to the importance of social work judgement, Laming (2009) and Munro (2011) also highlight the importance of supervision for providing social workers with a space to reflect on their work. Munro (2011) argues that supervision is vital for drawing out and scrutinising the reasoning that underpins decision-making and judgement. Despite the perceived value of supervision, there is scant evidence of its effectiveness and a lack of an empirical basis to support its value to the profession (Carpenter et al, 2012; Beddoe and Wilkins, 2019). Supervision should make visible the 'invisible trade' of social work (Pithouse, 1987); invisible because it takes place in the private spaces of home and family, but also because much of the work involves social workers making sense of information and experiences in order to reach judgements. Although supervision is a forum to bring into view the experiences of social workers and how they make sense of them, in practice supervision has tended to be another private space – largely unseen and unexamined (Beddoe, 2012; Wilkins et al, 2017) – in which social work operates (Patterson, 2019). Supervision should provide a space for sensemaking to take place (Lawler, 2015), however little is known empirically about what sensemaking in supervision looks like.

Social work sensemaking and social work supervision take place within a particular practice context, which in turn is influenced by broader socio-political factors (Parton, 2014). Before moving on to review the empirical literature relating to sensemaking and supervision, it is worth exploring the broader context of C&F social work in the UK.

1.2 The rise of managerialism and technical-rational approaches to practice

A key feature of contemporary C&F social work is the influence of managerialism and technical-rational approaches to practice (Harlow, 2003; Parton, 2004; Parton, 2008; Rogowski, 2011; Ruch, 2012; Lees et al, 2013). Managerialist and technical-rational approaches to practice draw on managerial concepts from the private sector, with a focus on outcomes, outputs, measurability, and performance management (Harlow, 2003). Technical-rational approaches to practice tend to be characterised by increased bureaucracy and adherence to procedure as an attempt to standardise practice (Parton, 2008).



Dominant political influence:

- Welfarism
- Neo-liberalism
- Austerity

Dominant practice orientation:

- Technical-rational/managerialism
- Focus on child welfare
- Focus on child protection

Figure A – Influential political and professional paradigms since 1970 (based on Parton (2014))

Parton (2014) sees the rise of managerialism and technical-rational approaches as resulting from a neoliberal view – prevalent in the UK in the 1980s under Margaret Thatcher’s government – of those who use services as being an ‘underclass’ who bear individual responsibility for their circumstances. The 1990s saw moves towards more preventative work with families, as ‘parenting’ became perceived as an issue of public concern, with social workers tasked with ensuring that the needs of children of ‘failing’ parents could be met (Parton, 2011; Parton, 2014).

The rise of individualism prevalent in the 1980s and beyond (Noble and Irwin, 2009; Parton, 2014) helped to re-conceptualise children as rights-bearing individuals, vulnerable to the influence of ‘bad parenting’ (Collings and Davies, 2008). Policy initiatives such as *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2003), implemented in the wake of the death of Victoria Climbié (Laming, 2003), were an example of the universal approach that saw the state as being intimately involved in promoting the rights and welfare of all children (Parton, 2011). This is in contrast to earlier approaches to C&F social work, with a narrower focus on CP and safeguarding (Parton, 2014). The policy emphasis on promoting the welfare of all children, coupled with the drive for measurable outcomes and subsequent increased bureaucracy, created conditions in which services became stretched and social workers had less time to spend with families (Parton, 2011). Reder and Duncan (2004) argue that responses to high profile child deaths that focus on policy and procedure fail to recognise the complex relational and psychological factors that underpin errors and so do not serve to address structural and systemic causes of errors in social work (see also Cooper, 2005; Houston, 2015).

Following the death of Peter Connelly in 2007, there was a shift away from universal service provision towards a narrower focus on risk and CP (Parton, 2011; Parton, 2014). Whilst the response of social work academics to the death of Peter Connelly was to promote moves away from apportioning blame

and implementing top-down policies and procedures (Munro, 2010; Munro, 2011; Cooper, 2011; Lees et al, 2013; Ruch et al, 2014), the reality of social work practice since 2009 has been an increase in referrals and children subject to CP investigations at a time of cuts and austerity (Parton, 2011; Parton, 2014).

The government's austerity policies saw children's services budgets reduced by approximately £2.2bn between 2010/11 and 2018/19 (Barnados, 2020); real-terms cuts have amounted to 28.6% of children's services budgets (National Audit Office (NAO), 2019). Cuts to services designed to prevent CP intervention have been even starker, dropping from £2.8bn in 2010/11 to £1.1bn in 2018/19, a reduction of 60% (Barnados, 2020). This shift in financial resources from preventative early support is mirrored in changes to the work undertaken by C&F social workers; between 2010/11 and 2017/18, the number of CP investigations undertaken by social workers increased by 77%, CP plans increased by 26%, and the number of children in care increased by 15% (NAO, 2019). By contrast, child in need (CIN) episodes rose by just 2% in the same period, a real-terms drop when taking account of population growth over that period (NAO, 2019). This led the National Audit Office (2019: 10) to conclude that local authorities had "responded to financial pressures by prioritising child protection work and reducing spending on non-statutory children's services". The narrow focus on CP and responding to risk limits the range of responses open to social workers and can lead them away from more creative, relational ways of working (Featherstone et al, 2014).

A consequence of managerialist and technical-rational approaches has been a perception of moves away from relationship-based, empathic, emotionally-informed practice to more depersonalised ways of working (Parton, 2008; Rogowski, 2011; Ruch, 2012; Lees et al, 2013; Trevithick, 2014; Sturt and Rothwell, 2019). Relationship-based practice has a rich history in C&F social work (Howe, 2010; Ruch et al, 2010). In contrast to technical-rational approaches, which focus on outputs and measurability, relationship-based practice has at its core the belief that meaningful relationships provide a vehicle for positive change that can increase child safety (Howe, 2010;

Brandon et al, 2020). Where technical-rational approaches favour notions of professionalism and attempt to standardise practice, relationship-based approaches involve emotional engagement with families, and acknowledge that relationships are unique and uncertain, necessitating a more personal approach to practice (Parton, 2008).

Krohn (2015) argues that there is a fundamental incongruence between the measurable outcomes prioritised within the technical-rational paradigm and the more relationship-based values promoted by the social work profession. Hingley-Jones and Ruch (2016) make the case that the austerity policies of the 2010s in the UK have further hampered the prospects for reflective, relationship-based practice, as social workers attempt to operate in a pressurised space between individuals experiencing suffering, and a state that increasingly appears to view those in need as unworthy of help and support.

Despite this, there remains significant interest in relationship-based practice (Ruch et al, 2010) and there is evidence from empirical research that, despite the challenges inherent in contemporary C&F social work, social workers are able to build and sustain relationships with families that are therapeutic and enable change (Ferguson et al, 2020a). Hingley-Jones and Ruch (2016), meanwhile, make the case that a balance needs to be struck between technical-rational and relationship-based approaches to practice and advocate for a 'both/and' as opposed to an 'either/or' perspective. The kind of clear management and organisational structures associated with technical-rational and managerialist approaches to practice can offer containment to social workers (Ruch, 2007a), and this suggests that a binary approach that sees technical-rational and relationship-based approaches as fundamentally incompatible is unhelpful.

1.3 Managerialism and the practice of supervision

Following the death of Peter Connelly, Laming (2009) recommended that all social workers receive good quality supervision, noting that supervision had shifted away from reflection towards procedure and oversight, reflecting the

parallel shift towards managerialist and technical-rational approaches to C&F social work. Despite initial good intentions to reform social work supervision, national supervision standards (Social Work Reform Board, 2012) were soon archived and the Ofsted inspection framework mentions supervision only three times (OFSTED, 2015); subsequent research on supervision practice suggests that a focus on process and oversight remains (Wilkins et al, 2017; Beddoe et al, 2021). Whilst there has been a burgeoning academic interest in supervision (Beddoe et al, 2016), this has not been mirrored at policy level, and there is concern about the future of supervision practice in light of the pressures of managerialism (Karvinen-Niinikoski et al, 2019).

The shift in practice towards a more top-down approach has led to an increase in first line management (Jones and Gallop, 2003; Parton, 2014) that has impacted upon the practice of supervision, helping to reinforce the prioritisation of oversight and accountability (Noble and Irwin, 2009; Beddoe, 2010; Ruch, 2012). White (2015: 252) suggests that technical-rational approaches to practice have led to a form of “e-supervision” that leaves little space for reflection and emotional engagement with the focus being on process and oversight. Sturt and Rothwell (2019) similarly argue that organisational demands limit the relational aspects of supervision that can promote growth and change.

That said, empirical research suggests that social workers find oversight and case direction to be helpful in supervision (Wilkins and Antonopoulou, 2018). Other empirical research suggests that upward delegation of accountability – a feature of managerial oversight – can serve as a defence for social workers against feelings of anxiety (Whittaker, 2011). It is not necessarily the case that managerialism and a focus oversight and adherence to procedure is a negative thing; frameworks for practice help to promote a sense of fairness (Evans, 2013) and provide a sense of relief for social workers in sharing responsibility for decision-making. Issues arise where procedures and processes dominate and are followed unthinkingly and uncritically (Broadhurst et al, 2010).

Despite the predominance of oversight in supervision, it remains a valuable space for social workers and their supervisors to engage in sensemaking (Patterson, 2019). Given the lack of research exploring what happens in supervision (Beddoe, 2012; Wilkins et al, 2017), little is known about whether and how supervision provides social workers with such a space. Wilkins et al (2018a) argue that supervision forms part of a 'golden thread' with practice and outcomes for children and families. Their findings suggest that where supervision is effective, practice is improved, and outcomes for families are more positive (Wilkins et al, 2018a). Supervision that promotes sensemaking should help to support social workers to make well-supported decisions about the lives of the children and families they are working with, and so the relationship between sensemaking and supervision is an important line of inquiry.

1.4 Undertaking the literature review

The literature review presented here is a narrative one; narrative literature reviews are useful for providing an overview of a topic and do not purport to survey all of the literature in a defined field in the way that a systematic literature review does (Ridley, 2008). Systematic reviews are large and complex pieces of work; in order to ensure rigour, they are often undertaken using a team of researchers and they necessitate the use of strict inclusion and exclusion criteria in order to demarcate the scope of the review (Ridley, 2008). Narrative reviews are suitable where the aim is to explore the chosen field rather than to fully survey it, as is the case when exploring existing literature in preparation for undertaking doctoral research.

Initial literature searches were carried out between October 2017 and January 2018 using the advanced search function of the University of East Anglia library catalogue. The university's advanced search function searches major journal hosting sites such as EBSCO Host and Elsevier as well as searching databases such as PyschInfo, the British Library, and Social Care Online. Search terms used, individually and in combination, were "sensemaking", "judgement", "decision-making", "supervision", "supervisor", "supervision

challenges”, “supervision outcomes”, “reflection”, “reflective practice”, “critical reflection”, “reasoning” and “uncertainty”; these terms were used in conjunction with “social work”, “children”, “children and families”, “child protection”, and “child welfare” in order to ensure relevance to the topic.

Further papers were drawn from systematic reviews of research into social work supervision (Bogo and McKnight, 2006; Carpenter et al, 2012; O’Donoghue and Tsui, 2015) and systematic literature reviews on decision-making (Lauritzen et al, 2018). Hand searching was also conducted, primarily drawing on references included in other papers using a snowballing method (Ridley, 2008). Ridley (2008) notes that snowball searching can be a highly effective way of finding key literature relevant to a subject area when undertaking a literature review. This technique was deployed throughout, with both backward and forward snowballing being used (Ridley, 2008). Forward snowballing was undertaken using Scopus as a means to identify papers that had cited other papers identified for the literature review. Further searches took place in October 2019 and September 2020 using the same search terms, and some later papers found through hand searching have also been included in the review.

Abstracts were screened for relevance before deciding whether to read the full text; since there is a large body of research literature on supervision, and sensemaking, judgement and decision-making, it was necessary to establish some inclusion criteria. Inclusion criteria should be established at the outset of a review and be explicitly stated (Efrat Efron and Ravid, 2019). Inclusion criteria are needed where the purpose of a literature review is not to be exhaustive of all literature within a chosen field, but instead to be representative of the literature in the chosen field (Cooper, 1988; Efrat Efron and Ravid, 2019). Establishing inclusion and exclusion criteria is important where reviews are intended to be systematic but is also important for narrative literature reviews (Efrat Efron and Ravid, 2019).

One criterion used for establishing whether articles were relevant for inclusion was the country in which the study took place. The papers included in the

review were primarily from the UK; however, international studies were included where interesting themes that correlated with or built upon findings from UK studies were evident; where they evidenced a useful comparison between the country of study and the UK context; or where the study was particularly novel in its methods or findings. Studies from outside the UK are identified as such within the literature review.

Another relevance criterion was the scope and focus of the research; papers that focused on statutory C&F social work were given primacy for inclusion. Studies on decision-making and judgement – contributing to the review of sensemaking literature – were narrowed down to those with a primary focus on *how* decisions were taken and judgements made by social workers as opposed to what kinds of decisions social workers make. Articles on supervision were narrowed down to focus primarily on the supervisory relationship and what happens in supervision as opposed to how often supervision takes place and how long it lasts for.

A further consideration was the recency of the research, with a preference for studies post-2003. This period has coincided with a significant increase in research on supervision practice (O'Donoghue and Tsui, 2015; Sewell, 2018) and decision-making (Lauritzen et al, 2018) and also represents the period in UK C&F social work following the death of Victoria Climbié and the review of social work practice that followed (Laming, 2003). As discussed, this period has been characterised by a dominance of technical-rational and managerialist approaches to practice and increasing pressures on social workers to keep children safe (Munro, 2011; Parton, 2011, 2014); research from this timeframe is therefore more likely to reflect contemporary C&F social work practice. Articles from outside this timeframe were included where they were highly significant within the field.

2. Sensemaking, intuition, and emotion

Sensemaking is closely related to decision-making and judgement; whilst the latter concepts have seen increasing academic interest in recent years, reflected in a large and growing body of empirical research (Lauritzen et al, 2018), sensemaking has received comparatively little attention (Avby, 2015). As an area of research interest, sensemaking has diverse roots in organisational studies (Weick, 1995), the psychology of decision-making (Klein et al, 2007), and sociology (see Whittaker, 2018, for discussion of sociological studies of social work sensemaking). These latter approaches have been particularly influential in an increase in practice-near social work research – often using ethnographic methods – which seeks to better understand how social workers reach judgements and make decisions in their everyday professional lives (Helm, 2021).

Cook and Gregory (2020) attempt to draw together some of these theoretical perspectives, and the empirical research that has followed, into a conceptualisation of social work sensemaking as a distinctly psychosocial process. They identify three lenses for exploring sensemaking – intuition, emotion, and social storytelling – and draw on commonalities and overlaps between literature utilising these three lenses to offer working hypotheses of what social work sensemaking is (Cook and Gregory, 2020). More recently, Helm (2021) has proposed a working theory of social work sensemaking as a form of peer-aided judgement that draws on Hammond's (1996) cognitive continuum theory, which will be briefly explored later in this chapter. The conceptualisation of sensemaking offered across the following two chapters will draw heavily on work from the psychology of decision-making – and in particular the work of Gary Klein in the field of naturalistic decision-making (NDM) – and on the work of Karl Weick from the field of organisational studies. Weick's spelling of 'sensemaking' – as opposed to 'sense making' or 'sense-making', which appear elsewhere in the literature – is used within this thesis due to the influence of Weick's ideas on the field of sensemaking and on this thesis in particular.

This chapter will begin by outlining the relationship between sensemaking, decision-making, and judgement, before moving on to focus on intuitive and emotional perspectives on sensemaking. Understanding sensemaking's relationship with decision-making and judgement will help to inform an exploration of what sensemaking is and how it functions to support social workers' decision-making and judgement. The following chapter will explore sensemaking as a form of social storytelling that is closely related to the notion of identity, drawing heavily on Weick's work and related empirical research.

2.1 Sensemaking, judgement, and decision-making

Sensemaking precedes the formation of a judgement and the taking of a decision (Platt and Turney, 2014; Whittaker, 2014). Judgements have been characterised as offering best working hypotheses about a situation (Taylor, 2013); they involve synthesising a range of information to create a single account that can then inform action (Helm and Roesch-Marsh, 2017). Decisions, by contrast, involve the choice of a concrete course of action from a range of possible options (Weick et al, 2005; Helm, 2016). Judgements *inform* decision-making through either suggesting a particular course of action or delimiting a range of options to be decided upon.

Sensemaking takes place in the process of formulating judgements and taking decisions (Platt and Turney, 2014; Whittaker, 2014; Helm, 2016); making sense of information and events renders them explicable in a way that can then inform a course of action (Weick, 1995). In order to make sense of situations, individuals attach meaning and significance to them (Cook, 2016); sensemaking is the means through which experiences are processed and interpreted in order to formulate judgements that can then inform decision-making (Platt and Turney, 2014).

Research on sensemaking is scarce (Weick et al, 2005), particularly in the field of social work (Avby, 2015). It is because of this relative paucity of

empirical research on sensemaking that the following sections will also draw on relevant literature from the closely-related fields of decision-making and judgement.

2.2 Sensemaking and intuition

Intuition has been described as knowing “without being able to explain *how* we know” (Vaughan, 1979: 46); when an individual makes an intuitive judgement, they cannot necessarily articulate how the judgement was made (Topolinski, 2011). Intuitive judgements are often experienced as gut feelings (Cook, 2017), with Hogarth (2010) characterising intuition as being a feeling of knowing. This section will explore perspectives on intuition and its relationship with analysis, before moving on to look at the role of intuition in C&F social work.

2.2.1 Different perspectives on intuition

Intuition has been well-explored within the field of the psychology of decision-making, with three main traditions developing during the latter half of the twentieth century: heuristics and biases (HB), fast and frugal heuristics (FFH), and naturalistic decision-making (NDM) (Klein, 2008; Kahneman and Klein, 2009). Though there are differences in how the traditions orientate themselves in relation to the use of intuition, there is a consensus across the traditions that intuitive reasoning is distinct from analytic reasoning: intuitive reasoning is quick, automatic, and unconscious; by contrast analytic reasoning is deliberate, computational, and time-consuming (Kahneman and Frederick, 2002).

Many situations – including the kinds of situations that social workers are frequently exposed to (van de Luitgaarden, 2009; Taylor, 2017) – do not lend themselves to the use of analytic reasoning. The notion that optimal judgement comes through an analytical process where rational actors have unlimited time and access to complete information does not reflect the reality within which most judgements take place. Simon (1972) argues that human

rationality is bounded: the ability to make rational decisions in real-world circumstances is proscribed by cognitive capacity, time, and environmental limits. As a result, rather than seeking perfect judgements, individuals are often making 'satisficing' or 'good enough' judgements (Simon, 1956), for which intuitive reasoning is well-suited (Taylor, 2012).

The NDM tradition has developed from this starting point: many judgements taken by individuals across a range of contexts are necessarily intuitive and it is important to understand how expertise can be developed in utilising intuitive judgement (Klein, 2015). In the NDM tradition, Klein (1998, 2015) proposes that intuitive judgements entail a form of pattern-recognition and pattern-matching; experienced decision-makers rapidly and unconsciously identify pertinent situational cues and compare them with a set of mental frames in order select a response. This model of pattern-recognition and matching is also known as recognition-primed decision-making (RPD) (Klein et al, 2007). Individuals develop skill in making intuitive judgements through repeated experience and through opportunities to reflect upon judgements made (Kahneman and Klein, 2009).

The HB tradition has tended to be characterised by a focus on how predictable biases can lead to errors in intuitive judgement (Kahneman and Klein, 2009). The affective component of the experience of a gut feeling (Topolinski, 2011), for example, can lead to bias, as individuals base their judgement upon a positive or negative affective response that, in itself, provides a weak basis for supporting the judgement made (Finucane et al, 2003). Within the FFH tradition, heuristics are seen as being useful rules of thumb – often based on professional knowledge and experience (Kirkman and Melrose, 2014; Taylor, 2017) – that enable quick judgements to be made.

Whether through the application of heuristics or through a process of pattern-matching, intuitive sensemaking takes place in two ways: through the rapid selection and interpretation of relevant situational cues (Cook and Gregory, 2020), and through recognising incongruence between situational cues and the existing repertoire of frames (Klein et al, 2007).

2.2.2 The use of intuition in social work

As mentioned previously, the nature of C&F social work is such that it lends itself to the use of intuition (van de Luitgaarden, 2009). Social workers are rarely equipped with full, reliable data which can be analysed; instead, social workers work with narrative accounts from a range of individuals, some of which may be partial, ambiguous, or contradictory (van de Luitgaarden, 2011). This, coupled with prescribed timescales for decision-making, creates conditions where the use of intuition is prevalent.

Historically, the HB tradition has been influential in the field of social work, with a focus on how predictable cognitive biases can impact on the intuitive judgements that social workers make (Munro, 1996, 1999). More recently, however, interest has been shown in how NDM can apply to social workers developing expertise in making quick judgements (Whittaker, 2018) and how FFH can help to explain the way that social workers quickly appraise complex information (Taylor, 2017). This section will consider empirical social work literature on the role of intuition, beginning with ethnographic studies that have sought to get close to the day-to-day practice contexts in which social workers make sense of information to inform their decision-making.

Ethnographic studies of social work decision-making reinforce the view that the fast-paced environment of C&F social work means that social workers rely on intuition to make sense of information (Broadhurst et al, 2010; Kirkman and Melrose, 2014; Saltiel, 2016). Saltiel's (2016) ethnographic study of decision-making in a C&F assessment team found that social workers used quick reasoning processes to take decisions. Social workers were often not explicitly aware of the professional knowledge underpinning the decisions they took (Saltiel, 2016); this resonates with the notion of intuition being a feeling of knowing (Hogarth, 2010) but without knowing how one knows (Vaughan, 1979). Saltiel (2016) noted that the time pressures experienced by social workers could lead to risky decisions being taken, however challenge from colleagues and the presence of a manager helped to mitigate this risk. One drawback of Saltiel's work is that due to difficulties in observing

supervision (Saltiel, 2017), he was only able to observe case-talk in the office space. How social workers used supervision, either one-to-one or in groups, to aid decision-making was only able to be explored through interviews with social workers and supervisors as opposed to through observation (Saltiel, 2017).

Other ethnographic studies of decision-making in teams undertaking first assessments also highlight how organisational and professional contexts influence the way that social workers make sense of information. Broadhurst et al (2010) and White et al (2009), drawing from large scale ethnographic research across five local authorities, looked at the ways in which processes and systems impacted on the assessment process, with a focus on the notion of latent conditions for error (Reason, 1997, 2000; Munro, 2005). Latent conditions for error are features of a system or organisation that increase the likelihood of errors being made (Reason, 1997, 2000), and in social work commonly include things like time pressures and understaffing (Munro, 2005). The systems in place across the local authorities involved in the research led to shortcuts being taken that were antithetical to good social work practice (White et al, 2009). The speed with which assessments had to be completed led to decisions being taken on incomplete information, including not seeing children (Broadhurst et al, 2010).

They argue that the system is set up to promote rushed decision-making; in part this is because of inflexible timescales for completion of assessment, however they also argue that blame culture – where individuals are seen as responsible for errors and act as scapegoats (Ruch et al, 2014) – inhibits the possibility of learning from mistakes and perpetuates the conditions for errors being made (Broadhurst et al, 2010). It is, however, worth noting that rigid timescales for initial assessment have since been eased (DfE, 2013) and the focus of the research on systems and timescales limits consideration of other factors that may contribute to or inhibit sensemaking.

Systemic issues inhibiting social workers' decision-making have been identified by other large-scale ethnographic studies. Kirkman and Melrose's

(2014) research involved five local authority front-door services and found a lack of opportunities to reflect on and learn from decision-making. As a result, Kirkman and Melrose (2014) found that there were common biases and flaws – such as confirmation bias and relative weighting of cases – evident in social workers' decision-making. Kirkman and Melrose (2014) also found that defensive decision-making, decision fatigue, and poor or incomplete information also impacted on the quality of decisions made. The findings are based on a large sample and shed light on how intuitive sensemaking can lead to poor or biased decision-making in contexts where time pressures are significant. However, the sample was drawn from teams taking decisions on whether to accept referrals – working to a timescale of one working day for decision-making (DfE, 2018a) – and so the findings may not be applicable to contexts where timescales are less restrictive.

The way in which social workers make sense of information in day-to-day practice has also been explored in empirical studies using qualitative interviews. Platt (2006) explored the kinds of reasoning employed by social workers in responding to referrals through the use of semi-structured interviews. The “intuitive steps” (Platt, 2006: 16) social workers used to make sense of referrals involved weighing five case factors: specificity of the harm caused; severity of any harm; risk of future harm; parental accountability; and corroboration of referral information. Where specific harm could be identified or potential harm was considered severe, a CP investigation was the likely decision, where the severity of harm was low or unknown but parents were viewed as responsible and the potential harm could be corroborated, an exploratory assessment would be carried out (Platt, 2006). The different factors interact to help workers quickly make sense of complex referral information (Platt, 2006). A strength of the study is the identification of professional heuristics used by social workers in their everyday sensemaking. The use of interview data has some limitations, in particular that participants may seek to present accounts that paint them in a positive light (Goffman, 1959) or may misremember what happened when recalling details retrospectively (Golden, 1992). Helm (2017: 390) notes that sensemaking is difficult to access since “it is so hard to consciously access and reflect upon

our own sense-making activity”; this is a limitation of studies using interviews to explore sensemaking.

The role of intuition in making sense of practice encounters has been explored by Cook (2016, 2017). Cook’s (2016) work on sensemaking and home visiting involved interviews with C&F social workers immediately after undertaking an initial home visit, combined with focus groups with social workers reflecting on experiences of home visiting. From the interview data, intuition was found to be crucial to how social workers began attaching significance to what they saw and heard on home visits (Cook, 2017). Gut feelings provided valuable cues for further enquiry and, at times, sensitised social workers to potential risks (Cook, 2017). Where there was incongruence between what was observed and felt during the visit and the social worker’s mental template, this tended to be expressed as an intuitive gut feeling that something was not right and warranted further exploration (Cook, 2017). Cook (2017) cautions that such gut feelings should not act as the sole basis for a judgement, they need to be scrutinised and supported with evidence. A strength of Cook’s work is that the method achieved closeness to how participants were making sense of the encounter immediately afterwards, thus mitigating the difficulties noted by Helm (2017) in accessing sensemaking retrospectively. It is possible, however, that using such a method provided an opportunity for sensemaking dialogue that the participants otherwise may not have had, and this may have influenced the way that they made sense of the home visit.

2.3 The interplay between intuition and analysis

As suggested within the above empirical studies, whilst intuition is often used by social workers, intuitive responses need to be scrutinised (Cook, 2017) and opportunities to reflect on intuitive judgement are important to mitigate against bias (Kirkman and Melrose, 2014). Intuition and analysis interact, offering opportunities for mitigating bias and developing skill in the use of intuitive judgement. In the HB tradition, the dual process model posits that deliberate analytic reasoning can become automatic and intuitive through

repetition (Kahneman, 2011). In the NDM tradition, a similar process occurs whereby repeated exposure to and reflection upon decision-making scenarios enables a more sophisticated repertoire of frames to be developed to support effective intuitive judgement (Klein, 2015). This creates common ground from which the two traditions acknowledge the capacity for developing expertise in intuitive judgement through its interaction with analytic reasoning (Kahneman and Klein, 2009).

Analytic reasoning can also be deployed as a check and balance on intuitive judgements (Kahneman, 2011) or when there is incongruence between a situation and an existing set of mental frames (Klein et al, 2007). In this context, sensemaking is a more deliberate process of selecting, interpreting, and testing information. Intuition and analysis operate on a continuum, with pure, non-conscious intuition at one end and computational, analytic reasoning at the other (Hammond, 1996). Different tasks require individuals to position themselves on different parts of the continuum (Taylor, 2012). For example, a decision about cost-benefit of residential providers for a looked after child may lend itself to more analytic reasoning, such as calculating expected utility (Taylor, 2012). On the other hand, where an out of hours team needs to decide whether there is a risk of harm to a child that requires an immediate response, a 'satisficing' (Simon, 1956) judgement based on an intuitive appraisal of the information at hand will be more appropriate (Taylor, 2012).

Sensemaking involves movement between conscious, analytical modes of reasoning, and non-conscious, intuitive modes of reasoning (Cook and Gregory, 2020); the following section will consider empirical research on the interaction between intuition and analysis in social work sensemaking, decision-making, and judgement.

2.3.1 How do intuition and analysis interact in C&F social work practice?

Research on how social workers make judgements in their day-to-day practice helps to illustrate how intuition and analysis interact, and how skill in intuitive judgement can be developed. Drawing on the work of Klein, Whittaker's (2018) ethnographic study of C&F social work teams found that experienced social workers were adept at pattern-recognition and were able to focus on pertinent situational cues more quickly than less experienced colleagues. Experienced workers limited the range of information they considered in order to reach judgements more swiftly, whilst also showing aptitude for identifying gaps or incongruencies (Whittaker, 2018). This finding is echoed elsewhere, in particular by Leonard and O'Connor (2018), who similarly found – through the use of focus groups – that more experienced practitioners showed greater aptitude than inexperienced social workers for quickly focusing on relevant information in order to inform their decision-making. Whittaker (2018) used the dual process model to explain how experienced workers could more rapidly select and interpret relevant information than less experienced colleagues. These studies usefully illustrate how experience in decision-making can promote effective use of intuition in making sense of information.

Other empirical research on decision-making has found that social workers employ both intuition and analysis to formulate judgements. Kettle's (2017) qualitative study using semi-structured interviews found that when social workers perceive a case to have reached a 'tipping point', a range of extrinsic factors – such as a harmful incident or changes in engagement – interact with shifts in social workers' perceptions to inform decision-making. Kettle (2017) argues that such judgements are a process rather than singular events, and they involve both intuitive and analytic reasoning. The research is useful in highlighting how intuitive and analytic processes are central to the way social workers reach decisions, however as touched on previously there are some limitations to the use of interviews to access sensemaking activity (Helm, 2017).

There is evidence, however, from ethnographic studies that supports the notion that social workers use more deliberate reasoning and are cognisant of when they are doing so. Scourfield and Pithouse (2006) used findings from ethnographic observations to explore the ways in which lay and professional knowledge interact within case discussions. Lay knowledge is akin to taking a common-sense approach, informed by shared cultural and social understandings, and provides a more intuitive way of understanding a family's circumstances (Scourfield and Pithouse, 2006). Professional knowledge, by contrast, involves the more formal application of theory; Scourfield and Pithouse (2006) found that workers were able to differentiate between these types of knowledge and when they were used, and observed that professional knowledge was often used in areas of work that were considered specialist or as a means to justify lay judgements. The use of ethnographic methods enabled closeness to everyday case-talk, however though there are parallels between lay and professional knowledge and intuition and analysis, they are not synonymous.

The findings of Scourfield and Pithouse (2006) are, however, similar to other studies that have focused on the use of intuitive and analytic reasoning. Hackett and Taylor's (2014) mixed-methods study involved documentary analysis of core assessments and semi-structured interviews with social workers. A strength of the methodology is that it enabled triangulation by using both written assessments and interviews, however both forms of data represent a final account of the case which may limit how much light is shed on the sensemaking that contributed to the decision taken. Hackett and Taylor (2014) found that participants tended to favour experiential reasoning – intuitive reasoning that draws on professional knowledge, experience, and affective responses – when making decisions. Analytic reasoning tended to be used in cases that were viewed as complex – for example, cases of sexual abuse – or cases where evidence needed to be gathered and presented – such as cases in the court arena – often as a means to reinforce a decision already taken using experiential reasoning (Hackett and Taylor, 2014). Hackett and Taylor (2014) argue that analytic reasoning should not necessarily be seen as a gold standard, and, echoing Simon (1972), that the

nature of certain decision-making environments is better suited to the use of experiential reasoning. Issues arise where the use of experiential reasoning limits the range of possibilities that social workers are willing to consider (Hackett and Taylor, 2014).

The existing empirical literature demonstrates that social workers tend to use intuitive reasoning as their primary means of making sense of information. However, there is some evidence that social workers use analytical reasoning where cases are complex (Scourfield and Pithouse, 2006; Hackett and Taylor, 2014) and this would seem to tally with the notion that individuals engage in a more deliberate form of sensemaking when faced with new or anomalous situations. Issues can arise where cases that are perceived as less complex are made sense of intuitively with no reflection upon them. Kirkman and Melrose (2014) note that this can lead to flaws and biases in decision-making, whilst Hackett and Taylor (2014) argue that overreliance on intuitive forms of reasoning can limit the range of possibilities a social worker is likely to consider. Below are some examples of how such biases and flaws can manifest in practice:

Case example	Intuitive response	Flaw or bias
<p>A social worker receives a referral for a family they worked with six months ago and closed the case with support from early help services. The new referral is for apparently similar concerns to when the case was previously</p>	<p>The situation remains the same and nothing more needs to be done. Continue providing early help services.</p>	<p>Limiting range of possible responses, form of confirmation bias whereby information is interpreted to confirm a pre-existing judgement (Hackett and Taylor, 2014).</p>

<p>worked by the social worker.</p>		
<p>A duty social worker is screening five incoming referrals. Each of the referrals warrants a s.47 response under the Children Act 1989. A sixth referral comes in and the information suggests that a s.47 response could be warranted, but the case is more borderline.</p>	<p>The new referral does not warrant a s.47 response as it is less serious than the previous five referrals.</p>	<p>Relative weighting of cases, whereby the severity of a case is assessed on the basis of comparison with other cases rather than on its objective merits (Kirkman and Melrose, 2014).</p>
<p>A social worker is carrying out an assessment on a chronic neglect case. The case is similar to another case that she worked recently where the situation deteriorated rapidly and a CP conference had to be convened.</p>	<p>Cases like this have the potential to deteriorate quickly and so a CP conference should be convened to support the family.</p>	<p>A combination of the above; the severity of the case is weighted using a previous case (Kirkman and Melrose, 2014) and past experience and confirmation bias influence the possibilities the social worker considers (Hackett and Taylor, 2014).</p>

Table 2: Case examples to illustrate potential flaws and biases in intuitive judgement

In each of the examples, judgement is skewed by the sole use of intuition since the uniqueness of each case is overlooked in favour of rapid, automatic sensemaking. Whilst past experience can be helpful to decision-making and judgement and can help to develop expertise, this is predicated on opportunities to reflect upon, unpick, and learn from decisions taken (Kahneman and Klein, 2009). Where such opportunities are lacking and where intuitive reasoning is used uncritically, such biases and flaws can lead to decisions being made that may either be more punitive or riskier than they might otherwise have been (Kirkman and Melrose, 2014). The repercussions of this for children and their families are potentially significant. The use of analytic reasoning is one means through which such biases and flaws can be avoided.

Despite the value of analytic reasoning for scrutinising intuitive responses, less is known about how intuition and analysis interact in social work. Whittaker (2018) draws on relevant theory to suggest that the dual process model helps to explain how more experienced social workers are able to engage in rapid identification of relevant cues to make sense of information quickly. However, the finding is based upon working backwards from observations of experienced social workers to infer that they have internalised previously analytical ways of thinking about cases. This is a reasonable inference to make but is not grounded in empirical observations of how analysis interacts with intuition to develop skill in the use of intuitive reasoning. More empirical research considering how intuition and analysis interact, particularly work that focuses on opportunities social workers have to subject intuitive judgements to analytic scrutiny, would add to our understanding of how these two forms of reasoning work together to contribute to social workers' sensemaking.

2.4 Sensemaking and emotion

This section will move away from considering sensemaking as a solely cognitive activity by exploring the role that emotion plays in sensemaking. Affect influences how individuals make sense of information; positive and negative affective responses to situational cues are correlated with positive and negative intuitive judgements being made in response to them (Finucane et al, 2003; Topolinski, 2011). This unconscious use of affective responses to inform judgements is known as the affect heuristic (Finucane et al, 2003). The social work literature notes the role that affect can play in influencing how social workers make sense of information; Taylor and White (2006), based on previous ethnographic fieldwork, noted that when a parent engendered a positive affective response this created an impression that they were a 'good' parent and this influenced how information was made sense of. When the children's father raised plausible concerns about the mother, these were dismissed because they did not cohere with the positive view of the mother (Taylor and White, 2006).

Affective responses, however, are not synonymous with emotional ones. Affect – though sometimes used as a synonym for emotion – is a simple positive or negative feeling in response to a situational cue; emotions, by contrast, are complex and nuanced (Finucane et al, 2003). Emotions can provide social workers with helpful 'emotion information' (Thompson, 2010; Lees, 2017a). Emotion information is "information that is sensed ... rather than derived empirically" (Lees, 2017a: 893). Emotion information is used by social workers frequently; however, Lees' (2017a) empirical work found that it was often filtered out in sanitised case records and assessments. These accounts of practice are seen as professional accounts, with emotion information seen as needing to be edited out of them (Lees, 2017a). This finding from Lees (2017a) reflects a wider ambivalence amongst social workers about whether emotions are 'professional' and allowable as a sensemaking resource (O'Connor, 2019).

Regardless of this perception the way that social workers make sense of their emotional experiences plays a role in how they make judgements (Taylor and White, 2006). The interplay between reason and emotion is so central to how social workers process information that rationality and feeling should be seen as inseparable (Damasio, 2006). Keinemans (2015) further argues that emotion is essential for the kind of moral reasoning that social workers are engaged in. Emotions act as a mediator between individual subjects and the object of their experience; they act as a means of understanding reality in a particular way that cannot be achieved purely through rational cognition (Keinemans, 2015; Robson, 2020).

An appraisal of 'facts' and 'evidence' is often insufficient to inform social workers' judgement; moral reasoning – informed by the social worker's emotional responses – is needed to attach significance to 'facts' (Taylor and White, 2001). Taylor and White (2000) offer the example of the Louise Woodward trial, where two different expert witnesses gave conflicting accounts of the likely cause of fatal injuries sustained by the baby she was caring for. These accounts were based on the same set of 'facts' and both accounts were compelling; ultimately, which account was accepted as being 'right' entailed a moral judgement about Louise Woodward's culpability and character rather than further analysis of the 'facts' of the case (Taylor and White, 2000). Echoing Damasio (2006), the implication here is not simply that emotions can be helpful sources of information, but rather that emotions play a critical role, alongside cognition, in how individuals make sense of the world; as O'Connor (2019: 8) argues, emotion acts "as a resource which inform[s] sense-making processes among social workers".

How emotion and cognition interact needs to be reflected upon in order to ensure that feelings act as a useful resource in social workers' sensemaking:

Social workers' emotions can thus be viewed as dynamic resources which if analysed and theorised, for example, practitioners' analysis of their discomfort, fear or anxiety,

can inform and safeguard practitioners and clients
(O'Connor, 2019: 8)

The making explicit of emotional responses helps to draw out the role they are playing in social workers' sensemaking; where emotional responses are not acknowledged, there is the potential for them to act as a source of unconscious bias (Taylor and White, 2006; Patterson, 2019).

2.4.1 How do emotions influence social workers in making sense of information in day-to- day practice?

Emotions are a natural part of human relationships and engaging with children and families can be emotionally challenging (Winter et al, 2019). This section will consider the ways in which emotional responses, particularly as they occur in the context of relationships with children and families, can influence social workers' sensemaking by reviewing relevant empirical literature.

Kettle's (2018) research, based on interviews with social workers, explored the links between decision-making, relationships, and feelings of anxiety. Families employed strategies such as hostility and non-engagement to manage anxiety in their relationships with social workers, often increasing the anxiety experienced by social workers as a result (Kettle, 2018). Social workers responded to this anxiety by trying to manage closeness and distance in their relationships with children and families, with too much closeness or distance impacting on their judgement (Kettle, 2018). However, it is not clear from the findings *how* closeness or distance influenced the judgements social workers made, and so the link is somewhat hypothetical.

Where relational anxiety is not managed, hostility in social workers' relationships with families can manifest itself. Ferguson et al (2020b) found that unacknowledged anxiety created by conflict with parents led to hostile relationships. Ferguson et al (2020b) argue for the importance of time and

space to reflect on relationships and the anxiety they can provoke in order to engage in more compassionate practice. This finding was based on a large-scale, long-term ethnographic study across several social work teams and as such provides robust evidence of how social work relationships develop over time. The research, however, did not have an explicit focus on sensemaking or decision-making and judgement, focusing on interactions between social workers and families, and so links between hostility and how social workers make sense of those families' lives are not fully drawn out. There are, however, some insights into how negative emotions may influence social workers' sensemaking:

The social workers meanwhile, regarded the parents as being responsible for the lack of cooperation and saw this as further evidence of their problematic parenting (Ferguson et al, 2020b: 5)

This offers some further empirical support to the notion, highlighted elsewhere (Taylor and White, 2006), that emotional responses to parents influence how their behaviour is made sense of.

Where the social worker's emotional experience of a parent becomes evidence in support of their judgement, there is a risk that the child is lost sight of. This concern is borne out in Horwath's (2011) analysis of focus group data, which found that challenges in building meaningful relationships with children and families ran the risk of limiting how well their voice and needs informed social workers' thinking. Anxiety plays a role in contributing to these challenges, with parents experiencing anxiety about social work involvement, and social workers experiencing relational anxiety with families alongside anxiety caused by the demands of their role (Horwath, 2011). Time constraints also presented a barrier for social workers in building relationships and genuinely seeing children (Horwath, 2011). The study evidenced challenges and anxieties in relationship-building and social workers' awareness of those. However, direct evidence to support how this influenced sensemaking was lacking, with links drawn via reviews of serious cases

(Brandon et al, 2008) to an absence of children's needs and voice in social workers' work.

Other empirical studies have found that feelings of anxiety can lead to social workers adopting defensive positions. Taylor et al (2008) draw on Menzies Lyth's (1960) work on organisational defences against anxiety to inform their empirical work on decision-making in care proceedings cases. Taylor et al (2008) found that workers used strategies such as ritual task performance, projection of feelings on to others, repeated assessments, and splitting in order to defend against anxiety. In another paper based on the same study, Beckett et al (2007) argue that decision-making in court has an overt focus on evidence; this focus on evidence and how it is used contributes to an adversarial atmosphere in court proceedings, which creates further anxiety. The strategies outlined by Taylor et al (2008) serve to create distance between social workers and their experience of this anxiety and are most commonly employed when the emotional experience of anxiety is unacknowledged. Again, though, links to sensemaking are somewhat tangential in the study, with a focus on relationships and practices as opposed to sensemaking, decision-making, and judgement.

As social workers become more experienced, research suggests that they become more mindful of emotional and relational aspects of their work. O'Connor and Leonard's (2014) research, using focus groups with experienced and student social workers, found that experienced workers were more mindful of how their own emotional state and feelings towards families may impact upon their responses to them. In a follow-up paper as part of the same longitudinal study, Leonard and O'Connor (2018) found that the extent to which feelings were allowable and how to manage emotions during encounters with families was an issue for inexperienced workers, whilst experienced workers were mindful of the importance of managing the emotional content of encounters and noted that this could influence their decision-making (Leonard and O'Connor, 2018). It is, however, unclear how experienced social workers used emotions as a sensemaking resource and more empirical work is needed in this area.

The role of emotions in making sense of practice encounters is explored within Cook's (2017) research on home visiting. Cook (2017) found that the emotional experience of home visits influenced how social workers made sense of what they observed. Where social workers felt incongruence in the emotional presentation of the parent, social workers were more likely to probe more deeply or express greater concern for the safety of the child (Cook, 2017). Cook (2017) argues that emotional responses, along with intuitive gut feelings, play a central role in sensemaking, though cautions that they ought to act as a starting point in sensitising social workers and should be subjected to scrutiny. How emotions continue to be involved in social workers' sensemaking beyond the home visit and what opportunities social workers have to reflect on their emotional responses is an area that requires further exploration.

As well as sensitising social workers to potential risks or incongruencies, emotions can also distort how social workers make sense of information. Cook (2019a), using interview and focus group data, explored the way in which emotions act as both resource and risk in making sense of practice encounters. Cook (2019a) identified a range of emotional experiences that can either positively sensitise social workers during a home visit or that can inhibit or distort how such encounters are experienced. Cook (2019a) suggests that, for emotions to play a positive role in how social workers make sense of home visits, social workers need opportunities to reflect upon the significance of emotional responses and to manage the emotions present within home visits. Where such feelings are not managed or reflected upon, they risk distorting interpretations or creating overwhelming feelings of anxiety that can lead to distancing from the encounter and potentially missing vital information (Cook, 2019a).

This finding is reinforced by Ferguson's (2017) ethnographic work, where he observed a social worker who was overwhelmed by anxiety shutting down and not being able to engage with or respond to the children. Cooper (2005) similarly argues, in reviewing the Victoria Climbié case, that intense feelings of anxiety lead to children not really being seen by social workers. By contrast

Regehr et al's (2021) work, piloting a programme for improving decision-making in the United States (US), found that where social workers were mindful of their emotional arousal, this sensitised them to the need to pause and engage in more deliberate thought rather than rushing to a more automatic, anxiety-driven course of action. There is evidence, then, that overwhelming feelings can inhibit sensemaking and that emotional awareness and regulation can help to promote sensemaking, however the empirical findings are limited to making sense of individual practice encounters and so further work is needed to understand the role of emotions in other contexts.

Opportunities to discuss how social workers make sense of the emotional experience of working with children and families are important. As Cook's (2019a) work implies, where opportunities to reflect on feelings are absent, emotional responses may distort how social workers gather and make sense of information. The ability to openly discuss emotions can also influence sensemaking in other ways. Forsberg and Vagli (2006) argue that the extent to which emotions form part of collegial case discussions influences how able social workers are to hold on to uncertainty in the way they construct cases. Forsberg and Vagli's (2006) ethnographic study of case discussions in Norway and Finland highlighted differences in the level of emotion-talk in case discussions between social workers. In Norway, after initial emotional framing of cases – something noted in Helm's (2016) UK-based ethnographic research also – social workers moved on to frame cases in more factual ways, leading to them building a case to support a concrete decision more rapidly. In Finland, by contrast, social workers maintained a more emotionally-engaged approach to case discussion, enabling them to hold on to uncertainty and explore alternative understandings (Forsberg and Vagli, 2006). This research is useful in understanding how emotions play a role in everyday sensemaking dialogue and how engaging with emotions can help to promote different ways of understanding cases. There is a paucity of such research, particularly in a UK context, so further empirical work is needed to understand how emotions feature in social workers' case-talk and what role they play in sensemaking.

2.5 Sensemaking, intuition, and emotion: a summary

Intuitive sensemaking takes place through the use of mental frames being rapidly applied to situational cues. In the HB and FFH traditions intuitive responses are characterised as heuristic rules of thumb which can either be helpful (Taylor, 2017) or prone to bias (Munro, 1996). In the NDM tradition, mental frames are developed through a combination of professional knowledge and repeated experience, and this can promote the development of skilled use of intuition (Klein, 2015). It has been noted that this more naturalistic approach to decision-making is a good fit for the realities of everyday C&F social work (Platt and Turney, 2014) and it is this conception of pattern-matching using mental frames that appears most helpful in understanding the relationship between intuition and sensemaking. Sensemaking takes place either through intuitively selecting and matching situational cues to the relevant mental frame in order to reach a quick judgement, or in recognising incongruence between the cues and the existing repertoire of mental frames. Cook (2017) suggests this incongruence is experienced as an intuitive gut feeling that can usefully sensitise social workers to the need to engage in further, more deliberate sensemaking (Klein et al, 2007).

The scope for developing skill in intuitive judgement emphasised by the NDM tradition helps to show how intuition can be developed and used effectively. The interplay between intuition and analytic reasoning contributes to experienced social workers developing expertise (Whittaker, 2018) and analytic reasoning helps social workers to make sense of situations that are complex or novel (Hackett and Taylor, 2014). It is crucial for social workers to have opportunities to reflect upon how they intuitively make sense of their experiences to ensure that their judgements are grounded in evidence rather than based solely on gut feeling (Cook, 2017). Further empirical work in this area would be beneficial; whilst opportunities to reflect on how information is made sense of are widely highlighted as being crucial, there is a limited empirical basis for what this looks like in practice.

The role of emotion in sensemaking, decision-making and judgement, whilst explored in the theoretical literature (Taylor and White, 2001; Taylor and White, 2006; Trevithick, 2014, O'Connor, 2019), is less well-explored in the empirical literature. The emotional experience of social work encounters can influence sensemaking (Cook, 2017, 2019a) and decision-making (O'Connor and Leonard, 2014; Leonard and O'Connor, 2018). Anxiety can lead to decisions being taken unthinkingly (Regehr et al, 2021), distancing from practice encounters, which can lead to information being missed (Cook, 2019a) or in extreme cases to sensemaking essentially shutting down (Ferguson, 2017). This runs the risk of children not being seen (Cooper, 2005) and can lead to children's needs and voice being absent in how social workers make sense of their lives (Horwath, 2011). Opportunities to reflect on and make sense of emotional experiences are therefore essential to ensuring that C&F social work remains child-focused. More work is needed to understand how emotions contribute to sensemaking; whilst they can act as risk or resource (Cook, 2019a), providing useful emotion information (Lees, 2017a) or acting as a source of bias (Ferguson et al, 2020b), the current empirical basis for the use of emotions in sensemaking is limited.

The following chapter will now move on to consider the role of storytelling, narrative, and identity in social work sensemaking.

3. Sensemaking, social storytelling, and identity

The preceding chapter explored the way in which intuition and emotion are involved in the sensemaking process. This chapter will move on to explore sensemaking as a process of social storytelling (Cook and Gregory, 2020) and how identity feeds into the sensemaking process. Sensemaking as a form of storytelling or narrative construction is intrinsically linked to the notion of identity (Currie and Brown, 2003; Weick et al, 2005) and this chapter will first explore the concept of social storytelling, drawing on empirical literature to illustrate what this looks like in C&F social work practice, before looking at the role that identity plays in how social workers engage in sensemaking as a form of social storytelling.

3.1 Sensemaking as social storytelling

Narratives play a central role in how individuals order and make sense of their experiences and how they attach meaning to events (Riessman, 2008; Floersch et al, 2010). Riessman and Quinney (2005: 403) – in reviewing narrative research in social work – draw on White’s (2002) work to argue that storytelling is the means through which “professionals ... render their formulations recognizable” to others. De Bortoli and Dolan (2015: 2152-2153), in a conceptual piece discussing the value of decision-making aids, further argue that “social workers like to tell stories that explain the circumstances of individuals”. Storytelling and narrative provide a useful means to understand how social workers engage in the process of making sense of the lives of the children and families they work with.

The notion of sensemaking as being related to story or narrative stems from the work of Karl E. Weick in the field of organisational studies. Weick (1995) argues that the way that sense is made of uncertain or anomalous circumstances is through a process of story-building. This process has three stages, beginning with *enactment*, where cues are first noticed and bracketed as requiring explanation (Weick et al, 2005). There then follows a process of

selection, which involves comparing relevant cues with mental models and beginning to articulate and tentatively explain the situation at hand (Weick et al, 2005). These first two phases have parallels with the process of pattern-matching, through first noticing incongruence between situational cues and the existing repertoire of mental frames, and then through selecting and interpreting further cues using mental frames to begin constructing a coherent narrative (Weick et al, 2005; Klein et al, 2007). Finally, the stage of *retention* involves the story being accepted and adopted by the organisation; at this stage, the story has explanatory power and the ability to inform future action (Weick et al, 2005).

Sensemaking promotes coherence in the face of complexity and uncertainty; it enables stories to be created that can be used as frames to interpret future situations, and resilient stories that offer ongoing explanatory power endure and offer a sense of stability (Weick, 2011). The aim of sensemaking, Weick et al (2005) argue, is not to find 'truth', but rather to construct stories that are able to explain retrospectively, to guide action prospectively, and that are plausible and resilient. Plausibility and identity are key features of the sensemaking process (Weick et al, 2005). The capacity of a story to be plausible is crucial, however plausibility is not necessarily fixed; what will be plausible to one audience may not be plausible to another (Weick et al, 2005).

Sensemaking functions within the particular context of the social and organisational worlds of the individual (Jeong and Brower, 2008) and helps to construct and enact a shared sense of professional identity (Currie and Brown, 2003). Cook and Gregory (2020) argue, drawing on relevant empirical literature, that such sensemaking in a social work context is inherently social, usually involving dialogue between social workers and their colleagues, leading to the use of the term social storytelling to reflect the social nature of such sensemaking.

3.2 How do social workers engage in sensemaking as social storytelling?

Social work sensemaking involves interaction between the individual, team, organisation, and wider society (Helm and Roesch-Marsh, 2017). Helm and Roesch-Marsh (2017) argue for the importance of understanding how individual judgements are formulated through a combination of the individual's knowledge and experiences, the team context, and wider organisational systems. Lauritzen et al's (2018) systematic review of empirical literature on referral decisions similarly found that decision-making is influenced by individual, team, organisation, and societal factors. This section will explore how teams and colleagues, the organisation, and wider societal and professional influences contribute to sensemaking as a form of social storytelling by reviewing relevant empirical literature.

3.2.1 The contribution of teams and colleagues

Social work teams and colleagues from extended professional networks provide a rich resource for social workers' sensemaking; however, despite the importance of this resource, relatively little is known empirically about how collegial case discussion supports sensemaking (Helm, 2021). Helm's (2016, 2017) ethnographic research explored how sensemaking takes place within the context of C&F social work workplaces. The research is one of only a handful of studies with a specific focus on social work sensemaking and as such makes a valuable contribution to the field. As Helm (2017: 389) notes, the intention of his research was "to shed further light on the role of informal interaction and discussion in sense-making"; one upshot of this is that the role of structured and formal opportunities for sensemaking dialogue – such as one-to-one supervision and group case discussion – is not explored and the research focuses instead on the context of the office-space as an informal arena for sensemaking.

Helm (2016) observed that social workers frame conversations to signal a need for sensemaking dialogue, and colleagues then engage in a process of

testing and challenging emerging narratives (Helm, 2017). This illustrates the sensemaking stage of enactment, through social workers' identification and framing of cues that need to be made sense of (Helm, 2016), and the stage of selection, where information is tested and interpreted (Helm, 2017). Sensemaking is evident through the conversations that social workers engage in with colleagues (Helm, 2016, 2017); this is congruent with Weick et al's (2005: 409) assertion that: "sensemaking is, importantly, an issue of language, talk, and communication". Sensemaking involves articulating events, often through dialogue, in a way that renders them explicable (Weick et al, 2005).

Teams and colleagues can, however, limit social workers' sensemaking. Helm (2017) notes that overly reinforcing colleagues may not challenge social workers' interpretations, limiting scope for reflecting upon how information is made sense of. This echoes findings from Jeyasingham's (2016) ethnographic study of two C&F social work office spaces, where conversations observed between colleagues were not challenging or reflective. Other research has highlighted how the collective nature of team culture and identity can limit sensemaking. Riemann's (2005) ethnographic study of case discussion groups in Germany found that, through structured case discussion, teams construct and reconstruct their identity:

Case discussions are speech events in which the collective memory of a team (Halbwachs,1980) and its collective identity become visible. Colleagues share a long-term history with each other that becomes alive in their discourse (Riemann, 2005: 419)

Riemann (2005) found that cases were presented and discussed in a narrative way. At times, these narratives were based upon collective memories that impacted on the analytical distance needed to reflect on the case; this took place either through too much closeness to families who had been known for a long time, or through antipathy towards them (Riemann, 2005). Riemann (2005) also found that the pressure to make decisions

quickly often proscribed the sensemaking process; complex cases were simplified into a simple set of choices – a finding echoed by Walsh et al (2019) – presented by the speaker, and the speaker’s instinct was generally reinforced by the group. At other times, Riemann (2005) observed that social workers would present cases as being unproblematic and straightforward, this went unchallenged and limited the scope for further sensemaking dialogue. Riemann’s (2005) research is a helpful illustration of how sensemaking takes place in more structured group case discussion and how such sensemaking is inherently narrative. However, the study took place within a team undertaking long-term family counselling and case discussions took place weekly; such settings and such frequency of group case discussions are not the norm in statutory C&F social work in the UK.

There is, though, evidence that dialogue between social workers, their colleagues, and supervisors provides them with opportunities to work up accounts of cases in C&F social work settings in the UK. Doherty’s (2016) ethnographic study of how social workers formulate ‘borderline’ cases – those where social workers saw a possibility of cases escalating to care proceedings – sheds light on the narrative and dialogic nature of sensemaking, and how sensemaking is an inherently interpretive activity. Social workers used narratives – constructed through dialogue – around peaks and troughs, propping up, and tipping points in their discussions of borderline cases (Doherty, 2016). Doherty (2016) suggests that sensemaking conversations involve using language performatively and that cases are formulated in relation to their particular context. This raises questions about whether social workers ultimately construct and present a unified narrative about a case or whether different narratives are presented in different contexts.

The context-dependent nature of how cases were constructed through dialogue resonates with Weick et al’s (2005) suggestion that sensemaking involves building stories that are plausible to a particular audience; for example, Doherty (2016: 710) found that incidents related to court cases were formulated using legalistic language like “evidence” and “significance” that

would be familiar to the court as the prospective audience. The research used data from informal case-talk as well as exploring how cases were discussed in more formal settings, such as pre-proceedings meetings and supervision discussions; this enabled comparison of how cases were constructed in different contexts and is a strength of the study. A limitation is how applicable the findings are for cases that are not considered borderline in relation to the threshold for care proceedings; borderline cases may encourage greater discussion and these discussions will occur in forums – such as pre-proceedings meetings – that are not open to other case types.

Drawing on a metaphor used in Munro's (1996) seminal paper on common errors in social work assessment, Thompson (2013) characterises the sensemaking process as piecing together a jigsaw. Thompson's (2013) ethnographic research involved observations of a C&F front door service responding to referrals. The way participants made sense of information was not linear but involved an iterative, interpretive process of going back and forth between the individual and the information at hand (Thompson, 2013). Thompson (2013) found that, whilst the way information was made sense of was often in a state of flux, this contrasted with the child's circumstances remaining relatively unchanged; it was the meaning and significance that professionals attached to information in its particular context that tended to change rather than the 'facts'. Thompson (2013) found that sensemaking took place through dialogue between professionals, testing out ideas and transacting information. The research usefully highlights how sensemaking involves selecting and interpreting information in order to build a coherent picture or narrative and sheds light on the role of case discussion in doing so.

The role of case discussion with colleagues and other professionals in the process of sensemaking is evident from other ethnographic studies also. Roesch-Marsh's (2018) ethnographic research on decision-making focuses on the collective way in which decisions are made. Roesch-Marsh (2018: 410) found that relationships between inter-agency partners helped to facilitate a process of "thinking it through" – a form of discursive sensemaking – whilst colleagues and managers acted as important sounding-boards for case

discussion that helped to facilitate decision-making. Whittaker's (2018) research, touched on previously, also found that discussion with colleagues helped social workers to identify and work up a most likely hypothesis, with other hypotheses being tested and discarded along the way. Taken together, these studies highlight the value of sensemaking dialogue in constructing coherent narratives to support decision-making.

Sensemaking dialogue often takes place informally as social workers go about their day-to-day work. Avby (2015), based on observations from a single day of an ethnographic-study of Swedish CP social work, found that the two social workers she followed used a debrief to help them to process the emotional content of an encounter and to begin to bring some order to the events they had witnessed. Avby (2015) argues that sensemaking ultimately involves an interplay between individuals, colleagues, organisations, and service users, and is influenced by the values, norms and expectations that define and underpin the relationships between them. The working day offered social workers informal opportunities to reflect upon encounters that may otherwise have not been reflected on, and Avby (2015) argues for the importance of such opportunities for reflection. The use of a single day of observations enabled depth in the analysis, drawing out the dialogic and emotional nature of sensemaking alongside its function in ordering events (Weick, 1995). The small sample used is a potential limitation, though Avby (2015) states that the sample selected was relatively typical of the wider observational data.

3.2.2 Organisational contexts and sensemaking

The way that social workers construct accounts of children and families' lives is influenced by the organisations in which they work and how they function. Falconer and Shardlow's (2018) comparative study of decision-making in the UK and Finland found that organisational context influenced who was likely to be involved in sensemaking dialogue. Whilst all of the social workers involved in the study said they seek support with decision-making, social workers in the UK were more likely than those in Finland to seek direction

from their manager at an early stage (Falconer and Shardlow, 2018). In one local authority in the UK where systemic practice was embedded – with group supervision used and cases held by social work units as opposed to individual social workers – participants were more likely to use colleagues to explore their thinking, which suggests that differences in who social workers sought support from related more to organisational culture than national context (Falconer and Shardlow, 2018). Though the research highlights useful differences in who supports decision-making in different organisational contexts, how these differences are manifested in sensemaking case-talk is not explored.

The influence of organisations on sensemaking is often implicit. Walsh et al (2019) found that organisational factors influenced the way that social workers made sense of complex family systems. A strength of the study is that in using focus groups and interviews about a case vignette it was able to capture how social workers made sense of the case through their talk, however it is argued that, whilst vignettes can be a useful research tool, they do not fully replicate the complexity and dynamism of real life cases (Hughes and Huby, 2002). Walsh et al (2019) found that social workers made sense of the vignette by breaking down the 'case' into a series of individual problems, so as to determine eligibility for organisational intervention or referral on to other organisations (Walsh et al, 2019). This resulted in the dynamic and interrelated nature of the family being overlooked in favour of addressing simplified, professionally categorised individual problems (Walsh et al, 2019). The way that sensemaking took place appeared to be intrinsically linked to organisational context, with the family's life being made sense of in such a way that it could be understood and responded to by the organisation.

The influence of organisational factors on sensemaking is discussed by Saltiel and Lakey (2019) in analysing a single home visit using the ecology of judgement (Helm and Roesch-Marsh, 2017). The use of a single visit enabled the creation of an in-depth case study, though it is unclear how typical an example of practice this was and this may limit the wider applicability of the findings. Saltiel and Lakey (2019) found that the strengths-based approach

of the organisation influenced the way that parental behaviour was interpreted to inform decision-making. A combination of the social worker's knowledge and value-base and the ethos of the organisation led to an empathic encounter with the family and a positive construction of the case that led to a decision to take no further action, with the authors arguing that different decision-makers working in a different organisational context may have reached a different judgement (Saltiel and Lakey, 2019). The way that social workers make sense of their experiences seems to be guided, consciously or unconsciously, by the culture and expectations of the organisation.

At times, the influence of organisational systems, culture, and structure is more explicit. McCormack et al's (2020) mixed-methods study of decision-making at the referral stage in the Republic of Ireland – also drawing on the ecological approaches to decision-making – found that local organisational factors were more influential than individual factors in the decision-making process. The study has some limitations: the sample size is relatively small (fifteen participants in the quantitative element of the study, seven in the qualitative element) drawn from one service. The use of interviews to look at how information was made sense of also has some limitations, given the difficulties in accessing the sensemaking strategies that underpin decision-making retrospectively (Helm, 2017). McCormack et al (2020) found that whilst individual professional judgement played a role in how decisions were taken by participants, it was the organisational context that was more significant in how they took decisions. This included the use of tools and approaches implemented by the organisation to aid decision-making, such as Signs of Safety, and the use of case meetings to discuss cases and take decisions (McCormack et al, 2020).

3.2.3 Professional and societal narratives and sensemaking

Wider societal and professional narratives also influence social workers' sensemaking. Walsh et al (2019) argue that social work policy in the UK has increasingly been geared towards a narrow focus on CP, which in turn

influences organisations to focus on responding to risk, and this helps to explain why social workers respond to complex families by identifying individual risks or problems that the organisation can respond to.

The way that professional and societal narratives influence how social workers construct narratives about children and families is evident in other research findings. Collings and Davies' (2008) research, based on interviews with CP practitioners in Canada, highlights how discourse around childhood influences how social workers make sense of children's lives. Collings and Davies (2008) argue that powerful societal narratives exist around vulnerability, protection, and the rights of children; similar narratives exist in the UK also (Parton, 2011). Collings and Davies (2008) found that these narratives decontextualised children from their families and impacted on the ways that social workers formulated cases. Featherstone et al (2014) argue that this individualisation of children has led to an unhelpful focus on eliminating risk, and with it a pull towards certainty that limits the range of responses available to social workers. This splitting of children from their families in contemporary social work is noted by Walsh et al (2019) as being a consequence of a narrow focus on CP that carries implicit conceptions of parents as a source of risk. Further empirical research is needed to see how this splitting plays out in social workers' case-talk in their day-to-day practice.

The way that parents are constructed by social workers can influence the way that they engage with and talk about families. Keddell (2011) found, in an Aotearoa context, that social workers who valued family maintenance engaged in positive framing of cases and constructed parents in ways that were non-blaming. This contrasts with findings from other studies where social workers' narratives about parents have led to more blaming case formulations (Keddell, 2011); Leigh et al (2020a), for example, found through a critical discourse analysis of relevant literature that discourses relating to parental disguised compliance distorted social workers' perceptions of parents and could ultimately become self-fulfilling. These kinds of professional discourses have power in how parental behaviour is made sense

of, though the empirical basis for their influence, particularly in a UK context, is relatively weak.

There is, however, some evidence that professional narratives can influence how social workers think about their encounters with service users. Cook (2019b) found that in discussing their work, social workers created a set of professional narratives about their identities as social workers. These narratives can positively or negatively influence the ways that social workers approach and interpret home visits, particularly through influencing closeness and distance in practice encounters (Cook, 2019b). The narratives that social workers constructed ran the risk of creating defensive or adversarial relationships with parents; for example, social workers' narratives about being courageous rescuers of children had the potential to distance social workers from parents (Cook, 2019b). The stories that social workers created through discussing their day-to-day practice conveyed something important about their identity; however, the construction of identity carried with it the prospect of othering the family and colleagues who were not social workers (Cook, 2019b). Cook's (2019b) research is novel in exploring the narratives social workers create about themselves as professionals and how this relates to their identity, and the use of focus groups helped to facilitate exploration of social workers' identities. However, how these narratives influence sensemaking is an area that requires further empirical work; it would be useful to see how such narratives manifest themselves in social workers' case-talk.

3.3 Identity and sensemaking

Identity plays a central role in sensemaking. Weick et al (2005: 416) argue that the construction and presentation of identity is so fundamental to sensemaking that – along with plausibility – it is one of the “two properties that differentiate sensemaking from basic cognitive psychology”. How individuals see themselves in their organisational context influences how they engage in sensemaking, as Weick et al (2005: 416) argue: “who we think we are (identity) as organizational actors shapes what we enact and how we interpret”. Not only does identity shape the way that sensemaking takes place, the narratives

created through sensemaking also serve to convey a sense of identity. Currie and Brown (2003: 563) further make the case that: “individuals and groups make sense of events in their working lives, and define their work identities, through the authoring of narratives”. In considering sensemaking as a form of social storytelling, it is therefore important to consider the role that identity plays in shaping how narratives are constructed and presented, and how the narratives that individuals create through their sensemaking serve to construct and present their sense of identity.

Links between sensemaking, narrative, and identity are also evident elsewhere; in discussing narrative approaches in social work research, Riessman and Quinney (2005: 394) argue that narrative is intrinsically linked to the construction of identity and state that “events are selected, organized, connected, and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience”. There is, then, interplay between *how* identity is constructed and *who* it is being constructed for when social workers engage in sensemaking: “sensemaking is incomplete unless there is sensegiving, a sensemaking variant undertaken to create meanings for a target audience” (Weick et al, 2005: 416). The presentation of identity is not fixed, as the facets of identity presented will be influenced by who the audience is and what is being conveyed to that audience (Weick et al, 2005).

This section will now explore the concept of identity in relation to social work, looking at the relationship between the personal and professional self in the construction of social work identity, before considering how notions of professionalism influence the construction of social work identity. The integration of personal and professional aspects of social work identity will be discussed, before then moving on to review empirical literature that suggests that aspects of social workers’ identities may influence how they engage in sensemaking.

3.3.1 Professional identity and the personal and professional “selves”

Social work identity is a complex thing, and the notion of there being a coherent social work identity is contested (Jordan, 2004). Smith (2012), drawing on ideas from the field of social pedagogy, suggests that social workers' identities consist of three “selves”:

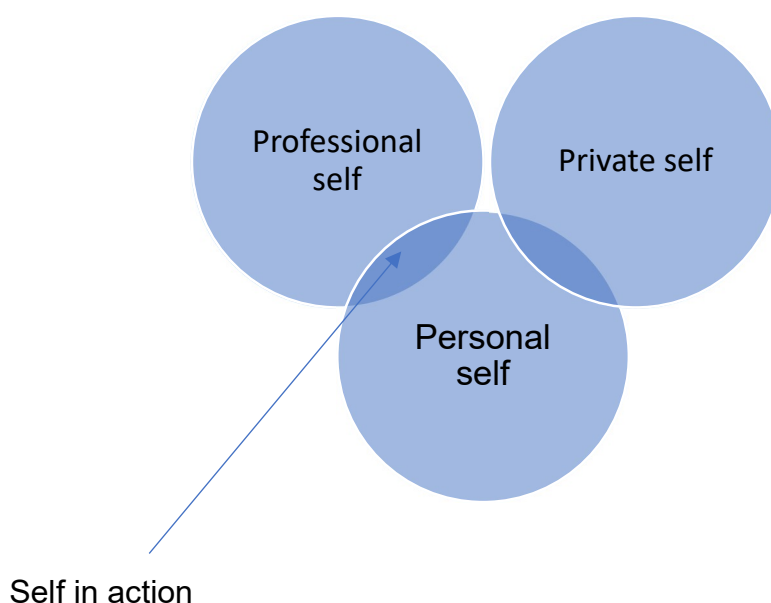


Figure B: The three “selves” and “self in action”

The professional self is based upon the legislative and regulatory context in which the individual works and further includes the knowledge, skills and values that underpin their work (Petrie, 2011). In social work, this will include professional standards, codes of practice, and codes of ethics from regulatory bodies like *Social Work England* and professional organisations like the *British Association of Social Workers (BASW)*. The personal self is where the individual's feelings, attitudes, and life experiences are located; the personal self is intrinsically linked to the personality of the individual (Petrie, 2011). The private self is where the boundary is drawn between what the individual is prepared to share of their personal self and what they are not (Petrie, 2011); the private self relates to how one behaves and interacts with those they are closest to and it is the aspects of this behaviour that are filtered out in a work

context that draw the boundary between the personal and private selves (Smith, 2012).

Boundaries between the three selves are not always neatly defined – for example, personal attitudes and values will overlap with and be shaped by professional values, though at times they may also come into conflict – and may depend on context. In some circumstances, what one chooses to share of one’s own experiences, and thus where the boundary between the personal and private is drawn, will vary. For example, sharing an experience of loss with a young person going through a bereavement may be a helpful way of showing them they are not alone, however it would not be appropriate to share this information in other circumstances where the sharing is about one’s own needs. It is important to reflect on what is being shared and why at the boundary between the personal and private selves, and the professional self helps in this task by providing a defined context for the work (Petrie, 2011).

Smith (2012: 50) argues that the personal and professional selves merge to create the “self in action” that is central to effective relationship-based practice. However, whilst the personal self is an essential vehicle for building relationships with children and families (Petrie, 2011), it is sometimes viewed as being distinct from the professional self (Smith, 2012), creating a split in social workers’ identities between the personal and professional. The remainder of this section will look at the role of the professional and the personal in the construction of social work identity, beginning by looking at the relationship between professionalism and social work identity.

3.3.2 Professionalism and professional identity

Social work’s professional status and the implications of this for social workers’ sense of identity is an area of contention. Jordan (2004) argues that social work has long struggled to pin-down a coherent sense of its identity as a profession, an argument backed up by Maylea (2020), who asserts that the professionalisation of social work has undermined its value-base as an empowering activity that seeks to tackle injustice. Maylea (2020) goes so far

as to suggest that this dissonance between the professed and enacted values of the profession, along with a lack of a coherent theoretical basis for social work, mean that social work should cease to exist. The argument is polemical and draws on binaries between social work as an organisation-based profession and social work as a vehicle for social justice that are somewhat crude. As noted previously, Ferguson et al (2020a) found that practising in a way that prioritises helping, empowering relationships is possible in contemporary practice contexts. A more nuanced consideration of social work's professional status acknowledges that it can hold in tension values that prioritise empowerment, relationships, and social justice alongside exercising professional power within organisations that promote adherence to processes and procedures (Hingley-Jones and Ruch, 2016).

The uncertainty about social work's sense of its own identity, evident in the extreme position of Maylea (2020) and the more nuanced position of Hingley-Jones and Ruch (2016), is important for sensemaking; the construction of identity through sensemaking is particularly prevalent in circumstances where uncertainty exists (Currie and Brown, 2003; Weick et al, 2005), and so it is likely that social workers' sensemaking will be influenced by the contested and uncertain nature of their identity. This influence is evident in the observations of Winter et al (2019), who found contrasting evidence of how successfully social workers integrated their human, feeling selves into their sense of what a professional social worker should be. This section will now consider some further empirical literature on identity in social work.

Social workers' identities are shaped by the organisation (including the team), their professional knowledge-base, and societal and political attitudes towards the profession. Leigh (2016) argues that social workers' identities are shaped by either adopting or resisting the positions that are open to them in their role within the organisation's culture and way of working. Using autoethnographic methodology, Leigh (2016) reflected that she had adopted the identity of "PPO queen" when working as part of an out of hours duty team. Leigh (2016) noted that her sense of identity had shifted over time, moving from being family-focused to being more risk-averse, which suggests that professional identity

shifts in response to prevailing organisational cultures. This identity was influenced by an organisational culture where the safety of the organisation and its social workers – manifested through defensive practice – was prioritised over the needs of the child and their family (Leigh, 2016). The research provides a powerful first-hand example of how organisational culture can influence how social workers' view themselves and how this can then influence their practice with children and families. Links with sensemaking are implicit through the author outlining her changing approach to families, further empirical research would be needed to explore how identity and organisational influences on it shape the way that social workers construct and present cases.

Societal attitudes towards social work, and how social workers experience public perceptions of the profession, also contribute towards shaping professional identity. Legood et al's (2016) research, based on semi-structured interviews with social workers, found that negative media perceptions of social work contributed to social workers perceiving themselves as being negatively viewed by the public. This then contributed to social work organisations being reactive in responding to perceived negative attitudes (Legood et al, 2016). Leigh (2016), drawing on the work of Goffman (1963), argues that social workers experience stigma from society because of their role in high profile child deaths, such as the deaths of Victoria Climbié and Peter Connelly. As a result, organisations carrying out the social work task act to appease society's expectations of the profession, often through developing risk-averse approaches to practice (Leigh, 2016).

Hobbs and Evans' (2017) research in an Aotearoa context also highlights that social workers self-stigmatise and feel shame due to their perception that the public sees them as responsible for removing people's children. Staniforth et al's (2016) research suggests that public attitudes towards social work are less negative than social workers' perceptions of their attitudes. It is the perception of public views of social work that is more powerful in shaping social workers' sense of identity than actual public attitudes (Legood et al, 2016; Hobbs and Evans, 2017). Whilst these studies usefully highlight the impact of public

perceptions of social work on social workers' sense of identity, there is a lack of empirical research which demonstrates how this then influences the way that social workers then engage in sensemaking.

As touched on previously, organisations are influenced by socio-political expectations of and responses to social work, and this can also influence how social workers then perceive themselves. Hoggett (2006: 177) makes the case that public organisations – such as those undertaking C&F social work – act as “a receptacle for containing social anxieties”. This feature of public organisations makes them uniquely complex; organisational cultures develop in the context of containing and responding to social and political expectations of and anxieties about the profession and its core function of keeping children safe (Cooper, 2018). Organisations can then be prone to responding to such anxiety in ways that shape practice; Hoggett (2010) argues that the obsession of public bodies with targets and indicators acts as a “perverse defence” against anxiety, which Cooper (2018) suggests creates additional layers of anxiety at organisational and practitioner levels, with fear of blame and pressure to meet performance targets feeding into the milieu that shapes social work identity. Cooper's (2018) work, however, has a relatively limited empirical basis, and Hoggett's (2006, 2010) work is not specific to the context of C&F social work.

Organisational cultures – in responding to socio-political pressures – can act as countervailing forces against social work as a profession (Leigh, 2014). Leigh's (2014) notion of countervailing forces draws on the work of Freidson (1970, 1986), who argues that professions emerge through a process that involves meeting the demands of a particular market and gaining specialist knowledge – including higher education qualifications – to be applied within the specified domain. Freidson (1970) further argues that professions are socially constructed, and part of the process of a profession developing is a form of social closure which creates a sense of membership and shared identity. This social closure confers on members a degree of power and privilege and offers a defence against attacks from external countervailing forces (Freidson, 1986). Leigh's (2014) research suggests that the

organisation acts as an internal countervailing force in social work, marking a point of difference from Freidson's conceptualisation of professionalisation. This makes social work susceptible to attack; it cannot rely on social closure as a defence since countervailing forces exist internally as well as externally (Leigh, 2014). This may contribute to the argument that social work lacks a clear sense of its professional identity (Jordan, 2004; Brodie et al, 2008).

This uncertain sense of professional identity is compounded by questions over whether social work fulfils the criteria associated with professionalism. Professions are characterised by a degree of autonomy in defining their knowledge-base and how they operate, and in exercising power over a particular domain (Freidson, 1970). Brodie et al (2008) argue, in reviewing changes to policy over a forty year period in Scottish social work, that social work has not managed to achieve such autonomy, and thus its professional status is weakened. Cootes et al (2021) and Zufferey et al's (2011) Australia-based studies highlight that social workers' knowledge-base is broad, and this can be both a strength and a weakness. The broad knowledge-base of social workers can enable them to work across disciplines with different professionals competently (Cootes et al, 2021). However, the more generic nature of social workers' knowledge-base (Zufferey et al, 2011) can lead to perceptions that social workers lack expertise and, as a result, sit low down in professional hierarchies (Cootes et al, 2021).

The challenges in social work asserting and being confident about its professional status contribute to a degree of uncertainty about what it means to be a professional social worker. A further complication for social work identity is how to integrate the professional and personal selves within a unified social work identity. The following section will consider how the personal and professional can be integrated into a coherent sense of what it means to be a social worker.

3.3.3 Reconciling the personal and professional self

In discussing the notion of expertise in social work, Fook et al (1997) discuss social work identity and draw on the notion of the personal and professional selves. They note that experienced social workers display confidence in their sense of identity and have managed to integrate their personal self into their professional identity (Fook et al, 1997). Inexperienced workers, by contrast, tend to struggle with reconciling the personal and professional, creating a sense of conflict and lack of confidence in their identity as social worker (Fook et al, 1997). Echoing Fook et al (1997), Leonard and O'Connor (2018) found that less experienced social workers felt uncomfortable with and ambivalent about the role of feelings, seeing them as not being allowable in the professional world of social work. Experienced workers, by contrast, expressed greater comfort in recognising and acknowledging the emotional and relational aspects of social work and this contributed to an increased sense of professional confidence in decision-making (Leonard and O'Connor, 2018). This section will consider empirical studies focusing on the interplay between the personal and professional selves in social work identity.

This distinction between the professional and the personal selves is evident in Winter et al's (2019) ethnographic research on emotional labour. Emotional labour involves the management and expression of emotions in fulfilling the demands of emotionally challenging work (Hochschild, 1983). Winter et al (2019) observed that social workers became task focused and somewhat cold and clinical when dealing with situations that were emotionally charged. Winter et al (2019) argue that this involves a form of performance, where a false and overly professional version of the self is presented to create distance from the emotionally difficult situation. The need to present a particular version of the self, as well as acting as a defence against difficult emotions, may be reinforced by social workers' ambivalence about how allowable emotions are in social work (O'Connor, 2019). This can create a sense of dissonance between the personal and professional self that is evident in social workers' practice (Winter et al, 2019). The ethnographic methods used by Winter et al

(2019) helpfully illustrate how identities are performed through interactions with children and families, such methods are also likely to be fruitful for exploring how identity is performed through everyday sensemaking dialogue.

Although social workers can be prone to engage in splitting the personal self from the professional self in order to manage emotionally challenging experiences (Winter et al, 2019), other studies suggest that the personal and professional necessarily interact; the professional identity of social workers influences how social workers perceive their personal identity (Leigh, 2014) and boundaries between the two are blurred rather than neatly drawn. It is also important to note that the apparent split between the personal and the professional is not always evident in social workers' practice; Winter et al (2019) found examples in their research of social workers embracing emotions and integrating their personal self into their practice in a meaningful way. Ferguson et al (2020a) similarly found that social workers engage in the use of their whole self in order to achieve emotional closeness to families so that they can build and sustain holding relationships with them. Ferguson (2011) refers to this as intimate CP practice, where closeness is seen as a virtue as opposed to a risk, and where the personal self is central to social work identity and relationship-based practice.

Social workers begin forming their identity whilst still in the university setting and Scholar et al (2014) argue that universities can play a key role in shaping social work identity. Scholar et al (2014) advocate for a conception of social work identity based on shared values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge, rather than a conception based on a bureaucratic conception of what it means to be a social worker working within an organisation. It is this latter conception that tends to dominate where the professional self is seen to come into conflict with the personal self in social workers' sense of identity (Winter et al, 2019). In focusing on the promotion of values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge, the perceived division between the personal and professional begins to dissolve (Scholar et al, 2014). Hyslop (2018) similarly argues, based on findings from an Aotearoa-based qualitative study, that despite neoliberal challenges, social workers retain a sense of identity based upon humanist principles of wanting

to assist service users. This identity is formed and reinforced through relational engagement with service users (Hyslop, 2018), where personal and professional aspects of identity are integrated in order to engage in meaningful relationship-based practice.

Integrating the personal and professional self can, however, be challenging for social workers in contemporary C&F practice. Tanner (2020) argues that compassionate, emotionally-engaged practice comes into tension with notions of professionalism, particularly within the neoliberal political context in which social work operates. Tanner (2020) argues that spaces are needed for social workers to be able to explore emotions and the relationships within which such emotions are experienced, whilst Winter et al (2019) similarly argue that such spaces are essential to avoid the kind of splitting of the personal and professional selves that occurred in some of their observations of practice. How such integration and splitting are evident in the way social workers discuss cases is not well-understood empirically and more work is needed to see how the presentation of identity influences sensemaking in social workers' case-talk.

3.3.4 How might identity influence sensemaking?

Although identity is somewhat lacking in the empirical literature relating to sensemaking, decision-making, and judgement in social work, there is some research which suggests that the values, attitudes, and dispositions that form part of social workers' identities can be influential in how they make sense of information. It is worth reiterating that, in contrast to other fields (Currie and Brown, 2003; Weick et al, 2005) identity as a distinct concept has been underexplored in relation to how it may influence sensemaking, decision-making, and judgement, and the following studies consider just some of the facets of social workers' identities.

The values, attitudes and dispositions that form part of social workers' identities can be influential in how they attach meaning and significance to information to inform decision-making. Benbenishty et al (2015) found, using

survey data relating to attitudes towards family preservation and removal of children with social workers in four different national contexts, that there were variances in case recommendations using the same vignette based on whether social workers' attitudes were pro-removal or anti-removal. Differences in decision-making could not be explained solely by the different national contexts of the participants – Israel, the Netherlands, Northern Ireland and Spain – with significant variation observed between participants from the same national context, suggesting that social workers' individual values and attitudes towards family preservation and removal of children influenced their decision-making (Benbenishty et al, 2015).

Other empirical studies similarly back up this link between the values and dispositions of social workers' and how they make sense of information. Keddell (2017), in an Aotearoa-based mixed-methods study, found that worker values and attitudes influenced how they assessed the likelihood and severity of risk of harm to children. Using survey data, Keddell (2017) categorised participants as risk-averse or risk-friendly and analysed qualitative interview data capturing their responses to a case vignette. Whilst risk-averse and risk-friendly social workers identified similar risk factors, they differed in their estimation of whether these were currently being experienced, the extent of harm caused, and the likelihood of future harm (Keddell, 2017). Risk-averse practitioners expressed risk and likelihood of risk with greater certainty, whilst the risk-friendly group used more tentative language (Keddell, 2017). Keddell (2017) suggests that each group may potentially over- or underestimate the significance of certain factors as a result of their disposition towards risk.

With both of these studies, the use of vignettes – as previously discussed – can struggle to replicate the dynamism of real cases (Hughes and Huby, 2002). That said, vignettes are noted to be useful for exploring individuals' attitudes and perceptions in social research (Hughes and Huby, 2002). Interestingly, despite their similar findings, the two studies reached contrasting conclusions. Benbenishty et al (2015) advocate for the use of structured decision-making tools – for example, numerical risk matrices – as

a means to mitigate the influence of subjective attitudes, values and dispositions on sensemaking and decision-making. Keddell (2017), meanwhile, argues that her findings demonstrate why such tools tend to be ineffective; social workers are adept at identifying similar concerns – suggesting a degree of shared professional expertise in identifying pertinent cues (Klein, 2015; Whittaker, 2018) – however, the meaning and significance social workers attach to these cues differs and is influenced by who they are and how they view themselves in the social work role.

The idea that the values and dispositions that form part of social workers' identities can influence how they make sense of information is further backed up by Fluke et al (2016). Fluke et al's (2016) US-based study used survey data to explore social workers' attitudes to family preservation versus child safety and found that differences in disposition were correlated with differences in decision-making. However, the study was based solely on survey data and this limits the capacity to compare decision-making on the same case as was evident in the vignette-based studies above. Fluke et al's (2016) findings were, however, similar to those of Keddell (2017) and Benbenishty et al (2015), suggesting that there is sound empirical evidence of a relationship between the dispositions and attitudes of social workers and how they take decisions.

Understanding the complexity of social work identity and the challenges involved in integrating personal and professional aspects of identity in contemporary C&F social work (Hingley-Jones and Ruch, 2016) is important given the strength of the relationship between identity and sensemaking (Weick et al, 2005). There is some empirical evidence to suggest that the values, dispositions, and attitudes of social workers are influential in how they make sense of information to inform their decision-making (Benbenishty et al, 2015; Fluke et al, 2016; Keddell, 2017). Moreover, as Cook's (2019b) research suggests, how social workers construct their identity through creating narratives about themselves can influence their interactions with families. How identity is presented by social workers in their day-to-day work and in the

narratives that social workers construct about their cases is likely to be a fruitful avenue for further understanding social work sensemaking.

3.4 Sensemaking, social storytelling, and identity: a summary

It is evident from the theoretical and empirical literature that sensemaking involves a form of social storytelling. This takes place through dialogue with colleagues (Helm, 2017) and supervisors (Falconer and Shardlow, 2018), and is heavily influenced by the organisational, socio-legal contexts of the profession (Walsh et al, 2019). Given that sensemaking remains an under-explored area (Avby, 2015), there is a need for further exploration of how social workers construct stories about children and families' lives and how others contribute to this process of social storytelling (Helm, 2021). Although Cook and Gregory (2020) synthesise the different perspectives on sensemaking to suggest that sensemaking is a psychosocial process involving the interplay of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and social factors, further research is needed to explore how intuitive, emotional, and narrative sensemaking take place in the everyday practice of C&F social work.

Sensemaking is intrinsically linked to identity; how individuals see themselves in their professional context influences how they engage in sensemaking (Currie and Brown, 2003), whilst sensemaking also serves to construct and present the identity of individuals within their organisational context (Weick et al, 2005). Social work identity is a complex thing, involving the interaction of personal and professional selves (Smith, 2012; Winter et al, 2019) and being influenced by organisational context (Leigh, 2016) and public perceptions of social work (Legood et al, 2016). Social work identity is also bound up with contested notions of professionalism, which contribute to an uncertain sense of what it means to be a social worker (Jordan, 2004). Aspects of social workers' identities influence how social workers make sense of information; the differing dispositions, values, and attitudes of social workers help to explain differences in how social workers make sense of the same information (Benbenishty et al, 2015; Keddell, 2017). There is, however, a lack of

research exploring how social work identity is constructed and presented through social workers' case-talk and further research is needed to understand the relationship between sensemaking and identity in C&F social work.

More research is needed generally to understand how sensemaking takes place in C&F social work practice (Platt and Turney, 2014; Avby, 2015; Doherty, 2016). Though the existing empirical research highlights the power of narrative and dialogue, there is a relatively small body of research on how everyday conversations involving social workers contribute to their sensemaking (Helm, 2021). What is particularly absent is a sense of how social work supervisors may be involved in sensemaking. Although Helm (2017) notes the role that supervisors play in developing a reflective team culture and offering structured reflection in supervision, there is scant empirical evidence of how supervisory dialogue contributes to sensemaking. It has been argued that supervision should provide a space for social workers to unpick and reflect on the judgements that they make and the stories they construct (Helm, 2011; Hackett and Taylor, 2014). The following chapter will explore what supervision is in C&F social work and what is known about supervision based on the existing empirical literature.

4. Social work supervision

This section will outline what supervision is and what its primary functions are by considering relevant theoretical literature, before moving on to review empirical research relating to supervision. Gaps in the literature will be highlighted, in particular gaps relating to the relationship between supervision, sensemaking, and decision-making and judgement, and gaps relating to what happens within supervision sessions and within the dyadic supervisory relationship.

4.1 What is supervision?

Supervision is a deeply-embedded part of social work practice, to the extent that its value to the profession is often taken as given (Carpenter et al, 2013). However, despite the assumed worth of supervision, reviews of empirical literature on supervision have found that there has been relatively scant research into how it functions in day-to-day practice (Bogo and McKnight, 2006; Carpenter et al, 2012; O'Donoghue and Tsui, 2015; Beddoe et al, 2016). Although there is a growing interest in supervision practice (O'Donoghue and Tsui, 2015; Sewell, 2018), there is a consensus that our understanding of supervision remains provisional (Carpenter et al, 2013; Beddoe et al, 2016).

Social work supervision emerged as an area of academic interest in the 1970s; Kadushin's (1976) work, developed in the US, was seminal in detailing the functions of supervision. Kadushin (1976) argues that supervision has three main functions: administrative, educational and supportive. The administrative function of supervision relates to tasks such as oversight of casework and ensuring adherence to procedures (Kadushin and Harkness, 2014). The educational function is characterised by the development of practitioners through offering guidance, coaching, and using supervision as a space to develop critical thinking (Kadushin and Harkness, 2014). The supportive function of supervision involves maintaining staff morale, helping to alleviate stress, and resolving disagreements (Kadushin and Harkness, 2014). The functions of supervision are not entirely distinct and will often overlap, for

example a discussion about a home visit may well perform both administrative and educational functions concurrently (Kadushin and Harkness, 2014).

Within the field of C&F social work in the UK, Morrison's (2005) 4x4x4 model of supervision has been influential. Morrison (2005) identifies four functions of supervision: management, development, support, and mediation. The management and development functions are broadly similar to Kadushin's (1976) administrative and educational functions, and the supportive functions also share many similarities. Morrison (2005) identifies that there are four stakeholders to be kept in mind within supervision: service users, staff, the organisation, and partners. The mediation function of supervision is designed to consider and reconcile the needs and perspectives of these different stakeholders (Morrison, 2005). The final element of Morrison's (2005) 4x4x4 model relates to the way in which reflective discussions are structured; Morrison (2005) posits a four-stage reflective cycle that draws on ideas from Kolb's (1984) model of experiential learning and Gibbs' (1988) reflective cycle.

The process of reflection begins with the concrete experience of the social worker, the reflective stage considers how the social worker felt about what they have observed as well as the perspectives and experiences of other stakeholders (Morrison, 2005). The analysis stage draws upon professional knowledge, theorising the experience and forming a hypothesis, which in turn informs the plans made in relation to the case (Morrison, 2005). This analysis stage is where the majority of cognitive processing and hypothesis-testing takes place. Taken together, the reflection and analysis stages should be where sensemaking occurs within supervision (Morrison, 2005).

Despite challenges in offering such a reflective space in supervision (Wilkins, 2017a), and despite Wilkins (2017b) suggesting a lack of interest in supervision at policy level, recently there have been some moves to ensure that supervision in C&F social work is prioritised and seen as a space where practice can be developed. The Knowledge and Skills Statements (KSS) for practice supervisors include the requirement to provide supervision that is analytical, reflective, and emotionally intelligent (DfE, 2018b) and guidance

remains that all social workers should receive supervision at least monthly and more often when at the NQSW stage (Local Government Association, 2020). The KSS further state that supervision should:

Strike a balance between employing a managerial, task-focussed approach and an enabling, reflective leadership style to achieve efficient day-to-day functioning (DfE, 2018b)

However, despite nods to reflection, analysis, and emotionally intelligent supervision, many of the standards are couched in the language of managerialism, with a focus on governance, performance management, and use of power and authority (DfE, 2018b). The standards highlight the complexity of the task in supervision, with supportive and developmental functions not always sitting comfortably alongside administrative and managerial functions, particularly within a technical-rational, managerialist practice paradigm where oversight and accountability can limit the space available for reflective, emotionally-engaged supervision (Noble and Irwin, 2009; White, 2015).

4.1.1 Supervision: formal meeting, relationship, or process?

The definition of supervision has remained open to revision and debate, with the complexity of supervision making it hard to pin down. Drawing on Beddoe and Egan (2009), Rankine et al (2018) provide the following definition of supervision:

[A] professional relationship between supervisee, supervisor and the organisation providing opportunities to reflect on the organisational, administrative, professional, practical and cultural contexts of practice (Rankine et al, 2018: 430)

This definition emphasises the relational nature of supervision, whilst supervision as theorised by Kadushin (1976) and Morrison (2005) primarily pertains to supervision as a meeting between a supervisor and supervisee. However, supervisors provide support outside of formal monthly meetings and the functions expected of supervision do not necessarily need to be provided by one individual supervisor in one form of supervision (Wilkins, 2017a). Bartoli and Kennedy (2015) argue against narrow conceptualisations of supervision:

The simplicity suggested in this description of a meeting between a supervisor and supervisee belies the intricacies of those transactions that take place within a dynamic relationship (Bartoli and Kennedy, 2015: 243)

The apparent ambiguity over what is actually meant by ‘supervision’ is highlighted by Beddoe and Wilkins (2019: 2) when they note that: “The word *supervision* can be used to describe a relationship, a formal meeting and a process”. It is this ambiguity that leads to some differences in findings regarding the value of supervision; where supervision is considered as a *formal meeting* there is often a perceived deficit in its reported quality (Wilkins, 2017a), whereas the supervisory *relationship* is generally viewed more positively by social workers (McPherson et al, 2016; Egan et al, 2016).

Thinking of supervision as a formal meeting between two individuals is to oversimplify C&F social work supervision (Bartoli and Kennedy, 2015). Wilkins (2017a) argues for a shift in focus from *supervision* to *support*, since such a shift enables consideration of the more varied ways in which social workers’ needs are met in practice. It is worth therefore considering the possibility that informal support from supervisors (Wilkins, 2017a; Wilkins et al, 2017), peer support (Ingram, 2015; Biggart et al, 2017; Helm, 2017), and the use of forms of group case discussion (Warman and Jackson, 2007; Ruch, 2007b; Lees, 2017b; O’Sullivan, 2018; Lees and Cooper, 2019) form part of how the functions of supervision are fulfilled in day-to-day practice.

4.2 What actually happens in supervision?

There is a relative lack of research looking at what actually happens in supervision (Beddoe, 2012; Beddoe et al, 2021) and a lack of studies involving supervisory dyads (O'Donoghue and Tsui, 2015), with the majority of research using surveys and interviews with non-paired social workers and supervisors. There is a limited amount of research exploring the content of supervision and what happens within supervision sessions, and this literature will form the basis of this section.

4.2.1 What do formal supervision sessions look like?

The structure of formal supervision sessions is one area that has received attention in recent years. O'Donoghue (2014), in an Aotearoa-based study involving interviews with supervisors and supervisees, identified that supervision sessions progress through five stages: (a) preparation, (b) beginning, (c) planning, (d) working, and (e) ending phases. The working phase is where cases are discussed; for supervisees there are two phases to this: telling the story and working through the story with the supervisor. This second phase enables the supervisee to make sense of the story via questioning and challenge from the supervisor (O'Donoghue, 2014). For supervisors, the working stage is characterised by clarifying the story and moving towards a decision (O'Donoghue, 2014); this would appear to be the phase of supervision where sensemaking takes place.

O'Donoghue (2014) argues that supervision is co-constructed and interactive, and this echoes findings from his previous study which found that supervisees' active input into supervision was crucial to its success (O'Donoghue, 2012). Davys (2019) makes the case that co-constructing supervision, using things like jointly negotiated supervision contracts, can help to create the kind of supervisory relationship that promotes open and effective challenge. Being open and honest about roles and responsibilities is one way to mitigate potential power imbalances in the supervisory relationship. Where such

imbalances are unacknowledged, Kadushin (1999) identifies a range of different games that may play out in supervision – for example, asking questions in an attempt to control the agenda or seeking allyship against the bureaucratic organisation – as each individual seeks to flatten, assert, or reverse the power hierarchy in the relationship. This illustrates some of the complexity within the dynamic supervisory relationship.

Opportunities to reflect together on the supervision session can help to work through some of these dynamics. Rankine (2019a) and Rankine and Thompson (2015), in an Aotearoa-based study, utilised a process of ‘thinking aloud’ about the content of supervision sessions as a way of learning from them. The process involved the supervisor and supervisee engaging in a critically reflective dialogue about a transcript of their supervision (Rankine and Thomson, 2015). Rankine (2019a) thematically analysed feedback from social workers and supervisors who had used this approach and found that, for social workers, it helped them to understand what they had taken from supervision and reaffirmed its value for them. Supervisors found it helped them to recognise their skills and how they were using them in practice, whilst both supervisors and supervisees felt that there was value in having the opportunity to reflect on the supervisory process (Rankine, 2019a).

4.2.2 Researching the content of supervision

In the UK, a number of studies have been undertaken that attempt to get close to supervisory practice. Wilkins et al (2017) analysed the content of audio-recorded case discussions from formal supervision sessions and found a lack of reflection and analysis evident in the recordings, with a heavy focus on information-sharing, problem-identification, and devising solutions. Typically, categorisation of problems was simplistic and focused on labelling rather than understanding or explaining observed behaviour and its impact (Wilkins et al, 2017). They found that there was little evidence of ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions, with a preference for ‘what’ and ‘when’; this was linked to managers feeling the need to have oversight of their supervisees’ cases (Wilkins et al, 2017). Wilkins et al (2017) noted that supervision sessions had a typical structure that

was similar to the structure outlined by O'Donoghue (2014), though the working stage moved quickly from the story to solutions, with scant evidence of challenge and reflection.

As part of the same project, Wilkins (2017b) undertook analysis of written records of supervision and found that they similarly demonstrated little evidence of analysis. Records of supervision rarely accounted for how or why decisions were reached, showed limited testing of alternative hypotheses, and minimal consideration of the perspectives of others (Wilkins, 2017b). Wilkins (2017b) makes links between how supervision is recorded and defensive practice, noting that the purpose of supervision recording appears to be to demonstrate accountability rather than to inform practice. Wilkins (2017b) notes that the Ofsted framework does not promote supervision as a space for analysis, instead focusing on the role of supervision in providing accountability. This creates pressure on organisations to prioritise oversight as opposed to promoting reflection in supervision. Other research has suggested that written accounts of practice tend to be sanitised (Lees, 2017a; Turney and Ruch, 2018) and this may account for Wilkins' (2017b) findings, however it is worth noting that the written accounts analysed also reinforce the findings of Wilkins et al (2017) from audio recordings of supervision.

Based on an analysis of video recordings of supervision, Bourn and Hafford-Letchfield (2011) similarly found that the support and development functions of supervision struggled for space over administrative and mediation functions of supervision (Bourn and Hafford-Letchfield, 2011). Although social workers prefer an active reflective supervisory style – one in which the supervisor is engaged and curious but not overly directive (Wonnacott, 2003) – such a style can be challenging to consistently utilise given the demands for recording actions and ensuring oversight (Bourn and Hafford-Letchfield, 2011). Within the recordings, there was evidence of reflection and discussion of feelings, though when difficult or distressing cases were discussed defences – such as using professional, clinical language – were employed to create emotional distance (Bourn and Hafford-Letchfield, 2011). This parallels the way in which social workers can be prone to performing a more detached, professional

version of themselves when faced with emotionally challenging situations (Winter et al, 2019).

As part of a wider, large-scale ethnographic study of C&F social work teams in the UK, Beddoe et al (2021) observed fifty-four formal supervision sessions across two office sites. They found that supervision tended to be dominated by oversight and accountability, particularly in one of the sites where supervision would often last for hours, taking place in a small room and dominated by the supervisor filling in information on the agency's IT recording system. This kind of supervision left no room for exploration of feelings or for any meaningful reflection; Beddoe et al (2021) did note that within the other site, where informal reflective dialogue was far more prevalent, supervision was less obviously dominated by oversight and compliance, though these remained features of formal supervision sessions. Beddoe et al (2021) argue for the need to understand how reflective, emotionally containing spaces are created both within and outside formal supervision, and how supervision can act (or not) as an extension of such spaces. These findings largely resonate with the other studies discussed in this section; where the content of supervision is analysed, oversight and accountability are more obviously evident than opportunities for meaningful reflection and emotional engagement.

4.2.3 Simulating supervision

Other studies have sought to use simulations of supervision in order to get closer to supervisory practice. Wilkins et al (2018b) and Wilkins and Jones (2018) used simulations of supervision as a basis for exploring supervisory skill. Wilkins et al (2018b) used an evaluation tool to grade simulated supervision and compared this with questionnaire data from social workers supervised by the participants involved in the simulated supervision. They found disparities between their evaluation and the questionnaire responses, with social workers overestimating the level of skill of their supervisor in contrast to the observed level of skill; they suggest that this may be due to

social workers viewing their supervisor holistically as opposed to focusing on a specific interaction as the researchers had done (Wilkins et al, 2018b).

Wilkins and Jones (2018) used a simulation of case guidance in a crisis situation and found that supervisors tended to gravitate towards rapid identification and clarification of problems and moving quickly to solutions. They observed limited reflection or consideration of rationale for responses, however they did note that the nature of the simulation – focusing on a crisis scenario – may have encouraged the use of certain skills over others (Wilkins and Jones, 2018). Offering guidance in a crisis situation is only one small facet of the overall practice of supervision and so may not reflect the full repertoire of the skills used by supervisors in their day-to-day practice. A limitation of simulations in supervision research is that they struggle to replicate the complexity involved in the supervisory relationship and how this is enacted in day-to-day practice (Bartoli and Kennedy, 2015).

4.2.4 Links between effective supervision and practice outcomes

Although there is generally a lack of empirical basis for supervision's efficacy (Carpenter et al, 2013), there is some evidence that supervision positively influences practice and outcomes. Wilkins et al (2018a) used audio recordings of systemic group supervision and home visits to explore the relationship between supervision, practice, and outcomes. Recordings of supervision and home visits were analysed using parallel evaluative frameworks; interviews with social workers and families were also used as part of the study. The authors found a 'golden thread' running through supervision and practice, whereby elements of supervision – such as focusing on how and why things were being done – positively influenced social workers' practice with families (Wilkins et al, 2018a). Practice focused supervision was associated with higher scores for use of 'good authority' – the capacity to be clear about concerns – and parental engagement and goal agreement measured through the use of evaluative questionnaires (Wilkins et al, 2018a).

Other studies have also found tentative links between supervision and client outcomes. Bostock et al (2019) used observations of systemic group supervision alongside recordings of practice, using the same framework as Wilkins et al (2018a) to evaluate supervision and practice outcomes. Bostock et al (2019) found that supervision they rated as fully systemic – supervision that was relational, curious, incorporated the voice of the family, and developed clear interventions – along with supervision displaying elements of being systemic were correlated with improved relationship-building and use of good authority. They hypothesise that this may be through systemic supervision providing opportunities to rehearse practice (Bostock et al, 2019). Benefits of systemic supervision were also found within Bostock et al's (2017) wider review of the implementation of systemic practice in a number of local authorities.

Dugmore et al (2018) similarly identified, through exploring the implementation of systemic group supervision in one local authority, the potential value of systemic supervision to social work practice, through promoting curiosity and enabling social workers to be more present and reflexive in their practice. Similar evaluations of other models of supervision and how these influence practice and outcomes for children and families are lacking, and this makes it difficult to evaluate whether systemic group supervision is a more effective supervisory model or whether it is simply the only model to have been evaluated in such a way.

The relationship between supervision and case outcomes has been explored in early seminal quantitative studies of supervision (Harkness and Hemsley, 1991; Burke, 1996). Burke's (1996) longitudinal study of statutory social work with children and families in the UK explored how likely social workers were to report a case as being resolved over a period of one year. Burke (1996) found that an increased frequency of supervision was correlated with high risk cases being more likely to be reported as being resolved with the one year period. Meanwhile, Harkness and Hemsley's (1991) research in the US found that client-focused supervision – where problems and goals are framed in the client's terms – was correlated with improved client engagement and goal

attainment in a mental health setting. However, there was no evidence that such supervision reduced mental health symptoms for clients (Harkness and Hemsley, 1991) and Burke's (1996) research did not include family or other measures for whether cases were resolved in a positive way. The empirical basis for supervision improving outcomes for clients is, therefore, limited.

4.2.5 Challenges in evaluating the effectiveness of supervision

Providing criteria for evaluating supervision is challenging given the lack of empirical basis for its effectiveness (Carpenter et al, 2013) and that empirical work on supervision tends to equivocate on what 'supervision' actually means (Beddoe and Wilkins, 2019). Models of supervision (Kadushin, 1976; Morrison, 2005) and supervision policy (Social Work Reform Board, 2012) have been used as a means to 'test' whether experiences of supervision match up with the ideal of 'good' supervision (Gibbs, 2001; Turner-Daly and Jack, 2017). The evaluative frameworks devised by Wilkins et al (2018a) and Bostock et al (2019) were devised in the context of evaluating systemic group supervision and systemic practice. Given the focus on systemic principles, such frameworks may not be useful for evaluating other forms of supervision and their relationship to practice and outcomes.

O'Donoghue et al (2018) and Wilkins (2019) have attempted to develop working models of effective supervision, based on reviewing the empirical literature, that can serve as a basis for evaluation of supervision quality. O'Donoghue et al (2018) argue for the importance of understanding supervision as a relationship, a task and a process. O'Donoghue et al (2018) found that there was a consensus in the literature around what is required for good supervision; for example, relationships that are containing, open and safe, and supervision that is reflective and not overly focused on administrative tasks and accountability. They argue that this consensus about what constitutes effective, supportive supervision can provide a foundation for evaluating supervisory practice (O'Donoghue et al, 2018). Given that an absence of support can influence poorer practice and decision-making

(Horwath, 2011, 2016), it seems likely that social workers who are well-supported through effective supervision are more likely to work effectively with children and their families. At present, however, the empirical basis for this link is lacking.

Wilkins (2019) highlights positive supervisory relationships, characteristics of the supervisor – their availability, reliability, and knowledge – a supportive organisational context, and supervision that focuses on administration, development, and support as being key features of effective supervision. Wilkins (2019) notes that there are gaps in his model which reflect gaps within the literature, for example characteristics of the supervisee are largely excluded. Wilkins (2019) further notes that the model is lacking in respect of the kind of ethical reasoning that social workers use and how this is included within supervision. As Taylor and White (2006) argue, moral reasoning is central to how social workers make sense of children and families' lives, yet from the existing literature we know comparatively little about whether and how supervision is used to support this kind of sensemaking.

4.3 Social worker and supervisor experiences of supervision

The majority of the empirical literature on supervision has relied on self-reports of supervision experiences as opposed to analysis of the content of supervision (Carpenter et al, 2013). Although historically much supervision research was based on large-scale quantitative surveys, since the turn of the twenty-first century a growing body of qualitative research has added to our understanding of how social workers and supervisors experience supervision (O'Donoghue and Tsui, 2015). This section will explore empirical literature based on the perspectives of those who experience it in day-to-day C&F social work practice.

4.3.1 How do social workers and supervisors perceive the quality of their supervision?

Within the UK and internationally, a number of quantitative and mixed-methods studies have helped to provide a sense of the 'big picture' of how social workers and supervisors experience supervision. In the UK, Turner-Daly and Jack's (2017) quantitative study found that social workers identified openness, care and concern, and opportunities for reflection as positive characteristics of their supervisory relationship, however only a third of social workers felt supervision met all of the standards for promoting effective working and a third of social workers reported having no reflection in supervision. On the whole, more social workers reported that they were dissatisfied with supervision than satisfied with it (Turner-Daly and Jack, 2017). Baginsky et al (2010), in undertaking a large-scale survey of social workers' experiences of practice more generally, similarly found that social workers reported that time for reflection in supervision was limited.

Johnson et al (2019), in undertaking a mixed-methods study of C&F social workers' experiences of practice, found that around two thirds of social workers reported receiving reflective supervision at least once every six weeks, and this was valued by participants. This could suggest a changing picture given the gap in time between Baginsky et al's (2010) and Johnson et al's (2019) studies. It is worth noting that Turner-Daly and Jack's (2017) sample was small for a quantitative study – only twenty-eight respondents – and was drawn from participants in a post-qualifying programme at just one university, so was a much narrower sample than that used by Baginsky et al (2010) and Johnson et al (2019). By contrast, Johnson et al (2019) surveyed over five thousand social workers from ninety-five local authorities, whilst Baginsky et al (2010) surveyed over a thousand social workers from fifty-two social work departments.

Mixed-methods studies of the experiences of NQSWs have tended to back up the notion that supervision does not consistently offer a reflective space for practitioners (Jack and Donnellan, 2010). Though NQSWs valued supervision

and most reported receiving supervision regularly (Manthorpe et al, 2015), supervisors were mindful that demands on their time made it challenging to provide NQSWs with the support that they need (Jack and Donnellan, 2010; Manthorpe et al, 2015). Jack and Donnellan (2010) found that NQSWs valued the supervisory relationship, whilst Manthorpe et al (2015) found that most NQSWs reported that supervision provided them with a space for personal support. However, it appeared that finding time for meaningful reflection alongside other demands was a significant challenge for supervisors, and only around one third of NQSWs reported that supervision gave them opportunities for developing reflection and self-awareness (Manthorpe et al, 2015).

Large-scale quantitative and mixed-methods studies of supervision practice in international contexts paint a somewhat different picture to the UK. O'Donoghue et al (2005) found that, in Aotearoa, social workers generally felt satisfied with their supervision, and rated supervision highly for thinking about the process of working with clients and for their own well-being and development (O'Donoghue et al, 2005). Similarly, Hair's (2013) survey of Canadian social workers found that they valued supervision being used for skill development and emotional support, as well as valuing challenge in the context of a supportive relationship (Hair, 2013). O'Donoghue and Tsui (2012) note the significant differences that exist in perceptions of supervision quality between the UK and Aotearoa.

Supervision varies by national context (Beddoe et al, 2016; Akesson and Canavera, 2018) and there are many possible versions and conceptualisations of supervision depending on context and culture (Beddoe, 2015, 2016). In Aotearoa, there are some significant differences that may influence the more positive view of supervision. Aotearoa has more of a culture of providing clinical supervision alongside organisational supervision (Beddoe, 2012; O'Donoghue and Tsui, 2012; Rankine, 2019b) and has a large community-based social work sector, which is non-statutory (Beddoe, 2016; Rankine et al, 2018). The differences between the UK context and other international contexts are noted elsewhere, with external supervision being a valued feature of social work practice in Sweden, where there is a greater

sense of supervision providing a reflective and emotionally-engaged space (Bradley and Höjer, 2009; Bradley et al, 2010).

4.3.2 The role of the supervisor

How supervisors see their role and what influences their supervisory practice has been the focus of a number of studies. Rushton and Nathan's (1996) work was a relatively early example of qualitative research in the field of supervision, with most prior research being heavily survey based (O'Donoghue and Tsui, 2015). The research involved focus groups with experienced managers working in C&F teams and found that supervisors felt that they provided supervision that included educative case discussions, despite the challenges of busy workloads making it hard to prioritise supervision. Tensions were noted between the need for supervision to be inquisitive and challenging, whilst still being supportive (Rushton and Nathan, 1996). Rushton and Nathan's (1996) work highlights that the existence of competing demands within supervision is a longstanding issue in C&F social work.

Much of the literature pertaining to the supervisor's role comes from studies in Aotearoa; Beddoe's (2010, 2012) research involved six supervisors and focused on the issues of risk and surveillance and the challenges of maintaining a reflective space within a managerialist practice paradigm. Echoing issues discussed at the very start of this thesis, Beddoe (2010, 2012) argues that managerialist influences on social work have led to the supervisory role becoming focused on risk and oversight. Beddoe (2010, 2012) found that supervisors valued offering a reflective space, even in the face of challenges. Whilst these findings have some resonance with Rushton and Nathan's (1996) work, more recently Wilkins (2017a) has argued that reflective supervision in the UK is not well-evidenced in terms of what it looks like and whether it is offered consistently.

Supervisors' experiences of supervision also underpin O'Donoghue's (2012) research, which highlights the role of past experience in the supervisory relationship. O'Donoghue (2012) found that as supervisees became more

experienced, they were able to learn what they needed from supervision and to be more participatory in it. Supervisees who went on to supervise others noted that being a supervisor had also affected their behaviour as supervisees; those who offered line management supervision to others found that their own supervision became more task-focused and less reflective (O'Donoghue, 2012). O'Donoghue (2012), drawing on a theoretical paper by Hanna (2007), notes the value of supervisors providing a secure base for their supervisees in the early stages of their career to promote their learning and development.

The finding that experience influences supervisory practice is backed up by O'Donoghue and Tsui's (2012) research. They identified four domains that influence the practice of supervisors:

- (a) experiences within supervision;
- (b) supervisory practice wisdom and approaches;
- (c) direct practice approaches, style and assessment checklists; and
- (d) emotional intelligence (O'Donoghue and Tsui, 2012: 14)

O'Donoghue and Tsui (2012) found that supervisors drew upon their practice experience and practice style to inform their supervision and that practice experience enabled supervisors to develop mental checklists that helped them to ensure that supervisees know their cases. Many of the sources of knowledge used by supervisors – reflexive use of intuition, professional knowledge, and use of prior experience to inform practice (O'Donoghue and Tsui, 2012) – are similar to the sources of knowledge used by social workers in their work with clients; this lends further weight to the idea that supervision can shape or model social workers' practice (Wilkins et al, 2018a; Bostock et al, 2019).

4.3.3 The supervisory relationship

As noted previously, relatively little research has explicitly focused on supervisory dyads (O'Donoghue and Tsui, 2015). There have, however, been attempts to look at the nature of the supervisory relationship, primarily focusing

on the notion of supervision styles. Radey and Stanley's (2018) US-based study identified two types of supervision style: 'hands on' supervisors are available, give consistent advice and support, and are closely involved with casework; 'empty' supervisors are less available, and provide limited support and oversight. Whilst all participants in their study expected and valued 'hands on' supervision, only half reported receiving this kind of supervision (Radey and Stanley, 2018). The danger with 'empty' supervision is that it fails to meet the professional and personal needs of social workers (Ellis et al, 2014; Ellis et al, 2015; Beddoe, 2017; Ellis, 2017). As Horwath's (2011, 2016) work highlights, neglecting the needs of social workers can negatively impact on practice with children and their families.

Wonnacott (2003) also identified different styles of supervision: active intrusive, passive avoidant, and active reflective. Social workers generally prefer the last of these supervision styles; an active reflective supervisory relationship should provide the conditions for both reflection and containment (Wonnacott, 2003). By contrast, supervision styles that are overly domineering or passive and detached do not provide the conditions for reflection and containment (Wonnacott, 2003) and lead to supervision that can be detrimental to social workers, and thus potentially detrimental to their practice with children and families.

The concept of supervisory styles is useful for understanding differences in how supervision takes place. However, supervision involves a relationship that is co-constructed (O'Donoghue, 2014) and supervisees actively contribute to the relationship (O'Donoghue, 2012). A focus on supervision styles may imply a one-way, linear relationship between supervisor and supervisee that does not necessarily reflect the dynamic nature of such relationships (Kadushin, 1999).

4.4 What is supervision used for in C&F social work practice?

As well as exploring social workers' general perceptions of supervision and the supervisory relationship, empirical research on supervision has focused on what supervision is used for and what it is most helpful with. This section will consider some of the empirical literature exploring what role supervision plays in social workers' day-to-day practice.

4.4.1 Case direction and skill development

In exploring through survey data what supervision is useful for, Wilkins and Antonopoulou (2018) found that social workers generally felt that supervision helped with oversight, task clarity, and adherence to timescales. However, supervision was less helpful for reflection, analysis and emotional support (Wilkins and Antonopoulou, 2018). Wilkins and Antonopoulou (2018) draw on the work of Shulman (1982) to hypothesise that supervision is part of a three-link chain along with practice and outcomes. Effective supervision should improve practice, which in turn ought to improve outcomes for service users (Shulman, 1982). This establishment of a 'golden thread' linking supervision to practice and to outcomes has a limited empirical basis in Wilkins et al's (2018a) and Bostock et al's (2019) work; if it is the case that effective use of supervision can improve outcomes for children and families, then better understanding how supervision is used by social workers is an important line of inquiry for empirical research.

Other studies have found that supervision has the potential to offer a space for social workers to develop critical thinking skills. Lietz's (2009) US-based study surveyed social workers and managers about their experiences of critical thinking in supervision. Around half of respondents felt that supervision helped them to develop skills in critical thinking (Lietz, 2009). Supervision, then, may provide scope for social workers to develop key skills and this ought to then improve their practice in working with children and families. Supervision is also helpful for task clarity and oversight, and these processes can be

beneficial for social workers in defending against the anxiety that C&F social work can evoke (Whittaker, 2011). However, it is evident, as highlighted by reviews of the empirical supervision literature (Carpenter et al, 2013), that not enough is known about what actually happens in supervision and so the empirical basis for how supervision may support social workers to develop their practice.

4.4.2 Containment and safety in supervision

A small number of studies have focused on the role of supervision in offering containment; containing relationships should help to ensure social workers' emotional needs are met so that their practice with children and families can be effective (Howe, 2010; Horwath, 2011). However, given the relational nature of containment, the lack of research involving supervisory dyads represents a gap in understanding how containment may be provided through supervisory relationships.

Froggett's (2000) work, drawn from a wider qualitative study of an organisation undergoing change, explored the role that supervision played in containing worker anxiety. Froggett (2000) found that despite the change process initially being fraught, supervision was a key forum for enabling tensions to be addressed and contained. Smith (2000) similarly explored how supervision can assist social workers to manage challenging emotions, highlighting the importance of supervisors 'being there' in response to the experience of fear. Social workers wanted their supervisor to understand and recognise their experience, to help them to reflect on the experience in a non-judgemental way, and to provide support and action (Smith, 2000). Gibbs' (2001) Australian-based study, however, found that most workers were not receiving supervision that provided space to explore feeling as well as thinking.

How allowable feelings are within supervision is an issue explored by Ingram (2015), whose mixed-methods study found that social workers often do not view supervision as a safe space for exploring emotions. Ingram (2015) highlights that managerialism has shifted the focus of supervision from

emotions to oversight and accountability, and so social workers instead use informal support from colleagues as their main form of emotional support. Other mixed methods studies have found that implementing reflective group supervision had a positive impact on social workers feeling contained (Lees, 2017b). Reflective group settings may offer an alternative space for exploration of emotions (Lees, 2017b; Lees and Cooper, 2019) where one-to-one supervision does not feel safe to do so. How these different forms of support – formal supervision, informal support, and group supervision – interact to offer social workers opportunities for containment is a gap in the existing empirical research.

Ingram's (2015) finding in relation to feelings of safety in supervisory relationships is also notable in empirical studies in the context of Australian C&F social work. McPherson et al's (2016) research focused on what effective supervision looks like, finding that the key overriding theme was that of safety within the supervisory relationship. McPherson et al (2016) note the complexity involved in balancing organisational and oversight functions of supervision with reflection and development, however as also found by Beddoe (2010, 2012), there was a commitment from participants to the idea that they should balance these competing demands. Egan et al (2016) similarly found that trust and safety were seen as crucial to the supervisory relationship, with a safe environment helping to facilitate non-judgemental challenge. Egan et al (2016) found that challenge was viewed positively by workers as a means to promote professional development so long as it took place within the context of a trusting supervisory relationship. Furthermore, a supportive supervisory relationship was felt by workers to promote critical reflection and better outcomes for clients (Egan et al, 2016). This finding suggests social workers perceive that there is a golden thread linking effective supervision with improved practice and improved outcomes for children and families (Shulman, 1982; Wilkins et al, 2018a).

4.4.3 Reflection within formal supervision

Some studies discussed earlier in this chapter noted the challenges in offering reflective supervision in the context of a relationship that also entails managerial oversight (Beddoe, 2010; Bourn and Hafford-Letchfield, 2011; Turner-Daly and Jack, 2017). Rankine et al's (2018) Aotearoa-based study explored dimensions of reflective supervision, finding that social workers valued time and space to reflect on their own issues and the impact of the work as well as opportunities to reflect on relationships and organisational and socio-cultural issues. Rankine et al (2018) argue that reflective supervision is a crucial space, however as Wilkins (2017a) notes, in the UK reflective supervision is not the norm for many social workers.

Supervisors' struggles to provide reflective supervision in the UK are highlighted by Turney and Ruch's (2018) evaluation of implementing a pilot of a Cognitive and Affective Supervisory Approach (CASA), which encourages exploration of 'emotion information' alongside 'event information'. Such an approach ought to support emotional sensemaking, through identifying and reflecting upon the sources and meaning of emotion information. Turney and Ruch (2018) found, however, that supervisors struggled to implement the CASA, citing external barriers such as time required for using the approach, alongside internal barriers such as wanting to offer solutions and worrying about getting it wrong. Participants noted that supervision encourages sanitised accounts of practice that focus on identifying a problem and providing a solution to it (Turney and Ruch, 2018), mirroring Lees' (2017a) finding that social workers tend to edit out emotions from their written accounts of practice and Wilkins et al's (2017) finding that supervision tends to move rapidly from problem identification to offering solutions. The difficulties in engaging with using the approach suggest that supervisory practice in the UK context is not conducive to providing a reflective space. The role of reflection in linking supervision and sensemaking will be explored in the following chapter.

4.5 Supervision – a summary

The literature highlights that there has been relatively scant research into what actually happens in supervision (O'Donoghue and Tsui, 2015; Wilkins et al, 2017) and that there is a limited empirical basis for the effectiveness of supervision (Carpenter et al, 2013). Some work is being done to address these gaps, with a number of studies based on the content of supervision taking place during the 2010s and 2020s (Bourn and Hafford-Letchfield, 2011; Wilkins, 2017b; Wilkins et al, 2017; Beddoe et al, 2021). This research backs up findings from other empirical studies which show that supervision does not consistently provide a reflective space for social workers (Turner-Daly and Jack, 2017) and that oversight and accountability play a significant role in social workers' experiences of supervision (Wilkins and Antonopoulou, 2018). Research on how supervision improves social workers' practice and outcomes for children and families (Wilkins et al, 2018a; Bostock et al, 2019) remains somewhat limited.

Although sensemaking is noted as a function of supervision (O'Donoghue, 2014; Rankine and Thompson, 2015; Patterson, 2019), existing research looking at the content of supervision has not explicitly explored sensemaking or the related areas of decision-making and judgement. Whilst it is noted that supervision conversations involve quick problem-identification and recording solutions (Wilkins, 2017b; Wilkins et al, 2017), the evidence base for this is relatively limited, and it is not clear how this more procedural approach to identifying and recording actions in supervision may influence sensemaking.

Promoting thorough sensemaking ought to improve social workers' decision-making and judgement (Taylor and White, 2006) and it is argued that supervision should offer a space where social workers can be uncertain and explore a range of possible hypotheses (Helm, 2011). Ultimately, better decision-making and judgement ought to promote better outcomes for children, but the existing empirical research on supervision does not explore how sensemaking, decision-making, and judgement take place in or are influenced by supervisory interactions. Drawing on the empirical literature, the

following chapter will consider how supervision may help social workers to make sense of their work.

5. Sensemaking and supervision

This section will draw out links between sensemaking and supervision based on relevant theoretical and empirical literature. The role of reflection, holding on to uncertainty, exploration of emotions, and containment will be the focus of this section. Through providing a space that offers these things to social workers, a shared space for sensemaking (Patterson, 2019) should be created. First, this section will begin exploring the very limited literature making links between supervision and sensemaking, decision-making, and judgement.

5.1 Sensemaking, judgment, decision-making and supervision

There is currently very little empirical research exploring the relationship between supervision, sensemaking, and the related areas of decision-making and judgement. Lawler (2015: 271), in a theoretical piece relating to the role of supervision, makes the case that:

A key additional element in the relationship is that of making sense of various situations. This means making sense of interventions and strategies with users of services but also making sense of the professional's own role and contribution in the organisation and in the profession

Supervision is conceptualised by Lawler (2015) as a sensemaking space, both in respect of individual cases and interactions, and in making sense of what it means to be a social worker. This resonates with Weick et al's (2005) assertion that a central aspect of sensemaking involves constructing and reconstructing identity. The relationship between supervision and sensemaking is further highlighted in Patterson's (2019) work, based on her experiences of delivering post-qualifying training to supervisors:

Various adaptations of a reflective learning cycle (Davys and Beddoe, 2010; Kolb, 1984) are used in supervision to structure a sensemaking process in which both supervisor and supervisee can participate. This opens up space between action and reaction where thoughtful attention is given to an issue before deciding how to move forward (Patterson, 2019: 53)

Patterson (2019) explicitly links sensemaking to the process of reflection, however, as previously noted, there is a lack of empirical research exploring how such sensemaking takes place within supervision.

The relationship between supervision and decision-making has been explored in Saltiel's (2017) ethnographic work. Saltiel (2017) found that the fast pace of work within the team led to supervision becoming a conveyor belt, focused on constructing agreed accounts of cases that could justify decision-making and be 'sold' to the organisation. Experienced social workers knew how to present cases in supervision to get the decision they wanted, whilst less experienced workers tended to be more reliant on direction from their supervisor (Saltiel, 2017). Saltiel (2017) found that experienced supervisors were able to challenge effectively and promoted consideration of a broader range of hypotheses, however, time within supervision was stretched and left limited scope for reflection. Saltiel (2017) argues that there is a need for further research into how supervisory relationships operate on a day-to-day basis and a limitation of his work is that he was unable to observe supervision sessions as part of his ethnographic study, and so his findings are based on accounts given by social workers and their supervisors.

Saltiel's (2017) work is relatively unique in having an explicit focus on the relationship between supervision and decision-making. Falconer and Shardlow's (2018) research, discussed earlier in the literature review, highlighted the propensity for social workers in the UK to seek supervisory support and input with decision-making and judgement at an early stage. However, the findings focused on *who* supported decision-making as opposed

to *how* supervisors contributed to supporting social workers in taking decisions. There is a lack of empirical research on the relationship between supervision, sensemaking, decision-making, and judgement. Given the importance to children and families of the decisions that social workers take, this represents a significant gap in the literature.

5.2 Supervision and exploring emotion information

As touched upon earlier in the literature review, feelings can be a useful guide and they can also be a source of bias (Munro, 2008). Emotion information can be valuable if it is able to be reflected upon and articulated (Lees, 2017a), though emotions also run the risk of distorting social workers' encounters with families where such reflection is absent (Cook, 2019a). This section will consider the role of emotion in relation to supervision; in theory, supervision provides a space for emotions to be reflected upon and utilised as a resource in making sense of casework (Turney and Ruch, 2018; Patterson, 2019).

Lees' (2017a) ethnographic study of information-sharing, discussed earlier in the literature review, found that emotion information was an important means of knowing for social workers and often preceded cognitive responses to encounters with families. Lees (2017a) found that social workers valued reflective supervision as a forum to talk about the emotional content of their work and to ensure that emotions are used helpfully, drawing some tentative links between effective use of emotion information and the role of supervision. Other theoretical work has likewise suggested that having a space for emotionally-informed conversations is valuable given the way that emotions contribute to decision-making and judgement (Keinemans, 2015). Meanwhile O'Connor (2019), based on reviewing empirical literature on the role of emotions in social work, argues for the value of emotions as a resource in social workers' sensemaking when social workers are given the opportunity to analyse and theorise emotional responses to situations.

The role of supervision in this respect can be summarised thus:

A worker's affective response may at times distort their judgement, giving a false sense of certainty or introducing bias into their decision-making but can also alert them to concerns which might go unnoticed. There are risks in attaching too much or too little weight to emotional information and a supervisor's role is to help explore what is significant (Patterson, 2019: 51)

Whilst the empirical literature suggests that formal one-to-one supervision may not be seen as a safe space for discussion of emotions (Ingram, 2013; 2015), other practices within C&F social work teams may help to compensate. For example, O'Sullivan (2018), Lees (2017b), and Lees and Cooper (2019) have all found through their empirical work that case discussion groups offer one means of promoting more emotionally-engaged case-talk, whilst Ruch (2007b) also argues for the capacity for reflective case discussion groups to provide a space for exploring emotions. Informal conversations with colleagues provide another space to explore the emotional content of the work in a way that can helpfully contribute to sensemaking (Helm, 2016). There is a need for social workers to use supervision, or other forums that can replicate functions of supervision, to process the emotional content of their work and to make sense of emotion information.

5.3 Reflection and supervision

This section will consider the relationship between reflection, supervision, and sensemaking. The concept of reflection – often taken for granted in social work (Wilkins, 2017a) – will be explored, followed by a discussion of supervision as a reflective space. Links between reflective supervision and social workers' sensemaking will then be discussed.

5.3.1 What is reflection?

In order for social workers to navigate their way through their responses to their work, to understand the meaning of their emotional engagement with

clients, and to explore hypotheses, a reflective space is needed (Ruch, 2007a, 2012). There is, however, some disagreement over the value and meaning of 'reflection' (Ixer, 2010, 2016). Ixer (2010, 2016) argues that there is a lack of an empirical basis for 'reflection' with limited research to justify its existence, what it is, and what it does. Some of these areas of contention are addressed by Ruch's (2007a) work, which, drawing on empirical findings, offers a sound basis for understanding the concept of reflection.

Ruch (2007a) outlines four types of reflection: technical, practical, critical and process reflection. Technical reflection broadly equates to weighing up factors to make decisions, applying knowledge for the purposes of problem-solving. Practical reflection is related to the influential work of Schön (1983) and is based upon the learning that can be taken from experience; rather than knowledge being constructed through top-down application of theories and frameworks, knowledge is constructed through reflection upon experience (Schön, 1983; Ruch, 2007a). Critical reflection focuses on power dynamics within the social constructs that underpin and create knowledge (Ruch, 2007a). Ruch (2007a) describes process reflection as being psychodynamically informed, based upon exploring the conscious and unconscious processes that take place within social work relationships. Process reflection enables consideration of the fundamental relatedness of social work practice and the way in which knowledge in social work is constructed (Ruch, 2007a).

Ruch (2007a) draws on her ethnographic findings to identify a form of reflection that she calls holistic reflection, which combines technical, practical, and process reflection. Ruch (2007a) found that social workers most often used this type of reflection in forums where case discussion explored practice in breadth and depth. Ruch (2007a, 2012) argues that supervision, alongside peer consultation and the team setting, is a crucial forum for providing the reflective space that social workers need. One limitation of Ruch's (2007a) research is that there is a limited empirical basis for how supervision contributes to reflection; the role of managers in facilitating reflective practice is highlighted, but the contribution of supervision as a reflective forum is based

primarily on reviewing existing literature as opposed to being grounded in the ethnographic data.

5.3.2 Supervision as a reflective space

In addition to opportunities for reflecting on emotions and relationships, Munro (2008) argues for the importance of supervision as a forum for unpicking the quick intuitive judgements that they make in their everyday practice. Through reflecting on the sources of intuitive judgements, and how social workers' emotions may be influencing their thinking, the quality of sensemaking and decision-making ought to be improved (Munro, 2008). Supervision, then, should be a space to engage with and reflect upon both intuitive and emotional aspects of sensemaking.

The social work task entails sifting through a range of perspectives, feelings and sources of information, including from children, their families, and other professionals. Social workers need reflective space within supervision to support them to process this array of event and emotion information (Turney and Ruch, 2018) in order make sense of families' lives (Harvey and Henderson, 2014). The previously discussed empirical research on sensemaking, judgement, and decision-making also highlights that reflective supervision should ensure that intuitive responses and sources of knowledge are tested appropriately (Hackett and Taylor, 2014; O'Connor and Leonard, 2014; Cook, 2017). Reflection is a crucial tool through which intuitive reasoning can be unpicked and learnt from in order to help develop expertise in intuitive judgement (Klein, 2015).

Turney and Ruch (2016), in a theoretical paper, also make the case for supervision being a reflective space for the cognitive and emotional work of decision-making to take place, and they explicitly link this kind of reflection to offering social workers containment. This theoretical work underpinned Turney and Ruch's (2018) piloting of the CASA, which, as discussed previously, highlighted barriers for supervisors in providing a reflective and emotionally-engaged supervisory space. Ferguson's (2018a) ethnographic work on home

visiting also highlights the connectedness of reflection and containment, noting that effective supervision promotes the development of an 'internal supervisor' that enables practitioners to reflect in action, which is the capacity to think on one's feet and respond to situations effectively (Schön, 1983). Ferguson (2018a) found that when faced with overwhelming anxiety, social workers' capacity to reflect in action was diminished or even temporarily switched off. Social workers therefore need opportunities to reflect not just to unpick judgements made, but also to process and make sense of their emotional experiences, and supervision ought to provide a space for this to take place (Turney and Ruch, 2016).

5.3.3 Reflection, supervision, and sensemaking

Reflection links to sensemaking in a number of ways. Reflective supervision enables the kind of practical reflection that promotes learning through experience (Ruch, 2007a). This can help the development of more intuitive forms of sensemaking through experiential learning (Schön, 1983; Kolb, 1984), enabling social workers to develop a broader range of frames through which to intuitively make sense of their experience (Klein, 2015; Whittaker, 2018). Process reflection provides social workers the opportunity to think about their work from an emotional and relational perspective (Ruch, 2007a).

Izod and Lawson (2015) argue for the power of relational supervision practice for promoting sensemaking and reflecting on the way that case narratives are developed. Related to this is the power of reflection for holding on to the possibility of there being multiple possible stories about a case (Higgins, 2019) and analysing the validity of these stories (Taylor and White, 2006). As touched on earlier in the chapter, Lawler (2015) also argues for supervision providing a space to reflect on the social work role and social workers' identities. Reflective supervision, then, would appear to be crucial for developing and checking intuitive responses, for exploring emotions, for developing narratives and considering alternative narratives, and for exploring identity; these are key sensemaking activities, and as such providing a

reflective space in supervision is a central means through which supervision can support sensemaking.

Figure C below offers an example of how reflective questioning in supervision might support sensemaking on a particular case:

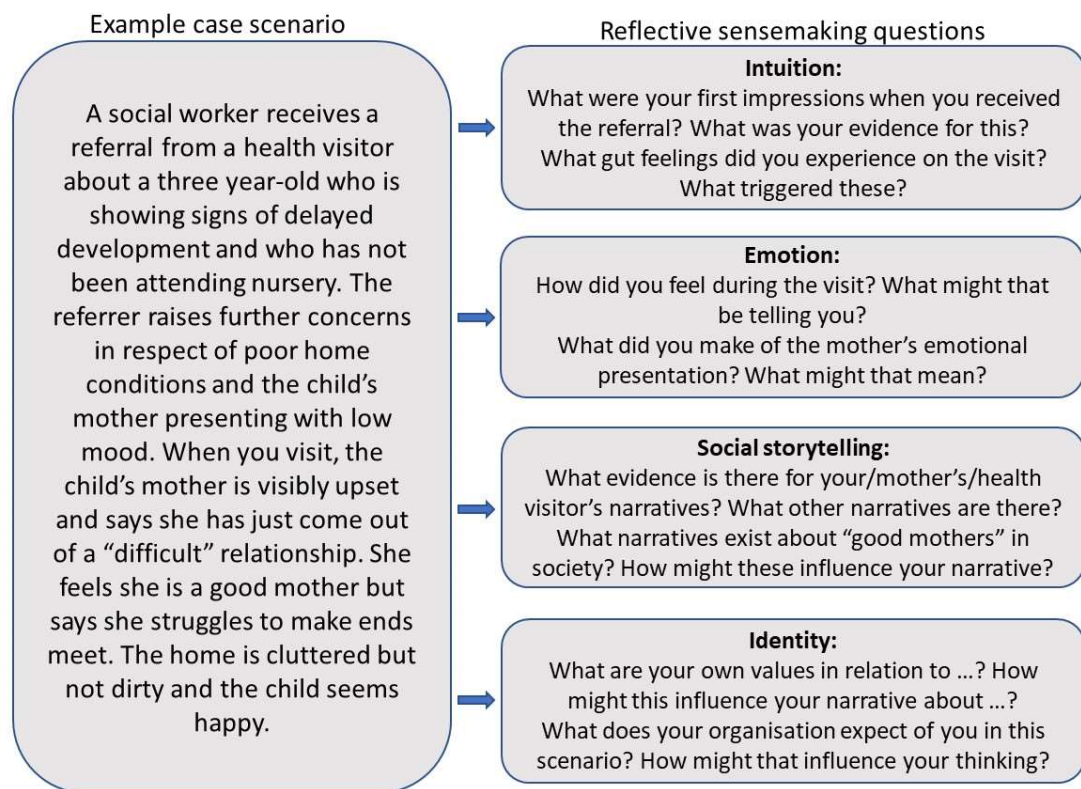


Figure C: Case example and related reflective questions to promote sensemaking

Reflective questioning, which should be a feature of supervision (Harvey and Henderson, 2014) can support social workers' sensemaking, and this in turn should enable social workers to make better judgements about the children they are working with (Taylor and White, 2001). Creating this kind of reflective space requires a degree of holding on to uncertainty as opposed to rushing to more fixed and certain positions.

5.4 Supervision, sensemaking, and uncertainty

The notion of holding on to uncertainty recurs frequently within the literature on sensemaking, decision-making, and judgement and is important in exploring the relationship between sensemaking and supervision. Helm (2011) argues that by holding on to uncertainty, workers are less likely to make assumptions that lead them to an illusion of certainty. Safe uncertainty entails remaining hypothetical and curious, and adopting a stance that is open to alternative explanations; this is possible where the anxieties engendered by uncertainty can be held so they do not feel unsafe (Mason, 2019). Taylor and White (2006) suggest that the pressure to be decisive within CP social work drives social workers towards seeking out certainty; in response to these pressures and to the anxiety caused by unsafe uncertainty, social workers can be prone to adopting positions of safe certainty (Mason, 2019). The search for certainty can lead to commitment to hypotheses that are poorly supported (Munro, 1996; Taylor and White, 2006) or that result in punitive decision-making (Mason, 2019), for example through escalating a case with a number of unknowns to CP to create an impression of safety rather than because a risk of significant harm is well-evidenced.

Supervision should offer a space for uncertainty to be safely held so that social workers are able to be curious and not rush to positions of certainty. There have been moves in recent nationwide training programmes for supervisors to bring the notion of safe uncertainty directly into supervision (Research in Practice (RiP), 2019). Tools have been developed to encourage supervisors to discuss the concept of safe uncertainty within supervision and to use the concept as a means to explore how social workers are making sense of children and families lives (RiP, 2019). This section will consider the relationship between certainty and uncertainty in C&F social work and the role that supervision can play in encouraging a position of safe uncertainty that promotes curiosity and exploration of multiple possible stories (Mason, 2019; RiP, 2019).

5.4.1 Certainty in C&F social work

C&F social work has been noted to orientate towards the seeking of certainty, and this impacts on supervisory practice (Bingle and Middleton, 2019; RiP, 2019). Preoccupations with concepts like risk and safeguarding, which have been prevalent in societal and political discourses about C&F social work (Parton, 2011; Featherstone et al, 2014), influence the seeking of certainty and the use of technical-rational approaches to seek to eliminate risk (Munro, 2004). White (2009) argues that the proceduralisation of C&F social work pushes out uncertainty; decisions have to be made quickly and this does not afford social workers the luxury of holding on to doubt. This influences how supervision functions; rather than acting as an uncertain and curious space, supervisors can instead be prone to seeking simple, causal explanations for behaviour (Bingle and Middleton, 2019).

Turnell et al (2013: 202) argue strongly against “the compulsion to pursue unattainable certainty” which results from the anxiety caused by uncertainty. This anxiety is compounded by the potential to be blamed should things go wrong (Taylor et al, 2008; Cooper, 2018); the existence of blame and scapegoating helps to perpetuate defensive practice (Ruch et al, 2014). One response to blame and scapegoating is to reduce uncertainty, however this can lead to social workers becoming biased towards decisions that are low-risk and that may be seen as punitive (De Bortoli and Dolan, 2015; Mason, 2019; Munro, 2019). Social workers defend against anxiety through practice which is distant from service users (Ferguson, 2017; Cooper, 2018) and through rigid adherence to processes (Whittaker, 2011; Whittaker and Havard, 2014), which reduces the scope for curious practice where uncertainty is safely held.

To avoid the pull to certainty, Higgins (2019) argues that social workers should adopt a narrative approach. By focusing on the storied nature of social work judgements (see also White and Stancombe, 2003), social workers can hold uncertainty through acknowledging that multiple narratives exist rather than there being just one possible account about a case. Taylor and White (2001)

make the case that the consideration of alternative narratives enables robust decision-making, since deciding amongst competing hypotheses involves subjecting them to greater scrutiny than simply accepting evidence that fits a predetermined narrative. This leads to the construction of what Weick et al (2005: 415) describe as “better stories” through more thorough sensemaking. The capacity to explore different possible narratives requires holding on to uncertainty and being curious (Cecchin, 1987).

5.4.2 Certainty, uncertainty, and supervision

Organisations respond to uncertainty and the anxiety that it causes by breaking down complexity into more manageable tasks that can be monitored (Lawlor, 2009; Whittaker, 2011; Smith, 2019). Organisations also respond to anxiety by becoming closed off and defensive in their dealings with other organisations (Morrison, 2000; Munro, 2019), leading to failures in communication (Reder and Duncan, 2003) that potentially limit opportunities for sensemaking discussion across organisational boundaries. Dingwall et al’s (1983) seminal work on child protection practice across health and social work settings in England highlighted the strategies that individuals as organisational actors use to effectively gatekeep child protection referrals.

This gatekeeping is influenced by what Dingwall et al (1983) famously labelled ‘the rule of optimism’. Social workers and the organisations in which they work negotiate conflicting societal values; Anglo-American societies value the privacy of family life, however they also recognise that certain ‘deviant’ parental behaviours constitute abuse and neglect of children that warrants state intervention in the private family sphere (Dingwall et al, 1983). The rule of optimism operates within organisations to minimise ‘deviant’ familial behaviour by beginning with the assumption that parents love their children and that some variation in what constitutes acceptable familial behaviour is allowable (Dingwall et al, 1983).

This means that the judgements social workers make tend to be inherently moral and characterised by uncertainty and shades of grey. This can lead to

disagreement between different professionals, who may apply differing value judgements to individual cases. One response from social work organisations is to ensure that the decisions social workers take are defensible and that there is accountability for decision-making through robust supervisory oversight (Dingwall et al, 1983). More recent empirical research has similarly noted these kinds of organisational behaviours and their propensity to create conditions where supervision is dominated by oversight and accountability (Smith, 2019).

This leads to an overt focus on rapid problem-solving and recording decision-making as opposed to more hypothetical exploration of the *how* and *why* of the work (Wilkins et al, 2017). Drawing on the psychoanalytic work of Melanie Klein (1975), Lawlor (2013) makes the case that taking such a problem-solving approach helps to alleviate the pervasive fear experienced under conditions of uncertainty. Similarly, upwards delegation of accountability provides another means through which anxiety can be defended against (Whittaker, 2011). To some extent, then, a problem-solving approach can provide a sense of relief for social workers, however it can also run the risk that the supervisory relationship becomes a form of “Snooper-vision” (Bartoli and Kennedy, 2015: 244), whereby the focus on oversight and on getting things right intrudes on the capacity to think through complex CP work and the social worker’s emotional responses to the work.

Supervision, however, ought to provide a space where uncertainty can be safely held on to (Helm, 2011; Bingle and Middleton, 2019). The comparative lack of empirical research looking at everyday supervision conversations means that relatively little is known about how uncertainty is held in supervision and this is an area that merits further exploration. Another area worthy of consideration is how supervision provides a containing space, given the feelings of anxiety that are bound up with experiencing uncertainty.

5.5 Emotional sharing and containment

This section will begin by outlining what containment is before moving on to consider the role of supervision in offering containment. The relationship between containment and sensemaking will then be explored.

5.5.1 Understanding containment

Sharing of emotion helps to promote emotional regulation (Rimé, 2009). Rimé (2009) notes that emotional regulation in childhood is dependent upon the infant's relationships with their caregivers. As children develop, they internalise the mechanisms through which emotions are regulated and learn to regulate emotion states independently (Rimé, 2009); in psychoanalysis it is suggested that this mechanism is the internalisation of the voices of adults who provided containment in childhood (Trevithick, 2011). Rimé (2009) challenges the notion that adults are fully capable of such self-regulation and suggests that the sharing of emotions in adulthood plays a similar role to that of attachment relationships in infancy; the sharing of emotional experiences helps to process those experiences and regulate the attendant emotion states.

The process of containment also has its roots in infancy, with the parent or safe adult acting as a container for the infant's unmanageable emotion states (Bion, 1962). The emotion states of the infant are taken in by the adult and projected back to them in ways that are manageable, thus enabling the infant to safely resolve troubling emotional experiences with the support of the adult container (Bion, 1962). Bion (1970) suggests that, as we move to adulthood, symbols become containers of affective responses and thus adults are able to use language as a means to regulate emotion states, however there will be times where overwhelming experiences in adulthood necessitate the support and assistance of an adult container, with psychotherapeutic relationships being one such example (Bion, 1962).

5.5.2 Social work and containment

Social workers are often characterised as being containers for their clients (Ruch, 2007a; Toasland, 2007). Indeed, relationship-based social work is dependent on the practitioner's ability to attune to and contain the emotion states of their clients (Morrison, 2007; Ruch, 2007a). Howe (2010) makes the case for a link between containment and safety in CP social work, arguing that practice which is not containing is likely to lead to increased stress for parents and increased parental stress is likely to place children at greater risk. Howe (2010) posits that the social work relationship can promote and model the kind of containing relationships that social workers would like parents to have with their children.

On the other hand, over-identification with service users can negatively impact on social workers' own capacity to cope emotionally (Kinman and Grant, 2011). Providing containment for clients is emotionally demanding (Howe, 2008; Winter et al, 2019) and social workers need to be provided with support in order to sustain containing relationships with clients (Ruch, 2007a; Toasland, 2007; Howe, 2010). Bion (1962) talks about the 'nameless dread' that infants are left with when feelings go unprocessed; similarly, adults who do not have opportunities to process difficult emotions are likely to be left with feelings of stress and anxiety (Howe, 2010). Harvey (2015) argues that relationships with parents are intense and can become overwhelming if containment is not offered.

Feelings of stress and anxiety in social workers correlate to an increased likelihood of burnout (Travis et al, 2016) and, in respect of sensemaking, they negatively impact on the ability to think clearly (Morrison, 2007; Ruch, 2007a; Rimé, 2009; Regehr et al, 2021). Further, such feelings lead to social workers employing defensive strategies that can lead to depersonalisation and poor outcomes for clients (Stalker et al, 2007; Travis et al, 2016). Horwath (2016) argues that stressed social workers with unmet emotional needs create a 'toxic duo' when working with parents who are not meeting their children's needs, thus increasing potential risks to the child. In order for social workers to be

able to operate safely and effectively they need to be provided with opportunities for containment (Horwath, 2016). Supervision is one means through which containment can be provided, with the supervisory relationship offering the potential to mirror and model the containing relationship between social worker and service user (Toasland, 2007; Ruch, 2012; Harlow, 2013).

5.5.3 Containing the container: the role of the supervisor, team, and organisation

The relationship between supervisor and supervisee can be central to how social workers manage the demands of the role. McFadden (2018) found, through interviews with C&F social workers, that relationships between supervisors and social workers are influential in decisions to leave or remain in social work roles. Drawing on Jordan's (2006) notion of relational resilience, McFadden (2018) found that social workers who experienced positive relationships with their supervisor were more likely to stay in the profession and feel a sense of self-efficacy. By contrast, a majority of participants who had left C&F social work identified the lack of such a relationship as a contributing factor to their decision to leave (McFadden, 2018). Although regular, effective supervision sessions were seen as important by participants, it was the quality of the relationship – described by participants as a sense of 'attachment' (Bowlby, 1988) – that was most crucial in influencing decisions to remain or leave (McFadden, 2018).

Studies from the US have similarly drawn links between attachment and supervision. Bowman (2019) argues for the importance of understanding supervisees attachment needs, whilst Bennett (2008) found that an understanding of attachment was important for supporting student social workers who could be prone to displaying attachment behaviours in the supervisory relationship. Bennett and Deal (2009) also argue that social workers need a safe space in which to make sense of the emotional responses that arise in relationships with service users. This resonates with the previously explored notion that supervision is more than a monthly one-to-one meeting and is instead a complex, dynamic relationship (Bartoli and Kennedy, 2015).

However, the lack of research using paired supervisory dyads and exploring how containment is offered through supervision creates a gap in our understanding of the extent to which supervision provides such containment.

Concepts from attachment theory also underpin Biggart et al's (2017) work on the notion of the team as a secure base, using an adapted version of Schofield and Beek's (2014) secure base model for foster carers. Providing a secure base involves the caregiver keeping the child in mind, enabling emotional experiences to be processed and increasing feelings of self-esteem and self-efficacy (Bowlby, 1988). Biggart et al (2017) found that respondents identified a number of team behaviours that fitted the five domains of the secure base model: availability, sensitivity, acceptance, co-operation, and team membership. Supervisors that were available and open were able to promote team cultures where sharing of emotion was possible (Biggart et al, 2017). Where supervisors showed a lack of attunement to the emotional needs of their team members, this led to workers feeling more anxious (Biggart et al, 2017). Biggart et al (2017) conclude that providing social workers with a secure base is vital for helping them to manage the emotional demands of the work and the role of the team, partly mediated through the supervisor, is central to this. Biggart et al (2017: 123) note that teams where open discussion with colleagues and supervisors was possible "helped CFSWs create more coherent narratives about their cases", which suggests that teams that offer a secure base can support social workers' sensemaking.

Other studies have shown the impact of contrasting team and office structures, and the opportunities for informal support they provide. Ferguson et al (2020c) spent fifteen months observing contrasting office sites; in one site social workers and managers were co-located in small offices, whilst the other site used hot-desking in a large, open plan office. Staff turnover in the open plan site was significantly higher, with forty-two workers leaving during the period of the study versus only five leaving the small office site (Ferguson et al, 2020c). Social workers in the small office site used informal and peer supervision far more frequently, with reflective case discussions being commonplace (Ferguson et al, 2020c). This was not evident within the open

plan office, leading the authors to hypothesise that the opportunity for in the moment reflective case discussion provides containment, and that for social workers who do not have such opportunities, holding on to the feelings generated by the work was not sustainable (Ferguson et al, 2020c). This finding is echoed by Ferguson (2018b: 79): “on returning to the office workers need to receive supervision that is attuned to their emotional and visceral experiences”; where such “‘live’ supervisory support” (Ferguson et al, 2020c: 9) is absent, social workers struggle to manage the emotional demands of the work.

Where social work organisations are under pressure, their responses can serve to exacerbate anxiety (Smith, 2019). Drawing on theories relating to organisational complexity (Cilliers, 1998; Urry, 2003), Smith’s (2019) autoethnographic study highlights the way that different parts of the organisational system influence each other in order to create, heighten, or alleviate issues. Smith (2019) discusses how pressures from Ofsted inspection created a focus on performance management within supervision, minimising the space to reflect on casework and to contain anxiety. Procedural responses to anxiety favoured defensive decision-making leading to increasing amounts of court work, which in turn increased workload and thus exacerbated feelings of anxiety for social workers (Smith, 2019). Parts of the system started to change in ways that reduced anxiety, one of these being the introduction of a new manager who prioritised more reflective, containing supervision (Smith, 2019). This enabled the development within the organisation of a culture where complexity could be acknowledged and uncertainty held onto (Smith, 2019). The relationship between organisational structure and culture and worker anxiety is similarly highlighted in other empirical studies (Antonopoulou et al, 2017).

5.5.4 Containing the supervisor

Supervisors can act as containers for social workers, however, as Toasland (2007) argues, providing such containment can be emotionally demanding. Moreover, Toasland (2007) and Revell and Burton (2016) make the case that

supervisors are at only one step removed from direct practice and are subject to many of the same stresses and anxieties that social workers experience. Supervisors who are not afforded opportunities for containment and reflection may struggle to provide reflective, containing supervision for their social workers (Toasland, 2007; Ruch, 2012; Patterson, 2015; Revell and Burton, 2016; Patterson, 2019). The capacity of supervisors to offer the reflective, containing spaces that social workers need is therefore dependent upon their own capacity to hold social workers' anxieties (Ruch, 2007b; Toasland, 2007; Howe, 2010) and this in turn will be influenced by how well the organisation holds supervisors by providing them with containing, reflective spaces (Ruch, 2007b; Toasland, 2007; Patterson, 2015; Revell and Burton, 2016).

Supervisors' needs are, however, not always well-prioritised (Patterson, 2019). The role of the supervisor is not a specialist role; supervisors are experienced social workers who progress into supervisory roles, and this transition from practitioner to supervisor can present difficulties (Bradley, 2006; Patterson, 2015). Patterson (2015) argues, based on experiences of delivering training to supervisors, that the move from practitioner to supervisor entails a perspective shift and that new supervisors are expected to hit the ground running. New supervisors often do not have the time or space required to reflect upon their new role and to embed the knowledge and skills needed to be a good supervisor (Patterson, 2015). Training and support for supervisors, which may be a means of bridging the practitioner-manager gap, is often scarce (Wilkins et al, 2017; Patterson and Whincup, 2018). Patterson (2017) argues that whilst there have been moves to create more reflective spaces for social work practitioners, supervision for supervisors has retained a heavily organisational focus, with little scope for reflection and containment.

5.5.5 Containment and sensemaking

It is evident from the theoretical (Cooper, 2005; Howe, 2010) and empirical literature (Ferguson, 2018a; Winter et al, 2019) that C&F social work can be fraught with difficult emotional experiences and feelings of anxiety. Such anxieties can be exacerbated through socio-political pressures on the

profession (Turnell et al, 2013; Hingley-Jones and Ruch, 2016) and through organisational responses to anxiety (Antonopoulou et al, 2017; Cooper, 2018; Smith, 2019). This is important for sensemaking in a number of ways. The ability to make sense of experiences can be inhibited by feelings of anxiety (Cooper, 2005; Ferguson, 2017; 2018a). Ferguson (2017) observed following a visit to a family that a social worker was so overwhelmed by the encounter that she could not give an account of what had happened; this inability to order, process, and attach meaning to experiences represents an absence of sensemaking. Unresolved emotional states inhibit the ability to think clearly (Rimé, 2009); uncontained social workers are less well-equipped to reflect upon experience and reflection is important for drawing out and making sense of intuitive and emotional responses to cases (Ruch, 2007a).

Whilst supervision is seen as being a crucial way in which containment can be provided (Toasland, 2007; Ruch, 2007b; Ruch, 2012; Turney and Ruch, 2016; Biggart et al, 2017; Ferguson, 2018a), relatively little is known about the features of supervision that promote containment. As touched upon previously, given the relational nature of containment, this gap in knowledge is exacerbated by the lack of research involving supervisory dyads (Carpenter et al, 2012; Carpenter et al, 2013; O'Donoghue and Tsui, 2015; Beddoe et al, 2016). Overall, there is a need to explore how supervision is enacted in practice and whether it offers opportunities for reflection, holding on to uncertainty, and containment that should support social workers' sensemaking. This should promote sensemaking that is more thorough and that enables the creation of better stories (Weick et al, 2005) and the formulation of better judgements (Taylor and White, 2006).

6. Summary and research questions

This literature review has highlighted the limited amount of research on social work sensemaking, with few empirical studies explicitly focusing on how social workers make sense of information to inform their professional judgement (Platt and Turney, 2014; Avby, 2015). Moreover, much of the research in the related fields of decision-making and judgement relies on retrospective accounts of decision-making by using interview data. Helm (2017) notes that individuals struggle to access their sensemaking strategies after the event, whilst more generally retrospective accounts in qualitative research can be prone to poor recall from participants (Golden, 1992). Interviews about how decisions are taken, whilst useful, have limitations in terms of bringing out the sensemaking strategies of social workers as they take place in practice. This gap and the limitations identified in the existing research informed the development of the first research question to be addressed by this study:

1. How does sensemaking manifest itself in social workers' case-talk?

There is evidence from the small amount of existing empirical literature that sensemaking can be observed through case-talk. There is a need to further understand how sensemaking manifests itself through case-talk, especially given the dialogic nature of sensemaking (Weick et al, 2005; Cook and Gregory, 2020). The small number of existing studies on sensemaking have focused on office case-talk (Helm, 2016, 2017), discussions with colleagues (Thompson, 2013; Avby, 2015; Doherty, 2016), home visiting (Cook, 2017), and case discussion groups (Riemann, 2005). There is a gap in understanding how sensemaking may manifest itself in other forms of case-talk and whether there are differences in how sensemaking takes place in different contexts. A further gap in the empirical research is how identity is presented through social workers' case-talk; whilst Riemann (2005) and Cook (2019b) discuss identity and how this can be expressed through social workers' narratives, more empirical work is needed to explore the relationship between sensemaking, narrative, and identity in C&F social work. These gaps will be addressed

through the methods chosen – to be explored in the following chapter – to address this first research question.

Whilst research and theoretical work on sensemaking, decision-making, and judgement posits the value of a reflective space within supervision (Helm, 2011; Hackett and Taylor, 2014), there has been very little research on *how* supervision provides this in day-to-day practice and how supervision may support social workers' sensemaking. Research on sensemaking, decision-making and judgement tends to focus on individual social workers or their interactions with their environment and colleagues. Research on supervision has tended to focus primarily on experiences of supervision, often via retrospective accounts (O'Donoghue and Tsui, 2015). In the limited number of empirical studies analysing the content of supervision, the focus has not been on sensemaking or on the related areas of decision-making and judgement. Whilst it is noted that supervision ought to provide a space for sensemaking (O'Donoghue, 2014; Rankine and Thompson, 2015; Patterson, 2019), what this looks like in practice is under-researched. This informs the second research question:

2. How does formal one-to-one supervision contribute to social workers' sensemaking?

O'Donoghue (2014), Rankine (2017) and Rankine and Thompson (2015) argue that supervision is co-constructed, though Wilkins (2019) notes that existing research does not tell us much about what supervisees bring to the supervisory relationship. Additionally, O'Donoghue and Tsui (2015) highlight the lack of empirical research that has involved paired supervisory dyads. As will be outlined in the next chapter, this study will seek to address these gaps by using paired dyads to explore both parties' perspectives on supervision as well as using data from one-to-one supervision from the same dyads.

There is some research which explores the benefits of supplementary forms of supervision, primarily in the form of reflective group case discussions (Lees, 2017b; O'Sullivan, 2018; Lees and Cooper, 2019). The value of alternative

forms of supervision that offer a broader package of support to social workers is also something that Wilkins (2017a) argues for. The existing research in respect of group supervision has tended to focus primarily on its value in offering containment (Lees, 2017b; O'Sullivan, 2018); it would be valuable to consider how it is that such forums might play a role in social workers' sensemaking.

The focus on informal supervision is a further novel aspect of this study. Wilkins (2017a) and Wilkins et al (2017) have suggested that much of what happens in the supervisory relationship takes place outside of formal one-to-one supervision sessions. Bartoli and Kennedy (2015) similarly note that supervision is more complex than is often implied by the focus on a formal monthly meeting. Little is known about the day-to-day practice of informal supervision, aside from some observations in wider ethnographic studies of decision-making and judgement (Saltiel, 2016). Given that supervision can be seen as a process and a relationship as well as an event (Beddoe and Wilkins, 2019), research which focuses on the relational and process elements of supervision (Lawlor, 2013) is likely to further our understanding of how supervision functions in practice. This leads to the final research question:

3. How do informal supervisory conversations, group case discussion, and informal peer discussion contribute to social workers' sensemaking?

Addressing this question will also provide opportunities for building on some of the provisional work on sensemaking as it takes place amongst colleagues on a more informal basis (Avby, 2015; Doherty, 2016; Helm, 2016, 2017; Roesch-Marsh, 2018). The empirical research base for how sensemaking takes place in case-talk between colleagues is relatively small (Helm, 2021) and research has not tended to fully consider how it fits as part of a wider picture that includes one-to-one supervision and opportunities for group case discussion. The research questions, taken together, should help to address this gap.

7. Methodology

This chapter will outline the rationale for my chosen methodology and will take a broadly chronological approach in outlining how and why the methodology was chosen and how decisions around sampling, access, data collection, and data analysis were made.

7.1 Designing the study

This section will look at the decisions taken prior to fieldwork commencing. This will include decisions taken in respect of developing the research questions, a rationale for the methodology chosen to answer the research questions, and consideration of some of the theoretical underpinnings of the study.

7.1.1 The development of the research questions

The previous chapters provided the background to the development of the research questions by highlighting gaps within the existing empirical and theoretical literature. The research questions, outlined in the previous chapter, were as follows:

1. How does sensemaking manifest itself in social workers' case-talk?
2. How does formal one-to-one supervision contribute to social workers' sensemaking?
3. How do informal supervisory conversations, group case discussion, and informal peer discussion contribute to social workers' sensemaking?

The research questions are listed roughly hierarchically; the primary focus of the research was social workers' sensemaking, with supervision – including

one-to-one supervision, informal supervisory conversations, and group case discussion – being a means through which to explore how social workers engage in sensemaking in particular contexts. The aim of the research was to seek closeness to sensemaking and supervision to further understanding of how they function in everyday C&F social work settings.

7.1.2 Ontological and epistemological position

It is important for researchers to be explicit about their own position on questions about the nature of reality and what can be known about it, as such positions invariably influence the researcher's choice of methodology (Bryman, 2016). Ultimately, a combination of the researcher's stance and the research questions will inform the methodology chosen to undertake a research project and it is important that there is alignment between the stance taken, the questions posed, and the methods used (Creswell, 2014).

Ontological and epistemological positions – the nature of what we can know and how we can come to know it – tend to be characterised by a binary opposition between positivist/realist and interpretivist/constructionist positions (Finlay and Ballinger, 2006; Bryman, 2016). A key feature of positivist/realist positions is that they posit the existence of an external reality that can be known through our engagement with it; these positions tend to be associated with the natural sciences, where it is purported that the scientific method brings us closer to knowing the 'real world' (Bryman, 2016). In contrast, interpretivist/constructionist perspectives posit that there is no knowable 'real world' accessible to the researcher; reality is constructed through our interpretation of it (Robson, 2011; Bryman, 2016). Strict forms of social constructionism paint themselves as purely epistemological positions, claiming neutrality towards ontological questions since nothing can be said about the 'real world' outside of our linguistic representations of it (Nightingale and Cromby, 2002).

In the social sciences, the two positions have been viewed as aligning with either quantitative or qualitative research methods (Finlay and Ballinger,

2006). Positivist/realist philosophical stances can be seen to underpin quantitative approaches that seek to test hypotheses to find ways to explain social phenomena (Creswell, 2014). On the other hand, interpretivist/constructionist stances underpin qualitative research, which purports to represent or further understanding of social phenomena as opposed to explaining them (Robson, 2011).

Alternative positions have been developed that offer a different perspective on the traditional dichotomy between a knowable real world open to the researcher and a position where the researcher's constructions of the world are all that are available. Critical realism is one such position; it treats constructionism as primarily an ontological position rather than an epistemological one, where tentative knowledge of constructed social reality is possible (Nightingale and Cromby, 2002). Critical realism can be either an ontological and epistemological position (Bhaskar, 1989; O'Mahoney and Vincent, 2014; Buch-Hansen and Nielsen, 2020) or an epistemological position that is consistent with an ontological stance of weak constructionism (Nightingale and Cromby, 2002).

Critical realism acknowledges that the 'real world' is not an objective, knowable entity but is instead constructed through power relationships, social structures, and language (Bhaskar, 1989; Nightingale and Cromby, 2002). Critical realists share constructionists' scepticism about the possibility of discovering objective 'truth' (O'Mahoney and Vincent, 2014). Where positivists view the social world as being a space where truths exist and where social structures are knowable and predictable, critical realists hold that the social world is not based on immutable facts and is constantly changing through human action and interaction (Buch-Hansen and Nielsen, 2020). However, critical realists hold that we can say things about social reality and that what we say can refer, albeit imperfectly and provisionally, to such a reality (Nightingale and Cromby, 2002). Furthermore, critical realists adopt a stance that enables the development of 'better' explanations by acknowledging the reality of power structures and hierarchies that influence how we understand the world, in contrast to strong constructionist positions where all explanations are viewed

as equally valid discursive constructs (O'Mahoney and Vincent, 2014). Power structures and hierarchies are seen as influencing the ways in which actors make sense of their world (O'Mahoney and Vincent, 2014); in this respect the constructed world with its power dynamics and social structures constitutes a weak form of external reality (Nightingale and Cromby, 2002).

My epistemological and ontological position is one of critical realism. My intention was to seek to understand the psychosocial environment that C&F social work practice takes place in (Taylor, 2017) and particularly how such an environment impacts on social workers' sensemaking and how supervision is enacted in everyday practice. A critical realist lens is useful for understanding organisational life (Vincent and Wapshott, 2014) and is consistent with using ethnographic methods as a means to understand the way that social structures influence and are influenced by the behaviour of individuals and organisations (Rees and Gatenby, 2014).

7.1.3 Research methodology

My chosen methodology for this study was ethnography. Ethnographic research usually encompasses multiple methods of data collection; its key method is participant observation, often supplemented by interviews, recordings, and documentary analysis (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Traditionally, ethnography emanated from anthropological research and was used as a method for understanding and articulating the practices of different cultures and groups (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Fetterman, 2010). Menzies-Lyth's (1960) seminal ethnographic study of the work of nurses in a hospital setting laid the groundwork for the development of institutional or organisational ethnography in the social sciences.

One of the aims of ethnographic research is to provide 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) through observation; thick description has the aim of interpreting, contextualising, and furthering understanding of that which is observed. It moves beyond the surface of human action in order to attach meaning to it and, in this respect, it has some parallels with sensemaking,

which likewise involves attaching meaning and significance to experiences (Cook, 2016). de Montigny (2018) argues that social workers are well-placed to undertake ethnographic research due to their capacity to attach such meaning and significance to words and actions in the course of their everyday work.

In social work, ethnographic methodology has been associated with a move towards practice-near and experience-near research (White et al, 2009; Froggett and Briggs, 2012), which is an approach to research that seeks to engage with the complex psychosocial reality of C&F social work (Cooper, 2009). My research questions were exploratory in nature and necessitated a closeness to practice that fitted with the use of ethnographic methodology. In particular, my interest in how social workers use informal supervision, group case discussion, and peer discussion lent itself to an ethnographic methodology, since these practices take place within the office space where social workers go about their work.

Ferguson (2016) identifies that within ethnographic research in social work, a distinction can be drawn between institutional ethnography (Longhofer et al, 2013) and practice ethnography (Longhofer and Floersch, 2012). Institutional ethnography takes place within social work organisations and usually focuses on an aspect of organisational culture or team function (Ferguson, 2016). These studies provide insights into things like the impact of anxiety and organisational defences (Whittaker, 2011), but such studies are also valuable for considering the organisational context of decision-making and judgement (Kirkman and Melrose, 2015; Helm, 2016; Saltiel, 2016; Whittaker, 2018). By contrast, practice ethnography focuses on practice encounters, such as home visits and meetings with clients (Longhofer and Floersch, 2012). Since my aim was to explore sensemaking and supervision within the context of the organisation as opposed to observing practice encounters, my study was an institutional ethnography. The research remained practice-near through seeking closeness to social workers' day-to-day work (Froggett and Briggs, 2012), but it was also concerned with the organisational context of sensemaking and supervision.

7.1.4 Psychosocial research and getting close to practice

One key benefit of ethnographic approaches to research is that they enable researchers to get closer to the 'doing' of social work practice, in contrast to the 'reporting' about practice that tends to come from using single qualitative methods, such as interviews (Quinlan, 2008). As my interest was in understanding what happens in different forms of supervisory and sensemaking dialogue, the use of an ethnographic methodology was necessary to achieve the requisite closeness to such conversations. Floersch et al (2014) highlight the inherently situated nature of social work, whilst Helm and Roesch-Marsh (2017) and Taylor and Whittaker (2018) note the interconnectedness of social workers' sensemaking, judgement and decision-making and the environment in which it takes place. An ethnographic methodology can offer important insights on sensemaking as a situated activity (Robson, 2020) and can also offer insight into how sensemaking takes place in differing contexts, such as formal one-to-one supervision and office case-talk.

My interest in exploring sensemaking within the context of supervisory relationships was further underpinned by a theoretical approach that was broadly psychosocial. Psychodynamic and psychoanalytical approaches to researching the life of organisations have been developed by the Tavistock Clinic to closely mirror the approach taken in their renowned child observation studies (Hinshelwood and Skogstad, 2000). More recently, the term 'psychosocial' has been used to describe research that engages with both the inner and outer worlds of research participants (Clarke and Hoggett, 2009; Julkunen and Ruch, 2016). Ethnographic research that is informed by psychosocial ideas acknowledges the complex social and organisational context in which individuals live, act and form relationships, as well as the way in which such a world is constructed by the words and deeds of individual actors (de Montigny, 2007, 2018).

Cooper (2009: 440) notes that “we desperately need our social work research to provide us with in-depth understanding of our complex psycho-social world”. Hollway (2009), meanwhile, states that a psychosocial approach to research is appropriate for understanding the intersubjective, affective and relational aspects of participants’ worlds. Further, in order to achieve this understanding, Hollway (2009) argues that observation is needed to enable the researcher to be ‘experience-near’; such nearness to experience enables the researcher to engage with the context in which lived experience takes place, and to go beneath the surface of speech and text. What lies beneath the surface is the complex interplay of internal and external forces influencing individual participants, and it is this interplay and how it manifests in the words and actions of individuals and organisations that characterises psychosocial research (Clarke and Hoggett, 2009).

Given the psychosocial nature of sensemaking (Cook and Gregory, 2020), a psychosocial approach to researching sensemaking in context appeared a good fit. There is a ‘golden thread’ running through psychosocial approaches to research, adopting an experience-near stance, and the use of an ethnographic methodology (Froggett and Briggs, 2009) that provided a coherence between the research questions and how they would be addressed by the chosen theoretical and methodological approach.

7.1.5 Data collection methods

As mentioned previously, ethnography is characterised by the use of multiple data collection methods, with participant observation being its defining characteristic (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Fetterman, 2010; Scott Jones and Watt, 2010). One benefit of using multiple types of data whilst doing ethnography is the possibility for triangulation in the process of analysis (Fetterman, 2010). This is of importance when undertaking ethnographic fieldwork; as the researcher’s own first-hand observations form a significant body of data it is useful to have other types of data that may challenge, confirm, or disconfirm the observations made by the researcher. Triangulating multiple forms of data is one way of ensuring the integrity of findings in ethnographic

research (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Fetterman, 2010). In particular, the use of interviews alongside observation offers an opportunity for participants to contextualise and explain observed behaviour (Heyn, 2001).

Ultimately, the methods of data collection need to align with the research questions posed. Some recent research on supervision has used documentary analysis of written supervision records (Wilkins, 2017b), however since my research questions were primarily concerned with the more relational and discursive elements of supervision as opposed to the output from supervision, I did not feel that using written supervision records would be beneficial in answering my research questions. My chosen data collection methods were participant observation, audio recordings of one-to-one supervision sessions, and semi-structured interviews.

Participant observation enables an outsider perspective to be taken (Fetterman, 2010) – though the extent to which I was an outsider will be explored later in this chapter – whilst interviews aim to elicit insider accounts from participants in relation to their own experiences (Hollway and Jefferson, 2013). Supervision, meanwhile, represents a naturally-occurring speech event that is co-constructed by two insider participants. This enabled me to contrast my observations of social workers' case-talk in the office setting, with presentations of cases offered during interview, with co-constructed case-talk in one-to-one supervision. The chosen methods help to address gaps in our understanding of how supervision as a practice is enacted in day-to-day C&F social work practice and how sensemaking takes place in different contexts. These gaps are noted as being significant in our understanding of supervision (Carpenter et al, 2013) and sensemaking (Avby, 2015; Helm, 2021).

Table 3 sets out the research questions, the data collection methods drawn upon to address each question, and the perspectives offered on each question as a result of the chosen data collection method:

Research question	Data collection method	Perspectives offered
How does sensemaking manifest itself in social workers' case-talk?	Participant observation, supervision recordings, semi-structured interviews.	Insider perspective (interview), outsider perspective (observation), co-constructed insider event (supervision)
How does formal one-to-one supervision contribute to social workers' sensemaking?	Participant observation, supervision recordings, semi-structured interviews.	Insider perspective (interview), co-constructed insider event (supervision)
How do informal supervisory conversations, group case discussion, and informal peer discussion contribute to social workers' sensemaking?	Participant observation, semi-structured interviews.	Insider perspective (interview), outsider perspective (observations)

Table 3: Research questions and data collection methods

As the above table demonstrates, the different data collection methods were needed to ensure that all of the questions were addressed using at least two different forms of data. For each question, naturally-occurring talk in the form of observation data or supervision data could be contrasted with accounts offered by participants in interview. Having more than one type of data – in both the method of collection and whether the case-talk was naturally-occurring or not – to address each research question enabled comparison of

data at the analysis stage to enhance the validity of the analysis (Fetterman, 2010).

Interview questions were developed with a view to encouraging narrative responses; such questioning can help to minimise the extent to which participants may become unconsciously defensive in their responses (Hollway and Jefferson, 2013). Questions were designed to be open and most started with language such as “Can you tell me about...” and “Can you give an example of...”; closed questions were deliberately avoided in order to minimise the likelihood of short one or two word responses. The questions were intended to elicit accounts of cases and of supervisory practice that told a story of the participants’ experiences. Follow-up questions were also drafted and these were intended to prompt participants to think more deeply, or to explore changes in their thinking over time. Questions were designed to encourage discussion of cases that would have formed part of their recorded supervision and that may have been discussed during my period of observation. This was intended to ensure that case-talk on the same case in the contrasting contexts of interview, supervision, and the office space could form part of the body of data.

As Helm (2017) notes, there are limitations to how well social workers can access their sensemaking process retrospectively, so the interview questions primarily focused on recent or ongoing cases given difficulties in recall when recounting events in the more distant past (Golden, 1992), whilst the use of other forms of data helped to mitigate the difficulties in accessing sensemaking activity through the use of interviews. Feedback on the questions was sought from supervisors and colleagues and minor changes were made accordingly. The interview schedules can be found in Appendices C and D.

The data collected through participant observation was in the form of written fieldnotes. Hand-written notes were taken contemporaneously and then written up immediately after the observation had finished in order to seek to preserve as much detail as possible. The fieldnotes were written in a descriptive fashion; this is the usual convention in ethnographic fieldwork

(Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Emerson et al, 2011). The written fieldnotes were used as data, alongside the transcribed audio recordings of the supervision sessions and semi-structured interviews. Any interpretive or analytic thoughts about my observations were recorded separately, either as analytic asides – short notes in parenthesis within the fieldnotes (Emerson et al, 2011) – or as fuller thoughts in my reflexive journal. Whilst some ethnographers also treat their reflexive journal as data (for example, Foster, 2016), my reflexive journal served as an aid to analysis but was not subject to formal analysis. It should also be noted that a further benefit of keeping a reflexive journal is to aid reflection about how observations are described; although the aim of fieldnotes is to provide a descriptive account, the use of language is necessarily interpretive and choices about how to present an account of the field and what is included and excluded are never entirely neutral (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Emmerson et al, 2010).

7.1.6 Use of self and reflexivity

One crucial facet of psychosocially-informed research is embracing the subjectivity of the researcher as a research tool in its own right (Hinshelwood and Skogstad, 2000; Hollway, 2009; Jervis, 2009; Foster, 2016; Ruch, 2016). Drawing on key psychoanalytic and psychodynamic concepts such as transference and projection, the feelings experienced by a researcher during research encounters are seen as potentially providing insight into the unconscious psychological states of research participants (Jervis, 2009) or the organisations in which they participate (Hinshelwood and Skogstad, 2000; Clarke and Hoggett, 2009). As an example, Foster (2016) found that in her ethnographic research, the way that the teams involved in the research interacted with her and made her feel provided useful insight into their culture and functioning.

In order for researchers to use their subjective experiences and their emotional responses effectively, certain conditions need to be met. The researcher needs to be prepared to be close to the experiences of others in the research process and needs to be open to emotional experiences within research

relationships (Broadhurst and Mason, 2014; Ruch, 2016). Further, any insights gained through the researcher's own emotional experiences and reflection upon these needs to be well-evidenced in the data (Jervis, 2009).

In addition to ensuring that insights gained through subjective experience are evidenced within the data, a further means of mitigating difficulties in the use of self as a research tool is the use of reflexivity. Reflexivity entails the researcher reflecting constantly on their experiences of research encounters and on the potential sources of thoughts or feelings that have been aroused by the encounter (Hinshelwood and Skogstad, 2000; Clarke and Hoggett, 2009; Hollway, 2009; Ruch, 2016). Reflexivity is also deeply-embedded in the practice of ethnographic research, which relies on the integrity of the researcher (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Fetterman, 2010). I kept a reflexive journal throughout the research process, updating it after each research encounter. The reflexive journal is a useful tool to begin to make sense of the researcher's own feelings about (Foster, 2016) and reflections on (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) research encounters. It is also crucial in helping to disentangle which responses have their locus within the researcher and which are responses to the unconscious world of the research site (Hollway, 2009; Ruch, 2016). Researchers bring a whole lifetime of experiences to the field, these shape how they respond to research encounters, and the reflexive journal provides an opportunity to understand the impact of these experiences (Clarke and Hoggett, 2009).

In my own case, I brought with me a decade of C&F social work experience, including four years of supervisory experience. This meant that I had a deep level of understanding of the type of work being undertaken by the teams and my own views about what constitutes good social work. These were based on my own orientation towards practice as a social worker and supervisor, and in both of these areas of practice I had always considered effective relationships to be essential. However, as a team manager I also prided myself on ensuring that my team functioned well by organisational measures such as assessments being completed within timescale and outcomes of audit activity. In essence, I sought to – though did not necessarily always achieve – create

an environment that provided scaffolding to social workers by providing high support (through containing relationships within the team) and high challenge (through setting high expectations around individual and team performance) (Mariani, 1997). Such an approach lent itself to my specialist role in managing and supervising NQSWs to help develop their practice and to seek to improve retention of staff.

Towards the end of my time in practice, I had started to become frustrated by what I felt were increasingly bureaucratic and unthinking approaches to the work. In delivering a workshop to fellow managers around effective supervision recording following my team's supervision records being audited as 'Outstanding', I shared that I had amended the standard recording form to include a section titled 'Reflection and Analysis' to help ensure that not only did this take place in supervision, but that it was evidenced in recording. I was met with a response from another manager along the lines of "but you've changed the form" and it was evident that the managers present were uncomfortable in deviating from the existing form. This was quite jarring for me as it suggested that recording processes were shaping practice to the extent that a minor amendment that could be beneficial was greeted with discomfort. This mirrored the kind of internal barriers identified by Turney and Ruch (2018) in piloting a reflective supervisory approach; supervisors worry about doing things the right way and this can make them reluctant to deviate from existing ways of doing things.

The local authority in which I worked had received back-to-back 'Inadequate' ratings by Ofsted and this had led to a number of processes and mechanisms for oversight being introduced. Much of this constituted enforced upwards delegation of accountability (Menzies Lyth, 1960; Whittaker, 2011), whereby increasingly decisions were being taken or overseen by senior managers, reducing the autonomy not only of social workers but also of supervisors. At the same time, despite demonstrable improvements in staff retention and audit outcomes, there remained scepticism from team and senior managers about the benefits of my team. I began to feel a sense of dissonance between what I was trying to achieve in my role and the direction of travel of the organisation.

This provides some context around my experiences in practice, which will have shaped how I undertook the research and how I made sense of the data I gathered. I will offer further reflection on this later in this chapter and in presenting my analysis.

7.2 Ethics, access, and sample

This section will begin by outlining sampling decisions taken, before moving on to discuss ethical issues that were considered in devising the study. I will then also discuss how access to the sites was agreed and how aspects of the study were negotiated with participants.

7.2.1 Sampling decisions

A key sampling decision in ethnographic research is deciding the number and type of sites to be used. The subject of my study was statutory C&F social work teams and this meant that local authorities would be the sites for the research. The next two decisions to be taken related to the type of teams and the number of teams to include in the study. I made the decision that I wanted to work with teams where C&F assessments took place following acceptance of a referral. My rationale for this was that my interest in sensemaking was suited to an environment where initial formulations of cases were taking place. Such sites have been used in other ethnographic studies (for example Broadhurst et al, 2010; Whittaker, 2014; Doherty, 2016; Saltiel, 2016) and have provided rich insights into how workers make sense of information to reach decisions.

The number of teams involved in the study was somewhat driven by the number of key participants involved in the study. I took the decision that I wanted to use a minimum of three practice supervisors and to include a minimum of three social workers per supervisor, totalling a minimum of twelve key participants. These key participants would be involved in having a one-to-one supervision session recorded, participating in a semi-structured interview, and being observed. This number was arrived at to enable a good spread of

experience across the participants and to include a number of dyads whilst ensuring the participant observation element of the study remained manageable.

Ultimately, I chose to go with a larger sample than this. My total number of key participants was seventeen social workers and five supervisors across two local authorities and four teams. My sampling strategy was generic purposive sampling (Bryman, 2016); such a strategy enables the selection of participants based on certain characteristics that the researcher is looking for, in this instance membership of a particular type of social work team. This sampling strategy is suitable for an exploratory qualitative study such as mine where the aims of the study are not comparative and where the findings are not intended to be universally generalisable (Bryman, 2016).

In addition to the key participants taking part in the study, the nature of the research also meant that there were a number of secondary participants involved in the ethnographic observations. Separate consent forms were devised for key participants and secondary participants to reflect their different levels of participation and these are appended to the thesis.

7.2.2 Ethics

Ethical approval for the study was sought from the Research Ethics Committee in the School of Social Work at the University of East Anglia and was granted on the 11th of May 2018. Research governance approval was also granted by the two participating local authorities. This section will briefly consider the key ethical issues considered in devising and undertaking the study.

In undertaking research that gets close to practice, the sensitive and intimate nature of what is being observed can have implications for participants (Ferguson, 2016). In particular, social worker and supervisors were exposing their practice and their emotional responses to the work to me and this could have felt anxiety-provoking for them. Given my experience as a team manager, this may have created a sense that I would be evaluating or judging

their practice. Participants can view observers as having a role in performance management (Leigh et al, 2020b) and this may have created further discomfort. These issues were addressed within the participant information sheet and through conversations held with the participating teams before the research commenced.

One issue that was pertinent to my research was the power dynamics involved in the supervisory relationship and the potential impact on participants if difficulties were observed within the relationship. Anonymity was important to protect participants as far as possible, and pseudonyms were used in the writing of fieldnotes and the transcription of interviews and recorded supervision sessions. The number of participants used – a minimum of three supervisees per supervisor and five supervisors in total – was intended to make it more difficult for participants to identify each other from the data. I also ensured in the presentation of my analysis that I did not focus overtly on supervisory relationships, but rather how supervision conversations were constructed. This mitigated the possibility of exposing issues within supervisory relationships.

Another ethical issue to consider was that social workers and supervisors would be talking about children and families and these discussions formed a large portion of my data. In writing fieldnotes and transcribing interviews and supervision recordings, children and families were anonymised to a single initial. This meant that children and families would not be identifiable from the data.

A further ethical issue to consider was the prospect of observing practice that I considered to be dangerous. I ensured that I was clear with participants about what I would need to do if I had concerns that a child may be at risk, and this was covered in the participant information sheet in Appendix B. Participants were offered the opportunity to debrief with me and were given my email address and that of my supervisor and Head of School so that they could contact us with any concerns about being involved in the research. It was made clear to participants that they had the right to withdraw from the study at

any time up to two weeks after data collection has ceased. This helped to ensure that participants were participating willingly and were aware of their right not to participate.

7.2.3 Selecting and accessing the sites

Access to teams was gained through local authority gatekeepers, using contacts that I had established directly, through my own professional networks, and through signposting from my supervisory team. I decided that I did not want to research in the local authority where I had previously worked. My reasoning for this was that I knew people there too well, and this would compromise my ability to oscillate between distance from and closeness to the participants (Froggett and Briggs, 2012).

Some practical considerations were involved when selecting research sites. Ethnography is a labour intensive methodology given the need for repeated site visits and the use of multiple data collection methods (Fetterman, 2010). For this reason, I needed to work with local authorities that I could easily travel to. I decided to target local authorities rated as at least 'Good' by Ofsted. This decision was underpinned by wanting to use sites that were similar as opposed to selecting sites that were obviously contrasting (Yin, 2009), and by the hope of observing 'good' practice.

Ultimately, I contacted three local authorities via relevant gatekeepers. Two of the gatekeepers were in workforce development roles within their organisation, the third was a senior manager. Two of the local authorities agreed to take part. I decided to use both local authorities; a number of other ethnographic studies in social work have used two or more organisations (Broadhurst et al, 2010; Kirkman and Melrose, 2014; Whittaker, 2014) and using two local authorities enabled a broader sample of key participants. As mentioned previously, my sampling strategy was generic purposive (Bryman, 2016) and so the teams were selected on the basis of similar characteristics as opposed to being contrasting cases.

The two local authorities provided access to one site each, with each site containing two co-located teams. Contact was made with the team managers and a face-to-face meeting took place to discuss the research, at which the managers agreed to participate. Further visits took place to meet with the participants and discuss the research with them prior to all team members consenting to take part in the research as either key participants or secondary participants. All team members gave this consent. The sites are referred to in the remainder of the thesis as Springshire and Summertown, and the context of the two teams based on my observations – offering ‘thick description’ of their day-to-day life (Geertz, 1979) – forms the first chapter of the analysis.

7.3 Data collection

This section will describe how data were collected during the research period and the rationale for decisions taken. I will then offer some brief reflections on the process of situating myself within the research sites.

7.3.1 Data collection in the two sites

Data collection took place between September 2018 and March 2019. The Summertown site was visited between September and December, whilst Springshire was visited between November and March. The decision to have minimal overlap between the sites was taken to enable me to immerse myself fully in each site during the observation period. Similar doctoral studies have also observed sites separately as opposed to simultaneously (see Whittaker, 2014).

Site visits for observation generally lasted between four and six hours, usually with a break in the middle. On a small number of occasions, time constraints meant that visits were three continuous hours with no break. Emerson et al (2011) note that periods of time of this length are suitable for novice ethnographic researchers. Handwritten fieldnotes were taken contemporaneously with a focus on preserving dialogue, using verbatim quotes in quotation marks where possible (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

Longer, more descriptive fieldnotes were written up immediately after the observation visit; writing them up immediately enabled greater preservation of what had been seen and heard during the visit (Emerson et al, 2011). During longer visits, I wrote up observations from the first two to three hours during a break, and this again helped to ensure that fieldnotes were written as closely as possible to the observation.

Supervision recordings took place whilst I was undertaking observation visits. The recording of supervision sessions was negotiated with supervisors and supervisees at the start of the observation period. We looked at when supervision was booked in and, if both participants agreed, this date was then used for the recording of supervision. On the day of the supervision, I checked that both participants were still happy for the recording to take place. Since my interest was primarily case-talk, I offered participants the opportunity to take some time at the beginning or end of the session to discuss any personal issues that they would rather not be recorded. Only a few participants requested this, with the majority being happy for the whole session to be recorded.

Supervision sessions lasted between forty minutes and one hour and fifty-two minutes. Due to there being multiple supervisors in the sites selected, when a supervision was taking place it was possible to observe conversations involving other supervisors or case discussion between colleagues. Audio recordings of supervision were chosen due to being less intrusive than being physically present; previous ethnographic studies have noted that the presence of an observer during supervision noticeably disturbed the setting (Saltiel, 2017). Audio recordings of supervision conversations have been used successfully in other studies (Wilkins et al, 2017).

Semi-structured interviews took place towards the end of my time observing the teams. The rationale for this was that I would have had an opportunity to build rapport during the period of observation, whilst utilising interviews at the end of the research also offered opportunities for myself and participants to explore observations from my time in the site (Heyn, 2001). As mentioned

previously, interviews were designed to elicit discussion of cases that had been discussed in the recorded supervision and that may have been discussed during the ethnographic observations. Interviews lasted between thirty-eight minutes and one hour and twelve minutes.

Below is a table outlining the data collected for the study:

Site	Observation visits	Supervision recordings	Interviews with supervisors	Interviews with supervisees
Summertown	11	9	3	9
Springshire	10	8	2	8

Table 4: Data collected across the research sites

7.3.2 Situating myself in the site

As the start of the research approached, I needed to decide how to position myself in relation to the site. In terms of positioning, I first had to consider my own degree of membership and whether to disclose this to participants. My social work background afforded me shared membership of the profession with participants (Scott Jones and Watt, 2010). I decided that I would share my professional background. My stance towards research is based on seeking closeness to practice and in order to do so relationships need to be formed; to build trusting research relationships, openness is important (Ruch, 2016).

On reflection, perhaps I also felt that I would be more likely to be accepted by participants if they viewed me as 'one of their own'. Cassell (1988) discusses how, as well as negotiating physical access to participants, the ethnographer needs to negotiate social access in order to carry out their research. By identifying myself as a social worker, it may have helped me to be more readily accepted. Julkunen and Ruch (2016) note that there is value in being partially

an insider as a researcher but that there are also challenges that result, and the opportunity to reflect on the impact of one's own identity is important in the research process.

Another consideration was my level of participation in the life of the sites. Gold (1958) identifies four types of observational role that can be adopted by ethnographers: complete participant, participant as observer, observer as participant, and complete observer. The complete participant ordinarily becomes a member of the group being studied and a full participant in the life of that group, often researching covertly (Gold 1958). The participant as observer also has some degree of membership of the group and participates in some of the life of the group, they are usually accessing the group for the purposes of research and this is made explicit (Gold, 1958). The observer as participant takes a less active role in the life of the group, they need not have membership of the group and their interactions have a more formal character (Gold, 1958). The complete observer does not interact with the group at all and maintains distance and detachment from the group (Gold, 1958).

Scott Jones and Watt (2010) note that ethnographers generally fall somewhere in the middle of this typology. I would characterise my role as being that of observer as participant; whilst I was happy to interact with participants to build rapport, I avoided involving myself in case-related conversations. I was mindful that engaging in case-related conversations could elicit the kind of sensemaking conversation that was the subject of my study and this could have distorted the observation data.

Consideration of my impact on the site as an observer was also key. I undertook a pilot visit to see how the teams responded to my presence and to test where to physically situate myself. Bryman (2016) notes that in the process of undertaking observation, participants tend to get used to the observer's presence and this was apparent over the course of my visits. Furthermore, whilst observation can distort behaviour and the flow of activity in the observed setting (Patton, 2002; Quinlan, 2008), the extent to which this is the case can be overstated, and the busyness of teams engaged in

important work often means the presence of an observer, particularly one who is becoming familiar to the participants, is unlikely to distract from their focus on their work (Hepburn and Wiggins, 2007).

From a practical point of view, in both sites I wanted to situate myself close to the key participants and in particular to the supervisors. This turned out to be relatively straightforward at both sites, the layout of the office space lent itself to me being able to position myself close enough to the supervisors to hear their conversations, as well as being able to hear conversations between others. Both offices were open plan and utilised hot-desking, though in slightly different ways. I will discuss the use of space and how this influenced case discussion in the first analysis chapter.

7.4 Data analysis

This section will explore the decisions taken about how to analyse the data, and how the process of analysis then proceeded. The rationale for decisions taken will be explored with reference to relevant literature. This section will conclude by revisiting reflexivity and offering some further thoughts on how my own experiences influenced the research process.

7.4.1 Choosing a method of data analysis

As previously discussed, the different data collection methods led to different types of data being gathered. Interview data involved elicited accounts from participants, whilst supervision recordings and observations involved more naturalistic case-talk. Fieldnotes involved outsider observations of speech and events, whilst the other two forms of data involved insider accounts; this is not unusual when undertaking ethnography (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Despite differences in the types of data collected, my aim was to seek patterns across the three kinds of data in order to explore how sensemaking manifested in case-talk across the different contexts of the interview, supervision, and office space. As such, I took the decision to utilise the same form of analysis for all of the data.

Historically, ethnographic research had close links to the use of grounded theory (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Flick, 2014), with ethnographic studies involving an iterative process of going back and forth between the field and the data until a point of saturation was reached. However, since the generation of theory has increasingly become less explicitly the focus of ethnographic research (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995), and since ethnographers increasingly enter the field with an existing theoretical base, ethnographers have tended to move away from grounded theory (Fetterman, 2011). On the basis that my aim was not explicitly to generate theory and that I would be approaching the field with some theoretical underpinnings in place, I decided that a grounded theory approach would not be a good fit for my study.

Discourse analysis would have been another potential method for analysing my data. Discourse analysis involves detailed analysis of transcribed dialogue and is often used to analyse naturally occurring data (Potter, 1996). Discourse analysis focuses on the way that conversations are constructed and the way that language is used between speakers, focusing on dialogic conventions such as turn-taking, and broaching and resolving disagreements, and it involves focusing on patterns of speech, such as repetition, pauses, and intonation (Potter, 1996; Bryman, 2016). It is concerned with the structure and function of talk and text and what they reveal about the speakers and their wider social context (Bryman, 2016). Whilst discourse analysis may have been compatible with analysis some of the data collected – primarily the transcripts of supervision recordings – it would not have worked so readily with other forms of data, and particularly the observation data which would not have had the requisite level of detail in the recording of dialogue to undergo discourse analysis. Moreover, the overt focus on speech and text inherent to discourse analysis runs the risk of side-lining some of the non-verbal components of the observation data. Indeed, there remain ongoing debates about the compatibility of ethnographic research and discourse analysis due to the perception that the former's focus on observation is at odds with the latter's focus on speech and text (Atkinson et al, 2011).

Narrative methods provided another possible means for analysing the data. Narrative analysis offers a degree of flexibility in how data is analysed and there are different ways of approaching narrative data; one key difference in narrative approaches in contrast to the other methods of analysis described here is that narrative approaches do not necessarily seek to fragment data into smaller units that can be coded or otherwise analysed (Riessman, 2008). A further contrast to grounded theory, and to a lesser extent to discourse analysis, is that narrative approaches enable the use and application of theory and theoretical lenses in how narratives are analysed (Riessman, 2008). Given that sensemaking has strong links to narrative construction (Weick, 1995) and that narrative analysis concerns itself with sense- and meaning-making activity (Riessman, 2008), narrative analysis offered some potential for making sense of the data.

However, whilst narrative analysis can be used with ethnographic data (Cortazzi, 2001; Riessman, 2008), it presents certain challenges when doing so. The kind of naturally occurring data that is observed by the ethnographer does not necessarily lend itself to narrative form (Cortazzi, 2001). Salmon and Riessman (2012) suggest that narrative has arguably come to be conceptualised too broadly, and not all language use constitutes narrative. Squire (2012) argues that the distinguishing feature of narrative in contrast to other forms of talk or text is that it is sequenced and progresses towards a resolution or transformation. Cortazzi (2001) suggests that for these reasons, ethnographic interviews as opposed to observation data are more likely to be suited to narrative analysis. Narrative analysis therefore may not have been well-suited to analysing the supervision and observation data.

Thematic analysis presented another option for analysis of the data. Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that the versatility of thematic analysis is one of its strengths, and likewise Terry et al (2017) note that one of the defining features of thematic analysis is its ability to be flexible in accommodating different theoretical approaches. Although thematic analysis has some similarities with grounded theory in the process of data familiarisation, coding, and identification of patterns across data, thematic analysis does not necessarily

aim at theory-generation (Terry et al, 2017; Braun and Clarke, 2019). Thematic analysis can organise and categorise large data sets and identify themes across the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). As well as categorising and describing data, thematic analysis can also be used to interpret data and to begin making analytic connections within and across identified themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2019, 2020) describe their brand of thematic analysis as reflexive thematic analysis, where the researcher's subjectivity is a key research tool. Transparency around use of theory – including where ideas from other qualitative approaches to data analysis have been drawn on (Braun and Clarke, 2020) – is a key feature of such thematic analysis.

One of the strengths of reflexive thematic analysis is that it is not wedded to one particular theoretical underpinning; it offers a minimally prescriptive method for analysing data that can be used alongside a range of different theoretical approaches (Braun and Clarke, 2020). This flexibility made reflexive thematic analysis a good fit for analysing my data. Unlike some of the other forms of analysis discussed, thematic analysis could be utilised across all of the data to enable a consistent approach to analysis that could identify patterns and similarities in the differing forms of case-talk. There are, however, some limitations to thematic analysis. By its nature, it fragments data into smaller blocks through the process of coding, and such a process means that the unity of accounts – including changes and contradictions within accounts – can be lost (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis, used in isolation, also limits consideration of language use and function (Braun and Clarke, 2006), since thematic analysis is primarily concerned with what is being said rather than who is saying it, to whom they are saying it, and for what purpose.

Thematic analysis can be used in combination with other forms of analysis in order to help mitigate some of these limitations. Shukla et al (2014) utilised thematic and narrative analysis in order to produce findings that identified cross-case themes supplemented with more detailed exploration of individual accounts. Shukla et al (2014) argue that the two methods are complementary; thematic analysis highlights themes from across the data-set that are then

illuminated by using narrative approaches at a case-level. The overall effect is to situate individual stories within a broader thematic context; narrative approaches allow for these big themes to be elucidated in ways that help to illuminate them (Shukla et al, 2014). Similarly, Floersch et al (2010) make the case that using different forms of qualitative data analysis can produce richer analyses than using just one approach. Floersch et al (2010) utilised thematic and narrative analysis alongside grounded theory to analyse data from qualitative interviews. The flexibility of thematic analysis and its value in identifying patterns across the data was supplemented by narrative analysis that focused on temporality, structure, and language use (Floersch et al, 2010).

When undertaking ethnography, Leigh et al (2020b) argue that the naturalistic nature of the data collected necessitates a degree of pragmatism and flexibility in the research process. Methodological pluralism and pragmatism are also highlighted elsewhere as being valuable in ensuring that *how* the research process takes place should be subordinate to answering the research questions (Wildemuth, 1993; Keddell, 2017). Researchers should not be wedded to a particular methodology or approach and should instead be prepared to use whichever approach best fits with the aims of the research (Wildemuth, 1993). It is, however, crucial that researchers are clear about how they have undertaken their analysis and why they have used their chosen methods (Braun and Clarke, 2020).

With this in mind, my analysis sought to draw on approaches and ideas from narrative analysis, whilst utilising reflexive thematic analysis as the primary method of analysis. Braun and Clarke (2020) suggest that other forms of qualitative analysis can helpfully be used in combination with reflexive thematic analysis, so long as the researcher is explicit that this is what they are doing and is able to justify why. Problems arise where analytical “mash-ups” are used unreflexively, without being made explicit, and where justification for drawing on different methods is not apparent (Braun and Clarke, 2020: 10). There are also a small number of instances in the analysis where I have drawn on concepts more commonly associated with discourse

analysis to make sense of aspects of the data, such as stake inoculation (Potter, 1996) and co-construction. This is not to suggest that I have analysed the data using discourse analysis as a method, but rather some of the theoretical concepts used in discourse analysis could helpfully aid understanding of particular aspects of the data, particularly when exploring how and why narratives were presented in a particular way. These concepts, grounded as they are in qualitative analysis of speech as text, are congruent with being used in combination with reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2020).

The desire to analyse *how* social workers constructed case narratives, *why* they presented such narratives in a particular way, and *what* the construction of cases looked like justified the drawing on of narrative approaches and a limited number of concepts from other qualitative approaches to enhance the thematic analysis. The approaches used work in a complementary fashion to enrich analysis (Floersch et al, 2010) by moving between the general and the particular (Shukla et al, 2014).

7.4.2 The process of analysing the data

I began by analysing the transcribed interviews following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2020) six-stage method for undertaking thematic analysis. This involved first familiarising myself with the data, then generating initial codes, before looking for themes across the codes, reviewing the themes, and then defining them (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The final stage of writing the report came later, once all of the data were analysed. The analysis proceeded by beginning with three interviews and using open coding to label units of the data. These codes were then reviewed and similar codes were combined and compared with the data to ensure an appropriate fit; these groupings provided a rough coding schema that could be used for the remaining interviews (Miles et al, 2014) and groupings of codes were provisionally labelled to begin identifying potential themes. An iterative process then took place, where two or three interviews would be coded using the developing schema, with new

codes added when necessary, and then further grouping of codes and refining of provisional thematic groupings took place.

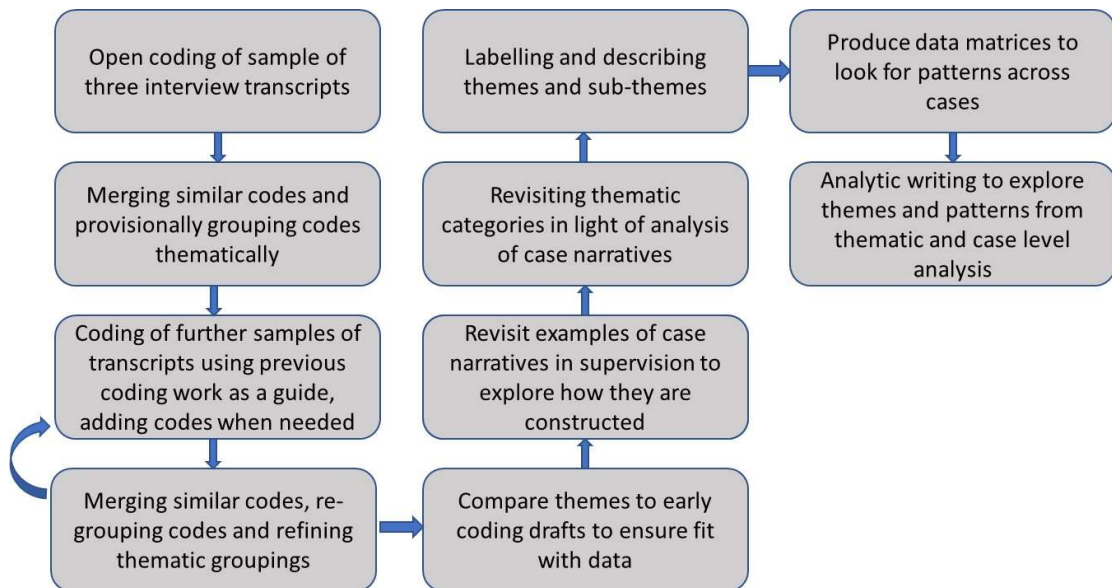


Figure D: Flow-chart of analytic process for interview data

Larger extracts from interviews, where an individual case was discussed, were revisited to look at how narratives about cases progressed and how they were presented by participants and what some of the features of this presentation were. This enabled me to think about how and why case narratives were presented as they were and to look at use of language in more depth than through thematic coding. Themes and sub-themes were then revisited, taking account of some of the ideas generated by exploring case narratives in more depth, and thematic labels were refined and described.

Data matrices were used as a means to look for patterns across participants and themes (Miles et al, 2014). Data matrices involve tabulating summaries or extracts of data by participant and theme and provide a useful way of quickly looking at a whole data-set (Miles et al, 2014). Analytic writing took place throughout all stages of the analysis within my research journal, and once themes had been identified and labelled, and matrices produced, further analytic writing took place. The process of writing helped to work up insights around the content of and use of language within the interview data. This

process of writing is central to both thematic (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and narrative (Riessman, 2008) approaches to analysing qualitative data. Analytic writing is also a useful way of moving from description to interpretation in qualitative data analysis (Gilgun, 2015; Braun and Clarke, 2019).

Transcripts of supervision recordings were then analysed, using the same process of open coding of a sample of the data, followed by merging and grouping codes and creating a rough coding schema (Miles et al, 2014) that was then revised through further iterations after going back and forth to more of the data. Extracts of supervision where particular cases were discussed in depth were then looked at to consider how case narratives were developed through dialogue, again focusing on the structure of the narrative and thinking about how and why it had been presented as it had. This again enabled a finer-grained consideration of language use to complement the thematic coding. Data matrices were used to look across themes and cases, making linkages and drawing out interesting cross-theme and cross-case ideas (Miles et al, 2014). At this stage of the analysis, my analytic writing began to synthesise themes and ideas from the analyses of the interviews and supervision transcripts, as well as identifying contrasts between the two sets of data.

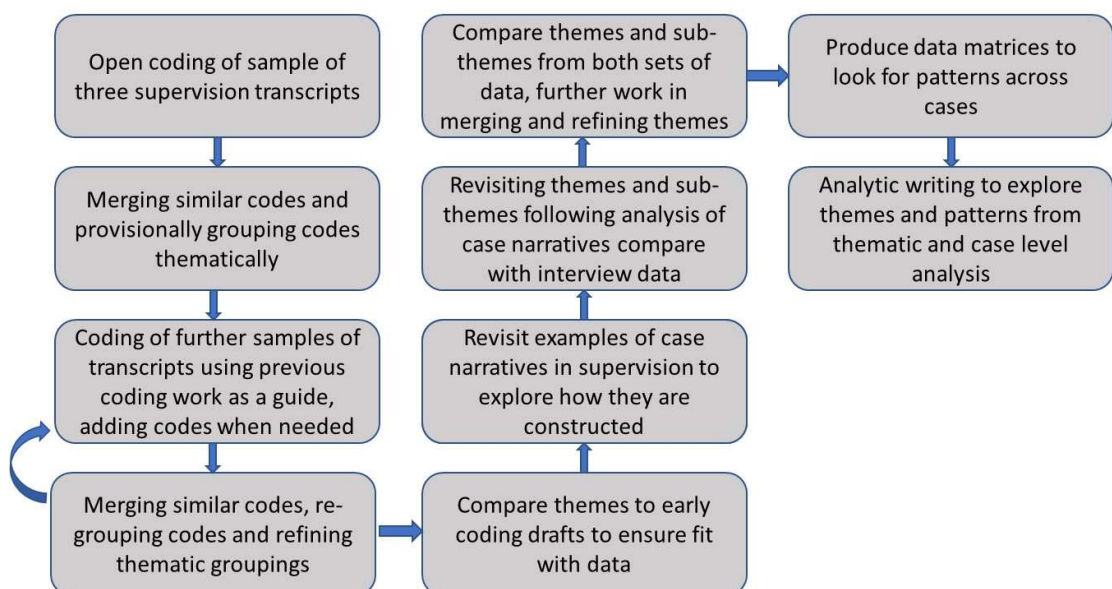


Figure E: Flow-chart of analytic process for supervision data

Fieldnotes were then analysed following a similar process to that in analysing the supervision transcripts and interviews, though with the initial coding of fieldnotes involving use of the previous analytic work as a guide. Essentially, this meant that the fieldnotes were analysed using an iterative process of comparison and refinement with the existing themes and sub-themes, with some sub-themes added specifically in relation to the fieldnotes. The nature of the fieldnotes meant that often full case narratives were not presented in the same way as they were in the supervision and interview data, however I was able to look at longer extracts of discussions of specific cases and this enabled me to consider how and why the partial case narratives were being constructed as they were. Data matrices were again used to look at data by theme and from each of the observations in order to look for patterns, and this was followed by further analytic writing. The writing enabled me to consider what was distinct about office case-talk and group case discussions whilst also reflecting on similar characteristics in how case narratives were constructed through case-talk.

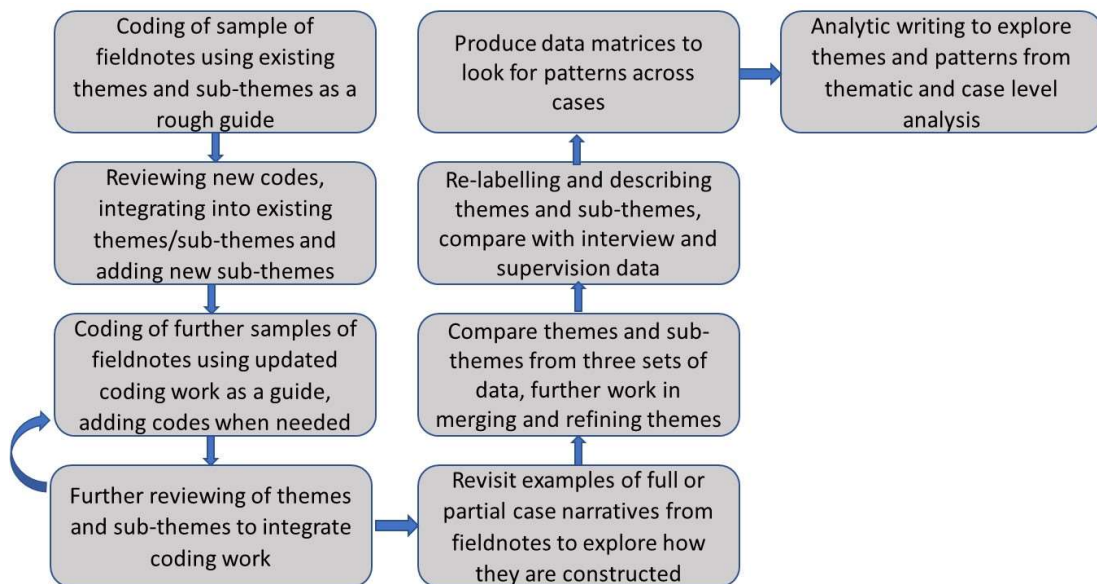


Figure F: Flow-chart of analytic process for ethnographic fieldnotes

NVivo 12 software was used to manage and categorise data. Initial coding of each set of data took place manually, and only once the developing coding schema had become sufficiently robust did the process of coding move to

NVivo. Using NVivo to categorise the data in this way enabled easy switching between looking across cases thematically and focusing on particular case narratives in order to consider the way that such narratives were constructed and reconstructed over time.

Ultimately, through combining the analyses and through considering the data both thematically and narratively, three stages of sensemaking were identified. Under each of these stages, themes and sub-themes were identified. These themes were in evidence to some extent in each form of data, however, the prevalence of themes and sub-themes varied across the sets of data, with some sub-themes being unique to one set of data, and these differences will be explored in the subsequent analysis chapters. Structuring the analysis in this way helped to synthesise the thematic and narrative approaches to the data (Squire, 2012).

7.4.3 Reflexivity revisited

I have already touched upon the issue of reflexivity and its importance in research using my chosen approach and methods (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Foster, 2016; Braun and Clarke, 2019). I briefly mentioned my impact on the site and suggested that through an ongoing process of observation, participants tend to become used to the researcher's presence (Bryman, 2016) and that participants are often too busy to be distracted by the presence of the researcher (Hepburn and Wiggins, 2007). That said, there were some occasions, particularly early on in my period of observation, where I was mindful of how I had become an audience for some participants. During an early observation in Springshire, one of the supervisors and two social workers asked me if I wanted to observe them mapping a case together. This involved a structured case discussion with one of them tabulating worries, strengths, and hypotheses. At the time, this felt as though it may have been done for my benefit, and whilst case discussion proved to be frequent and rich in Springshire, on no other occasion did I observe a similar mapping taking place. During the same visit, one of the social workers also asked me if there was

anything they could do that would be interesting for me, which reinforced my impression that some of the participants felt a desire to perform for me.

Patton (2002) and Quinlan (2008) note that the researcher's presence can distort the environment being observed, and this appeared to be the case early on in the research sites. It is possible that participants were engaged in a form of impression management (Goffman, 1959) whereby they wanted to make a positive impression on me by providing me with interesting things to observe. Impression management has been noted as an issue in other ethnographic fieldwork in social work (Leigh et al, 2020b). I am mindful that I too was likely to be keen to present myself in a certain light, and perhaps to seem professional and detached. This presentation may then have influenced how participants interacted with me. Research relationships and research data are co-constructed (Clarke and Hoggett, 2009), and so my behaviour as much as that of the participants contributed to how natural our interactions were. As time progressed and I became more comfortable in the sites, it felt as though the participants also became more relaxed and it felt less as though I was an audience and that I had instead become part of the set.

Upon finishing my fieldwork, I initially found it difficult to reorientate myself; being back at the university and revisiting academic literature felt strange. Whilst I had transcribed and familiarised myself with supervision and interview data during the period of observation, I had not undertaken any formal coding. My initial attempts at coding were a struggle; I felt too close to the data and found it challenging to not think about my overall impressions of participants when looking at the data. Reflexive writing and supervision discussions helped me to name, explore, and work through some of the feelings I was experiencing. This enabled me to become more comfortable in working with the data.

It is worth noting that qualitative analysis is itself essentially a sensemaking process (Braun and Clarke, 2020) that mirrors the subject of my research. I have explored within this thesis the concept of epistemic humility (Leary et al, 2017) and the value of acknowledging that multiple narratives are possible in

the face of complex experiences. In presenting my analysis, I am telling a story that will invariably be influenced by my own experiences and theoretical orientations and I do not purport to tell *the* story of the data. I am conscious that I approached this research as someone with a social work background; this sensitised me to the use of professional concepts and professional narratives that were familiar to me as a social worker that may have been unfamiliar and perhaps less prominent for other researchers. It was important for me to be aware of and to use consciously, transparently, and purposively the knowledge and perspectives that I brought to the process of analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019). Reflexive writing and the use of supervision have helped to ensure such transparency and to ensure that the analytical process was robust. In the coming analysis chapters, I will at times draw on how my subjective experiences and interpretations influenced how I made sense of the data.

8. Introduction to the analysis chapters

My analysis will be presented across four chapters. Braun and Clarke (2019) argue that in undertaking reflexive qualitative research, the term analysis is appropriate for presenting how data have been made sense of. Themes and ideas are not found, nor do they emerge, they are developed through the researcher actively interpreting data (Braun and Clarke, 2019, 2020). The presentation of the analysis should tell the story of the researcher's interpretation of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2019) and this will be the aim of the following sequence of chapters.

The first chapter will present an overview of the research sites, looking at their structure, function, and practices. This chapter will draw primarily on data from observations and will include some extracts from my reflexive journal to illustrate my thoughts on the two sites as the fieldwork was being undertaken. At times, relevant extracts from interviews will be used to highlight particular features of how the teams functioned in their day-to-day work. This chapter will provide useful background and will help to lay the foundations for the forthcoming chapters as they progressively build a more in-depth ethnographic case study of sensemaking and supervision in the office sites.

The following chapter will draw on analysis of interview data to map out sensemaking in social workers' case-talk. The analysis of the interview data explores how case narratives were presented by social workers, highlighting prevalent themes within case narratives and how these narratives were structured. In mapping sensemaking as a process of constructing a case narrative, this chapter will also provide a basis for subsequent exploration of similarities and differences in how social workers construct and present case narratives in different contexts.

I will then move on to offer an analysis of transcripts from formal one-to-one supervision, building on the findings from the interview data to explore how case narratives are constructed and presented within supervision. Again, themes that were prevalent within the data will be explored alongside an

exploration of how case narratives were presented, elicited, and co-constructed through dialogue. This chapter will explore similarities and differences between the presentation of cases in the supervision and interview data.

The final chapter of the analysis will revisit the observation data, focusing explicitly on sensemaking case discussion in the office and in formal group case discussion. Again, key themes will be discussed, alongside considering the role that case-talk in these settings plays in developing case narratives. This chapter will also highlight where there are similarities in social workers' case-talk in the office space and in group case discussion and where there are points of difference with supervision and interview case-talk.

The analysis will demonstrate that there is consistency in the key themes relating to social workers' sensemaking across the interview, supervision, and observation data, whilst also exploring important differences in how social workers constructed and presented case narratives in different contexts. This ability to look at the contextual nature of social workers' sensemaking is a strength of the methodology used. The discussion will follow this series of chapters and will highlight the distinctive contribution made to the field as a result of this analysis, and implications for C&F social work practice and future research will be explored.

9. Overview of the research sites

This overview is intended to offer a ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) of the day-to-day life of the office sites. The overview provides context for the coming chapters, offering a sense of the interaction between individual, team, and organisation that underpins the way that social workers reason in practice (Helm and Roesch-Marsh, 2017). The main focus of this chapter will be the structure, relationships, and functioning of the teams. Drawing on the work of Biggart et al (2017), the extent to which the teams provided a secure base for their members will be explored. As discussed in the literature review, one of the ways that teams and supervisors can support sensemaking is through providing a safe and containing space. As Biggart et al (2017: 123) note, such conditions help social workers to “create more coherent narratives about their cases”; this would suggest that teams which provide elements of the secure base model – availability, sensitivity, acceptance, cooperation, and belonging – may provide conditions for sensemaking dialogue to take place.

In Summertown, the teams were responsible for undertaking first C&F assessments following referral, whilst also undertaking long-term intervention with families assessed as needing a service at CIN or CP level. Ordinarily, cases entering care proceedings transferred to child in care teams; however, during the period of observation, issues within the organisation meant that the teams were holding cases throughout the duration of care proceedings. The Summertown teams were having to take decisions regularly on cases entering or coming to the end of care proceedings, and the impact of this on how cases were made sense of will be considered.

In contrast to the teams in Summertown, the Springshire teams did not hold cases long-term. Whilst the teams held CIN cases for short-term interventions of no more than six months, their primary focus was on carrying out first assessments, with high risk cases requiring longer-term work transferring to a family intervention team. The nature of the work in Springshire encouraged a greater emphasis on triage, which resulted in a focus on quick, collaborative

categorisation of cases and appraisal of levels of risk. How this influenced sensemaking dialogue in the team will be explored.

9.1 Summertown teams

The two Summertown teams were co-located in my first research site. The teams covered a single urban area (population circa 70,000) with high levels of deprivation. The teams in Summertown were divided along geographical lines, with each team covering half of the area.

9.1.1 Team working arrangements

The two teams had a good relationship with each other and were happy to cooperate:

I've got Robin, the manager of the next team, the manager of the other team is L, I haven't particularly gone to her, but I know I could. Obviously, there's Steph, and I do, I have bounced off him. It rarely happens, but I just know that there is somebody there (Interview with Casey, SW, Summertown)

The two teams were, however, distinct and at times participants emphasised the distinctness of the teams:

[O]ur team is so loud and chatty, we don't shut up, so I think there is that element of it, I don't think it happens in every team, necessarily. I don't know if you've maybe picked up on that, doing what you do, but I don't think comparing ourselves to Team 1, I don't hear them having as many conversations as we do (Interview with Katie, NQSW, Summertown)

[Y]ou won't get any better support ... I'm obviously talking about Team 1, but I feel we have a really supportive team
(Interview with Suzie, SW, Summertown)

This distinctness of the teams was reflected in seating arrangements. There were two long banks of ten desks, with a central divider separating the five desks on either side; one bank was occupied by Team 1, whilst the other bank was occupied by Team 2. The supervisors in Team 1 preferred to sit together, ordinarily at the same desks; by contrast, the supervisors in Team 2 moved around and rarely sat together.

In Team 1 this created something of a management hub and workers tended to move to their supervisors to speak to them. In being more spread around the team, the supervisors in Team 2 were involved more regularly in office case-talk without social workers approaching them. However, it was notable in both teams that when in-depth conversations were required, social workers physically moved to sit next to the supervisor they wished to speak to.

Some of the differences between the teams were noted in an entry in my reflexive journal, after three or four visits to the site had taken place:

Team 1 is generally quieter than Team 2, there is less conversation between people. Team 2 also has a kind of hierarchy of advice and 'supervision', with experienced social workers being very involved in offering case guidance and support as well as the 'formal' supervisors (the consultant social workers (CSWs) and practice manager) in the team. In Team 1, this is less evident. The experienced social workers seem to work quite independently and don't necessarily provide that kind of mentoring to less experienced workers. This means that workers tend to go to the practice manager or CSWs, though even this they do less often it seems than the workers in Team 2 (Reflexive Journal)

In Team 2, the physical spreading across the office space of supervisors and experienced social workers who could give advice fostered open discussion amongst the team and, as I observed, they were the more vocal of the two teams.

9.1.2 Membership, relationships and containment

The way that members of the teams communicated with each other and the rituals they developed helped to shed light on participants' sense of membership and belonging. Conversations between colleagues helped to reinforce relationships that seemed to provide relief from the emotional demands of the work. In this section I will draw on observations of some of these interactions and will explore the notion of the team offering a secure base (Biggart et al, 2017) to participants.

Social workers in Summertown often used humour as a means of coping with the stress that comes with the role:

Kelly rates the case as a 10 in terms of how likely it is to go to court (with 10 being certain, 1 being very unlikely). Kelly asks Steph to hurry up and jokes that otherwise her own kids will end up on the spreadsheet (Summertown, Observation 5)

Humour can be utilised to defuse tension and alleviate the negative feelings associated with dealing with human suffering (Sullivan, 2000) and so it is unsurprising that the use of humour sometimes felt dissonant with the seriousness of what was being discussed. Within the teams, humour seemed to play a role in managing anxiety by creating a degree of emotional distance from the work. Sullivan (2000) cautions, though, that the kind of gallows humour social workers use can risk becoming dehumanising.

Humour can, however, also help to reinforce a shared sense of identity (Morriss, 2015), contributing to feelings of membership of the team and

profession. Membership is one of the five domains of the secure base model (Biggart et al, 2017). Other rituals like the buying of food, socialising together, and making tea and coffee for each other also provided a sense of team membership:

Casey offers to make a drink for people in her team and offers me one. Shortly afterwards, Heather also offers to make drinks (Summertown, Observation 9)

I note someone takes a cake from the end of the desks and I am aware that whenever I visit there is always food – mainly biscuits and cakes – available for the team (Summertown, Observation 2)

Food tended to be communal – placed at a table at the end of one of the banks of desks – across both teams, whilst social events and the making of tea and coffee tended to be team-specific. This reinforced the perception that the teams were cooperative but distinct, with a stronger sense of membership of their own team and a weaker sense of membership of the co-located teams as a collective.

Availability – the feeling that someone is there if needed (Biggart et al, 2017) – was experienced across team boundaries by some participants. Many of the social workers felt that managers and colleagues were available:

[T]here's always somebody I can talk to about something ... my colleague has gone into another team but I would share lots with her and vice versa. And then I've got some colleagues in another team who I'd share (Interview with Shelley, SW, Summertown)

Alongside availability, Shelley alluded to a feeling of sensitivity, that her feelings would be acknowledged and she would be supported to regulate them (Biggart et al, 2017). It is notable that Shelley saw support as coming from

colleagues across teams. By contrast, Jordan expressed discomfort in seeking support from outside his team:

I'm not used to go to other manager to obtain advice ... So usually I am going to my team, to my consultants and manager (Jordan, SW, Summertown)

Jordan's past experience as a social worker had been in another country where he acknowledged that practice was more hierarchical and directive. This may have limited Jordan's sense of how allowable it was to seek support from a different manager than his own.

Another element of the secure base model is acceptance, which relates to building self-worth and self-efficacy (Biggart et al, 2017). There were examples of this from both teams through the giving of positive feedback:

Robin says to Catherine that Sam said she did really well at the meeting yesterday. Catherine smiles and says that it is a hard case. Robin says that it is a tricky one but you did really well, I think it worked well (Summertown, Observation 7)

Harley turns to Simone, who is sat two desks away, and says that her assessment of X was a really good assessment (Summertown, Observation 3)

Finally, cooperation – working together to help solve problems (Biggart et al, 2017) – was also evident during my observations:

Robin praises the team for pulling together and says, I think that although we are short of numbers we're a really good team (Summertown, Observation of Group Supervision)

At the end of observed group case discussion, Katie noted some of the benefits of the cooperative discussion in helping to move her thinking forward:

Katie says that it has been really helpful, particularly in thinking about linking the strengths to the worries. Katie says, I have been keeping them quite separate (Summertown, Observation of Group Supervision)

The five domains of the secure base model interact to help to create an environment where workers feel safe, supported, and contained. This is important in terms of sensemaking, since emotional dysregulation can impact the capacity for clear thinking (Rimé, 2009), and feelings of anxiety can influence low-risk decision-making (De Bortoli and Dolan, 2015). In providing a secure base, the social work team offers an environment where social workers can openly discuss cases and manage the emotional demands of the work and this was in evidence during my time in Summertown.

9.1.3 Risk and anxiety

In Summertown social workers moved cases on by closing them, stepping them down to a family support service, or transferring them to a child in care team when care proceedings were initiated and a young person became looked after. During my time observing the team, staffing pressures on the child in care teams meant that Teams 1 and 2 were holding cases for the duration of care proceedings. This was noted as creating a bottleneck, with a steady flow of cases coming into the team combined with a reduced capacity to move cases on:

The same with the children that are looked after in our team, any court work that's going on, for me to be able to balance if I know a case is going to PLO, possibly into court, and we can't transfer cases out to the child in care team at the moment ... because we can't shut the front door, the work is always coming in. So, I don't want to overload ... an

experienced social worker with four or five court cases, where they just get over-stressed and you don't get the quality of work from people that we like to have (Interview with Sam, Supervisor, Summertown)

The extra workload created for the team by the inability to move cases on led to Sam feeling a need to prioritise workload management so that workers did not become overwhelmed. Meanwhile, this increased workload carried with it concerns about maintaining a high standard of work. It was a balancing act for Sam to ensure quality was maintained, work was allocated, and workers were not overburdened.

For social workers, the experience of taking cases through care proceedings presented different challenges:

So, for me it's a first time experience as well, so I think it's been talking to colleagues about what to expect, what's going to happen next, what do I need to be doing. Because, generally, obviously, we're child in need, we should be transferring this case over, really, to child in care, but unfortunately they're not in a position they can take cases, so I will be holding this case, literally, right through until the final hearing now (Interview with Suzie, SW, Summertown)

Suzie, despite being an experienced social worker, had not held cases right through care proceedings before and this was an area where she felt less confident. Generally, within Summertown there was a sense that cases within care proceedings or on the brink of care proceedings were the ones that most preoccupied social workers and their supervisors; most of the cases that social workers and supervisors discussed with me during interview were in care proceedings or on the brink of care proceedings being initiated.

Although social workers in Summertown were clearly used to having to take difficult decisions about children and young people, the enormity of having to

make more final recommendations, combined with the pressures involved in greater exposure to the court arena, weighed upon them. The sense of personal responsibility was highlighted by Courtney (Supervisor) during the group case discussion:

Courtney adds, and ultimately you will be on the stand being asked if there is no other option than adoption (Summertown, Observation of Group Supervision)

Making such recommendations carries a huge emotional burden, and decision-making within the court arena is highly anxiety-provoking (Taylor et al, 2008). The increased level of care proceedings work being undertaken within Summertown seemed to contribute to a preoccupation with risk in office case-talk.

In one of the early observations, there was a tragic incident where a mother had lost her baby at the end of her pregnancy and was in hospital having to give birth to a child that would be stillborn. The issue of risk played a significant role in Robin's (Supervisor) discussion of the incident:

Robin has moved round the desks to speak to Carly about the case of the stillborn baby. Carly is giving him an update, which includes a suggestion that the 10 year-old is actually dad's nephew rather than his son. Robin comments that this is useful and might help to make some sense but also complicates things. Robin then says that in some ways one of the most significant risks for the family was mum and dad's ability to meet the needs of a newborn baby and this risk is no longer there. Robin says that it sounds harsh to say, but it is true (Summertown, Observation 2)

I reflected at the time that Robin's comments felt somewhat jarring, however when I examined this feeling I came to realise that it was not because I could not relate to Robin's framing of the incident, but quite the opposite:

[R]eflecting on how I felt about it two things came to mind: firstly, I don't think I would have batted an eyelid at such a comment 12 months ago when I was in practice, and secondly, it is actually the sort of thing I could have imagined myself saying as a team manager (Reflexive Journal)

Robin's comment held a mirror up to my own practice as a team manager and it was this that jarred me. The preoccupation with risk and with seeking to eliminate risk has become a central feature of contemporary C&F practice (Parton, 2011; Walsh et al, 2019) and this was reflected in both Robin's framing of the case and in my own reflections about how I might have framed the case myself when working as a team manager. Such a focus on risk can, however, potentially become myopic and limit the kinds of approaches and responses that social workers consider; in particular, the focus on risk-reduction can side-line the more emotional and relational aspects of C&F social work (Featherstone et al, 2014).

Other explanations for focusing on risk-reduction in this instance are also possible; such a focus may have served as a means to create distance from the emotional experience of working with a parent who had just lost a baby. Robin may also have downplayed the incident for the benefit of the two relatively inexperienced social workers who were working with the family. Framing the loss of a baby as an issue of risk-reduction offered them a simplified, professional way of making sense of an incident that may otherwise have felt overwhelming. Bourn and Hafford-Letchfield (2011) similarly observed supervisors and social workers using professional, clinical language when discussing emotionally distressing cases in supervision, and this acted as a means to defend against difficult feelings.

The pressure of holding cases throughout care proceedings appeared to increase feelings of anxiety for social workers. This manifested itself, at times, in seeking positions of safe certainty:

Lucy says, “Or you need an incident!” And everyone laughs. Robin says, that would make it clearer though. Lucy says, once there is an incident we know, otherwise we don’t always have the evidence. Katie agrees and says, that’s a bit like the one we had last week. Robin says, yes, we were in court and the judge said she was a bit worried that we were asking for removal on a neglect case but then she was like, it’s okay because there was a trigger incident (Summertown, Observation of Group Supervision)

A “trigger incident” was seen as providing certainty in decision-making, not just for social workers but for the courts also. Lucy characterised this certainty as knowing, which contrasted with the uncertainty when there existed multiple concerns but no single incident that could provide definitive evidence of harm.

Paradoxically, social workers who were tasked with keeping children safe seemed to desire, on some level, the kind of certainty that comes from an incident that is potentially harmful to a child. The anxiety caused by having to think that parents may seek to deliberately harm their child is usually associated with avoidance or denial (Cooper, 2005) but another possible response is to desire evidence of such harm in order that the child can then be kept safe. This evidence helps to achieve a position of safe certainty rather than a position of unsafe certainty, in which the risk is minimised (Cooper, 2005). Such a position, however, can lead to bias towards decision-making that is overly risk-averse (De Bortoli and Dolan, 2015; Mason, 2019).

9.1.4 Reflecting on decision-making and the propensity for individual bias

One way that potential bias was guarded against within Summertown was through discussion about decision-making and differences in decision-making:

Courtney and Steph are talking about inconsistencies in decisions made on cases. Steph says that cases where the

concerns seem to be the same often end up with different outcomes. Steph says he wonders why and whether personality comes into it. Courtney says about a family, “They are workable” and will engage (Summertown, Observation 4)

Steph and Courtney (Supervisors) suggested that decision-making was, to an extent, dependent on factors unrelated to the type or severity of the case. What was different on each case was not necessarily the ‘facts’ of the case, but instead the perspective of the social worker and the relationship that they had with the family.

Social workers’ personalities and dispositions were also cited as being a contributor to differences in how they make sense of cases:

Steph comments about workers being different and says that someone like Kelly tends to be less optimistic so might see children as being more likely to go into care than they are (Summertown, Observation 5)

The individual dispositions of social workers towards risk have been shown elsewhere to influence how social workers construct cases and take decisions (Keddell, 2017). This is one factor that potentially impacts upon how individual social workers engage in sensemaking; their experiences and dispositions will vary, and this potentially leads to making sense of information in varying ways, and there was a sense that participants were cognisant of this issue.

9.1.5 Space and the Summertown site

Conversations took place freely, though I did note that often there was either a lot of conversation – creating that general buzz of noise that makes conversations hard to follow – or none at all. This makes me wonder whether, when it is quiet, there is

some inhibition and a desire not to be overheard (Reflexive Journal)

The Summertown office was modern and the desk set up felt somewhat like a call centre, with long, narrow banks of desk running the length of the open-plan office. Teams had defined areas and the Summertown teams' area was at one end of the office, separated from other teams by a bank of lockers.

The excerpt above came from the first entry into my reflexive journal and would be a recurring pattern throughout my visits to Summertown. Noise levels tended to fluctuate between a singular buzz of conversation that sometimes made it hard to pick up individual conversations and almost total silence. Another feature of the teams in Summertown was that they operated a hot-desking policy. This meant that there were fewer desks than there were team members; during my time observing the teams there were up to thirty-four members of staff (including non-social work staff) across the two teams and only twenty desks. Away from the team area, another bank of five desks was available for hot-desking and some workers preferred to situate themselves there, particularly Paul (SW), and Casey (SW) when working on writing reports. Generally, desks were available in the team area and I was usually able to occupy one of the desks as a base for my observation.

On one occasion towards the end of my period of observation with the team, I found myself unable to find a seat within the team:

[T]he desks in the team area were all full and so initially I was sat on an extra chair at the end of the bank of desks where the communal food is usually kept. I immediately felt somewhat disconnected from the teams and like an outsider ... I wonder too whether the hot-desking arrangements ... can lead to workers who can't get a desk feeling similarly disconnected from the team (Reflexive Journal)

Other studies considering the impact of office space have found that hot-desking arrangements negatively impact on social workers, through limiting opportunities for spontaneous case discussion, and creating a sense of isolation (Ferguson et al, 2020c).

Despite the issues with hot-desking and the fluctuations in levels of noise, social workers regularly discussed cases with each other and with supervisors in the team. Any inhibition felt was not sufficient to stifle case discussion altogether but may have limited the times at which workers felt able to speak up.

9.2 Springshire teams

The Springshire teams were co-located in my second research site; the two teams covered the same geographic area, comprising a mix of urban and rural areas, including one large urban area (population circa 170,000) and several smaller market towns. Work was divided between the teams on a rota basis rather than along geographical lines.

9.2.1 Team structure and team membership

The teams in Springshire alternated duty weeks between them. The teams were further divided into two pods in each team, with each pod consisting of three social workers and a senior social worker (SSW). Pods took turns on duty, so that each pod was on duty one week in four. SSWs in the teams did not have formal supervisory responsibilities for social workers, though they did provide additional reflective supervision for NQSWs and facilitated group case discussions. SSWs triaged and allocated new cases and offered informal support and guidance to the social workers in their pod. On a day-to-day basis, SSWs were involved in much of the case discussion that took place in Springshire.

To all intents and purposes, the distinction between the two Springshire teams functioned mainly to demarcate supervisory and work allocation

responsibilities. The teams presented largely as one entity in terms of membership and daily interaction:

So, although they're Team 1 and Team 2, we're a team
(Interview with Kai, SW, Springshire)

This sense of the two teams presenting as one was echoed by my own observations:

The teams here are well-established and close knit, operating as two teams primarily for practical reasons; membership is of *the teams* as far as I can tell rather than Team 1 or Team 2 (Reflexive Journal)

The lack of distinction between the teams, for the most part, added to a sense of availability within the team:

To be honest you forget we're two teams sometimes ... I'd feel comfortable talking to all four [SSWs] (Interview with Chris, SW, Springshire)

That said, some participants expressed a preference to go to their own colleagues as a first port of call because of a sense of familiarity and closeness with them:

[I]f I want actual guidance Lesley, Ashley and Toni are ... the people I would speak to ... So, Jan the manager of Team 2, I would go to Toni over Jan even though Jan is more senior just because I've got a more sustained relationship with Toni (Interview with Jesse, SW, Springshire)

Although some social workers expressed a preference for using their immediate team colleagues for guidance, there was generally a sense of

consistently working across team boundaries. This manifested itself in things like co-working, where joint visits would be undertaken by members of the two teams rather than colleagues from the same team. This then prompted case discussion across team boundaries, as thoughts on the joint visit were shared:

Chris arrives back in the office and Toni says, “Just the man” and says that she wants to talk to Chris about the visit he went on to her case ... Toni says to Chris, so I want to know what you think about my case now you’ve visited (Springshire, Observation 4)

There followed an interesting discussion about the case in question, which I will revisit later in the analysis chapters, that served to highlight how collaboration between the two teams helped to contribute to sensemaking dialogue.

9.2.2 Membership, relationships, and containment

Returning to the notion of the team as secure base, the operation of the two teams as essentially one entity provided a strong sense of membership, availability, and cooperation (Biggart et al, 2017). Elsewhere in my observations, I saw signs of the team also promoting sensitivity and acceptance:

Micky says, I’m struggling with what things need to look like when they’re better, I can’t just say for partner not to be there as that’s their choice, you’re really good with DV cases (Springshire, Observation 5)

Andy then goes straight over to Jan and sits down next to her, he says, I think we need to have a case discussion ... There are so many concerns and accusations being brought up by each parent ... I’m just running around at the moment,

I haven't even started the assessment ... Jan says, I can see you are worried about this but it's only just come in. We could hold a strategy meeting to share information (Springshire, Observation 9)

Micky was the SSW in Chris' pod, but in common with a lot of the office discussion, the power dynamics were not immediately evident within their relationship. Chris was treated as a valued colleague whose skills could assist her and who Micky could acknowledge her own weaknesses to. This reinforced the sense that colleagues were able to acknowledge difficulties, cooperate, and promote each other's sense of worth.

The relationship between Jan and Andy was somewhat more hierarchical as Jan was Andy's supervisor. Andy appeared to be seeking both guidance and reassurance, and Jan's response captured this need for containment and direction. She named and acknowledged Andy's feeling of worry and this helped him to feel contained. Jan's practical suggestion to hold a strategy meeting offered guidance in a way that was also containing, providing Andy with a clear sense of direction where previously he had been feeling overwhelmed. It is, however, also worth noting that Jan's response could be seen as offering a sense of safe certainty, favouring risk-averse decision-making – in this case, holding a strategy discussion – at a point where she acknowledged that little was known about the case due to it only just coming in. This may have helped to alleviate Andy's anxieties, but could be experienced by the family as punitive.

There was a strong sense of membership and belonging within the Springshire teams and a shared sense of competence and respect between team members. The competence of the teams and their members was stressed by social workers and supervisors alike:

I really trust their professional integrity. I think that's it for all three of them. They are all excellent social workers (Interview with Jesse, SW, Springshire)

They are such a wonderful team in that they will all jump in, support each other, we often have a lot of debates on duty and that's both teams jump in and they will support each other with their thinking and how to manage difficult cases (Interview with Ashley, Supervisor, Springshire)

Pithouse (1987) argues that a shared sense of collegial competence is crucial to maintaining harmony and morale and a sense of equality between team members, and this was evident in Springshire.

Much like in Summertown, humour provided a sense of relief and encouraged camaraderie:

Jan says to the team, is anyone going to go to J's? Jan says that she has no food or heating and she came in crying. Jan jokes, I said to her "I'm sorry, I'm going to work in the West Indies" and everyone laughs. Jan then says, no I spoke to her for a while (Springshire, Observation 3)

As in Summertown, at times the use of humour seemed at odds with the subject matter and appeared to provide relief from the emotional challenges of the work. The role of such light-hearted conversation was highlighted by Lesley:

[W]hat you need in this job as well because you're dealing with such dark issues and dark troubling cases perhaps you need that lighter conversation and that more informal conversation to actually balance what you're talking about (Interview with Lesley, SSW, Springshire)

As discussed previously, humour can alleviate some of the difficult feelings that arise in an emotionally demanding job like social work (Sullivan, 2000). The use of humour can also help social workers to perform their identity and to express a shared sense of competence with fellow insiders (Morriss, 2015).

9.2.3 Perceptions of competence – insiders and outsiders

The shared sense of competence in Springshire manifested itself in negative attitudes towards other professionals at times, including openly questioning their competence:

Micky says, we need to speak to the other local authority and ask them “What the hell are you doing?” (Springshire, Observation 6)

Jesse says, I don’t think the health visitor knows what they are doing to be honest (Springshire, Observation 9)

Frustrations at other professionals were expressed with some regularity and there was a sense within some of the talk in the office that other agencies were seen as less well-equipped to deal with the demands of assessing and managing risk than the Springshire teams were. This came across in expressions of other professionals overreacting or worrying unnecessarily:

Andy says, that nurse has pissed me right off ... I’m not sure what more can be done, they raised no safeguarding concerns (Springshire, Observation 3)

Toni comes off a call, Jesse asks how she is and Toni responds, “Just a health visitor having a worry”, and Jesse responds, “Having a wobble” (Springshire, Observation 4)

Expressing frustrations at other professionals is not necessarily uncommon, and social workers often act as containers for the anxieties of other professionals (Kettle, 2018). This can potentially lead to psychodynamic processes such as transference and counter-transference taking place between social workers and professionals; such processes act as psychological defences against anxiety for both parties (Trevithick, 2011).

However, these processes and the defensive or hostile responses they can engender can result in communication difficulties between referring agencies and social workers, particularly when the emotions involved in being concerned about the safety of a child go unacknowledged (Reder and Duncan, 2003; Lees, 2017).

In respect of sensemaking, this propensity to view other professionals with scepticism sometimes influenced the way that information was interpreted:

Jesse reads a case note to Toni from the children's school, "this family is causing unrest in the village". Jesse says, he just doesn't like the people "who don't fit". Jesse adds, he has an idea in his head of who he wants in his school and if they don't fit... (Springshire, Observation 9)

Jesse was quick to explain away the concerns of the school as being a result of bias and this could have been related to the general sense of scepticism about other professionals' capacity to assess and manage risk. In the case in question, the family had yet to be visited and Jesse's view was formulated from referral and historic information. There was a danger that Jesse's scepticism about the motives for the referral could have led to her minimising genuine concerns about the family.

9.2.4 Springshire teams: triage and ongoing case discussion

A significant part of the work in Springshire involved managing the inflow of new cases. This required a process of triage to make quick judgements about key issues and the potential level of risk on incoming referrals. As a result, a lot of case-talk involved making sense of cases based on limited or emerging information:

Jackie says, looking at the chronology, "This has all the hallmarks of fabricated illness". Toni says, it really does.

Jackie says that mum is ill herself and Toni says that mum's anxieties are high. Jackie says, "That's another complicating factor". Toni says that there are so many medical professionals involved that she's not sure who to invite to the strat (Springshire, Observation 2)

This extract was fairly typical of case discussions following receipt of a new referral. There were some interesting things that were implicit in the discussion; for example, Toni talked about who to invite to the strategy discussion, suggesting that she had already decided that the case was likely to meet the s.47 threshold. Her initial triage of the case suggested that it was high risk, even whilst she and Jackie were still making sense of the referral.

Jackie and Toni agreed in their conceptualisation of the case as being one of fabricated illness. That both of them, as SSWs, reached this conclusion based on a brief appraisal of the information suggests a form of pattern-matching was taking place (Klein et al, 2007). They picked up on pertinent cues within the referral that they intuitively recognised as being signs of fabricated illness.

The initial conceptualisation of the case, however, was not fixed and continued to be in a state of flux as more information was considered:

Toni says, they've said that if mum's not happy and wants a second opinion she needs to go to another hospital, which she's done. Toni says, is this an anxious mum and it's come to us as she's not happy with the hospital or is it...? Jackie says it is difficult to know (Springshire, Observation 2)

A second possible hypothesis was generated at this stage and both Toni and Jackie subsequently appeared to be in a position of greater uncertainty about the case, based on a piece of information regarding the mother seeking a second opinion. This alternative narrative may have resonated with the scepticism the Springshire teams had in relation to other professionals. It is also worth noting that when trying to piece together a narrative about a case

during the stages of triage, social workers' thinking is in a state of flux, and how they make sense of information can change quickly (Thompson, 2013).

Where supervisors became involved in the process of triage, this tended to be where a concrete decision was required or where one of the seniors was unsure how to proceed:

Ashley then sits down next to Toni, who says to Ashley that she needs to speak to her about CG. Toni says, she's 3 I think, we had the case years ago because of mum being in a DV relationship ... Toni continues, we've done absolutely everything with this one: parenting assessment, DV courses. Ashley asks, what about work with dad? Toni says, he won't engage with us... Toni says, mum is back in a relationship with him ... What do we do? She already knows it all ... Ashley asks, is it just emotional abuse or also physical? Toni says there has been physical before.

Ashley asks about the impact on C. Toni says, I think It's too early for there to be an impact now as he's only just returned. Ashley says, I'm not sure it's CP. Toni responds, I'm not even sure what we would do with it under CIN ... Ashley adds, but if we can't evidence the harm to C and if they won't work with us then there's nothing we can really do ... if we can evidence harm to C then it's CP but if not... (Springshire, Observation 10)

This example highlighted some of the features of sensemaking that will be explored in the coming chapters. In particular, when there was a need to move towards a decision there was a tendency to use particular professional concepts like threshold, categories of harm, engagement, and impact on the child as ways to quickly make sense of information to inform decision-making. In this extract, all of those elements were in operation as Ashley (Supervisor) used the language of emotional and physical abuse, discussed the threshold

for CP, and drew on evidence – or lack of evidence – of impact on the child as a means to support decision-making.

9.2.5 The role and use of office space in Springshire

The use of the office space in Springshire contributed to collaborative triage. The teams occupied two banks of desks, one of eight desks (four each side) and one of six desks (three each side). However, unlike in Summertown, there were no dividers running down the middle of the banks of desks. The larger bank of desks had two desks allocated to Jan and Ashley, who sat opposite each other. The remaining six desks were used by the pod that was on duty that week and then other social workers from either team filled the remaining desks. The smaller bank of desks was used by anyone from either team who wished to sit there and was usually quieter than the duty desks. A walkway and a row of lockers separated the teams from other teams, giving a sense of privacy. Additional seats behind Ashley and Jan's desks also enabled the ad hoc creation of spaces for semi-private case discussion with supervisors.

I reflected on how this organisation of the office space contrasted with Summertown:

There is a duty bank of desks where both managers sit and this is the main hub of the team where most case conversation takes place. The other bank of desks seems to be used by workers who aren't on duty, to do work on their laptops and make calls. In Summertown, the organisation of the office space and the teams meant that there was less obviously a 'place' where most case conversation took place, it was often dispersed around the office (Reflexive Journal)

This layout and use of space contributed to a sense of ongoing, collaborative case discussion in Springshire. The nature of their main function may also

have contributed to this; workflow was brisk, and triage formed a large part of the role. This seemed to trigger, on busy days especially, a constant process of making sense of incoming information.

Although hot-desking was in place in Springshire, the ratio was much more favourable than in Summertown: fourteen desks to eighteen staff, meaning that it was rare for anyone to sit outside the team. Staff turnover levels in Springshire were low:

I've been there for so long ... our team's quite stable
(Interview with Leigh, SW, Springshire)

I generally think that's why people stay in that team as well,
we don't really have staff vacancies ever (Interview with
Jesse, SW, Springshire)

This may have contributed to the feeling of membership and availability experienced by the team members, which helped to create an environment where open case discussion took place frequently. The ability to co-locate with colleagues has been noted in other studies to promote ongoing case discussion and improved staff retention (Ferguson et al, 2020c).

9.3 Contrasting the two sites – roles and focus

There were various similarities between the sites, as well as some differences. One key difference between the sites was that the work that appeared to most occupy social workers and supervisors in Summertown was court work; by contrast, the Springshire teams were more occupied with the brisk flow of incoming referrals. Another difference was the use of space and the feel this created in the teams. It is possible that this was related to the teams' main function. The more structured use of space in Springshire reflected the need to organise things in a way that kept a large inflow of cases under control. This was also reflected in the clear structure of the teams – divided into separate pods – which further served to organise the work in a way that made it

manageable. Such structure was less essential in Summertown, where the inflow of cases was steadier, and a significant proportion of the workload was longer-term.

9.3.1 Shared challenges of being a supervisor

Despite some differences between the sites, a common issue across the teams was the emotional demands involved in supervising staff. For Courtney, this challenge was compounded by her holding cases alongside supervising social workers:

When you're full up, and I know that if things are going on in my cases ... Sometimes, I'm full up in myself, and that's very difficult to then come in and give supervision, because I'm aware that I'm full up, or I'm in high practice mode (Interview with Courtney, Supervisor, Summertown)

The sense of being "full up" was also experienced by supervisors who did not case-hold:

I always believe that we only have a certain amount of capacity of our own to give ... because everyone just wants a piece of you and there's only so much you can give out, and you're left a little bit exhausted with little to give in supervision, and sometimes I just dread it because I think "Oh God, I have to sit there and focus for a whole hour and a half and I'm exhausted and I can't think" (Interview with Ashley, Supervisor, Springshire)

Even within teams that appeared to provide a secure base and that were perceived to be functioning well by their members, the pressures of the work persisted. On an individual level, for supervisory staff to consistently provide a space for social workers to reflect upon and make sense of their work was a challenge. Biggart et al (2017) note the key role that supervisors play in

modelling team cultures that foster support and case discussion and so it is important that supervisors are adequately supported so that they do not feel “full up” or “exhausted”.

9.4 Summary

The interaction between social workers and the environment in which they make sense of their work is important (Helm and Roesch-Marsh, 2017; Taylor and Whittaker, 2018). This chapter has identified some of the key features of the teams and office sites and has begun to signal some of the ways that team context may influence sensemaking.

The teams involved in the study displayed many elements suggestive of them providing a secure base for social workers and offered a space for shared and collaborative sensemaking. Though the space for case discussion manifested differently in the sites, there were many common features also, including formal and informal hierarchies and the role of senior workers in facilitating support and discussion with less experienced social workers.

10. Mapping the sensemaking process through interview case-talk

This chapter will present my analysis of how sensemaking manifested in participants' interview case-talk. Sensemaking took place where a specific decision needed to be taken – usually as part of undertaking an assessment – and this involved a process of constructing a case narrative to explain the situation and support decision-making. Sensemaking also took place through the attaching of meaning and significance to information and experience as participants went about constructing explanatory case narratives. Three sensemaking stages were derived from the analysis of the entire corpus of data: initial formulations, developing the narrative, and adopted account. In undertaking assessments, social workers passed through these stages, at times going through them more than once where new information or a change in circumstances necessitated a reappraisal of the case. This revisiting or re-engaging with earlier sensemaking stages will be touched upon in the following chapter.

At the initial formulation stage, case framing and case history were the themes generated from the analysis. At the stage of developing the narrative, the themes derived were testing and weighing information, generating hypotheses, and feelings and relationships. The stage where an adopted account was presented was most evident where decisions were being taken or had been taken and represented the end point of or a pause in sensemaking. This stage of sensemaking was less evident in both interview and observation data and so this stage will be explored within the following chapter presenting my analysis of the supervision data. At this final stage, the lines between sensemaking, decision-making, and judgement become blurred, and so adopted accounts are less fully-explored in the presentation of my analysis.

The key themes derived from the analysis and presented in the coming chapters are located within the first two stages of sensemaking, which is where the majority of sensemaking activity appeared to take place. Within these two

stages, more of the data is weighted towards the stage of developing the narrative, and in particular the testing and weighing of information. A number of sub-themes were identified under this and other key themes. Thematic mapping outlining the themes and sub-themes generated through my analysis is appended to the thesis at Appendix H.

The themes most prevalent in the interview data were case framing, case history, testing and weighing information, and feelings and relationships. These themes and identified sub-themes will form the basis of this chapter. Following thematic coding of the data, narratives about individual cases from the interview data were looked at to get a sense of how they developed. Based on this analysis, this chapter will also consider the relationship between different stages of sensemaking, focusing in particular on the interaction between initial formulations and developing the narrative.

10.1 Initial formulations

This section will look at the way that social workers discussed their initial thinking on a case; at times this was presented when they introduced the case, whilst at other times, social workers went back to discuss their initial thoughts about the case when describing how their thinking had changed. The different ways that cases were framed and the role that case history played in early constructions of case narratives will be the focus of this part of the analysis.

10.1.1 Case framing and the role of intuitive judgement

Early framing or categorisation of cases was a common feature of participants' interview case-talk; this usually took the form of a quick appraisal of referral information or a first impression derived from an initial visit:

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" ... there was no immediate concerns (Jesse, SW, Springshire)

I went around to do a joint [visit] with the early help, I mean, that was chronic neglect, the flat was really unkempt. These two boys were running riot (Kelly, SW, Summertown)

In both instances, participants made a rapid appraisal of the information at hand. Sensemaking seemed to take place automatically; pertinent cues were identified – the unkempt nature of the flat, the children being dirty – and compared with relevant mental frames in order to quickly form a provisional judgement (Klein et al, 2007). In Kelly's case, picking up on cues related to the condition of the flat and the children's behaviour enabled her to recognise the case as one that fitted with a frame of chronic neglect.

The frames used by social workers are based on individual experience, professional knowledge, and wider organisational and professional influences; experienced decision-makers draw on experience of comparable situations combined with learning from past decision-making in order to intuitively appraise information (Kahneman and Klein, 2009; Klein, 2015). There was evidence in the way that cases were framed of professional and organisational influences on sensemaking; in Jesse's case, she talked about immediate concerns, which reflected the importance of triage in how cases needed to be made sense of within her team.

In Kelly's case, categorising the case as one of "chronic neglect" involved applying a common professional label given to cases where concerns relate to parenting not being "good enough", meaning that a child's needs are not met over a period of time. The identification of such cases has been a focus of CP social work for much of the twenty-first century, in contrast with types of abuse involving deliberate harmful acts (Tanner and Turney, 2003). Neglect forms one of the four categories of harm that C&F social work is tasked with identifying and responding to (DfE, 2018a), so it is unsurprising that such an

embedded professional categorisation was utilised by social workers making a quick appraisal of information.

Early judgements, reached through intuitive sensemaking, appeared to anchor participants. The identification of a case as being of a particular type provided a template for how to go about making sense of the case. The framing and categorisation of the case brought to bear the social workers' synthesised knowledge and experience in both recognising it as a particular type of case *and* in sensitising them to further information to be gathered and made sense of. Intuitive sensemaking feeds into sensemaking as a process of story-building by offering an initial explanation in response to information or events, and by helping to direct the process of selection that informs the developing case narrative (Weick et al, 2005). This will be further explored later in the chapter.

10.1.2 Emotional responses in case framing

At times, social workers' emotional responses were prominent in their framing of cases:

I from the beginning really felt there was a vulnerability in dad ... he had said to me it's not true and ... actually there was elements of exploitation going on where the young person was going round to this family's home because the victim's father was the tenancy manager of their home and he was perhaps using that property to deal [drugs] from
(Lesley, SSW, Springshire)

First impressions can be powerful and are often accompanied by an emotional and moral response; early emotional and moral responses tend to persist in how social workers go on to interpret future information (Taylor and White, 2006). This was evident in Lesley's case, where following the father confessing that he had sexually abused his son's friend, the initial emotional and moral response to the case remained:

[A]ll of that information is out there but also, I still see a vulnerability in him (Lesley, SSW, Springshire)

Recognising that such emotional responses are inevitable and being able to name them and to consider their impact on how social workers think about their work is important for safeguarding against possible bias; in Lesley's case, her sympathy towards the father – which she openly acknowledged – did not prevent her from changing her initial hypothesis in light of new information. The need to be mindful of emotional responses and how they may bias sensemaking was evident elsewhere in the interview data:

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 (Chris, SW, Springshire)

This ability to “check” oneself is important; in this instance, it enabled Chris to reflect on his early emotional responses to the mother in order to ensure that they were not biasing how he thought about the case

10.1.3 Case history

As well as using referral information or observations from a first visit to create initial formulations of cases, social workers also drew on case history:

I've got a current unborn who she's previously had a child removed and adopted ... The relationship with the current father is characterised with domestic abuse, and that was the previous concerns when the first child was removed ... most of the concerns are around disguised compliance (Katie, NQSW, Summertown)

There was a juxtaposition of the previous concerns with the current worry about disguised compliance. The previous concerns had – through the court arena – been established as meeting the threshold of significant harm. These

concerns were viewed as proven and this certainty about the veracity and significance of the previous concerns provided a backdrop for the current concerns. Katie went on to elaborate the dilemma that underpinned her understanding of the case:

I'm currently trying to investigate whether he's been to her flat, because she's telling me that they're not in a relationship, he's not around. But I'm hearing completely different stories from the shopkeeper below and family members (Katie, NQSW, Summertown)

Katie's initial formulation of the case appeared to be that if the parents were still in a relationship then the previously established threshold of significant harm would be met once again. The past certainty about the existence of this relationship was lacking at the point at which Katie spoke to me about the case due to the "different stories" she was getting. Katie appeared to be in a position of unsafe uncertainty, where she could not be certain about the risk, and where such uncertainty felt unsafe because not knowing potentially posed a risk to the child. Such a position is an uncomfortable one to occupy and often leads to seeking safe certainty as a response (Mason, 2019). In this instance, this manifested itself through seeking to prove that the partner was still in the mother's life:

[W]e discussed going into the shop and asking if I could see the CCTV (Katie, NQSW, Summertown)

Katie was just really hoping for 100%, get him on camera, get that evidence so she could present it to mum (Courtney, Supervisor, Summertown)

Safe certainty could be achieved through uncovering a definitive piece of "evidence" that would ultimately support a similar decision as was taken with the couple's first child. Experiencing feelings of uncertainty can lead to social workers seeking decisions that eliminate risk and create feelings of safety

(Mason, 2019). That is not to say that Katie consciously wanted to recommend permanent removal of the child, however such a decision may have served to alleviate her being “really worried” about the case. This desire to seek substantiating evidence to alleviate anxiety was evident where cases had a history of involvement and where past concerns were high.

During this early stage of sensemaking, the way that cases were categorised, the initial judgements that were made about them, the case history, and emotional responses combined and interacted. Sensemaking at this early stage tended to be quick and intuitive; this intuitive sensemaking served to both provisionally explain initial information and to sensitise participants to how to select and interpret further information to support subsequent sensemaking.

10.2 Developing the narrative: testing and weighing information

Within the interview data, testing and weighing information to establish its evidentiary value was a crucial part of how participants made sense of cases. Here, social workers engaged in sensemaking through attaching meaning and significance to information and incorporating it into or excluding it from their developing case narrative. The testing and weighing of information was prevalent in all of the participants’ interviews and this section will explore how this manifested in participants’ case-talk.

10.2.1 Corroboration and triangulation

In the extract presented earlier in the chapter, Jesse spoke about a case where her initial formulation was that it was about “dirty kids”. From this initial starting point, Jesse went on to seek information that built upon this early categorisation of the case:

I think meeting the kids was the real “Okay, something’s off here” ... One of the kids fell asleep in my session which has never happened to me ... I can smell him, when I left the

room there was a smell on me and I hadn't touched him
(Jesse, Social Worker, Springshire)

Jesse drew upon first-hand experience of seeing and spending time with the children to further develop her case narrative. Jesse also drew on her own experience as a means to make sense of what she had seen; the exceptional nature of a child falling asleep during a session, combined with the visceral experience of being able to smell the child, led her to feel a sense of incongruence which triggered further information-gathering:

I got all the back files and did a full chronology and that's when I started looking at it going, "When do we say enough now?" (Jesse, SW, Springshire)

The chronology helped to triangulate Jesse's own worries about the presentation of the children, and the combination of Jesse's own experiences and putting together the chronology prompted her thinking on the case to shift. This will be explored further later in the chapter.

Chronologies were cited at other times by participants as being useful sources of information, especially in cases where concerns were long-standing and related to patterns of behaviour:

[P]ulling together this health chronology, sort of, really indicated the way that we would need to be looking at removing this baby as soon as she was born (Suzie, SW, Summertown)

Suzie viewed the chronology as being a valuable piece of evidence that helped to triangulate her initial formulation of the case. Participants valued information that they were able to gather themselves, either in the form of their observations or through putting together a chronology, and this kind of information tended to be seen as having evidentiary weight.

Even where social workers appeared quite certain in their initial formulation of a case, further information was generally sought to corroborate their judgement:

I think having met the children, seen the family dynamics, been in the family home ... I felt the children were at risk but having the discussions and to meet a threshold needs evidence (Micky, SSW, Springshire)

Although first-hand information was seen as important, there was an implication from Micky that this alone was insufficient to justify a decision in relation to the threshold of significant harm. Judgements based solely on an intuitive appraisal of a visit appeared to be viewed as insufficiently robust on their own. This was touched upon by another social worker, who contrasted gut feeling with evidence:

You can't evidence she is indoors because it's unannounced, you knock at the door and wait and it looks like there's no-one home. But there is a gut feeling that there is someone but you can't prove (Brooke, SW, Springshire)

Brooke equated evidence with the capacity to provide proof; the notion of proof suggested a degree of credibility that was not attributed to gut feelings. For social workers, if evidence could be identified that confirmed an intuitive judgement then this helped to create a feeling of certainty. "Evidence" and "proof" tended to have ascribed to them an objective status that meant that they were free from the subjectivity of the participants. At times this distinction between social workers' judgement and what was seen as objective "evidence" created a sense of distancing the social worker from responsibility for decision-making:

Mum is having a psychiatric assessment ... so the outcome of that will determine whether mum is able to actually care

for this baby in a safe way or not. So, we're, sort of, holding a lot on the psychiatric report (Suzie, SW, Summertown)

Expert assessments, such as those undertaken by clinical psychologists or medical professionals, were often seen as strong forms of evidence by social workers, to the extent that they could determine decision-making. However, as will be explored shortly, social workers did not always view expert assessments as being determinative. In the previous chapter, I discussed some of the pressure on Summertown as a result of holding cases throughout care proceedings and how this had led to feelings of anxiety about needing to make final recommendations to the court. Delegating accountability for decision-making to an expert assessment may be one way of defending against such anxiety.

The desire to create distance from individual accountability for decision-making also appeared to be evident in Suzie using “we” instead of “I” when she talked about decision-making on the case. This was something that participants did frequently when talking about cases, and another common feature of participants’ case-talk was to refer to assessments impersonally as *the* assessment:

[I]t is challenging, and it might go to court, it might not, the PCA [parenting capacity assessment] needs to conclude that (Lucy, NQSW, Summertown)

Whether that would be for a supervision order, whether that would be to actually remove baby under an ICO, that would be determined in the parenting capacity assessment. However, the parenting capacity assessment was negative (Courtney, Supervisor, Summertown)

There appeared to be something about the written assessment that made it impersonal and conferred a degree of objectivity upon it. This may be a form of what Potter (1996) refers to as stake inoculation. Stake inoculation occurs

where individuals, through their use of language, attempt to disavow themselves of a statement or viewpoint in such a way as to make it appear that what they are presenting is objective (Potter, 1996). Reliance on *the* assessment may help to create such a sense of objectivity about the participants' judgement. It may also serve to create emotional distance when making recommendations in cases where removal of a child is a live possibility.

10.2.2 Coherence and congruence in testing and weighing information

In social workers' interview case-talk, the value of information often appeared to be instrumental rather than absolute. Despite expert assessments being seen as strong forms of evidence, where they did not cohere with the social worker's prevailing narrative, they were not necessarily seen as being determinative:

[W]e'd had the psychological assessment of the parents, which was very negative of the mum, whereas Jo's parenting assessment's quite positive ... I was challenging her to say why I shouldn't follow the recommendations of the psychological assessment...if Jo was feeling that the psychological assessment ... didn't necessarily go to the parenting of the children (Robin, Supervisor, Summertown)

Despite the acknowledged weight given to expert assessments within the court arena (Beckett et al, 2007), where such assessments did not reinforce the view of the social worker they were seen as open to challenge. To some extent, the value of such assessments was contingent upon how well they fitted with the developing case narrative. Though this was the only example of its kind from the interview data, further evidence of the value of expert assessments being somewhat contingent will be explored again in the analysis of the observation data.

There were many examples in the interview data where other pieces of information were tested and weighed for their sense of congruence or fit with the developing case narrative:

And, that's the difficult bit, which does make it so complex, because the contacts go really well, they're really good, there's not been any concerns raised at the contacts ... [but] from our point of view, it's still the basis of that around mum's mental health and how that will impact (Suzie, SW, Summertown)

They said we don't feel it's consistent with what she's described, like we don't feel there's consistent evidence ... and actually she has made a disclosure. And effectively, we're saying it's not consistent with what we're seeing (Chris, SW, Springshire)

This is not necessarily problematic, attempts to triangulate information are important and experienced workers tend to use triangulation to inform decision-making (Whittaker, 2018) and a sense of congruence and coherence is crucial to creating plausible narratives (Weick, 1995). How well information fits with an existing narrative can be a useful means to test information, however it carries a degree of risk that information that seems incongruent may be dismissed rather than being fully considered and potentially incorporated into a more nuanced case narrative. In Suzie's case, for example, the mother's good parenting during contact was seen as "difficult", when it may have been possible to account for her positive parenting during short contact sessions within an overarching narrative where the mother was not able to meet the baby's needs all of the time.

There were other occasions within the interview data where pre-existing narratives appeared to colour how information was interpreted:

[M]ost of the concerns are around disguised compliance ... I've had to, like, investigate whether she's telling me the truth ... at one point with her previous child she was on the CIN plan, and I thought, well, that's really positive ... But, talking it through in my team it's, like, but you need to, kind of, look deeper into that, and was that a stable period, or was that just bumbling along the bottom of child in need (Katie, NQSW, Summertown)

The initial formulation of the case as being primarily about disguised compliance influenced Katie's sensemaking; this was evident in her feeling the need to investigate whether the mother had lied and led to her reconsidering historical information with a greater degree of scepticism. Within the story-building process, during the selection phase, individuals use retrospective attention to test and weigh information to decide whether and how to incorporate it into their developing narrative (Weick et al, 2005). This appeared to be evident in Katie looking back at past information in light of a narrative about disguised compliance. Where such narratives are strong, it is questionable how open to revision they might be in light of conflicting information.

10.3 Developing the narrative: feelings and relationships

Another key feature of the way that social workers presented narratives about their cases involved drawing on their emotional and relational experience of the case. This section will draw on analysis of the role of engagement and relationships in case-talk and will explore how emotional experiences sometimes created a sense of dissonance for social workers between their personal and professional selves.

10.3.1 Engagement and relationships

The notion of engagement recurred frequently in how social workers talked about their cases:

[W]e'd kind of gone from her pushing me away and pushing me away to suddenly opening up and I felt a bit like ... we were getting somewhere. 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 (Jo, SW, Summertown)

It appeared that Jo's level of worry for the baby was related to levels of engagement and the quality of the worker-parent relationship. The relationship between engagement and parental openness and social workers' perceptions of risk has been noted in other studies (Hackett and Taylor, 2014; Cook, 2017). The relationship between engagement and risk is complex, it is known from analysis of serious case reviews that positive parental engagement can mask risks to children (Brandon et al, 2009). On the other hand, Brandon et al (2020) note that positive worker-family relationships are central to protective CP practice. Social workers need to have opportunities to reflect on relationships and to consider their impact on how they make sense of a child's circumstances; in the example above, it would be valuable for Jo to reflect on whether her positive relationship with the parent is genuinely protective or whether it may be leading her to be over-optimistic about the parent's capacity to look after their child safely. Where engagement or positive parental relationships are used unthinkingly and uncritically to appraise levels of risk, this potentially places children at risk (Brandon et al, 2009).

At times, social workers demonstrated an awareness of how their own feelings about a parent might influence their thinking:

I remember Andy being surprised because he was like it's almost like you found it really like exciting to get those police checks, because you were kind of vindicated in terms of that. And I felt that was really good because at that moment I was like, yeah, I'm really frustrated at this dad and I need to bring this in. And then I was able to go back and have more conversations with him, more at a human level to be able to see kind of see it more (Chris, SW, Springshire)

The role of colleagues and supervisors was important for some social workers in helping them to acknowledge their feelings and the impact they may be having. There is a danger that a negative perception of a parent can lead to a form of confirmation bias and, in this instance, Chris had a positive emotional response to receiving police information that confirmed his negative view of the father. This could have reinforced Chris' narrative about the father, however the challenge from Andy enabled a degree of reflection from Chris that helped him to take a different approach. Where feelings about the work were seen as allowable and their impact reflected upon, this enabled participants to explore the interaction between their emotional and relational narratives about the case, and their professional understanding of the case.

10.3.2 Dissonance between the personal and professional in case-talk

Within the interview data, several participants talked of a need to separate or split off a more 'human', feeling self from the professional self in trying to make decisions. This was particularly evident where a personal narrative about the case was dissonant with a developing professional narrative that suggested the parent posed a risk of harm:

[W]e have a good relationship, but I've also, kind of, had to separate myself from that ... put those feelings to one side and make sure you're being professional. I am professional, but you have to, kind of, remember that you're here to do

the job and put those feelings to one side (Katie, NQSW, Summertown)

I always like to consider myself as being professional throughout all of my assessments, but I am only human and emotionally there's certain things that are, like, this is really difficult, this is really hard (Suzie, SW, Summertown)

The participants highlighted a contrast between a “professional” self that puts feelings to one side and a “human” self that engages in relationships and has feelings about the work. Other studies have suggested that this splitting off of the two selves is one way of managing the dissonance created by the human feelings that arise when needing to communicate difficult professional decisions (Winter et al, 2019). In the above examples, this feeling of dissonance was amplified by a sense that the culpability of the parents for harm or risk of harm to their children was limited:

[I]t's been made quite apparent throughout the parenting assessment we did, or the pre-birth parenting assessment we did, that a lot of this is from her own upbringing (Suzie, SW, Summertown)

Emotional and moral reasoning play a significant role in social workers' sensemaking (Taylor and White, 2001); when such reasoning came into conflict with a more “professional” appraisal of the case, this increased the feeling of dissonance that led to the form of splitting outlined above. Whilst this kind of splitting can be unproblematic and is “a feature of normal behaviour – as a way of managing two competing elements” (Trevithick, 2011: 397), the professional self can come to obscure the “human” self (Wonnacott, 1965). At a wider professional level, this split is reflected in the perceived schism between technical-rational approaches to practice and relationship-based approaches to practice. This split reinforces the notion that feelings and relationships need to be kept separate from “being professional” and is a

feature of social workers' ambivalence about use of emotions in their work (O'Connor, 2019).

When I came to analyse the interview data, I found it hard as I felt too close to the participants, and I wrestled with how allowable such closeness was:

I fully understand that ... separating the data from the participants aids analysis. I am not sure, though, that this is necessarily what I want to be doing, at least not entirely. Ethnography is about getting close to people and building relationships, it is about trying to understand individuals and groups within their own context. This inevitably means it is not always possible to completely separate out the data and the individuals/dyads as my broader interactions with and perceptions of them form part of my overall understanding of what is going on (Reflexive Journal)

To some extent, the conflict between a relational, "human" self that felt close to the participants, and a more professional self that needed to seek analytic distance mirrored the conflict experienced by several of the participants. In my case, the desire to incorporate emotional and relational aspects of the research into my analysis needed to be balanced with not allowing closeness to the participants to unduly influence how I made sense of the data. For social workers, their relationships with service users function in a similar way, and the splitting apparent in the interviews was one way of attempting to mitigate the influence of the feeling, "human" self on their professional judgement. I had to be mindful that my own experiences of this tension were not being projected on to participants, and this involved revisiting the data to ensure that my interpretation was valid, and this validity was further reinforced by grounding this aspect of the analysis within the existing literature.

10.3.3 Resolving dissonance between the personal and professional

One way that social workers seemed to move past difficult feelings arising from dissonance between their personal and professional narratives about cases was to focus on the child:

I've just focused on the children now. Really, really trying to think about what their life is gonna look like in 5 years' time, 10 years' time, thinking about it like that (Shelley, SW, Summertown)

[A]s much as I feel for mum because of her mental health issues, from my point of view it's what is the best needs of this baby. I believe that's what I've done throughout, and I think that's what you have to hold on to, is what's best for this baby (Suzie, SW, Summertown)

By focusing solely on the child, participants seemed to bracket off the sympathy they felt for the parents. Focusing on the child did not necessarily help to resolve the dissonance participants felt, but rather it appeared to support social workers to move past or defend against the uncomfortable feeling that came with it. It was notable elsewhere in the data – and I will return to this in the next chapter – that a focus on impact on the child often served as a way to move social workers towards taking a decision.

Professional aspects of social workers' identity seemed to take centre stage to enable difficult decisions to be made; however, participants were able to acknowledge the empathy that they felt for the parents also. The emotional and relational aspects of their identity – the “human” self that participants identified – were not completely obscured; it appeared that different aspects of the participants' identities were presented at different times, with more emotional and relational aspects of their identity coming to the fore in interactions with children and families, and in discussion with colleagues, with

more professional aspects of their identity coming to the fore when decisions needed to be taken and justified.

Reflecting further on my initial struggles with the analysing the interview data, a feature of this was that I felt a sense of disappointment that interview transcripts from some of the participants whom I had viewed as being warm, empathic social workers read as being somewhat sanitised and clinical:

This separation between case-talk and feelings talk in their interview gives their discussion of cases quite a surface, generalised feel. They almost come across as passive at times in their casework; they are following processes, they are gathering evidence, but the sense of their thinking and their interactions is quite absent (Reflexive Journal)

There was a disconnect between my experience of the individual and how they talked about their practice in interview. This experience of dissonance likely sensitised me to this aspect of how participants spoke about their casework and how different facets of their identity were presented in different contexts.

10.3.4 Moral reasoning: parental culpability

At other times, there was no sense of a disconnect between participants' emotional experiences of cases and the decisions they needed to take. This tended to be where parents were perceived as blameworthy; though instances of this were uncommon in the interview data, they are worth considering here:

[I]f someone was intentionally hurting a child, then that's not okay, it's quite black and white ... they're very easy to say, well, that's not okay. Bang, out (Lucy, NQSW, Summertown)

[A] lot of the families that we work with the neglect is, sort of, unintentional, but a lot of the things that the dad was

disclosing that day were, actually, really mean and that was intentional harm ... the decision on that case was made really quite quickly that he should come into foster care that day ... it was the right thing (Taylor, NQSW, Summertown)

As noted in the previous chapter, specific harmful incidents offered a sense of certainty to social workers. However, there was also a sense that where parents could be characterised as blameworthy, the emotional and moral experience of the case more easily aligned with the professional judgement being made. In these kinds of cases, social workers did not experience the dissonance that can lead to a separation of the personal and professional aspects of the self. The moral reasoning used in judging a parent's culpability creates a sense of certainty (Taylor and White, 2001) and this appeared to be evident here in the way that Lucy and Taylor characterised decision-making on cases where parents were seen as blameworthy.

10.4 Sensemaking and the influence of initial formulations

Earlier in the chapter, I touched upon the ongoing influence of initial formulations of cases on the sensemaking process. I now want to explore how two case narratives went on to be developed from these initial formulations in order to contrast two different ways that such formulations influenced subsequent sensemaking. Jesse's case that she initially categorised as being about "dirty kids" and Kelly's "chronic neglect" case will be offered as examples of how initial formulations appeared to act as either cornerstones or touchstones in how case narratives were constructed.

10.4.1 Initial formulations as cornerstones

As highlighted earlier, following her initial formulation of the case as being about "dirty kids", Jesse went to see the children and this triggered a sense of something being "off". She subsequently put together a chronology which reinforced to her that the case may be more serious than she had originally

thought. Her narrative continued to develop and shift as she gathered and interpreted information:

[W]hen does the smelly, dirty kid step into actually this child is being significantly neglected? (Jesse, SW, Springshire)

[D]ifficulty 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 (Jesse, SW, Springshire)

Jesse's narrative about the case began by putting in place a first building block – a cornerstone – of this being a case of “dirty kids”. The experience of seeing the children reinforced the notion that the children were “dirty kids” but also made her feel “something's not right” and signalled to Jesse that further exploration was needed. This prompted Jesse to put together a chronology, which she interpreted as evidencing that the issues the children were experiencing were longstanding and this contributed to a developing narrative that the case was one of chronic neglect. Professional knowledge about “all the classic stuff” relating to neglect helped to reinforce the developing narrative further. This exemplifies sensemaking as a process of story-building. As Jesse's thinking about the case progressed and her narrative became more coherent, it also became more robust and certain:

[I]t's a chronic neglect case and actually the challenge of that has been getting senior management to look at it in the way it needs to be looked at (Jesse, SW, Springshire)

Jesse's initial judgement about the case carried some uncertainty in her suggestion that the case could “probably close”, however there was little uncertainty expressed in her final judgement that this was a case of chronic neglect. Jesse was so certain in her judgement that she was prepared to stand up to senior management to get them to look at the case “in the way it needs

to be looked at”, to agree her recommended action for a CP conference to be convened.

Jesse’s initial formulation in this case was what I have labelled a *cornerstone* formulation. A cornerstone is the first stone laid in the construction of an edifice. It provides a foundation and remains a part of the finished construction but does not necessarily determine what the final construction will look like or how it is constructed. In Jesse’s case, her initial formulation indicated low level concerns about physical neglect, but through gathering and making sense of further information she constructed a narrative of chronic neglect that she saw as reaching the threshold of significant harm. The notion of “dirty kids” remained part of the final narrative and guided the early stages of how Jesse began constructing her case narrative but a wider range of issues were woven in as the story was built.

10.4.2 Initial formulations as touchstones

Kelly’s initial formulation of the case as being one of “chronic neglect” appeared more certain from the beginning and underpinned much of the way she went on to make sense of the case. This initial formulation appeared to act as a *touchstone*; the formulation provided a standard against which subsequent information was tested and weighed. Kelly sought information that was most pertinent to and could potentially reinforce her initial formulation:

We did finally get all the information from the previous county, which takes it back to when the oldest child was first born, exactly the same concerns, you know, repeating concerns (Kelly, SW, Summertown)

Kelly’s process of testing and weighing information appeared to be strongly influenced by the initial formulation of the case:

[W]hen is it going to stop? ... Have we reached the point where we’ve gone too far, where things should have been

done previously, years ago? Is that too late now, and we're saying it's just good enough? But, how long do we keep these children on a CP plan? (Kelly, SW, Summertown)

Kelly's sensemaking related not to whether the children were experiencing chronic neglect, but what the impact of this was and what could be done about it. Though the term "chronic neglect" did not appear in the above extract, there were elements of Kelly's questioning that alluded to it, such as the use of "good enough", a reference to the professional notion of good enough parenting (Winnicott, 1965), a standard beneath which neglect becomes a concern. The ongoing nature of chronic neglect can be problematic for social workers in trying to determine the level and timing of intervention (Tanner and Turney, 2003) and this was evident in Kelly's questioning of herself about the case.

The strength of Kelly's narrative about chronic neglect seemed to background other potential narratives about the case:

Straight away, from ten minutes of conversation with mum, you could clearly see there was a learning need there ... she is a really likeable mum ... she has got her own needs ... Ultimately, if it is that mum just cannot keep these boys safe and contain them, then we're going to have to look to get legal advice (Kelly, SW, Summertown)

Despite acknowledging some mitigation in the mother's culpability and highlighting that she was likeable, her role in Kelly's narrative was simplified and reduced to her capacity to "keep these boys safe and contain them". Implicit in Kelly's sensemaking about the mother was the notion of whether she could meet the standard of good enough parenting that would ultimately determine whether the cycle of chronic neglect was likely to continue. Professional notions of good enough parenting and impact on the child influenced how Kelly tested and weighed information. It also appeared that Kelly's focus on the impact of the mother's parenting on the children enabled

her to create distance from more relational and moral narratives relating to the mother's likeability and culpability.

10.4.3 Contrasting cornerstones and touchstones

Kelly's initial formulation of her case as being one of chronic neglect was not revised through constructing her case narrative; instead, the initial formulation was used as a means to make sense of the information Kelly was gathering and interpreting. By contrast, the status of Jesse's initial formulation appeared to be more provisional and open to revision or augmentation; indeed, ultimately her initial formulation of the case being about "dirty kids" became just one part of a narrative about the children experiencing chronic neglect, and her initial judgement about the level of risk was substantially revised.

One explanation for this difference may be down to the different forms of assessment being undertaken by Jesse and Kelly and the context of their teams. Jesse was undertaking a first assessment following referral and her quick, initial formulation was based on triaging referral information. Jesse then had had forty-five working days to complete the assessment in line with statutory timescales (DfE, 2018a). The stages of forming an initial, intuitive judgement followed by a process of gathering, interpreting, and selecting information to inform a final judgement proceeded in a fairly linear fashion. This led to a relatively straightforward progression through the stages of story-building (Weick, 1995) within which the initial formulation of the case acted as a starting point to orientate Jesse and sensitise her to relevant cues to inform her developing narrative.

Kelly's assessment was a parenting capacity assessment to inform a decision about whether to issue care proceedings. Kelly had been working the family prior to starting this period of assessment and a judgement relating to chronic neglect had already been made and was reflected in the children being subject to a CP plan. This formulation of the case was not questioned, but instead was used to think about and interrogate the children's current and likely future circumstances. The story-building process was different insofar as there was

already a coherent narrative in respect of chronic neglect that could explain the family's circumstances. Kelly's story-building involved revising and adding finer-grained detail to the narrative, through exploring the current and future impact on the children of chronic neglect, and through exploring the mother's capacity to meet the children's needs to a good enough level now and in the future. However, the prevailing narrative of chronic neglect remained largely the same throughout.

10.5 Sensemaking in interview case-talk: the process of constructing a case narrative

Analysis of the interview data has drawn attention to the interaction between early, more intuitive sensemaking and the story-building that follows. At the early stage of sensemaking – which I have described as an initial formulation – key themes related to how cases were framed and the role of case history. To some extent, this phase of sensemaking and the themes identified within it resonate with the sensemaking concept of enactment (Weick et al, 2005), where relevant cues are noticed and identified as needing explanation.

Within the sensemaking phase of developing the narrative, the way that information was tested and weighed by social workers was a key theme. Social workers engaged in corroboration and triangulation – particularly of their own first-hand observations or gut feelings about cases – and used congruence as a means to make sense of the information they were gathering. Feelings and relationships also played a part in sensemaking at this stage; participants were generally mindful of their emotional responses, and in some cases how these could influence their thinking, though often it appeared that social workers felt uncertain about how allowable feelings were as a “professional” social worker. This at times created a sense of dissonance, particularly where parents were viewed sympathetically and where their culpability was seen as limited. Where the emotional, relational, and moral experience of the case led to these dissonant feelings, social workers tended to engage in a separation of the “professional” and “human” self, bracketing off their emotional responses and focusing more narrowly on the child as a means to move forward.

The influence of early sensemaking on how information is selected and interpreted has also been explored. The notion of touchstones and cornerstones is a useful metaphor for whether initial formulations of cases act as a measure against which to test and weigh information or whether they act to guide how information is gathered and interpreted. Understanding how social workers' initial formulations of cases influence their sensemaking is useful; in the cases presented here where initial formulations were used as touchstones this was often due to there being a significant case history informing the initial formulation of the case.

However, there is a danger that if such formulations are only minimally open to revision, this could bias subsequent sensemaking. In the case Katie discussed, the history and subsequent concerns about disguised compliance led to her reappraising information in a less positive light. Research suggests that where narratives around disguised compliance are held by social workers, they can reduce the possibility of other explanations being considered (Leigh et al, 2020a). It is therefore valuable for social workers to have opportunities to reflect on their initial formulations of cases and to consider how they influence the way that they are gathering and interpreting information to inform their decision-making.

11. Sensemaking in one-to-one supervision

This chapter will present an analysis of transcripts from recordings of formal one-to-one supervision. As with the interview data, the supervision transcripts were analysed thematically and this analysis enabled identification of themes and sub-themes that sat within the three sensemaking stages of initial formulation, developing the narrative, and adopted account. The most prevalent themes from analysis of the supervision transcripts were case framing, testing and weighing information, and generating hypotheses. The final sensemaking stage of adopted account will also be explored within this chapter as this was most evident in the supervision data in contrast to the interview and observation data. I will use discussion of adopted accounts to suggest how social workers revisit or re-engage with earlier stages of sensemaking when they face changed circumstances. I will also touch on the comparative lack of exploration of feelings and relationships within the supervision data in contrast to the interview and observation data.

Further analysis of supervision transcripts took place by looking at extracts of discussion of individual cases in depth to consider how case narratives were developed through supervisory dialogue. The function of supervision in negotiating and creating an agreed account of the case will be explored and differences between supervisory dyads will also be briefly discussed. These sections are influenced by a focus on *how* cases were constructed and presented in supervision rather than *what* themes were prevalent at each stage of sensemaking. In discussing differences between dyads, some data from interviews and observations will be drawn upon to help illustrate identified differences. The chapter will conclude by briefly summarising how sensemaking functions in formal supervision sessions and why it may function in this way. The final analysis chapter will then follow, focusing on sensemaking dialogue in the office space and in group case discussion.

11.1 Initial formulation: case framing in supervision

This section will consider the way that cases were framed in supervision; whereas in the interview data, social workers sometimes went back to revisit their initial formulation of the case, in supervision case framing always happened at the outset of the discussion of a case. There were some similarities in how cases were framed, in particular how cases were sometimes framed by intuitively categorising cases, however some differences were evident, particularly the way that framing of cases in supervision also seemed to function to indicate how much or how little discussion of the case was required.

11.1.1 Case framing as informal agenda-setting

Within supervision, often cases were introduced through quick updates, generally highlighting tasks that had been or were due to be completed:

Sam: Right. (Typing) Let's get cracking on the Cs.
So?

Casey: Erm, it's all good actually.

Sam: So we had...

Casey: I've got the core meeting after this.

Sam: When's the RCPC?

Casey: Erm, it is the 25th (Summertown)

Where this kind of framing took place, cases were only discussed briefly. Social workers and supervisors seemed to negotiate which cases would be discussed and which would be prioritised for longer discussion. Sometimes

this would be done explicitly through agreeing a list of cases to discuss or through social workers or supervisors highlighting a desire to discuss a particular case at length. At other times this was done implicitly through how the case was framed. There seemed to be an understanding between social workers and supervisors that where a case was framed by tasks completed or to be completed, that this was all that needed to be said. This fulfilled the requirement for supervision to provide oversight and accountability on all cases whilst acknowledging that some cases required more discussion than others.

11.1.2 Case categorisation

At other times, cases were framed by identifying main worries or referral concerns, and this was done similarly across supervisory dyads, though there were some differences in the level of detail offered about the case. Often, framing relied on shorthand categorisations or simplified accounts of referral issues:

Robin: So what are we worried about?

Shelley: Oh god! Neglect, CSE.

Robin: She's only 12 isn't she?

Shelley: Yeah, and she's really at risk of so many things
(Summertown)

Micky: So the referral came in that mum had disclosed historical and current significant high risk domestic abuse between her and dad of an emotional, financial and physical nature. So the

referral came off the back of, actually police contact and dad being arrested.

Jan: Mmm (Springshire)

Framing of cases tended to rely on professional conceptualisations of the case using categories like “neglect”, “CSE”, and “domestic abuse”. This was similar to the way that social workers framed cases in their interviews, with such professional categories being used as a means to quickly present what type of case the social workers were dealing with. At other times in case framing, initial formulations of cases were reached through a brief dialogue:

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?

Leigh: Yeah (Springshire)

Sam: Right, T. S is all over the shop isn't she?

Casey: Mmm hmm. She's homeless, she's missed the last two supervised contact sessions. She's homeless and nor did she turn up for...

Sam: (Typing) S's lifestyle is chaotic (Summertown)

In both instances, the social worker offered some details about the case and the supervisors responded with an intuitive categorisation of the case or a label for observed behaviour. The categorisations relied on professional concepts – such as “chaotic lifestyle” and “neglect” – which offered shorthand ways of identifying particular behaviours or case features. What appeared to be happening in these instances was a form of pattern-matching, whereby the supervisors intuitively compared the brief case details given by the social workers with mental frames that enabled them to make a quick judgement (Klein et al, 2007). This process paralleled the way that social workers rapidly appraised information in order to quickly categorise cases.

11.2 Developing the narrative in supervision

Case discussion in supervision followed a similar pattern across supervisory dyads; following case framing, social workers generally presented information to their supervisors and this information was often then made sense of using professional concepts like impact on the child and risk of significant harm. Impact on the child was also evident in the interview data and appeared to serve to as a means to alleviate feelings of dissonance for social workers. In supervision, impact on the child appeared to function more as a means to quickly attach significance to information to move towards decision-making. The concept of threshold – present, though less evident, in the interview data – served a similar function. The development of hypotheses was, however, more prevalent within supervision than in interviews and may point to the dialogic nature of sensemaking (Cook and Gregory, 2020). This section will look to draw out the key features of how case narratives were developed in supervision.

11.2.1 Testing and weighing information in supervision: presenting information

Social workers often presented a significant amount of information to their supervisor; generally, this included information from first-hand observations alongside information from other professionals and family members. This presentation of information sometimes represented what Wilkins et al (2017: 944) describe as a “verbal deluge”:

Kai: So I went round to see mum, I actually spoke to the consultant, Dr O, and I spoke to the specialist nurse, D, and I went round and met with mum and dad last week, Friday, and they actually gave me their position. And at the time it was like, they were relentless, they can't give their daughter the, I think it's called, I can't remember what it's called, it begins with S, strefenol or something, they don't want to give it to her cos they actually have had her on it since around August last year up until November, and it was gradually being increased, the dose. When she was up, started at 18 then it went up to 36ml, then when it went up to 50 that was when she started having some really terrible seizures.

Ashley: Right.

Kai: Something like eleven in 2 months or something like that (Springshire)

Courtney: But how's she doing at school in general?

Katie: Yes, school have no concerns. They don't observe any of that behaviour in school. They will, they did say, they mentioned about her processing information and she previously worked with Stacey in the Team 1, so I spoke to Stacey about her...

Courtney: Yeah.

Katie: ...and Stacey didn't have any concerns about the family, or like the parenting (Summertown)

The accounts offered by the social workers appeared to play a role in ensuring accountability and oversight. Presenting information in detail provided evidence of the work that social workers had undertaken, whilst also ensuring that their supervisor had oversight of the work they were doing. This helped to create a sense of shared accountability.

11.2.2 Selectivity in presenting information

It is worth highlighting that what information social workers presented to their supervisors and how they presented it was not a neutral process. Social workers choose – consciously or unconsciously – to share, withhold, or highlight particular pieces of information. Kadushin (1999) highlights this as a tactic that social workers can employ to mitigate power differentials in the supervisory relationship, however the information social workers choose to share or not share can also result from a desire to steer their supervisor towards a particular decision (Saltiel, 2017).

Within the interview data, social workers were mindful of their capacity to set the agenda for what they would discuss in supervision and how they would discuss it:

I go in to say “This is what I’m worried about. This is what’s happening. This is exactly what happened. This is what I’m thinking” so I go in more informed in my own self rather than looking for some to tell me it (Micky, SSW, Springshire)

[W]hen I go to supervision I feel like I’m quite prepared, I know my cases inside out, I know what [my supervisor] needs to hear ... it works both ways in being prepared for what I need to get out of supervision, as well (Kelly, SW, Summertown)

Having clarity about what was to be discussed and about what to get from supervision was highlighted by social workers as something that they had learnt through experience. Generally, more experienced social workers highlighted that they primarily used their supervisor to check out their own ideas or even simply to update their supervisor about their cases:

I think it’s, sort of, about me actually informing what’s happening, if I’m being completely honest. I think sometimes it’s, sort of like, this is happening, this is happening, and this is happening, and this is what I propose to be the plan for moving forward (Suzie, SW, Summertown)

Whilst it tended to be more experienced social workers who felt confident in leading supervision conversations, less experienced workers also showed an awareness of how they might be selective in seeking supervisory guidance:

Robin and Steph, they are my go to ... it’s probably unconsciously I know they’re going to give me the answer I want, whereas, some others probably wouldn’t (Katie, NQSW, Summertown)

Whilst on the surface social workers appeared to use supervision to present information to their supervisors, what information they chose to present and

how they presented it could steer the development of the case narrative in supervision. How they were making sense of the case was likely to be implicit in this presentation of information, with information that supported their developing narrative being more likely to be that which they chose to present. Within supervision the way that information was presented functioned both to provide oversight and accountability and to develop an agreed case narrative.

11.2.3 Testing and weighing information in relation to threshold

In supervisory case discussions, there were many occasions where the supervisor played an active role in interpreting information to inform the developing case narrative:

Casey: Z finds ways to do everything her peers do despite having this, erm, shortened forearms. She does, she can dress herself, she just finds different ways of doing things despite having limited hand movement and forearm movement.

Sam: She's a resilient young girl.

Casey: She is a resilient little girl and she shows, she can demonstrate empathy, she is amazing.

Sam: So there's evidence of good parenting then?

Casey: Yeah, and that's, and that has been my dilemma throughout this is these are gorgeous children who have really good attachment to their parents, who are confident (Summertown)

It appeared that there was a process of collective sensemaking taking place, with Sam and Casey both contributing to interpreting information about the child's behaviour as being evidence of resilience, and this in turn was interpreted as being evidence of "good parenting". Professional knowledge of attachment theory was drawn on to reinforce this interpretation, though was somewhat misused in describing the attachment as a "good attachment". This reflects a wider difficulty that social workers sometimes have in using theory to inform their work (McCafferty, 2020; Stepney and Thompson, 2020), leading social workers to use 'handbook' versions of theory to inform their case narratives (White, 2009).

Casey initially presented as being worried about the family, describing their situation as a "nightmare" and stating "I am just really concerned" as they were due to be evicted and had not been truthful about their efforts to find housing. This had led to Casey feeling anxious about the case and querying whether it needed to escalate to CP, prompting a discussion about the threshold of significant harm:

Sam: But nothing in there about any of these children suffering significant harm.

Casey: Well, no, I agree that's why it's on CIN and not safeguarding, it's just that they will then be homeless. They'll be street homeless in 36 days (Summertown)

Sam was ultimately successful in steering the developing narrative about the case away from a decision to escalate the case to CP. As discussed previously, responses such as escalating cases can help to create a sense of safe certainty when unsafe uncertainty is being experienced (Mason, 2019). Sam did not necessarily experience the same anxiety as Casey, and his narrative about the family was more positive; his interpretation of the information Casey shared about the case as evidence of "good parenting" may have been intended to reassure Casey. The parents' capacity for "good

parenting” offered a sense of safety that the children were unlikely to come to harm even whilst the family’s circumstances remained uncertain, enabling Casey to feel less anxious as a result.

It appeared that there was, initially, some disagreement in Casey and Sam’s positions over whether the case should escalate. Disagreement is noted as a key part of decision-making, however, where power imbalances exist the way that disagreement is enacted through speech is often not explicit (Angouri and Locher, 2012). The disagreement between Sam and Casey about whether the case should escalate was not named openly, instead a narrative about the parents providing “good parenting” – evidenced by the children’s “good attachment” – was negotiated and agreed to justify the decision for the children to remain on a CIN plan.

11.2.4 Testing and weighing information: impact on the child

The use of impact on the child was often implicit in how participants spoke about cases in their interviews and was frequently used by supervisors as a means to make sense of parental behaviour:

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. So that is something that we need to, rather, in terms of his presentation and basic care needs nobody has raised any concerns, including

school. So, you know, his general care is good, he's always presented well (Springshire)

Later in the supervision discussion, impact on the child was used again by Ashley to help make sense of the significance of information about the father's behaviour:

Ashley: Let's go back to dad being angry, how does that impact, make M feel?

Brooke: He said that he gets worried when dad gets angry, so all he's saying is dad angry, grandad is even angrier, that's his words (Springshire)

The use of impact on the child seemed to play a number of functions in the conversation. It helped to bring the discussion back to the child, so that information that primarily related to the father's behaviour was interpreted in light of the child. Related to this, the use of impact on the child helped to begin to move from the 'raw' information to developing a case narrative that could inform decision-making. Interestingly, despite M saying he was "worried when dad gets angry", this was not followed up in the conversation. Instead, Ashley's implied view that there was a lack of evidence of impact on M from his dad's behaviour was expressed explicitly:

Ashley: I just don't think that we've got enough to keep pushing it ... even if he is using some drugs we're not evidencing enough impact on M (Springshire)

The way impact on the child was used here had some limitations; M's feeling of being "worried" did not appear to count as evidence of impact, and the focus was very much on the present. The potential future risk to the child was not explored, despite *risk of harm* as well as actual harm forming part of the s.47 threshold. Moreover, it is known that the harm caused by parental substance

misuse is often chronic and not always visible (ACMD, 2012), and so impact on the child may not be readily observable. Using impact on the child in this simplified way enabled a narrative to be developed that could support swift decision-making, and this may have been a function of the Springshire teams' need to manage workflow. This may, however, lead to less obvious and less tangible impacts on children being overlooked.

The focus on how information either evidenced or did not evidence impact on the child appeared to be a deeply-ingrained part of how participants made sense of cases. In interview, this focus was noted by social workers and supervisors alike:

[I]t's bringing it back to that child at all times, what is the impact (Kelly, SW, Summertown)

[T]his changed my vision about to maintain focus only on the child and not the rest of the family (Jordan, SW, Summertown)

I just sort of asked her questions like what's the impact on the child (Ashley, Supervisor, Springshire)

[I]t's about pulling her around to what's the risk for the children (Sam, Supervisor, Summertown)

There was a sense in the interviews and within the recordings of supervision that social workers and supervisors were preoccupied with the notion of impact on the child. This overt child-focus is not necessarily problematic in itself, however by focusing on children as subjects of risk and parents primarily as a source of risk, there is a danger of children being decontextualised from their families. The preoccupation with safeguarding and risk has been a central focus of C&F social work in the UK for much of the twenty-first century (Featherstone et al, 2014; Parton, 2014) and has been associated with social workers over-simplifying the complex lives of the families they work with

(Walsh et al, 2019). There was evidence in most supervisions of impact on the child being used as a means to make sense of information, and this could lead to a reductive approach to understanding the complexity of the lives of the families being discussed.

11.2.5 Testing and weighing information: congruence

Congruence played an important role in how information was tested and weighed by participants in interview and was also evident in supervision. As case narratives developed, pieces of information were interpreted, included, or excluded on the basis of how well they fitted with the agreed narrative that was being constructed. This was potentially evident in Ashley and Brooke's discussion above; the report of the child feeling "worried" was not explored because implicitly a narrative was being constructed where there was insufficient evidence of impact on the child to warrant keeping the case open.

At other times, information was interpreted by participants in such a way as to support their narrative about the case:

Lucy: T said, what did he say to me, I want 50 days with mum and 20 days with dad.

Courtney: Yeah.

Lucy: I thought that was brilliant that sums up what you, what you want.

Courtney: Yeah. Most of the time with mum but you still want to see dad. So every other weekend.

Lucy: Yeah. And I said what about weekends and he said yeah, not every weekend but some

weekends with dad. So that's, to me, that's alternate weekends

Courtney: Yeah.

Lucy: That's clear (Summertown)

In the example above, Lucy was making a recommendation to court about contact for T and had recommended weekend contact on alternate weekends. Both Courtney and Lucy interpreted the child's wishes as supporting this recommendation. Immediately prior to offering this interpretation of T's wishes, Lucy expressed the following:

Lucy: Because at the minute they get 5 days with mum and 2 days with dad with all the stuff going on at dad's, and then back at mum's again, then back at dad's again.

Courtney: Yeah, yeah.

Lucy: I think it's too much (Summertown)

Lucy's starting point was a narrative about T's level of contact being "too much" currently and wanting to reduce this. However, T's expressed wishes – for "50 days with mum and 20 days with dad" actually reflected the current level of contact as opposed to Lucy's proposed change. That these wishes were interpreted as being "clear" in supporting a recommendation for contact to reduce to every other weekend suggested that Lucy and Courtney made sense of T's wishes in such a way as to make them congruent with their own narrative. Interpreting the wishes of young children – T was 6 years-old – is complex and T also said they did not wish to spend every weekend with their dad. It is, however, possible that T's wishes could validly have been interpreted to support a continuation of their current level of contact. The sense made of

information appeared to be contingent upon its fit with the developing narrative.

There were other occasions where pieces of information that were incongruent with a developing narrative were passed over and not fully considered:

Ashley: G described H as having an affair with father,
bit of a worry (Springshire)

Though this information was put forward by Ashley, its implications for how G (the mother) viewed the sexual abuse of her daughter, H, were not explored. Ashley and Jesse had previously worked up a hypothesis to explain G's "failure to protect" as being a result of circumstances – this will be explored further in the following section – however this information could have challenged that hypothesis and suggested other possible motivations for not disclosing the abuse. That this information was not discussed further suggested that it was not seen as significant, and this appeared to be related to its lack of fit with the developing narrative.

11.2.6 Developing or revising the case narrative: generating hypotheses

One function of supervision in promoting sensemaking is in providing a space to generate hypotheses. At times, social workers did this simply through being offered room to talk through their thinking:

Chris: Erm, so the, we went to see T and obviously
the kind of hypothesis we've got on that is that
T and L are in a relationship and I wonder
whether they've been in a relationship
continuously...

Jan: Yeah.

Chris: ...since we've been involved, like every 6 months. I think that's quite a strong possibility (Springshire)

Hypotheses most frequently focused on explaining an important aspect of a parent's or child's behaviour. The language used when hypothesising tended to be more tentative and curious than language used at other times, with words like "wonder" and "possibility" acting as markers of uncertainty; such hypotheses were offered as *an* explanation rather than being *the* explanation.

Whilst providing social workers with the opportunity to talk through their thinking provided one means through which hypotheses were generated, at other times hypotheses were offered as a response to prompts and questioning from supervisors:

Sam: That's telling us something isn't it? That before the school holidays his behaviour in school was fine, we haven't been alerted to anything since the school holidays, but at home we're having all this behaviour reported and coincidentally at the same time...

Jordan: Yes.

Sam: ...she starts a new relationship with an abusive partner.

Jordan: And I think, I think...

Sam: What do you take from that?

Jordan: I think it's a reaction of course from R to the new partner. I think it's more determined by this man in the house, being in the house with abusive

behaviour. Maybe it's, it reminds him about his father, who also was abusive and controlling (Summertown)

Initially, Sam prompted Jordan using pertinent situational cues he had identified. Sam then followed up with a direct question to see what sense Jordan had made of the cues that he had identified, prompting Jordan to hypothesise about the young person's behaviour at home.

Supervision should create a space for sensemaking in which both supervisor and supervisee can participate but how they participate in that space – particularly in generating hypotheses – can vary. In the case of Sam and Jordan, it appeared that Sam first made sense of the information shared by Jordan and identified relevant situational cues that enabled him to come up with a hypothesis. He then fed the cues back to Jordan in a way that enabled Jordan to come up with a hypothesis that helped to explain the behaviour that he had observed. In this way, Sam appeared to be checking that Jordan was making sense of the information in the same way as him. Sam acted as a guide and played a role in steering Jordan towards a hypothesis.

Elsewhere, supervisor and supervisee engaged in sensemaking on a more equal footing. This manifested itself in a degree of turn-taking between supervisor and supervisee in suggesting potential explanations for behaviour:

Taylor: Maybe in her mind she was supporting other families.

Courtney: Maybe, and that's what I thought, is that her kind of feelings about what kind of happened.

Taylor: Maybe it makes her feel better about what she went through losing her children.

Courtney: Yeah (Summertown)

The attempts to understand the mother's behaviour built progressively, ultimately reaching a point where there appeared to be agreement that the final rendering of the hypothesis by Taylor was plausible. This interaction also showed the way that hypotheses are selected and developed through dialogue (Whittaker, 2018). In this instance, however, there was less of an obvious guiding hand and sensemaking took place more collaboratively.

The degree to which supervisors, consciously or unconsciously, steered social workers in generating hypotheses varied from dyad to dyad. At times, relatively minimal input from the supervisor was required to shape the developing hypothesis:

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

Jesse: We've got a few, the one that I'm sticking with at the, the one that feels the most relevant now I guess, is I think that G failed to protect because of the constraints of her cultural understanding and her place within this country rather than as a malicious, complicit failure to protect.

Ashley: Mmm.

Jesse: That's the one I'm sitting with, I think.

Ashley: Explain that one to me a little bit more.

Jesse: So 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 didn't 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 (Springshire)

Ashley initially sought Jesse's current hypothesis about the case; in opening the conversation, however, she also highlighted the shared nature of hypothesising by using "we". Ashley probed Jesse for some more detail around her hypothesis that the mother's behaviour was explained by her cultural understanding before, at the end of the conversation, adding that she felt the fear of deportation was an issue. Later on, as the discussion developed, this aspect of the narrative appeared to be more central to explaining the mother's behaviour than Jesse's initial hypothesis:

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

Jesse: Massive fear (Springshire)

The fear of deportation was agreed on by both Ashley and Jesse as being "massive" and led to Ashley's more certain, less hypothetical suggestion that this fear meant that the mother would "never" have spoken out. Though Jesse's initial hypothesis was more fully explored, the brief suggestion from Ashley about the impact of the fear of deportation was ultimately the hypothesis that seemed to be selected and worked up as being the most likely explanation for the mother's perceived failure to protect. In this instance, Ashley appeared to steer the developing case narrative away from cultural

explanations and towards a fear of deportation. As I touched on in the previous section, the development of this hypothesis also seemed to exclude other potential explanations for the mother's "failure to protect".

11.3 Adopted accounts: change, threshold, and role

At a certain point in the case discussion, social workers and supervisors moved to offering a brief account of the case that could support decision-making. This generally happened towards the end of discussing a particular case and was evident across the supervisory dyads. This stage of sensemaking appeared to be something like the notion of *retention* explored previously, where the story that has been built is plausible and can be adopted by the organisation (Weick et al, 2005). At this stage, the account presented is both explanatory and can justify action.

This can be seen in this example, where Jo had framed the case by signalling her prospective decision-making:

Jo: Their conference is next Friday and I'm hoping that the outcome will be a CIN plan.

Robin: Mmm hmm.

Jo: Cos I'm struggling to have reason to keep them on a CP plan (Summertown)

Following a question from Robin about her most recent visit, Jo was then able to offer an account of the case that underpinned her suggested decision:

Jo: Children were really good, it's been a very calm summer holiday and she said it, 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 in a, A's definitely in a better place than when I first met her. Yeah R is starting high school...today.

They've got really good support from A's friend B, she came round when I was there with her two boys and I could see they're really, they've all got, C as well, they've all got a really good relationship and B sort of steps in, helps with the children, things like that, which I think is probably really helping. It means that A can still do things, or if it's all getting a bit too much, one or all of them can go and see B. And also A's parents are brilliant to her as well (Summertown)

Jo's narrative about the case contained some language that signalled a degree of certainty, for example she talked about A – the mother – “definitely” being in a better place now. This notion of A being in a better place now created a narrative of positive change, with such a narrative being central to the recommendation to move from a higher level of intervention to a lower level. The narrative of change was reinforced by drawing on A's positive experience of the recent summer holiday in contrast to past summer holidays, and further positives in terms of support for A were then identified. The narrative at this point was sufficiently coherent and strong that it could inform future action, in this instance, Jo's recommendation for the case to step down to CIN.

At other times, building a case to support decision-making took place more collaboratively, with supervisor and supervisee both contributing:

Jan: Maybe we do the referral to (Service)?

Erin: Mmm hmm.

Jan: Maybe he can have a key worker there who he can talk to so ... If he enjoys talking to someone and we take that away from him he might spiral down even further, but if he has someone, maybe we can talk to (Service) and see if they have a key worker who can, who can meet with him regularly to give him, not counselling, but just a sounding board and maybe he'll accept that and that is away from statutory services but they can then keep an eye on who he's mixing with. Because if he goes to (School) without supervision he will mix with all those other young people who are into cannabis and that won't be a good thing.

Erin: Mmm hmm, cos I said, cos I've just updated the plan and the review, and I said, in the plan I've answered all the questions, all the things in terms of I wanted mum to do parenting, she said no. Wanted them to manage school, well he is now on a managed move. So the only thing was just to support him through the managed move but I don't think that's down to us to hold it open...

Jan: No.

Erin: ...if he can get somebody else to talk to (Springshire)

The narrative constructed here to build a case to support closing the young person drew on some aspects of the young person's behaviour and presentation, however the major focus was on delimiting the social work role and considering what work others might be able to do instead. When reaching

a point of taking decisions, it appeared to be that case narratives weaved in additional justifications to support decision-making. These justifications often related to the input of other professionals, the limits of the role of the team and social worker, or the notion of threshold.

Such accounts were, however, not necessarily final. There was some limited evidence from the data that where circumstances changed, social workers revisited their previously adopted account and reinterpreted information they had previously gathered to develop a revised case narrative. I highlighted earlier Sam and Courtney discussing a case where they agreed that there was evidence of “good parenting” that supported a decision for the children to remain on a child in plan. This agreed narrative was worked up to something approaching an adopted account, however, later in the research Courtney spoke about the family in interview and had reappraised the case following an escalation in concerns:

[O]n first glance it looks like she adapts because she’s had excellent parenting, it’s not, she’s been left entirely to her own devices and she’s worked and negotiated her way to do everything (Courtney, SW, Summertown)

In supervision, the child’s presentation had been interpreted as evidence of resilience, which had been linked to “good parenting” and a “good attachment”. As the level of worry increased, the child’s presentation was reinterpreted to suggest that they had thrived despite absent parenting. This highlights the way that sensemaking is not necessarily linear, and even where accounts are agreed, this may only be temporary as changes in circumstances require reappraisals and reinterpretations of information. Examples such as this were comparatively rare, in part due to the relatively limited time I was able to spend in the sites, however it offers an interesting instance of a social worker’s change of perspective in light of changing concerns and how this led to a reinterpretation of information and a revising of a previously agreed account of the case.

11.4 Emotions and relationships in supervision case discussion

Discussions about emotional responses to cases were limited within the supervision data; where emotions or relationships were discussed, the focus tended to be on engagement. At times, feelings of sympathy or empathy were expressed, however exploration of their impact on social workers' thinking were lacking. There were rare occasions where social workers used supervision to explore how issues in their private life might impact on their thinking about a case:

Leigh: And I also wasn't sure whether I was struggling because obviously with what's going on for me, whether I was...

Jan: Yeah, it could be.

Leigh: I don't know, I just thought ooh, this is a bit...

Jan: Close to home.

Leigh: Yeah (Springshire)

Jan went on to question Leigh about the case to check that the information she had gathered supported her judgement and that she had not been unduly biased by her home situation. However, such conversations were not the norm within the recorded supervision sessions. Generally, social workers' well-being was considered separately from case discussion, usually at the beginning of the supervision meeting.

Instances of openly reflecting upon how social workers felt about families were uncommon, though there were some occasions where social workers and supervisors talked about how positive relationships with parents had made a difference:

Courtney: She's struggled with others, because you are, 100%, you name the worries with her, you do what you say you're gonna do...

Lucy: Yeah.

Courtney: ...you say when she's doing things well, you can recognise that, and that really works.

Lucy: It does, helps to maintain.

Courtney: It helps the plan and the progress.

Lucy: She's made brilliant progress and so has E to be fair. So, she's agreed to, to hang on in there, but we're friends again now (Laughs) she was cross with me last week but we're friends again now (Summertown)

Where positive relationships between social workers and families were evident, these relationships were seen as promoting change. Jordan (2006) argues that psychological growth occurs within the context of positive relationships; such relationships create feelings of safety that help to promote growth. These ideas underpin relationship-based social work, with the worker-parent relationship seen as being crucial to promoting and sustaining positive change and child safety (Howe, 2010; Ruch et al, 2010; Ferguson et al, 2020a). Opportunities to reflect on relationships are vital to sustaining relationship-based practice, however such opportunities were not afforded to social workers routinely in the recorded supervisions.

11.5 Power dynamics, disagreement, and creating an agreed account in supervision

As discussed previously, whilst supervisees have some power in the supervisory relationship in their ability to share or withhold information, it is also the case that supervisors hold power over supervisees. Supervisors play a role in performance management of supervisees, and this creates power dynamics that can make containing, reflective supervision challenging (Beddoe, 2012). In some of the examples above, the supervisor also had the power to shape hypotheses and to steer the developing narrative in a particular direction. I reflected that, at time, this seemed to involve an attempt from supervisors to simplify cases in order to agree decision-making:

One case dominates a big chunk of the supervision and there is quite a lot of uncertainty in the case ... There is further dissonance because, despite a number of issues, the child is doing well. The supervisor tries to pin SW down to what their main worry is on a number of occasions. They also focus on what it is that SW wants to see and what SW expects from them for the case to be stepped down. These questions seem to be attempts to simplify the case and to move it on from the murky grey area that it inhabits for much of the discussion. The uncertainty around the case seems to be uncomfortable for both and so the questioning seems to attempt to alleviate that (Reflexive Journal)

In reflecting on the case discussion, the sense of discomfort that I picked up on in listening to the supervision and revisiting the transcript sensitised me to the idea that there was an expectation in supervision that agreed accounts of cases and agreed decision-making may not allow room for uncertainty to be held on to. This was evident in the supervisor's attempts to simplify an uncertain and complex case in such a way that key issues and desired outcomes could be identified and a recommendation to step the case down from CP, or not, could be made.

In the example discussed above, there was some discrepancy between the supervisor and social worker in respect of their level of worry about the case. The supervisor was seeking to find a way forward to step the case down from CP, whilst the social worker retained a high level of concern. I noted elsewhere that disagreements do not always surface explicitly (Angouri and Locher, 2012) and the resolution of disagreement took place here through more implicit means, in the use of questioning about the social worker's worries and desired outcomes. Supervisors can be reluctant to challenge social workers openly and directly, so as to not disrupt the sense of equality and collegial competence that underpins team harmony (Pithouse, 1987; Saltiel, 2017); this may also influence disagreement being implicit rather than explicit in supervisory dialogue.

A number of social workers expressed appreciation that supervisors had oversight of their work and they appreciated the shared responsibility and sense of direction that this engendered:

[S]he understood ... the complexity of the case I'm dealing, that's why she's also taking part of that responsibility on her shoulder (Brooke, SW, Springshire)

I used to feel really anxious about going into supervision, but then I'd come out with a sense of relief, I know what I've got to do (Kelly, SW, Summertown)

The sharing of responsibility and the giving of direction helped social workers feel less anxious about their work through providing a form of upwards delegation of accountability (Whittaker, 2011). That said, despite valuing shared accountability, some social workers expressed that it was important to feel confident to challenge their supervisor:

I think I'm more assertive about what I think about things now. So when I was first having supervision I would just accept what I was told, so this is what you need to do, off

you go and do it, and whether I, and probably if I didn't really agree I didn't really have the confidence to say actually I don't wanna do that or I don't think that's right. But now I feel quite confident about doing that (Jo, SW, Summertown)

Where social workers had developed confidence in challenging their supervisor, the process of case discussion in supervision was seen as entailing a degree of negotiation and compromise:

And, I think it's worth talking it out, isn't it, because you're not going to agree on everything, so it's finding that balance (Suzie, SW, Summertown)

[M]e and my supervisor, I've come from one end and she's come at the complete other and then we've had to meet in the middle somewhere (Jesse, SW, Springshire)

Within supervision, supervisors and supervisees were attempting to negotiate an agreed position that respected each of their perspectives on the case, that furthered their individual agendas, and that preserved their relationship in the face of disagreement. Ultimately, participants used supervision to construct narratives that were plausible and that supported decision-making. The need for social workers and supervisors to be accountable to the organisation for their practice seemed to permeate discussions, leading to information being shared and made sense of in ways that were often reliant on a limited set of professional ideas and concepts, such as impact on the child and threshold. In making sense of and presenting cases in this way, social workers and supervisors could demonstrate that they were fulfilling their organisational roles.

11.6 The construction of supervisory dialogue

Across the supervision recordings, there were three main ways that case discussion took place: direct questioning, co-construction, and offering space

to explore. All of the supervisors used these means of discussing cases at times. However, some supervisors appeared to favour one approach over others; for example, Jan appeared to favour offering her supervisees a space to explore their thoughts. This was something noted by her supervisees in their interviews, as well as being evident within the supervision recordings:

[T]here's definitely a way in which she gives you a space to talk about your feelings on cases ... I think she just creates quite an open space to reflect on that (Chris, SW, Springshire)

Jan's capacity to provide a space meant that often she took more of a listening role in supervision, offering direct guidance only when needed, whilst giving her social workers space to explore their thinking. Jan's propensity to take more of a backseat in supervision was also noted during one of my observations:

Ashley says to Jan, can you make me a cuppa? Jan says, I've just got out of supervision and been doing loads of talking, you should make me a cuppa. Ashley says, you barely talk in supervision, you're more of a listener (Springshire, Observation 8)

I reflected at the time that I saw myself more in Jan than in some of the other supervisors:

I see myself more like Jan and I need to be mindful that I am not over-identifying and as a result forming some unconscious judgements ... based on how much of myself I see in them (Reflexive Journal)

This identification with Jan in terms of how I saw our supervisory practice could have influenced me wanting to portray her in a positive light, and so I have been mindful of ensuring that my interpretation of how she tended to create a

space in supervision for talking and listening was grounded in the data and in the expressed views of her supervisees and colleagues.

For other supervisors, there appeared to be more of a pull towards steering supervisory case discussions in a particular direction. I highlighted earlier in the chapter examples from Sam and Ashley where they appeared to steer case narratives in a particular direction. This sense of direction was something that both touched upon in their interviews when discussing their approach to supervision:

It's just trying to get them to come up with a plan and I know what I want them to do (Ashley, Supervisor, Springshire)

I like to have very clear directions of cases, so I have an idea where they're going (Sam, Supervisor, Summertown)

As noted previously, many participants liked this sense of direction and shared accountability, and often this desire to play more of a steering role in supervision led to a more questioning or co-constructing approach from Ashley and Sam in comparison to someone like Jan.

One common feature across the supervisors was the perceived need for supervisors to be more directive with less experienced workers, whilst experienced workers were expected to be more autonomous and to bring their own solutions:

[A]s an experienced worker I'd be expecting her in supervision, which she does, to tell me what she thinks needs to happen next ... [with less experienced workers] I think naturally you end up offering more direction rather than looking to them for as many of the answers as you possibly would an experienced social worker (Robin, Supervisor, Summertown)

I think we have a more free-flowing conversation and I give them room to explore and experiment and go with their view whereas if you have newly-qualifieds or if you have a worker who is a bit scatty or, you have to be more directive (Jan, Supervisor, Springshire)

This echoed some of the thoughts of social workers explored earlier in this chapter; experienced workers noted that they brought their own agenda and had a clear idea of what they wanted to get from supervision. There was an expectation that power dynamics in the supervisory relationship flatten over time and the level of input of the supervisor into case direction decreases. There was also acknowledgement, however, that even experienced social workers sometimes needed guidance in different ways. Jan, for example, highlighted that some experienced workers can still be “scatty” and require more direction as a result, whilst Sam, Robin, and Ashley also highlighted that some experienced workers require more guidance and oversight than others. Experience alone was not necessarily sufficient for supervisors to feel comfortable with allowing social workers greater autonomy in case direction, trust and confidence in the social worker was also required.

11.7 Supervision and sensemaking: agreeing the narrative

The notion of supervisor and supervisee having to create an agreed account of the case played an important role in how sensemaking took place in supervision. Saltiel (2017) suggests that supervision involves a process of supervisors and social workers co-constructing an account of the case that can be sold to the organisation and other professionals. C&F social work is characterised by having to take decisions in conditions of uncertainty (Taylor, 2017); at the same time there are pressures for social workers – coming from other professionals, the courts (Taylor et al, 2008), and the public (Cooper, 2005) – to be clear and confident in their decision-making. Sensemaking in supervision involved creating and presenting a case narrative that the social worker and supervisor could agree on; a narrative that would be plausible to

the organisation to whom it was to be presented through the written supervision record. Through making sense of and presenting cases in this way, social workers and supervisors demonstrated their accountability and professionalism to the organisation.

Social workers and supervisors often relied on a limited range of professional concepts to make sense of cases. Initial case framing tended to draw on familiar professional labels like neglect and “DV” as ways of quickly categorising cases. Meanwhile, discussion of relationships and emotions was less evident in supervision than in the interviews. It may have been that the formal nature of supervision and the need to create an agreed narrative and an agreed supervision record meant that supervision discussions were necessarily sanitised, with the emotional content removed. As has been observed in other studies, professional accounts of practice tend to push out emotional content in favour of more clinical presentations of cases (Lees, 2017a).

Despite this, there were occasions where conversations were more exploratory and social workers were given space to explore their thinking. At other times, there appeared to be collaboration between social workers and supervisors in seeking to understand and explain behaviour. This tended to be where supervisors were happy to share or even cede responsibility for the development of a case narrative. In such instances, supervision provided scaffolding for social workers’ sensemaking, whereas more directive approaches appeared to steer social workers’ thinking towards the supervisors’ preferred narrative and led to swiftly reaching a point of decision-making. Whilst this enabled a sense of safety and feelings of reduced anxiety for social workers, exploration of alternative hypotheses was reduced. That is not to say that more curious, uncertain conversations were absent; however, the formal nature of one-to-one supervision and the need to create agreed accounts of practice that demonstrated shared accountability limited the extent to which such conversations took place.

12. Sensemaking in the office and in group case discussion

This chapter will consider how sensemaking played out in conversations that took place in the office and in formal group case discussion. As with interview and supervision data, the observations were analysed thematically, in this instance using some of the already identified themes and sub-themes as a guide to the analysis. Case narratives from formal group case discussion were looked at as a whole to explore how these narratives were developed through the discussion, and some longer extracts of case-talk in the office space were also looked at to consider how they acted to progress developing case narratives.

In the observation and group case discussion data, there was relatively limited evidence of social workers presenting or constructing an adopted account to support decision-making and as such the key themes that will be explored in this chapter relate to the stages of sensemaking of initial formulation and developing the narrative. The most prevalent themes in the observation and group case discussion data were case framing, generating hypotheses, testing and weighing information, and feelings and relationships. Case framing was a particularly central theme in the observation data given the work the teams were undertaking and the need to triage incoming referrals. Some previously explored and some new sub-themes related to case framing will be explored within this chapter. Some other unique sub-themes – such as “playing devil’s advocate”, exploring intuition, and exploring emotions – will also be explored.

I will also briefly explore the impact of power dynamics within group supervision and will look at how shared narratives influenced sensemaking in both the office space and in group case discussion. The chapter will conclude with some thoughts on similarities and differences between case-talk in these settings in comparison with dyadic supervision and participants’ interviews.

12.1 Initial formulation: case framing

I discussed in the opening analysis chapter the role of triage within Springshire, however, such triage was evident across both sites and provided insight into the role that dialogue played in early sensemaking. The way cases were framed during the process of triage often encompassed offering or developing an initial formulation of the case, much as was evident in the interview and supervision data.

12.1.1 Case framing and pattern-matching

In Summertown, there was an interesting example of how referral information was discussed and made sense of between Taylor (NQS) and Robin (Supervisor) in order to frame an incoming case:

Robin is speaking to Taylor about a case that may be coming through to the team, Taylor is on duty so will be the one to respond if it does come through. Robin says that a 111 call was received from dad and he was advised to take the child to hospital, he seemingly could not be bothered and so passed the phone on to mum. Mum said that she had wanted to take the child to hospital and dad had pushed her in the stomach ... Robin says that the hospital make no reference to controlling behaviour, only to the delay in presenting.

Taylor asks Robin if he has looked at dad on the system. Taylor says there are question marks about him and that he may be having a baby with a different partner next year. Robin says we will see what happens, they are all back home now as hospital discharged them because the explanation for the injury was consistent. Robin says he sees it mainly as a DV issue alongside the delay in attending (Summertown, Observation 10)

As in earlier examples from interview and supervision data, there appeared to be a form of pattern-matching at play (Klein et al, 2007), with Robin intuitively making sense of the referral information to frame the case as being mainly “a DV issue”. This framing used similar professional shorthand as was evident in other forms of case-talk and it appeared to be a consistent feature of the initial process of making sense of referral information that the aim was to categorise the case. These categorisations served to both label the case, using agreed professional concepts, and in labelling them, provided something of a guide for how to proceed with subsequent information-gathering and sensemaking. This was evident later on when Taylor returned from a visit to the family:

Taylor says that the health visitor has been working with mum and has previously spoken to her about a refuge, Taylor says that she spoke to mum about going to a refuge also. Robin asks “So what’s next?”. Taylor says, supporting mum to leave him if that’s what she wants ... Robin asks if there has been any physical abuse? Taylor says only yesterday when he pushed her in the ribcage. Robin says that still, it is really horrible. Taylor says that it is really horrible, mum feels trapped as she does not want to leave without the baby ... Robin says that the incident seems to have brought to the surface what’s really going on in their relationship ... Robin says that it seems that mum really wants to do her best (Summertown, Observation 10)

Whilst Taylor also fed back the parents’ accounts of the incident that led to the referral, the focus of the conversation quickly switched to concerns about domestic violence. Taylor focused on this issue in the information she had gathered and how she presented it to Robin; the concerns about the injury to the baby were somewhat backgrounded in the discussion. I suggested earlier in the analysis chapters that initial formulations of cases seemed to guide how information was gathered and made sense of, and this also appeared to be evident here.

12.1.2 Case framing: incongruence and uncertainty in early sensemaking

There were instances within the observation data, though less commonly, of cases being framed by signalling worries or uncertainties about them:

Kai says to Toni across the desks, this referral that's come in, it's really worrying (Springshire, Observation 4)

This signalling of worry from Kai triggered a brief discussion, which suggested that some of her worries came from the fact that the details of the case were confusing:

Kai says she doesn't know why they've not gone to the council to have dad removed and to not know where they are; Kai says she can't understand why they are still there. Toni says that dad seems to leave for a few days and then come back, not sure what it is about. Kai says, it mentions the children smelling and having head lice? Toni says, yes that was about a year ago. Kai asks, what has that got to do with the DV? (Springshire, Observation 4)

As discussed in the previous chapters, social workers valued coherence and congruence in developing case narratives and tended to be wary of information that felt incongruent. Kai's framing implied that the issues of head lice and the children smelling were not congruent with "DV", and this may explain her sense of worry; Kai was attempting to make sense of the lack of fit between concerns that might typically be associated with neglect and the referral concern of "DV". This framing of cases by a sense of worry or uncertainty was a means of signalling the need for sensemaking dialogue.

12.1.3 Professional shortcuts in case framing

The way that professional knowledge – often in shorthand, simplified forms – influenced sensemaking was sometimes evident in the process of triage and case framing:

Micky, looking at the information on her laptop, asks: “Who’s the toxic trio?” and Toni says “Dad”. Micky says, “Not mum?”. Toni says, “No”, and adds, dad takes coke and is aggressive towards mum (Springshire, Observation 4)

The notion of the “toxic trio” (Brandon, 2009) originates from findings that intersecting poor parental mental health, domestic violence, and substance misuse are prevalent in a high proportion of cases of serious injury or child death (Brandon et al, 2009). The term has become ingrained in C&F social workers’ talk (Sidebotham, 2019), and for Micky it offered a shorthand means for understanding a combination of concerns within the referral. However, the term can remove nuance and lead to a narrow focus on these specific three issues, when in fact a range of other issues can also intersect to multiply risk (Sidebotham, 2019). The utility of the term as a means of making sense of an individual case is somewhat questionable and may suggest that social workers draw on research and theory in a simplified, ‘handbook’ way (White, 2009).

The questioning of “who” is the toxic trio also suggests a propensity for social workers to situate familial problems within particular individuals. The array of issues that contribute to the existence of the “toxic trio” often involve complex relational dynamics and societal issues, such as poverty and unemployment. The framing of the toxic trio as being behaviour exhibited by an individual may reflect the tendency to reduce complex family systems to simple, individualised problems, resulting in part from neoliberal political discourses (Walsh et al, 2019). This brief extract shows how political, societal, and professional narratives appear to influence quick sensemaking conversations in day-to-day C&F social work practice.

The need to quickly make sense of cases when faced with a continuous stream of incoming referrals can also influence shortcuts being taken. Across the different sets of data and across both sites, there seemed to be a role for these kinds of shortcuts, particularly in the early life of a case. At times this took place collectively, reinforcing the use of such shortcutting strategies through repetition.

12.2 Developing the narrative

The office space provided opportunities for social workers to discuss their cases in ways that helped them to make sense of information and to generate and test emerging hypotheses. Case discussion in the observation data took an exploratory tone, with social workers adopting positions that enabled them to question information and to be curious. However, tensions between wanting to build and maintain positive relationships with families and being sceptical about their motives persisted. This section will explore how office case-talk supported social workers to generate hypotheses, to test and weigh information, and to explore feelings and relationships in developing case narratives.

12.2.1 Generating hypotheses: “playing devil’s advocate”

There were occasions within office case-talk where participants openly played devil’s advocate in order to generate alternative hypotheses:

Chris says, “Playing devil’s advocate” if you’ve seen W have seizures and the doctor says no to a diagnosis, is it wrong to seek a second opinion? Toni says, no, absolutely not. The issue is the other diagnosis, the syndrome, the tests have all been negative, there are no signs of him having it. Chris says, the epilepsy is the important one as it relates to the symptoms mum’s reporting ... Toni asks, why would you not want him to go to school though? Chris says, well if you

genuinely thought it wasn't in his best interests ... Toni says, I wonder if the doctor decided to prescribe the medication because mum is a teacher? ... Toni adds that the hospital remember mum because she is "very forceful, feisty" and she is articulate and will push her point. Chris asks, but does being feisty warrant such a response? (Springshire, Observation 4)

In playing devil's advocate, Chris opened up a discussion where information that could have been used to portray the mother in a negative light was interpreted differently to support an alternative hypothesis. Chris's questioning approach encouraged Toni to adopt a similar approach, questioning both herself and Chris to explore the contrasting hypotheses. In advocating competing hypotheses about the case, Chris and Toni were able to subject them to scrutiny, echoing other research findings which suggest that social workers select a best hypothesis through discussion (Whittaker, 2018).

At this point it did not appear that either hypothesis – mother as deliberately harming her child versus mother as concerned parent – had been adopted with any certainty, and it may have been that the narratives being explored were deliberately at the extremes of plausible hypotheses that could explain the presenting concerns. What was evident, however, was that information could be interpreted by both Chris and Toni as being supportive of their chosen narrative. For example, the mother seeking a second opinion could have been because of genuine concern for her son, or it could have been her seeking attention for her own needs. The selection of a preferred hypothesis when the 'facts' of the case can be interpreted to support two very different narratives requires the use of moral reasoning about the mother's intentions and culpability (Taylor and White, 2001).

Informal case-talk in the office generally provided a space where uncertainty and curiosity were possible. However, even in this environment there was evidence that the need to take a decision pervaded much case-talk:

Toni says, the issue is whether it is inhibiting his development. Chris says, it could be CIN? Toni says, it could be, I think mum would engage actually. Chris says, I know the CP threshold is what it is, it's significant harm or it isn't, but if mum would engage perhaps we could help break it down, help her understand the worries (Springshire, Observation 4)

After exploring the two narratives about the case, Toni moved towards a position of refocusing on the impact on the child. This appeared to enable her to set aside the contrasting narratives about the mother's behaviour and, to some extent, to render them moot. By focusing on whether there was an impact on the child's development, the mother's motivations – be they from a position of concern or otherwise – were less significant. This then enabled discussion of prospective decision-making in relation to the CP threshold. There was acknowledgement that even legalistic definitions of threshold can be open to interpretation, and the 'facts' of a case can be interpreted and used in such a way as to support one threshold decision or another.

Despite this move towards decision-making, the conversation enabled some holding on to uncertainty to explore two potential hypotheses; no fixed narrative about the mother's motivations was reached and this appeared to open up the possibility of considering a supportive approach under CIN, as opposed to seeking a position of safe certainty that may have influenced a quick escalation to CP.

12.2.2 Testing and weighing information: scepticism towards parental accounts

There were a number of occasions in the observation data where social workers and supervisors expressed scepticism about information shared by parents:

Jo says she doesn't know what to make of the young person's mum and Robin asks "In what sense?". Jo says she's not sure whether to believe her (Summertown, Observation 1)

Jesse adds, I think it's another son. Jesse says, I think they have family in (Place) too. Ashley says, make sure you tell the police, that might be where dad is. Ashley adds, it's like lies after lies (Springshire, Observation 2)

In the first extract, there was a degree of uncertainty from Jo in whether or not she could believe what the mother was telling her. This appeared to be a gut feeling that something did not feel right, and such gut feelings are generally experienced when a sense of incongruence is felt but cannot necessarily be explained (Topolinski, 2011). In the second extract rather than Jesse having a gut feeling about whether information could be trusted, information from another source created a sense of certainty that the parent was lying. In this particular case, there were already concerns that the information being shared by the parent was unreliable, and so the information from another source was congruent with Jesse's developing narrative.

12.2.3 Congruence and triangulation in testing and weighing information

As in the interview and supervision data, congruence and triangulation appeared to be significant in testing and weighing information in office case-talk, and there were other occasions where information from parents was congruent with other sources of information or the social worker's developing narrative. In these instances, parental accounts were subjected to less scrutiny:

Harley asks does he live there? Sally shakes her head and says that family have given an explanation and that he is not living there (Summertown, Observation 9)

The family's account that an individual who was shown on the system as living in the property was not actually living in the property was accepted relatively uncritically. Sally had just visited the home and the family's denial tallied with her own first-hand observations from the visit, thus offering a degree of triangulation. Elsewhere, the sense that information was believed or not dependent upon how congruent it was with the social worker's own observations or narrative about a family was further in evidence:

Lucy says that both families admit that they fall out and make stuff up about each other. Lucy believes them about this. Paul says "Good", he sounds relieved. Lucy says the young person she is working with is doing well, she is in college and does a lot around the house as she has two younger siblings. Paul says he has also worked with the young person before and was shocked when the allegation was made (Summertown, Observation 9)

Lucy and Paul shared a positive view of the young person and family and felt that the allegation made did not fit with that impression. This may be why Lucy said she "believes them" when they said that they "make stuff up about each other" and may explain Paul's willingness to also accept this explanation. Information, across the different sources of data, tended to be more likely to be accepted by social workers if it was congruent with their own narrative about the case.

As touched on in previous chapters, the value of information was to some extent contingent on whether it did or did not provide evidence for the social worker's developing narrative. I offered an earlier example where an expert assessment – undertaken by a psychologist – was challenged by Jo and Robin, and in the below example there was some disagreement over the evidential value of a different expert assessment:

Robin says that G (the psychologist) has sent through her assessment. Shelley responds, "Yeah". Robin asks if it is

helpful, Shelley makes a sound as though she is unsure and then says, “Mmm, sort of”. Shelley says that there have been many positive improvements, Robin says that there have been positive improvements but that it is still not good enough. Shelley says that her plan is to look with the family at what still needs to change; Shelley says that she saw the children yesterday at nursery and she wished she had a video of what they were like compared to what they are like now. They are talking, they are walking well and playing, they are clean. Robin says that the assessment makes a pretty clear recommendation for removal of the children. Shelley says, “but they have a family member going in now once a week” to help and that they would struggle to meet threshold (Summertown, Observation 6)

Shelley’s ambivalence about the assessment was evident; the recommendation for removal was at odds with her narrative about the case. There was a sense of professional disagreement between Shelley and Robin; Robin appeared to be much more comfortable with the psychological assessment as he favoured a narrative that things continued to be “not good enough” despite the changes noted by Shelley. Each interpreted the value of the assessment in different ways; for Shelley its helpfulness was limited as it ran contrary to her preferred narrative – backed up by her first-hand observations – whilst for Robin it was useful and clear, and more closely aligned to his own narrative about the case.

12.2.4 Testing and weighing information: signalling and holding on to uncertainty

There were several examples within office case-talk of social workers beginning conversations where they wished to test information by signalling a feeling of uncertainty:

Paul has come and sat next to Lucy, he says “I can’t get my head around this one” (Summertown, Observation 4)

Ashley returns with a large sheet of paper and some coloured pens. Keeley says, shall we do Signs of Safety? Jesse says, yes, I think the grey areas will be enormous with this one (Springshire, Observation 2)

Where uncertainty was acknowledged, it helped to create conditions where more exploratory and hypothetical conversations could take place. In the above examples, the signalling of uncertainty preceded a more in-depth discussion about the case. In the latter example, Ashley, Jesse, and Keeley mapped out their worries and identified gaps in their knowledge. This then prompted some hypothesising about the case. It seemed that holding an uncertain position created conditions for exploring hypotheses as opposed to attempting to rush to decision-making.

In expressing uncertainty, power hierarchies tended to not be evident; there were a number of examples of senior team members openly acknowledging uncertainty, often in response to less senior team members offering a different perspective:

Chris says, there is a link between the step-dad and another case so I know about him, if he has made threats to have the family killed it could be more than an empty threat ... Micky then turns to Chris and says, that’s completely changed my mind on that one. Chris says, because of the threat from step-dad? Micky says yes ... Micky then says to Chris, so I need to read this in a different light (Springshire, Observation 5)

Micky adopted a position of epistemic humility in which she acknowledged that the way she had initially seen the case may have been wrong. Micky talked about looking at the case again “in a different light”; the information in the

referral took on new significance for her because of Chris's first-hand knowledge of the case. Thompson (2013) found that at the stage of piecing together a referral, the sense that was made of a case remained in flux depending on how the individual was interpreting and reinterpreting information. Something similar was in evidence here, and the process of dialogue played an important role in triggering Micky to consider that a different narrative about the case was possible.

12.2.5 Feelings and relationships: engagement and making sense of risk

The office space provided a safe space not only to acknowledge uncertainty, but also to explore relationships with children and families. As in other settings, social workers often focused on engagement, particularly on how engagement or perceptions of engagement can influence decision-making. This was evident in the conversation between Toni and Chris discussed earlier in the chapter, where threshold decision-making was weighed against the perceived likelihood of engagement. There was an implicit suggestion that where a parent was willing to work with them, information could be interpreted in such a way as to justify a less punitive decision in relation to the CP threshold.

Relationships between parents and social workers are complex and anxiety is a key feature of them, and it may be that the perception of a parent as being willing to engage alleviates some of the anxiety that social workers feel in working with them. This reduction in anxiety enables less punitive decisions to be taken as workers do not rush to reach a position of safe certainty. Engagement, then, potentially influences sensemaking in both conscious and non-conscious ways. On a conscious level, it appeared to be something that social workers explicitly took account of when thinking about cases:

Tracey says she is completing a parenting capacity assessment, when asked her view she says, "If mum is willing to work with us, which she is, she can make the changes" (Summertown, Observation 1)

At other times, the perception of engagement appeared to have more of an unconscious influence, creating a sense of worry when it was felt that positive engagement might not be forthcoming:

Jackie asks Leigh, can you talk about that mum you assessed previously who wouldn't engage in supervision?
Jackie says, it's come back in and she might not engage again this time (Springshire, Observation 8)

Jackie's concern that the parent might not engage led to her seeking, via Leigh, some input and oversight of the case from the team manager. The worry about non-engagement elevated Jackie's level of concern about the case, leading to a degree of upward delegation of accountability (Whittaker, 2011). By contrast, in the prior extract Tracy's perception that a mother would engage gave her a sense of confidence that she would make positive changes.

As noted previously, the relationship between engagement and risk is complex. On the one hand, positive engagement can lead to underestimations of risk (Brandon et al, 2009), however positive engagement can also engender relationships where change and growth are possible (Jordan, 2006). Whether the kind of affective responses to cases triggered by perceptions of positive engagement are helpful depends on whether there are sufficient opportunities to reflect on them (Cook, 2019a; O'Connor, 2019). There was evidence that, within the office space, social workers were aware that engagement could influence how cases were perceived and made sense of. This was touched upon earlier in the opening analysis chapter, where Steph and Courtney discussed families being "workable" as a means of making sense of why similar cases sometimes resulted in different outcomes.

Similarly, Toni and Chris' discussion suggested that a decision around whether a case met threshold could be influenced by the perception that a mother would engage. That is not to say that this is necessarily problematic; positive social worker-parent relationships can create conditions for reducing risk and increasing safety (Howe, 2010; Brandon et al, 2020). The important thing is

that social workers have a space to reflect on relationships and how they might be influencing the way that they make sense of the family's circumstances.

12.2.6 Feelings and relationships: exploring the impact of relationships

The office space also offered opportunities for social workers and supervisors to reflect on the impact of relationships. Both the risks and benefits of positive working relationships were discussed in the office setting:

Steph then comments that, "We as social workers get groomed all the time" by parents, 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", and, "You'll hear it many times" 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 (Summertown, Observation 3)

Chris says, you had a good relationship with them. Andy says, they're the only family I've ever had dinner with! Adding, not deliberately ... Andy says, yeah, she didn't like Jody, she can be a bit of a terrier. She needs someone a bit more fluffy. I took her through the PLO, it's just how you manage her ... Micky asks Chris and Andy, so we think it's a good match? Andy says, with Helen and L, yes (Springshire, Observation 5)

The tension between relationships as a vehicle for change and relationships as a source of risk was evident in these two extracts. The right fit between a social worker and a parent was seen as being a positive as it could help to promote positive change, however there was also a perceived risk that parents could be consciously or unconsciously "grooming" social workers. Implicit in

this suggestion from Steph was the idea that parents may not be genuine and may engage as a means to deceive or manipulate social workers.

Around halfway through the fieldwork in the first office site, I made note of the way in which much of the office conversation appeared to entail making sense of what it meant to be a social worker, rather than being about making sense of cases per se:

I feel I am still getting a lot of interesting data but not necessarily what I expected ... some of the social workers – and supervisors – focus on making sense of their role, including its ambiguity, its changing nature, and the uncertainty inherent in it, as much as or perhaps even more so than making sense of specific cases (Reflexive Journal)

I am mindful that my own experiences of practice likely gave me a heightened sensitivity towards the challenges of the C&F social work role, and this was evident in this early reflection. When I later came to analyse the observation data, this seeming ambivalence about relationships was particularly prevalent in how social workers and supervisors made sense of their role through office case-talk. The tensions between wanting to build meaningful relationships that could promote change and worry about the potential for being “groomed” or otherwise deceived by parents was never far from the surface, particularly in Summertown where the longer-term work undertaken by the team necessitated relationship-building, often with families who were receiving social work input involuntarily.

This tension made it difficult for social workers to maintain relationships long-term in a way that felt safe for them. The need to balance a degree of scepticism about parental motives with sustaining a positive working relationship was a struggle:

Courtney says that some of the cases she's had too long and now can't "even really see whether there has been meaningful change" (Summertown, Observation 4)

Ashley says to Toni, who is sat diagonally opposite her, the F case, do you want it? Toni says, no, "I think it needs someone to look at it with fresh eyes. I know it so well" (Springshire, Observation 7)

There was a suggestion from both Courtney and Toni that they could no longer really be 'objective' about the families in question because of their closeness to them. Riemann (2005) found that where long-term relationships between social workers and families existed, social workers risked 'going native' and normalising the family's circumstances. This closeness can run the risk of the social worker's view of the family being based on a form of unsafe certainty, whereby the relationship becomes the primary means of making sense of the case, and where the relationship may become either collusive (Mason, 2019) or hostile (Ferguson et al, 2020b). Spaces to reflect on relationships with individual families can offer a means to engage in effective relationship-based social work (Ruch, 2012), however such spaces are not always available for social workers.

12.3 Group case discussion

Group case discussion offered a forum for more structured case-talk than was evident in the office space. At the same time, the focus of group case discussion was less overtly on decision-making than in one-to-one supervision, and so some of the more exploratory and hypothetical characteristics of sensemaking in office case-talk were also evident within group case discussion. This section will focus on the role of group case discussion in developing the narrative, drawing out similarities and differences in how this took place in group case discussion in contrast to other settings.

12.3.1 Developing the narrative: testing and weighing information

Within group case discussion, there was a strong emphasis on testing sources of information and thinking about what they might mean. In both group case discussions, triangulation of information was seen as important. Echoing some of my earlier analysis, in Springshire there appeared to be some scepticism about input from other professionals, prompting a discussion about seeking further information from them:

Toni says, ask them for a chronology of their involvement, what work have they actually done with him? She adds, my fabricated illness case, the health chronology was really helpful. Jackie says, yes, our chronology is one thing but we need other professionals' too (Springshire, Group Case Discussion)

This seeking of information offered a means to enable a degree of triangulation of sources. Triangulation was also evident in Summertown in seeking to test out information from a parent:

Robin adds, things that you already have information on that you can test her on, you know she has lied about paying her water arrears so you can test her on that to see if she's honest (Summertown, Group Case Discussion)

In both instances, the prompt to test information related to shared narratives that were being developed about the two cases through the group case discussion. In this sense, there were similarities between group case discussion and other forms of case-talk, with information being tested against the developing narrative.

12.3.2 Testing and weighing information: the influence of shared narratives

In Springshire, the narrative developed through the case discussion related to the young person being let down by services. This narrative was evident at various times in the group case discussion, sometimes very starkly so:

Jackie says, I have this horrible thought that I need to get out there. I wonder if he has been kept under the psychiatrist and the hospital for the benefit of their research programme rather than for his needs. There is a lack of information forthcoming from them ... Lesley says, I would want to see what recommendations school and the psychiatrist are making for future work. Make them accountable. What is their care plan? Jackie says, when I speak to them I feel like they want to give the problem to us. Toni says, they need to take ownership, push back on them (Springshire, Group Case Discussion)

I highlighted earlier in offering an overview of the teams that some of the negativity towards professionals from social workers in Springshire may have been a result of projection, transference, or counter-transference in response to the anxiety that working with CP concerns can generate (Trevithick, 2011). This may also have been evident here, given how Jackie described feeling about the case:

Jackie then continues, my own feelings on this case: it feels huge, overwhelming (Springshire, Group Case Discussion)

This feeling of being overwhelmed can trigger psychological defences against anxiety; projection on to others of the difficult feelings associated with the case can be one such defence. Interestingly, Toni went on to hypothesise that Jackie's feelings of being overwhelmed may themselves have originated in the parents:

Toni says, it's transference from the parents who are feeling overwhelmed. Lesley says, they are putting it on you (Springshire, Group Case Discussion)

Alongside this potential explanation, it is quite possible that Jackie's response to feeling overwhelmed was to project those difficult feelings on to the professionals involved with the young person as a form of defence. It may also have been that I was particularly open to these transactions of anxiety due to my own experience of the group case discussion. I noted at the time:

It felt a little tiring taking such a volume of notes so quickly and trying to keep up with the discussion and not miss anything pertinent. I wonder if perhaps by own feelings mirrored in some way how Jackie was feeling: almost like running on a treadmill, desperately trying to keep up ... Was I vicariously experiencing what it might be like to be responsible for O, either as his parent or as his social worker? (Reflexive Journal)

Though this experience may well have attuned me to Jackie's feelings of being overwhelmed by the case, these feelings were evident in Jackie's own words. It is, however, interesting how feelings of being overwhelmed or anxious can be transacted between family members, social workers, other professionals, and even observers, and thus pinning down the source of such feelings can be complex. Whatever the source of the negativity towards other professionals within the discussion, the conversation between Jackie, Toni, and Lesley reinforced a shared perception that other professionals are not necessarily reliable.

In the group case discussion in Summertown, the scepticism about the mother's capacity to sustain positive change was underpinned by a shared narrative of disguised compliance:

Robin says, what worries me is the little nuggets of dishonesty from her pointing to a bigger picture ... Courtney says, disguised compliance is a big issue for me (Summertown, Group Case Discussion)

As discussed in previous chapters, disguised compliance is a somewhat problematic label for the behaviour of parents working with social workers. One issue with the label is its propensity to be self-fulfilling; positive behaviour is viewed through a sceptical lens as being 'false' and change is treated as being superficial, with the aim of trying to manipulate the social worker (Leigh et al, 2020a). This was evident to an extent in how the discussion about the mother's honesty proceeded:

Taylor asks Katie, what would swing it for you ... Robin says, what about being honest? Katie says, yeah. Taylor asks, would that be enough? Katie says, I don't know, I'm not sure. Robin says, I think it would. 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 (Summertown, Group Case Discussion)

Where parental behaviour is viewed through a lens of disguised compliance, it can be hard to shift such a perception. Whilst Robin acknowledged that he felt the mother being honest would be enough to sway the decision, he ultimately concluded that disguised compliance was "running through it all". Such a perception risks any apparent honesty being treated with scepticism; the prospect of *genuine* honesty appeared to be limited by the narrative of disguised compliance. This may explain Katie's own uncertainty about whether the mother being honest would "be enough"; consciously or unconsciously, the narrative of disguised compliance meant that there could only ever be an appearance of honesty that would be insufficient to allay Katie's worries. This potentially limited the ways of making sense of the mother's behaviour, with her openness and engagement being precluded from

being interpreted as evidence of genuine positive change or genuine honesty. The case had been previously held in the team, and the mother's dishonesty when her first child was subject to care proceedings seemed to be present in the team's collective memory; such collective memories can be powerful in shaping how cases are made sense of in group case discussion (Riemann, 2005).

12.3.3 Testing and weighing information: exploring intuitive responses

Group case discussion offered a space for social workers to explore their intuitive gut feelings. The value of gut feelings was acknowledged, though tempered with the need to be able to support them with evidence:

Robin adds, if you aren't feeling confident about baby returning home then that tells you something, but you need to be confident in thinking about why the apparent strengths might not be strengths (Summertown, Group Case Discussion)

Katie appeared to feel trapped between a gut feeling that things were not good enough and an emotional pull towards optimism for the mother:

[T]here has been some improvement but Katie says she is not sure it is enough or if it is sustainable (Summertown, Group Case Discussion)

Katie appeared to hold two narratives about the case that did not sit comfortably together, based on her intuitive and emotional responses to the case. By framing the case in terms of these two competing pulls, one optimistic and one pessimistic, it enabled a degree of testing of the evidence that supported the narrative that the mother had genuinely changed, and evidence that supported the narrative that change was insufficient or unsustainable:

Courtney adds, she engaged really well with it, she did really well there ... Katie says, she opened up a lot there. She is trying but it comes down to whether or not she has the ability to do it, she had a crap childhood and she can do it at times but not always (Summertown, Group Supervision)

The potential positive of the mother engaging with professionals and opening up was tempered with caution about whether it was sufficient and whether it was sustainable, reinforcing Katie's sense of there being a dilemma.

12.3.4 Feelings and relationships: exploring emotions

This capacity to explore emotional and relational responses to working with children and families was a feature of group case discussion:

Katie then summarises why she has presented this case today: she feels stuck (Summertown, Group Case Discussion)

Katie adds, I want her to do well though (Summertown, Group Case Discussion)

Courtney adds, and ultimately you will be on the stand being asked if there is no other option than adoption (Summertown, Group Case Discussion)

Katie was able to acknowledge her feelings of being stuck and her positive disposition towards the mother. Courtney, meanwhile, acknowledged the enormity of the decision and the pressure created by having to defend such a recommendation in the court arena. This acknowledgement of the anxiety-provoking nature of having to make a recommendation – though the anxiety was not named directly – appeared to create a safe space for Katie to be honest about her feelings about the case. Katie was then able to reflect on

some of the tensions between her positive feelings about the mother and her worries about the case.

The process of being able to openly express feelings and to talk the case through with colleagues appeared to offer Jackie some containment in group case discussion:

Jackie says, thank you, I have a to do list now when yesterday I had nothing. I've felt overwhelmed with it
(Springshire, Group Case Discussion)

Emotional sharing with colleagues is important for helping to maintain a sense of emotional and cognitive equilibrium (Rimé, 2009). There are links here with containment too; the sharing of emotions enables them to be processed through being taken in by the group and given back to the individual in a more manageable way. Jackie's subtle shift from present to past tense in discussing feelings of being overwhelmed suggested a move from unmanageable to manageable feelings about the case.

12.3.5 Power dynamics and narrative development

In Summertown, the term "disguised compliance" – which was influential in the narrative about Katie's case – was used only by supervisors Robin and Courtney. Whilst it appeared to pervade one of Katie's narratives about the case – indeed, what ultimately appeared to be the dominant narrative – she did not use the term herself. In Summertown, all members of the team were present for group case discussion and there appeared to be some power dynamics at play within the group, with the voices of supervisors being dominant and guiding the direction of the case discussion.

The use of "disguised compliance" by Robin and Courtney was one example of this; it created a short-hand way of summarising the scepticism about the mother's capacity for genuine honesty and sustained change, ensuring that this remained at the forefront of the case discussion. As the case discussion

progressed, the focus shifted to how to evidence the concerns and present them in such a way that they could stand up in court. In particular there was a focus on Katie being “confident in thinking about why the apparent strengths might not be strengths”. Whilst Katie already held a narrative about the mother that was sceptical, this appeared to be reinforced by the input of senior colleagues highlighting the issue of disguised compliance, and ultimately seemed to steer Katie towards making sense of the perceived strengths in such a way that they were no longer seen as strengths, thereby reinforcing the evidential basis for recommending a plan of adoption. In this sense there appeared to be an echo of the function of one-to-one supervision in trying to reach an agreed narrative about the case, and the supervisors played a role in shaping this narrative.

In Springshire there were no supervisors involved in the group case discussion, which instead involved three SSWs from across the two teams and one less experienced social worker. The three SSWs dominated the discussion with relatively limited input from the less experienced social worker. However, the discussion appeared to take place on a more equal footing with no individual obviously steering the direction of the narrative. At times, the SSWs constructed hypotheses together, building on and reinforcing a shared understanding of the case:

Toni says, he’s been labelled heavily. Jackie says, yes and there’s real power behind those labels, what’s on pen and paper. He could have come to identify with them. There’s been too much focus on the risk that he might pose rather than on his own vulnerability ... Lesley says, if he came out as medium risk from AIMS assessment though we would have to let college know. He could go back to being labelled again. Toni says, it’s being recreated all the way through for him (Springshire, Group Case Discussion)

Collectively, the SSWs made sense of the young person’s behaviour as being a result of him being labelled as a risk and him responding to this label. This

narrative was congruent with the earlier expressed scepticism about the other professionals involved in the case, since they were complicit in the labelling of the young person:

Toni says, but he shouldn't be [becoming an abuser] with all the input he's had, professionals have helped to create this
(Springshire, Group Case Discussion)

As discussed previously, such congruence is an important part of how narratives are constructed; the narrative about labelling explaining the young person's behaviour was congruent with the previously explored perception of other professionals and the weaving together of these two narratives by the three SSWs helped to reinforce the developing account of the case. This created a shared sense that the narrative being developed was plausible, coherent, and explanatory. In contrast to the group case discussion in Summertown, however, this process of reaching an agreed narrative was not overtly led by any one of the individuals' own narratives or by a supervisory agenda to seek to support decision-making.

Though there were differences in terms of power dynamics and how this may have influenced how case narratives were developed in group case discussion, across the two sites there were also similarities in how group case discussion functioned. The nature of group case discussion, with less explicit focus on oversight and decision-making, created space for open expression of uncertainty and engagement with emotions. There was also room for exploration of intuitive gut feelings. Sensemaking in group case discussion also incorporated the key step of testing and weighing information and attaching significance to it to inform the developing narrative.

The role of coherence and congruence continued to be important in how case narratives were developed. The labelling narrative constructed in Springshire was explanatory in terms of the young person's behaviour and fitted with the perception of other professionals being unhelpful. This scepticism about other

professionals also served to present an aspect of the team's identity that was highlighted earlier when offering an overview of the Springshire teams.

The narrative of disguised compliance in Summertown fitted with the scepticism about whether perceived strengths were actually strengths and whether the mother was being honest. This narrative may also have served to present an aspect of the team's current identity, with disguised compliance being associated with the interplay of risk, anxiety, and relationships when working with involuntary clients (Leigh et al, 2020a). Suspicions about parental motives can be further exacerbated by the adversarial nature of care proceedings (Taylor et al, 2008). Given the previously identified preoccupation with risk that was evident in Summertown as a result of an increase in court work, it is possible that the prevailing case narrative in group case discussion reflected this aspect of the team's identity at that time.

Whilst group case discussion appeared to provide a space where uncertainty could be explored and held on to, there remained something of a pull towards singular and more certain accounts. The narratives of disguised compliance and labelling that came to dominate how the cases were understood appeared to be adopted as explanatory as the conversations progressed.

12.4 Contrasting sensemaking in informal and formal spaces

The process of constructing a case narrative remained similar in informal spaces in contrast to interviews and one-to-one supervision, and at times social workers drew on similar ideas to help them attach significance to information. The tension between the desire to build meaningful relationships that can promote positive change and a scepticism about parental motivations was often present in office case-talk. This tension was reflected in social workers' interviews, where they described a contrast between a "human" feeling self and a more detached "professional" self. At times, this tension between building emotionally-engaged relationships and the risk of deception

or complicity within such relationships was a feature of case-talk across both sites.

The informal space of the social work team and the space created in group case discussion provided a degree of safety for workers to express and process emotions. Emotional sharing is important for individuals in maintaining a sense of emotional equilibrium and enabling cognitive functioning (Rimé, 2009). It was noticeable, however, that across all forms of data emotions were generally seen as a source of potential bias, as something to be contained, or as something to be bracketed off from professional judgement, as opposed to being a legitimate sensemaking resource (O'Connor, 2019). This ambivalence about emotions and relationships ran through much of the office case-talk and case-talk in group case discussion. Discussion of emotions and relationships was less evident in formal one-to-one supervision. In interviews, emotions tended to be discussed with a degree of ambivalence: they were both a natural part of the work but also not necessarily allowable as a "professional" social worker. This resonated with my earlier reflections on how much of the office case-talk involved participants seeking to make sense of their role and how to manage relationships within the boundaries of their professional role.

Though the office space and group case discussion provided a degree of openness and room for uncertainty and exploration of emotions, the pressure of needing to take decisions remained evident. At times, supervisors took a more directive approach, implicitly or explicitly, to steer discussions towards a particular narrative. This may be linked to the issue of accountability that is a feature of the managerialist paradigm in C&F social work. One consequence of this is a focus on managerial oversight of cases, and this need for oversight can pervade the supervisory relationship (Bartoli and Kennedy, 2015). That said, explicit case direction was less apparent in the office and in group case discussion than in one-to-one supervision, and, overall, this meant that case-talk in these settings tended to be more exploratory and hypothetical than in one-to-one supervision, where the need to create an agreed narrative to present to the organisation limited how much uncertainty could be held on to. In the discussion to follow I will discuss some of these differences further,

relating my analysis back to the existing literature and considering why there may be differences in sensemaking case-talk across different contexts. I will also discuss what my analysis means for C&F social work practice.

13. Discussion

The discussion will begin by drawing on the analysis of the interview data, recordings of supervision, and observations of case-talk in the office and in group case discussion to map out social work sensemaking as a process of constructing a case narrative. Broadly in line with Weick (1995), the purpose of such narratives is to both retrospectively explain a situation as well as to inform future action. It is in this function of informing action that sensemaking precedes and underpins decision-making and judgement (Platt and Turney, 2014). Within this section, I will situate my analysis of sensemaking in different forms of case-talk within the wider literature.

In exploring the way that case narratives are constructed, I will highlight that how narratives are built and presented differs across different contexts. I will explore these differences by revisiting the links between sensemaking and identity (Weick et al, 2005), focusing particularly on how cases are discussed in one-to-one supervision in contrast with other settings and the role that the presentation of identity in different contexts plays in explaining differences in how cases are constructed. This is one of the novel aspects from my analysis, and whilst wider literature will be drawn upon to situate the analysis, highlighting the relationship between identity and sensemaking in social work makes a unique contribution to the field.

This will lead on to a discussion of how one-to-one supervision sessions sit alongside other forms of support for social workers in helping them to make sense of their work. I will look at the role of informal supervision, collegial discussion, and group case discussion in supplementing one-to-one supervision and what some of the limitations of this might be. This represents another novel contribution to the field; whilst other theoretical work has suggested that supervisory functions may be carried out by other forms of support for social workers (Wilkins, 2017a), there has been a lack of empirical basis to show how these supervisory functions may be dispersed across C&F social work teams in their day-to-day practice. Implications of the research for C&F social work will be explored, focusing on the need to provide social

workers and supervisors with spaces that can promote better sensemaking. I will also discuss how the Covid-19 pandemic, alongside broader moves towards flexible working policies, may impact on social work practice in light of my analysis.

Finally, I will identify strengths and limitations of the study. In particular, I will look at how proximity to practice has enabled a more nuanced understanding of how supervision and its primary functions are enacted in day-to-day practice, and how using multiple forms of data collection has helped to highlight the influence of context on how social workers engage in sensemaking to construct case narratives. The chapter will conclude by suggesting some future directions for research.

13.1 Mapping sensemaking: constructing a case narrative

Sensemaking in the context of C&F social work involves the construction of a case narrative through a process of story-building:

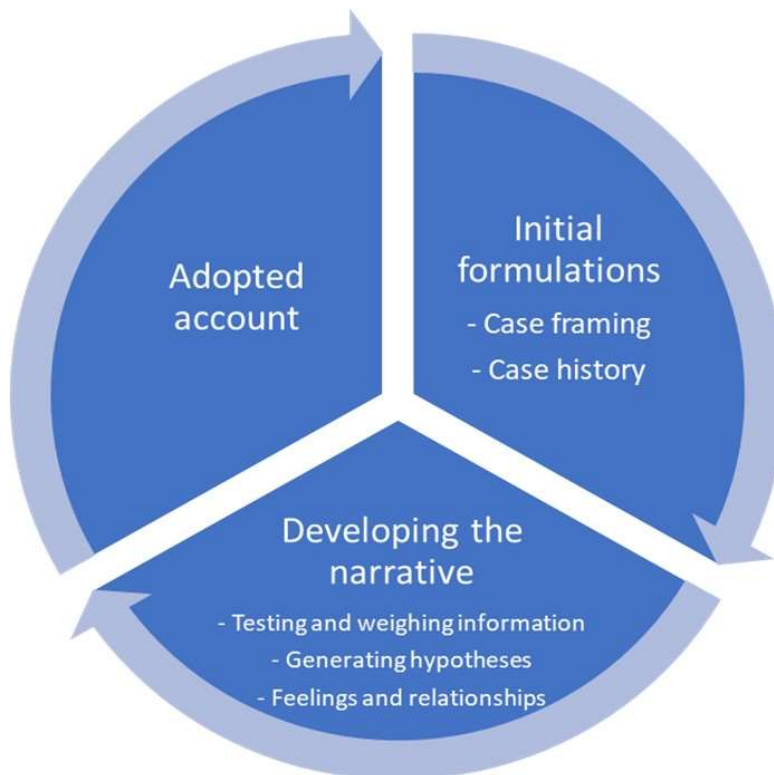


Figure G: Diagram of constructing a case narrative

The diagram represents the three stages of sensemaking identified through the analysis of interview, supervision, and observation data, and includes the key over-arching themes identified and presented through my analysis. The diagram is intended to represent how case narratives are developed when a decision needs to be taken on a case – for example, when an assessment is being undertaken – however sensemaking activity takes place throughout. Social workers progress through the cycle in order to reach a decision, though there was some evidence of social workers passing through the cycle more than once when new information created a need to reappraise an existing adopted account on a case. The diagram is most useful for understanding how sensemaking functions to support decision-making, other studies have shown how sensemaking functions in practice encounters such as home visits (Cook, 2016), and this kind of sensemaking likely sits within the initial formulation and developing the narrative stages identified in the diagram. However, my data related to assessment decision-making and so it is in this context that the diagram has been developed.

Early on in the construction of case narratives, participants offered initial formulations of cases using more intuitive forms of sensemaking to frame cases or appraise case history. The case narrative was then developed by testing and weighing information, generating hypotheses, and drawing on feelings and relationships to inform the developing case narrative; within this, social workers also used moral reasoning to make sense of behaviour.

At the final stage of sensemaking – which I have labelled the adopted account – the lines between sensemaking, decision-making, and judgement blur; participants at this point offered more certain narratives that were used to justify the taking of a particular decision. The majority of sensemaking activity took place within the first two stages of the above model, hence themes related to sensemaking being concentrated within these two stages, and these themes making up the bulk of the preceding analysis chapters. These adopted accounts at times fed back into participants' initial formulations of cases; this

was especially evident where cases had a long history of involvement, where a new assessment had been triggered on an already active case, or where a reappraisal of the adopted account was needed in light of new information.

13.2 Initial formulations

Initial formulations of cases were created through categorising or framing the case and drawing on case history. In analysing the interview data, I identified that these initial formulations acted as cornerstones or touchstones in subsequent sensemaking. Where initial formulations acted as touchstones, cases were framed with more certainty; typically, this happened in instances where the family were already well-known to the social worker or their team. By contrast, where initial formulations acted as cornerstones, this tended to be where cases were less well-known.

These initial formulations influenced how social workers went on to make sense of the case. Where the initial formulation acted as a touchstone, it acted as a yardstick against which information would be tested and weighed as the case narrative was developed. Where initial formulations acted as a cornerstone, whilst they influenced how the narrative was developed – in particular, by sensitising social workers to how to gather and interpret information – there appeared to be more scope for the case narrative to be developed in different ways. Whilst cornerstone formulations remained a part of the final case narrative, they had usually been built upon or augmented through the sensemaking process. In both instances, the initial formulation was influential – echoing other work on early judgements (Munro, 1995; Taylor and White, 2006) – however the nature and degree of influence differed depending on whether the initial formulation acted as a touchstone or cornerstone.

13.2.1 Use of intuition and the role of dialogue in initial formulations

Within the findings across the interview data, supervision recordings, and observation data, there were examples of what appeared to be pattern-matching (Klein et al, 2007). This involved rapidly and unconsciously identifying pertinent cues from referral information or visits to families and offering an initial formulation of the case based on those cues. These formulations were often couched in professional language; cases were frequently framed in supervision and in interviews using established categories of harm, such as neglect (DfE, 2016).

At other times, social workers framed cases in the office space, and occasionally in supervision, by feelings of uncertainty or worry in order to signal a need for sensemaking dialogue. This resonated with Helm's (2016) findings about the use of framing, particularly emotional framing, to initiate sensemaking conversation with colleagues. More deliberate sensemaking tends to be triggered by a sense of incongruence (Weick, 1995) and an inability to intuitively make sense of situational cues (Klein et al, 2007), which then manifests through expressions of doubt, uncertainty, or worry. Sensemaking dialogue then assists social workers to move forward from this initial uncertainty in the process of developing a case narrative (Helm, 2017; Whittaker, 2018).

Whilst this early stage of sensemaking has many similarities with Weick's (1995) enactment stage – where situational cues are noticed and recognised as needing explanation – one subtle difference is that social workers and supervisors not only recognised the need for explanation but also offered an initial formulation of the case that helped to inform subsequent sensemaking and thus shape how the explanatory narrative would be developed.

13.3 Developing the narrative

This stage of sensemaking has significant parallels with Weick's (1995) selection phase of the process of story-building. During this phase, information is selected and meaning and significance attached to it; mental models are used (Weick et al, 2005; Klein et al, 2007) to help to make sense of information in order to incorporate it into the developing narrative. Provisional hypotheses begin to be articulated and tested, and social workers draw on emotional and relational understandings of cases to inform their developing narrative.

13.3.1 Feelings and relationships

The role of feelings and relationships was evident within the interview data, where social workers would often interweave emotional, relational, and moral narratives about parents or children – narratives of sympathy or antipathy, of vulnerability or culpability – with narratives that drew more heavily on professional concepts like impact on the child, and shorthand explanations of parental behaviour, such as disguised compliance. In many cases, more emotional and relational narratives came with a suggestion that the “human” self was distinct from the “professional” self, mirroring similar observations from Winter et al (2019). The prevalence of emotional and relational narratives suggested that many social workers felt drawn towards working in a relationship-based way with families, however the bracketing off of the “human” and professional in how cases were talked about in many of the interviews suggested that social workers felt uncertain about the extent to which such relationships felt allowable. This would seem to reinforce Smith's (2012) assertion that in practice, social workers struggle to integrate their personal and professional selves and instead treat them as distinct.

That feelings and relationships play a role in how social workers make sense of cases and reach judgements is well-established (Taylor and White, 2001; Damasio, 2006; O'Connor and Leonard, 2014; Keinemans, 2015; O'Connor, 2019). However, it is also apparent that social workers struggle with whether emotions are “professional” (O'Connor, 2019). Emotions can act as a resource

or as a risk (Cook, 2019a) and this was apparent in how emotions and relationships were discussed in office case-talk; on the one hand, there were examples of positive relationships being seen as vehicles for change, on the other hand, it was apparent that the closeness needed to engage in meaningful relationship-based practice was seen as running the risk of collusion with families who may be “grooming” social workers.

Although emotions play a role in sensemaking, there is a tendency for emotional understandings of cases to be stripped out of formal accounts of practice (Lees, 2017a). This was evident in supervision, where discussions of feelings were usually separated out from case discussion and situated within conversations about social workers’ well-being. This meant that feelings *about* cases were often not discussed or were reduced to brief expressions of sympathy or frustration. This meant that how such feelings could inform or potentially bias an understanding of the case was rarely explored. On a small number of occasions, the role of relationships in facilitating engagement and change was discussed in supervision, though this was limited to a small number of cases. There was also one instance of a social worker asking to speak about a case in more depth because the issues felt “close to home”. Here, the social worker’s case narrative was then tested against their observations and other sources of information, and both the social worker and supervisor felt satisfied that the judgement was justified and well-evidenced. Such testing of emotional experience against other sources of information was, however, not commonplace, and instances of emotions being seen as a potential sensemaking resource were almost entirely absent.

13.3.2 Testing and weighing information and developing hypotheses in the office space

The way meaning and significance were attached to sources of information was often contingent on how congruent the information was with the participants’ developing narrative about the case. The meaning and significance attached to information are not fixed and often change as social workers’ narratives shift (Thompson, 2013) as they seek to create a plausible

and coherent narrative (Weick et al, 2005). Congruence and coherence are correlated with a positive affect response, which in turn tends to be correlated with positive judgement (Topolinski, 2011). However, this can create bias through the affect heuristic, whereby positive affective responses result in positive judgements being made (Finucane et al, 2003). The affect heuristic can combine with confirmation bias to lead to information being interpreted selectively; Taylor and White (2006) found that where social workers had a positive view of a parent (affect heuristic) they tended to reject evidence to the contrary (confirmation bias). Chris (SW) touched upon this in his interview, noting that his positive feelings about a mother could lead to him being biased in his attempts to understand her daughter's behaviour. Being mindful of the role of congruence and affect in how social workers make sense of information is important in order to mitigate possible bias.

One means for mitigating such bias is through adopting a position of epistemic humility (Higgins, 2019) and being open to challenge. This was evident at times within the observation data, for example Micky (SSW) talked about reading a referral in "a different light" following a discussion with a colleague. Furthermore, the flexibility in the way that information can be interpreted was evident in a conversation between Toni (SSW) and Chris (SW) where Chris deliberately played "devil's advocate". Within the conversation, both parties were able to use information about the family to evidence contrasting narratives about the case; this led to two potential hypotheses about the case being developed. By holding on to both hypotheses, information was not automatically interpreted solely by how congruent it was with a preferred narrative.

At other times, the way that information was interpreted seemed to be influenced by factors relating to the team and organisation. In Summertown, it was notable that risk pervaded how cases were made sense of. In part, this appeared to be related to the teams having to hold on to court work for the duration of care proceedings. This led to scepticism about information from parents and the development of shared narratives of disguised compliance on some cases, narratives which reflect doubts about parental truthfulness (Leigh

et al, 2020a). The court arena has a propensity to create an adversarial relationship between social workers and families (Beckett et al, 2007; Taylor et al, 2008) and it is possible that increased exposure to the court arena may have influenced how relationships with parents were perceived; within Summertown, office case-talk often reflected tensions between a desire to build meaningful relationships and worries about being deceived by parents.

13.3.3 Testing information and developing hypotheses in supervision

In supervision, information was frequently tested and weighed using a limited number of professional criteria, such as the threshold of significant harm and impact on the child. This mirrored Platt's (2006: 16) finding that social workers in frontline settings tend to reduce decision-making to a limited set of "intuitive steps" related to parental culpability and characteristics of the harm experienced. Many supervisory conversations took the form of the social worker presenting information – including first-hand accounts of their work, and the views of other professionals and family members – that was then tested in terms of whether it evidenced significant harm and whether it evidenced a negative impact on the child.

This quick appraisal of information using criteria related to significant harm and impact on the child appeared to take place intuitively, however there was less evidence of more deliberate sensemaking being commonplace in supervision. Occasionally hypotheses were mentioned, though rather than leading to consideration of multiple hypotheses, this tended to lead to a process of the social worker and supervisor co-constructing a singular shared narrative about the case. This resonates with other studies, which have identified the propensity for supervision to focus on constructing single, linear explanations (Bingle and Middleton, 2019). This process reinforces the notion that the purpose of case discussion in supervision is to create an agreed account (Saltiel, 2017) and to identify a problem or set of problems that can then be responded to (Wilkins et al, 2017).

Patterson (2019) argues that supervision ought to provide a shared sensemaking space, and there were occasions where social workers and supervisors were more exploratory in how they discussed cases and where they appeared to hold on to uncertainty. Safe uncertainty is beneficial because it enables social workers to continue testing hypotheses and exploring alternative narratives (Helm, 2011). Safe uncertainty entails the use of authoritative doubt, where the social worker draws on their professional knowledge and expertise to explore and scrutinise possible narratives about a case (Mason, 1993). Turning back to sensemaking, Weick et al (2005) state the following:

Sensemaking ... is about continued redrafting of an emerging story so that it becomes more comprehensive, incorporates more of the observed data, and is more resilient in the face of criticism ... People may get better stories, but they will never get *the* story (Weick et al, 2005: 415)

The creation of better narratives involves adopting a position of safe uncertainty and acknowledging that other stories are possible and worthy of consideration. Holding on to safe uncertainty resists the pull to safe certainty that can lead to rushed, risk-averse decision-making (Mason, 2019). Ultimately, however, social workers and their supervisors are tasked with making concrete recommendations within prescribed timescales, and this relies upon constructing a case narrative that can plausibly explain the presenting situation and inform future action (Weick et al, 2005). Where information is scrutinised and alternative narratives are explored, it should lead to more robust judgements (Taylor and White, 2001). The use of authoritative doubt –using expertise from a position of safe uncertainty (Mason, 1993) – should promote *confidence* in decision-making and judgement as opposed to *certainty*.

13.4 The adopted account

This final phase of sensemaking is similar to Weick's (1995) stage of retention; the story at this point has explanatory power, is plausible, and can inform action. This end stage of the sensemaking process was primarily evident within one-to-one supervision – though with some instances in interview and observation data also – which provided a forum for agreeing an account of the case and taking agreed decisions. Where social workers and their supervisors offered an adopted account, this tended to be in support of a concrete decision being taken.

These adopted accounts tended to be justificatory and characterised by certainty. At times, this process of presenting adopted accounts happened collaboratively between social workers and their supervisors. In my findings I highlighted supervisory dialogue between Jan (Supervisor) and Erin (NQSW) where each took turns to build a case to justify closing a case with support from other services. At other times, particularly with more experienced workers, the presenting of these accounts was led by the social worker, which would appear to support Saltiel's (2017) finding that experienced social workers know how to present a case in supervision in order to get a particular decision.

13.5 Exploring differences in case construction and presentation

Within the interview data, social workers appeared to wrestle with how allowable feelings were in how they talked about their work. As touched upon previously, this led to social workers sometimes talking about the professional self as being separate from the "human" or personal self, with similar findings noted in other studies (Winter et al, 2019). Social workers did, however, generally present a narrative about the case that contained emotional, relational, and moral components alongside a more formal, professional account of the case. Case narratives were generally presented as complete, or close to complete, with a distinct beginning, middle, and end. In the

interviews more so than in the supervision and observation data, the stages of sensemaking presented in the diagram earlier in the chapter were all evident. The chosen methodology was useful in this respect; as touched upon previously, the interviews were designed to elicit a narrative about the participants' cases and this enabled data to be collected that could map how social workers construct case narratives through their talk. This then provided a basis for comparison with how social workers presented case narratives – or partial narratives – through naturally occurring talk in supervision, the office space, and group case discussion.

This approach highlighted that in the supervision data, there was comparatively little exploration of feelings and relationships. Brief expressions of sympathy or empathy occurred at times but these often appeared to act as asides and rarely formed part of the narrative being constructed about the case. In contrast to the interview data, the social worker's emotional experience of the case was largely absent. Other studies have also found that emotions play a limited role in formal supervision sessions, outside of checking on the social worker's well-being at the start of the session (Bourn and Hafford-Letchfield, 2011; Wilkins et al, 2017, Beddoe et al, 2021). Social workers do not necessarily see supervision as a safe space for expressing and exploring feelings (Ingram, 2015).

Subsequently, the way that narratives were developed in supervision tended to rely upon the use of professional concepts like impact on the child, good enough parenting, risk of significant harm, and disguised compliance. These ideas acted as shortcuts to enable the supervisor and social worker to agree an account of the case and subsequent decision-making relatively quickly. This left little room for hypothesising and exploration, echoing other findings which suggest that supervision case discussion can tend towards offering singular explanations (Bingle and Middleton, 2019) and relatively uncritical problem-identification and offering solutions (Wilkins et al, 2017).

There was evidence within the office space and in group case discussion that talk about feelings and relationships was more allowable. In both group case

discussions, for example, the presenting social worker was able to talk about how they felt about the case and the individuals involved. There is evidence from other studies that group case discussion can provide scope for more emotionally- and relationally-informed conversations that offer social workers scope for reflection and containment (Lees, 2017b; O'Sullivan, 2018; Lees and Cooper, 2019). In particular, O'Sullivan (2018) found that such spaces helped to draw out hitherto hidden feelings of anxiety and how such feelings impacted on their work. This was evident to some extent within the group case discussions that I observed, where feelings such as being "overwhelmed" and "stuck" were expressed and acknowledged and responded to by those present.

Informal case-talk in the office also provided opportunities for social workers to discuss feelings and relationships. Social workers would signal worry or uncertainty and this would trigger a discussion that helped social workers to make sense of a particular issue (Helm, 2016). The office space also provided opportunities for reflection and exploring hypotheses, and there was evidence of social workers challenging each other's thinking and playing "devil's advocate". This is somewhat in contrast to other studies, for example Saltiel (2016) and Broadhurst et al (2010), who found that similar teams tended to work at a pace that meant thinking became primarily automatic. Whilst there were many examples of social workers and supervisors using intuitive sensemaking within my study, there were also examples of collaborative discussions that provided opportunities for more deliberate sensemaking.

13.5.1 Identity and audience

As discussed earlier in the thesis, sensemaking is inherently related to identity; through constructing narratives, identities are constructed, reconstructed, and performed (Weick et al, 2005). As explored previously, social workers' identities are made up of professional, personal, and private "selves" (Smith, 2012: 50). Whilst social workers' personal and professional selves frequently merge or overlap (Leigh, 2014; Scholar et al, 2014), social workers can struggle to integrate their personal and professional selves, either through lack

of experience (Leonard and O'Connor, 2018), or through pressures created by neoliberal influences on social work identity. These neoliberal influences, which are often associated with technical-rational approaches to social work practice (Rogowski, 2011; Parton, 2014), create a perception that feelings and relationships are distinct from or in conflict with notions of professionalism (Hingley-Jones and Ruch, 2016; Tanner, 2020). It is for this reason that social workers are prone to splitting off the "human" or personal self from the professional self in their work (Smith, 2012; Winter et al, 2019).

Riessman and Quinney (2005) make the case that narratives are constructed in particular ways for particular audiences. The presentation of a narrative conveys something about the identity of the individual (Riessman, 2008), and this presentation of identity takes place with a particular audience in mind (Riessman and Quinney, 2005). Sensemaking involves the constructing of narratives, and in constructing narratives social workers construct and reconstruct their identities (Riemann, 2005; Weick et al, 2005). At the same time, the narratives they construct are intended to be persuasive and plausible to a target audience (Weick et al, 2005).

13.5.2 Identity and audience in one-to-one supervision

The question of who and what supervision is for helps to shed light on why case narratives are developed and presented as they are in one-to-one supervision. Patterson and Whincup (2018: 423) talk of the "empty chair" in supervision, which symbolises the absent service user who is being discussed. They suggest that keeping the empty chair in mind helps to remind social workers and supervisors of the importance of keeping the service user in mind and exploring their perspective (Patterson and Whincup, 2018). By contrast, Saltiel (2017) argues that case discussions in supervision do not reflect the narratives of service users, but instead involve the creation of an account that can be sold to the organisation and other professionals. Here, the organisation appears to fill the metaphorical empty chair. How cases are discussed and constructed in supervision is likely to vary depending on who the intended

audience is and which aspects of the social worker's and supervisor's identities they are presenting through their discussion.

Earlier on, I explored how social work identity is in part shaped by the organisation and how social workers position themselves in relation to it (Leigh, 2014, 2016) and by the way that society perceives the social work profession (Legood et al, 2016; Leigh, 2016). In one-to-one supervision, the organisation appeared to be the intended audience for the case narratives being constructed and presented. It is worth noting that the organisation acts as something of a proxy for wider society and its expectations of the profession (Hoggett, 2006; Leigh, 2014); in this sense, it is not *just* the organisation that becomes the audience, but the organisation as an embodiment of wider sociolegal and political expectations of the social work profession (Cooper, 2018).

In the interview data, one social worker referenced using supervision to check that their practice was "defensible", whilst two of the supervisors spoke of the role of formal supervision in providing "oversight". The negotiation of an agreed case narrative that can be recorded through the written supervision record enables supervisors to demonstrate their oversight of the case and social workers to demonstrate that their thinking about the case is defensible. These accounts must be plausible to the organisation as both employer and as a proxy for wider societal expectations of the profession (Leigh, 2016).

The impact of this appeared to be a foregrounding of more professional aspects of social workers identities and backgrounding of the personal or "human" self in how they discussed their cases. Similar observations were made by Winter et al (2019) when analysing how social workers presented themselves in interactions with children and families. Some interactions were noted to be devoid of emotion and heavily task-focused, despite the situations observed clearly being emotive for the young person involved (Winter et al, 2019). Similar to my own findings, Winter et al (2019) found that when social workers spoke about the interaction subsequently, they did express emotions about the case and their relationship to the young person that were not see

within the interaction. It is in this respect that Winter et al (2019) highlight that the presentation of a more professional self is a form of performance, since away from the context of the interaction the social worker's "real", human self is in evidence. This performance serves as a defence against emotions that are seen as not being allowable (Winter et al, 2019). Much the same appeared to take place in supervision; the social worker's emotional and relational experience of the case was largely edited out, despite being apparent in both the interview and observation data. If it is the case that the organisation – imbued with expectations of what it means to be a "professional" social worker – is the intended audience in supervision, then the performance of a professional version of the self serves to both meet the organisation's expectations and to manage the emotional experience of the work in a context where such emotions do not feel allowable. Beddoe et al's (2021) observations of supervision also seem to bear this out; supervision is increasingly a formal space for professional oversight, rather than an emotionally- and relationally-engaged practice.

The perception that one-to-one supervision is not a space for exploration of emotions has also been noted elsewhere (Ingram, 2013, 2015) and this results in the more relational and emotional aspects of social workers' identities being suppressed within that space:

The opportunity for reflective, emotionally supportive supervision was sacrificed to the organisational imperative to comply with government-imposed performance indicators ... Audit requirements and the pressure for performance data over-rode the need for attention to what was occurring emotionally and viscerally for the workers ... alongside analysis of what was going on in the relationship, especially below the surface (Ferguson et al, 2020b: 11)

Smith et al (2012: 1474) similarly found that managerialist approaches to C&F social work have been "eroding the social work relationship in favour of bureaucratic, procedural systems". This inhibits the extent to which it is

permissible for social workers and their supervisors to explore emotional, relational, and moral narratives within supervision. Instead, a more “professional” identity is performed as a means to meet the expectations of the organisation.

Professional aspects of social work identity manifested in formal supervision not merely through a comparative absence of talk about emotions, but also through the use of a shared professional knowledge-base as a means to make sense of cases. This was evident in the way that cases tended to be categorised by the primary categories of harm (DfE, 2018a) and by the use of professional concepts like impact on the child and risk of significant harm as means to test and weigh information. There was also evidence that generic narratives were used to explain family behaviour, for example through constructing behaviour as disguised compliance (Leigh et al, 2020a). These ways of presenting cases represent the kind of professional narratives highlighted by Patterson and Whincup (2018) as being evident in supervision, and through their use the social worker and supervisor’s professionalism can be demonstrated.

Findings from other research reinforce the notion that organisational expectations limit how social workers construct cases. When faced with the complexity of children and family’s lives, Walsh et al (2019) found that social workers responded by categorising the family’s circumstances as a series of simplified individual problems (Walsh et al, 2019). This way of responding was influenced by the need to construct cases in ways that fitted with responses that were available and agreeable to the organisation (Walsh et al, 2019). This would seem to reinforce the notion that in some contexts, social workers present cases with the organisation in mind, constructing the lives of children and families in ways that can be ‘sold’ to the organisation (Saltiel, 2017).

The influence of the organisation and the simplification of families’ lives that takes place when constructing professional accounts does not happen in isolation. C&F social work in recent years has tended towards a narrow focus on risk and CP and this has had the knock-on effect of children being

decontextualised from their wider family (Collings and Davies, 2008; Walsh et al, 2019). Walsh et al (2019) note that social workers perceive children as a 'case' that needs to be understood and categorised and this leads them away from understanding the family as a complex and relational system. Supervision can act as a space to explore complexity (Patterson and Whincup, 2018), however often one-to-one supervision reinforces the pull towards simplified accounts of families' lives (Wilkins et al, 2017; Bingle and Middleton, 2019; Beddoe et al, 2021). This was evident through my analysis; social workers and supervisors constructed and presented narratives that foregrounded more professional aspects of their identity in order to meet the expectations of the organisation as audience. This enabled them to demonstrate their practice was "defensible" and achieved the function of ensuring oversight, however this led to singular agreed narratives being that often excluded emotional and relational understandings of cases.

13.5.3 Identity and audience in other contexts

Although within one-to-one supervision this pull towards simple, singular explanations that circumvented discussion of feelings and relationships was strong, within the observation and interview data there was evidence of social workers exploring multiple narratives about children and families in their work, and these narratives included consideration of relational and emotional aspects of their work with the family. The suggestion is that the organisation occupying the 'empty chair' in supervision influences the way that cases are presented in that context; the absence of this audience in social workers' office case-talk, in group case discussion, and within their interviews, may explain the different character of how cases were constructed and presented in these settings.

In these contexts, there was a sense of social workers being "among themselves" (Riemann, 2005: 417). Riemann (2005) notes that the kind of collegial atmosphere created when social workers are among themselves offers social workers a space to openly express uncertainty. Ingram (2015) similarly found that social workers value the shared experience of their

colleagues, and this provides a safe space for them to explore feelings. This appeared to be the case in both the office space and in group case discussion, where my observations highlighted greater prevalence of emotional and relational talk about the work, and with it more of a sense of uncertainty and exploration in how cases were discussed. The office space and group case discussion provided a space where uncertainty could be held safely whilst social workers were in the process of making sense of a case.

That narratives presented in interview were also characterised by exploration of emotional and relational narratives may be explained by my own professional background and the familiarity participants had with me following the period of fieldwork. When social workers are interviewed by other social workers, especially ones they are familiar with, this can lead to a sense of identification and shared understanding of what it means to be a social worker (Leigh, 2014). In both contexts, that the audience was other social workers as opposed to the organisation appears to have been significant, and appears to have enabled social workers to present case narratives where both the professional and personal aspects of their identity were, at least to some extent, allowable.

13.6 Supervision, support, and 'better' sensemaking

It is evident from my analysis and from the wider literature that social workers value having spaces that allow them to explore their emotional and relational experiences of their work. It is also evident that the way in which case narratives are constructed – and the aspects of identity that they foreground – varies depending on context and audience (Riessman and Quinney, 2005). In this respect, it is possible to characterise informal case discussions in the office and formal group case discussion as offering a context that helps to supplement formal supervision. If one-to-one supervision does not consistently offer a space where emotions and relationships can be explored – and there is ample evidence from my analysis and other empirical studies that this appears to be the case (Bourn and Hafford-Letchfield, 2011; Ingram,

2015; Wilkins et al, 2017; Beddoe et al, 2021) – then group case discussion and informal collegial case discussion may help to compensate.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, ‘better’ stories (Weick et al, 2005) and more robust judgements (Taylor and White, 2001) are possible when sensemaking involves testing and weighing a range of information and scrutinising emerging and alternative hypotheses. Helm (2011) argues that this holding on to uncertainty enables a more analytical and exploratory approach that is important for improving decision-making and judgement. Ideally, supervision should provide a space for such sensemaking activity to take place (Helm, 2011; Patterson, 2019); however, in practice it appears that contemporary supervision in C&F social work is not consistently conducive to providing such a space. Instead, the focus on oversight and accountability (Wilkins and Antonopoulou, 2018) – exacerbated by neoliberal and managerialist approaches to practice (Noble and Irwin, 2009; Ruch, 2012) – leads to formal supervisory practices that are highly procedural and process-driven (White, 2015; Beddoe et al, 2021) which do not allow room for more relational exploration of the work (Sturt and Rothwell, 2019).

In this respect, one-to-one supervision potentially limits ‘better’ sensemaking through its tendency towards seeking singular, agreed accounts to be presented to the organisation. The shortcuts used in supervision – such as employing a limited range of professional concepts and generic narratives – to quickly make sense of and simplify complex family circumstances do not promote the scrutiny and exploration of alternative narratives that enable ‘better’ sensemaking (Taylor and White, 2001; Weick et al, 2005). Other studies, meanwhile, have shown the value of informal dialogue and of group case discussion for providing sensemaking opportunities (Riemann, 2005; Thompson, 2013; Avby, 2015; Doherty, 2016; Helm, 2016, 2017). This appeared to be evident in my observation data also; social workers and supervisors used opportunities throughout the working day to discuss cases in ways that were often more hypothetical and curious, where worry and uncertainty could be openly expressed, and feelings and relationships explored.

Informal spaces can therefore potentially compensate for deficits in formal one-to-one supervision in terms of promoting better sensemaking. Wilkins (2017a) makes the case that there is a need to move away from a focus on supervision as being *the* space where social workers engage in reflection on their work. Instead, Wilkins (2017a) argues that other forums – such as group case discussion – may more effectively provide the kind of support traditionally associated with formal one-to-one supervision. There was evidence across my data that informal peer and supervisory dialogue and group case discussion provided valuable opportunities for social workers to make sense of their work. Group case discussion particularly offered opportunities for more emotional and relational narratives about cases to be explored, and this helped social workers to reflect on their orientation towards the case and how they might move on from feeling “stuck” or “overwhelmed”. There is evidence from other empirical studies to support the value of forms of group case discussion as a means to promote reflection and emotional engagement (Lees, 2017b; O’Sullivan, 2018; Lees and Cooper, 2019).

It would seem, then, that a combination of opportunities for informal sensemaking dialogue and colleague support in the office space, coupled with more structured forums for group case discussion, can help to supplement formal one-to-one supervision. Wilkins et al (2017) note that many functions associated with the supervisory role take place outside of formal supervision, whilst Bartoli and Kennedy (2015) argue that supervision is much more complex and dynamic than being a one-to-one meeting that takes place monthly. My findings appear to back this up, but also to show that some functions of supervision and some of what researchers tend to think of supervision as providing are implicitly delegated to the wider team and colleagues in day-to-day practice. This was particularly evident in the role of SSWs in Springshire, who provided significant levels of informal ‘supervisory’ support in allocation and triage of cases, and in the way that some of the experienced social workers in Summertown similarly made themselves available for informal case discussion with colleagues in the office space. The observation that functions usually associated with the ideal of supervision (Beddoe et al, 2021) appear to be carried out by teams as a collective across

a number of contexts is a novel one, made possible through methods that enabled closeness to practice and use of a range of sources of data.

13.6.1 Limitations of informal spaces supplementing supervision

A number of studies have noted the tendency for informal spaces to be overly reinforcing, and thus not offering space for safe challenge (Ingram, 2015; Jeyasingham, 2016; Helm, 2017). The effectiveness of more structured case discussion groups, meanwhile, can be limited where workload pressures impact on attendance and the ability to fully engage with the group (Lees and Cooper, 2019).

Within my own observations, there was some evidence that social workers were able to challenge each other's thinking when discussing cases in the office space. There were also some examples of this put forward during interview, though the most notable examples from the observations and from interview involved the same participant. Not all participants felt comfortable to freely discuss their work in the office space, and not all teams had a culture where such discussion was commonplace. This meant that accessing opportunities for sensemaking dialogue within the office varied. Some voices dominated in some teams – ordinarily, the voices of more experienced and established team members – and these voices sometimes steered case discussions in a particular direction. Supervisors were also prone, at times, to direct social workers or to use the kind of professional shortcuts evident in one-to-one supervision when discussing cases in the office, rather than offering opportunities for more exploratory and curious sensemaking dialogue.

Formal group case discussion took place infrequently; at each of the office sites, group case discussions that I had been scheduled to observe were cancelled on the day due to nobody being able to attend. In Springshire, only four people from across the two teams attended the observed group case discussion, whilst in Summertown one of the teams had no group case discussion at all during the period of observation. If the effectiveness of such

forums is cumulative – and Lees and Cooper’s (2019) research suggests this is the case – then the infrequency of group case discussion in the sites may limit the benefit that it has for social workers. Another limitation was the lack of a specific model or structure being used in group case discussion; where such group forums have been found to be beneficial, there was a theoretically-informed model underpinning the case discussions (Lees, 2017b; O’Sullivan, 2018; Lees and Cooper, 2019).

There is also the potential within group case discussions for them to act to reinforce rather than challenge; this was evident, in slightly different ways, in both group case discussions I observed. Riemann (2005) found that shared narratives were evident in group case discussions that formed part of the collective memory of the team; this was apparent in the group case discussion in Summertown, where some of the more senior members of the team appeared wedded to a narrative that the mother was engaging in disguised compliance based on prior involvement with her. Though it was evident that the less experienced members of the team did not necessarily share this narrative, their voices were not able to come through so strongly. This meant that the dominant shared narrative about the mother was reinforced, limiting the scope for fully exploring alternative narratives about the mother.

In group case discussion in Springshire, the sense of shared collegial competence that was evident in the interview and observation data also meant that the social worker’s thoughts and feelings about the case were reinforced, rather than scrutinised. This manifested in narratives about the young person and their parents that were singular, linear, and somewhat pathologizing – similar to findings from Bingle and Middleton (2019) – and through blaming other professionals for the presenting situation. Social workers can be prone to expressing negative perceptions of other professionals as a means to explore or assert their own individual or team identity (Morrison, 2000; Bell and Allain, 2011), and the narrative in the group case discussion helped to reinforce the social workers’ shared perception of their competence, but potentially at the expense of exploring alternative narratives about the case.

13.7 Implications for practice

Munro (1996) talks about the process of assessment in social work as being like putting together a jigsaw without knowing what the picture will be and without being able to easily discern the colour and shape of the individual pieces. Using this metaphor, sensemaking has two functions. Sensemaking as a process of constructing a case narrative informs the judgement made at the end of the process of the assessment; it leads to completion of the puzzle. Sensemaking, however, also takes place throughout the process of building the puzzle. It informs choices over which piece of the puzzle goes where, it gives colour and shape to the previously indistinct pieces in order that they may fit together with other pieces to create a coherent picture. This necessitates choices about which pieces to keep and which to discard. Better sensemaking takes place through gathering, interpreting, and incorporating as many pieces of the jigsaw puzzle as possible, whilst still creating a coherent picture (Weick et al, 2005).

My findings suggest, however, that to some extent social workers do not start off without any picture or template in mind when putting together the jigsaw, and the pieces are gathered and used selectively. Taylor and White (2001) make the case that social workers often display a strong psychological commitment to a quickly-formed first hypothesis, and this can then lead to the pieces of the jigsaw being selected or discarded based on how well they fit with the picture in the social worker's mind's eye. This was evident in the value placed on congruence and coherence in how social workers tested and weighed information across their interviews, supervision, and office case-talk. My findings also suggest that identity and how and to whom this is being presented can also influence the way in which the jigsaw is put together. Leigh's (2016) research shows how social workers' identities shift over time, particularly in relationship with organisational expectations. Leigh (2016) found her own process of assessing and responding to risk in crisis situations changed as her identity shifted, leading to her becoming more risk-averse in her decision-making. To return to the jigsaw metaphor, she began putting together the puzzle differently than she had before.

Given what my findings show in respect of how social workers and supervisors go about constructing cases through their sensemaking, there are four main areas relevant for practice in order to try to promote better sensemaking:

- Social workers need to have opportunities to reflect upon and unpick the intuitive judgements underpinning their initial formulations of cases.
- Social workers need opportunities to hold on to safe uncertainty in order to consider and explore alternative narratives, and to weigh up evidence and counter-evidence in relation to their developing case narrative.
- In order to be able to reflect and hold on to safe uncertainty, social workers need to feel contained and have time and space to safely discuss their emotional experiences of the work.
- Related to this, social workers – and supervisors – would benefit from being able to reflect on their sense of identity in order to seek to integrate personal and professional aspects of who they are as social workers.

Broadly speaking, the first two implications relate to intuitive sensemaking and sensemaking as social storytelling, whilst the third and fourth implications relate to emotional sensemaking and the role of identity in sensemaking. I will now explore these implications in more depth. There is overlap in what is likely to be required to address these implications, as a result the following section will consider the first two implications for practice outlined above, whilst the subsequent section will consider the third and fourth implications for practice. This section will then conclude by exploring the implications of my analysis for social work during and post the Covid-19 pandemic.

13.7.1 Reflecting on initial formulations and exploring alternative narratives

Given how influential early judgements can be in the life of a case (Munro, 1995; Taylor and White, 2006), opportunities to reflect upon and unpick them are important. The way social workers constructed initial formulations of cases, within supervision and in other settings, tended to rely on intuitive pattern-matching, often using quick professional shortcuts to categorise or label cases. Such labels can carry power and can potentially distort social workers' perceptions as they work with the family (Leigh et al, 2020a) and so opportunities to reflect upon how these labels are used and what that might mean for the social worker and family are important. Furthermore, the development of greater expertise in intuitive judgement is reliant upon regular feedback loops and opportunities to reflect on how intuitive judgements were made (Kahneman and Klein, 2009; Klein, 2015).

As social workers develop their case narrative, they can be prone to too readily accepting a particular account or particular piece of information as fact (Taylor and White, 2001) and my findings suggest that this is particularly the case where a piece of information is perceived as being congruent with the developing narrative. Taylor and White (2006) argue for the need for social workers to examine the stories they construct and to hold open the possibility of exploring different narratives as a means to remaining in a place of safe uncertainty (Taylor and White, 2006) and this can mitigate the risk of confirmation bias in how information is gathered and made sense of.

Some authors have suggested the use of decision-making aids – such as decision trees and risk matrices – as one means to mitigate potential bias as social workers go about making sense of their work (Kirkman and Melrose, 2014; Benbenishty et al, 2015; Nyathi, 2018). There is, however, limited empirical evidence of the efficacy of such tools (Featherston et al 2019) and in C&F practice such tools are rarely utilised effectively (Gillingham and Humphreys, 2010; Wilkins, 2015). In part this is because, whilst social workers tend to be adept at identifying risk factors (Wilkins, 2015), the meaning and

significance they attach to them varies from individual to individual (Keddell, 2017). Decision-making tools aim to simplify and standardise decision-making; however, given the complex ways that social workers make sense of information this is not a straightforward task. Two different social workers may identify the same type of risk but apply a risk matrix in a different way because the significance they attach to the risk differs (Keddell, 2017). Such differences in decision-making and appraisal of risk were commented on by participants within my study, and it was acknowledged that, to some degree, different social workers assess differently. The aim of decision-making aids is to create a sense of objectivity in decision-making, but it is questionable how feasible and desirable such an aim is (Munro and Hardie, 2019). For these reasons, my recommendations will focus on approaches and tools that can aid better sensemaking as opposed to seeking means to standardise the decision-making process.

As has been highlighted throughout the thesis, supervision ought to provide a space for social workers to test and check their thinking, including unpicking and reflecting on intuitive responses to cases. Also, as previously discussed, Patterson and Whincup (2018) argue for the value of supervision as a place where different narratives can be explored. Brown and Turney (2014) similarly argue that supervision provides a crucial forum for exploring the story that the social worker is developing as they undertake the process of assessment.

However, with the average caseload for C&F social workers standing at just over sixteen children (UK Government, 2021) it is not necessarily possible for reflective discussion of every child to take place (Wilkins, 2017a). Within the hour and a half usually allotted for supervision, an average caseload of sixteen allows for just five and a half minutes of discussion for each child, without taking account of time needed to discuss the social worker's well-being and development needs. Turney and Ruch (2018) found in implementing the reflective CASA model that supervisory conversations on one case could last for as long as forty minutes. Longer supervision sessions are not necessarily a panacea as research suggests that the helpfulness of supervision declines once supervision is over two hours long (Wilkins and Antonopoulou, 2018).

Supervisors need a degree of flexibility and permission to limit the number of cases that are discussed in supervision; in depth discussion of a smaller number of cases would be achievable within a supervision session of up to two hours in length. Within my recordings of supervision, informal processes did take place to negotiate which cases would be discussed in greater depth. However, often these more in depth conversations were not characterised by reflection on social workers' initial formulations of cases or on exploration of alternative narratives. It is also worth noting that fourteen of the seventeen recorded supervisions lasted less than an hour and a half, with six lasting less than an hour. This may suggest that other pressures on the supervisory space – such as workload pressures – limit the time available and how the time is used in supervision, with similar barriers to reflective supervision noted by Turney and Ruch (2018).

Organisations need to find ways to prioritise giving social workers and their supervisors time and space to reflect together upon their initial formulations of cases and to explore alternative narratives. Where such time and space are afforded for supervision, there are a number of resources available to supervisors to help them to provide supervision that can facilitate better sensemaking. Research in Practice have developed open access tools that promote the use of safe uncertainty within supervision (RiP, 2019). The use of such tools is one way to seek to encourage supervisors, and social workers, to use supervision differently and to see it as a space to be uncertain and curious, to explore multiple possible narratives, and to unpick the sources of initial formulations of cases.

Research in Practice also offer open access guidance on using the CASA approach (Turney and Ruch, 2018), which encourages exploration of multiple narratives – in particular, the social worker's personal and professional narratives (RiP, 2020a) – about cases. Ferguson (2018a) notes that the provision of such reflective supervision helps social workers to develop an internal supervisor; in other words, by modelling reflection in supervision, social workers become more able to independently reflect in action (Schön, 1983). This capacity for independent reflection should also facilitate better

sensemaking from social workers in their day-to-day practice through more curious engagement with sources of information.

Alternative forms of 'supervisory' support are also likely to be beneficial for social workers. My findings suggest that social workers value opportunities outside formal one-to-one supervision to explore their thinking. Alongside my findings, existing empirical research suggests that group case discussion is a useful forum for this kind of reflection, but the effectiveness of such groups is predicated on regular attendance (Lees and Cooper, 2019). This requires a commitment at all levels of the organisation to not simply providing such a space for social workers, but actively encouraging regular participation. Formal group case discussions took place infrequently in my research sites and did not have a clear structure or model underpinning them. Commitment to an evidence-based model of group case discussion and ensuring that such discussions take place regularly would be a fruitful way forward to promote better sensemaking.

There have been moves in a number of local authorities in the UK towards implementing ideas from systemic practice (Bostock et al, 2017); systemic practice encourages the use of safe uncertainty and curiosity (Cecchin, 1987) as a position to explore multiple narratives about children and families' lives (Mason, 1993). Given that there is some tentative evidence of the usefulness of using systemic group supervision in C&F social work (Dugmore et al, 2018), including some evidence of its benefit in promoting better practice and better outcomes for families (Wilkins et al, 2018a; Bostock et al, 2019), organisations wishing to promote better sensemaking may wish to explore the potential benefits of implementing systemic approaches to group case discussion.

13.7.2 Containment, talking about emotions, and exploring identity

The ability to safely hold on to uncertainty is predicated on a supervisory relationship that feels safe and containing. Hewson and Carroll (2016) argue that the depth of reflection in supervision is related to the depth of the

supervisory relationship; trust and safety are needed in order for supervision to be a space where meaningful reflection can take place (Wilkins et al, 2018a). Containment is also essential to ensure that social workers are able to think clearly and engage in reflection (Ferguson, 2018a). It is therefore important for social workers to have opportunities to talk about and process their emotional experiences.

I highlighted from my analysis that social workers in some contexts drew on emotional and relational ways of making sense of their work that are associated with the “human”, personal aspects of their social work identity. However, within formal one-to-one supervision, it tended to be the case that more “professional” aspects of identity were presented, resulting in narratives being developed that were largely devoid of emotional and relational content. In essence, this presentation of a “professional” identity obscured important aspects of what constitutes the “real” self of social workers (Winter et al, 2019).

Being able to explore one’s own identity is important, since there are facets of social workers’ identities that influence how they make sense of their work; interpretations of ‘facts’ about a case vary from individual to individual and are influenced by things like social workers’ orientation towards family preservation (Benbenishty et al, 2015; Fluke et al, 2016), their tolerance of risk (Keddell, 2017), and their own value base and experiences (Horwath, 2007). Ideally, supervision should provide a space for exploration of the relational, emotional, and moral components of social workers’ work and promote successful integration of personal and professional aspects of their identities.

For this to be possible, supervisors need to feel that they have permission to provide supervision that is not focused primarily on oversight and accountability. One way that such a culture can be promoted is through providing supervisors with containing and reflective supervision. Howe (2010) argues that social work relationships should mirror the kinds of caring, curious relationships that social workers wish for parents to have with their children. If supervisors are to mirror these kinds of relationships in how they supervise social workers, they too need such relationships to be mirrored through the

organisation (Toasland, 2007; Howe, 2010; Ruch, 2012; Patterson, 2015), including in how they are supervised. This should prevent supervisors from feeling “full up” and struggling to provide the kind of containing space their supervisees need.

Supervisors would also benefit from opportunities to think about their own identity and how this influences their supervisory relationships; some supervisors in my study noted they did not have opportunities to talk about supervision and that involvement in the research had helped them to think about what they do in supervision. Managerialist aspects of the technical-rational paradigm have increased the responsibilities of supervisors and particularly the extent to which oversight and accountability have become a focus of the role (Noble and Irwin, 2009; Parton, 2014). There is a risk that this leads to supervisors adopting a professional identity in supervision that narrowly focuses on oversight, and this was evident in my study in the way supervision was largely used to agree shared accounts, using a limited range of professional concepts to make sense of cases.

In the same way that technical-rational approaches can lead to practice that is automatic and unthinking (Broadhurst et al, 2010), supervision can similarly function to process cases quickly and automatically (Saltiel, 2017). Opportunities for supervisors to think about what it means to be a supervisor and to explore how they use supervision would be a fruitful way of promoting more reflective and containing supervision. Research in Practice have developed resources to promote the exploration of the supervisory relationship (RiP, 2020b) and this provides one practical means for social workers and supervisors to think through the process of supervision together.

Group case discussion can help to supplement one-to-one supervision in offering containment and in offering opportunities to explore identity. O’Sullivan (2018) found that group case discussions provided a space for social workers to name and explore some of their difficult feelings about their work. The containing role of group case discussion has also been noted elsewhere (Hingley-Jones and Ruch, 2016; Lees, 2017b). Cook’s (2019b)

research also suggests that social workers naturally explore what it means to be a social worker when they are among themselves (Riemann, 2005) and so group case discussion may also provide a space for social workers to reflect on their identity and to explore how their perception of themselves and how their own values and experiences may influence the way they make sense of their work.

Given that my findings show that, in practice, a number of settings and individuals provide some of the supportive functions usually associated with supervision, it is likely that a combination of one-to-one supervision along with the use of forms of group case discussion and creating an open, supportive team culture are likely to be central to meeting social workers' support needs (Wilkins, 2017a) and promoting better sensemaking.

13.7.3 Implications of Covid-19 and future practice in social work

During the later stages of completing this doctoral thesis, the Covid-19 pandemic impacted almost all areas of our lives, with social work being no exception. Social workers have had to adapt and find new ways of working where face-to-face contact with colleagues and families has been significantly limited. Data collection and data analysis took place prior to the pandemic, however some of my findings are significant as the UK emerges from the pandemic into what may be a changed professional landscape for C&F social work.

My findings suggest that social workers and supervisors greatly value opportunities to discuss cases informally in the office space and to use colleagues for emotional and practical support. This was evident through my observations as well as being mentioned in a number of interviews. Other ethnographic research also suggests that informal case discussion with colleagues is crucial for sensemaking (Helm, 2016, 2017); the proximity of colleagues and a manager also offer ad hoc opportunities for reflection and for providing social workers with containment (Ferguson et al, 2020c). It would

seem, then, that physical proximity to colleagues is vital for social workers to have a sense of emotional safety and to have a space where sensemaking dialogue can take place, and the Covid-19 pandemic necessitating an instant shift to home-working is likely to have had a negative impact in this regard.

However, Cook et al's (2020) research during the first lockdown from March to July 2020 found that social work teams had, to an extent, managed to mitigate some of the impact of suddenly working from home. Teams were able to quickly replicate things like team meetings and group supervision using online platforms, and, in many cases, teams went on to create informal spaces using apps such as WhatsApp or through creating online virtual water coolers where workers could log on to work and chat together virtually (Cook et al, 2020). This demonstrates social work's capacity to respond to crises and mitigate their impact, at least in the short-term. However, Cook et al (2020) caution that, whilst teams who were already functioning well and providing a secure base to their social workers were able to continue to do so during lockdown, teams that were experiencing difficulties found that issues were exacerbated by lockdown restrictions. In teams where there were factions or where new team members were being integrated, the lack of physical co-location proved problematic, and many social workers reported feeling disconnected from their teams during lockdown (Cook et al, 2020). It is also too early to say whether the partial success of well-functioning teams in coping with these crisis measures is sustainable longer-term.

There have been some potential positives to arise from changes to social work practice brought about by lockdown restrictions. Ferguson et al (2021) and Cook and Zschomler (2020) both found benefits of working with families virtually. Ferguson et al (2021) found that, despite the physical distance created by lockdown restrictions, social work practice during lockdown was noticeably compassionate and supportive towards children and their families. Social workers focused on care as opposed to control, building empathic relationships with families during a time of shared challenge (Ferguson et al, 2021). The enforced blurring of the personal and professional spheres for social workers suddenly forced to work from home and having to balance

home and work life simultaneously may have helped to contribute to practice becoming more relationship-based. Ferguson et al (2021) and Cook and Zscholmer (2020) also note that the pandemic and subsequent lockdown led to unprecedented disruption, including to the usual procedural requirements that social workers are subject to. It is possible that this shift away from focusing on procedure and compliance in favour of pragmatism and improvisation (Ferguson et al, 2021) may have contributed to a move towards prioritising relationship-based practice over the kind of adherence to procedure associated with technical-rational approaches to practice.

Creative and flexible ways of engaging with children and families adopted as a result of lockdown restrictions are likely to remain in some form of hybrid delivery of social work in future (Cook and Zscholmer, 2020). It is also possible that a rebalancing towards prioritising relationship-based practice over compliance with procedure could take place as we move out of the pandemic (Ferguson et al, 2021). However, as Cook et al (2020) and Cook and Zscholmer (2020) found, the physical distance created between team members created difficulties for social workers. Whilst there is some evidence that well-functioning teams coped during the first lockdown, there is also evidence that others struggled without the ongoing support and dialogue that helps social workers to make sense of their work (Cook et al, 2020). This resonates with Ferguson et al's (2020c) finding that social workers benefit from the kind of informal conversations when returning to the office from a visit that support social workers to make sense of what they have seen and felt. Some social workers expressed significant anxiety that the 'new normal' in social work would be an increase in remote working as a means to reduce costs associated with maintaining large office spaces (Cook and Zscholmer, 2020; Cook et al, 2020).

These findings, taken alongside my own findings, would suggest that moves towards increased remote or agile working post-pandemic would have a negative impact on social workers through inhibiting opportunities for informal sensemaking dialogue, as well as negatively impacting on social workers' sense of safety and emotional well-being. Social work organisations need to

think about how the physical spaces they create for social workers promote or inhibit the kind of reflective spaces that are central to their practice (Beddoe et al, 2021) and to promoting sensemaking (Helm, 2021). More positively, if the shift towards more caring and relationally-engaged social work with children and families observed by Ferguson et al (2021) can be maintained, this could have a significant impact on how social workers engage in sensemaking. If organisations embrace such practice, this could help to create the kind of cultural shift needed for supervision to become more emotionally-engaged and relationship-focused, and for organisations to promote spaces where social workers and supervisors can explore their identities and the personal and professional narratives they construct about the children and families they work with.

13.8 Strengths and limitations of the research

The study has a number of strengths, in particular how the use of ethnographic methods has helped to address gaps in existing research. The study forms part of a relatively small body of research with a specific focus on sensemaking in social work, and as such adds to our understanding of what sensemaking looks like in day-to-day practice. By using data from interviews, supervision recordings, and observations, I have been able to show how social work sensemaking involves constructing a case narrative and that how such narratives are constructed and presented differs across different contexts. As touched on previously, the interview data helped to provide something of a baseline for how social workers constructed case narratives when prompted to do so, and this enabled comparison with the construction of case narratives in supervision and in office case-talk. Whilst there are limitations to using interviews to access social workers' sensemaking (Helm, 2017), the use of supervision and observation data enabled triangulation in the analysis.

As a result of being able to contrast how the construction of case narratives differs by context, I have been able to explore the role that identity plays in sensemaking. Although Weick et al (2005) note that identity plays a role in sensemaking, this has not previously been explored in relation to social work

to any great extent. Through considering the role of audience in how social workers talk about cases, this study has shown how the presentation of different aspects of social workers' identities can influence the way that they construct or co-construct narratives about their cases. This depth of analysis would have been difficult to achieve with only one type of data.

Another strength of the study is the closeness achieved to practice, and in particular to supervisory practice. As discussed earlier in the thesis, there is a paucity of research exploring the content of supervision (Carpenter et al, 2012; Wilkins et al, 2017; Beddoe et al, 2021) and this study makes a significant contribution to understanding what supervision looks like in real world contexts. A further strength of the study, in contrast to previous studies that have utilised data from supervision sessions, is that in also using interview and observation data with the same participants, it has been possible to move beyond viewing supervision simplistically as a one-to-one monthly meeting (Bartoli and Kennedy, 2015). Previous studies have noted that many functions of supervision are likely to take place outside formal monthly meetings (Wilkins et al, 2017) and by using observations of informal conversations in the office and group case discussions, this study has been able to look at how other forms of case discussion may help to supplement formal one-to-one supervision. This has enabled me to explore implications for practice that go beyond improving the quality of formal one-to-one supervision.

A potential limitation of the study is whether the analysis may hold across other settings outside the research sites. Given that qualitative research tends to be underpinned by a constructionist philosophy, claims to qualitative analyses purporting truths that hold across different settings are potentially problematic (Bryman, 2016). Noble and Smith (2015) propose the slightly weaker term of applicability to think about how qualitative research findings may be used in other settings. Rather than claiming to hold true across settings, qualitative analyses instead shed light upon similar areas of practice in comparable contexts (Carminati, 2018). Where analyses have been generated through a transparent and rigorous process, this increases their potential applicability to comparable settings (Noble and Smith, 2015).

Another potential limitation of the study is that of researcher bias. Ferguson et al (2019) note that in undertaking ethnographic research, researcher subjectivity plays a role in how data are interpreted. In large-scale ethnographic studies, the use of the research team is one method of mitigating against potential bias (Ferguson et al, 2019). The nature of doctoral research means that data collection was not undertaken as part of a research team, and the absence of another pair of eyes and ears within the research sites is a potential limitation of the study. To attempt to mitigate this, transcribed data – including fieldnotes, interview transcripts, and supervision transcripts – were shared with my supervisory team and some supervisions were used to discuss how the data were being analysed and interpreted. On occasion, extracts of data were also shared with my PhD colleagues for us to discuss as a group in order to seek alternative perspectives, including from colleagues who do not have a background in social work.

Noble and Smith (2015) also highlight the issue of researcher bias in qualitative research and suggest that through documenting analytical steps and decisions, researchers can increase the consistency and trustworthiness of their findings. Noble and Smith (2015) also suggest that triangulation of findings through using different methods of data collection and seeking different perspectives on the same phenomenon can help to mitigate bias. Throughout my PhD I have kept a research journal where analytical ideas and decisions have been documented. Reflexivity is also crucial for enabling transparency about potential bias and researcher impact (Ferguson et al, 2019) and I have kept a reflexive journal throughout the PhD. By utilising different kinds of data and by including supervisor and social worker perspectives on supervision – elicited through interview – alongside recordings of supervision, I have managed to use triangulation in my analysis that would not have been possible utilising just one method of data collection.

13.9 Implications for future research

The body of research relating to sensemaking in social work remains modest (Avby, 2015). The relationship between sensemaking and dialogue would be

worth further exploration in order to understand how better sensemaking can be promoted (Helm, 2021). Supervisors in this study tended to use direct questioning, co-constructing, or allowing social workers to explore their own narrative as the three main means for engaging in case discussion. It would be useful to explore further, and with a more explicit focus, how these different ways of engaging in dialogue about cases may influence the narratives that social workers construct. This could be done using a case vignette and role-playing different styles of supervisory conversation about the vignette. Interviews could be used to explore how social workers construct a narrative about the case following the different styles of supervisory conversation to explore similarities and differences.

Another avenue for exploration would be differences in sensemaking between inexperienced and experienced social workers. Some comments have been made on levels of experience within this study, however it has not been possible to undertake an in-depth comparative analysis. This could be factored into the design of the study outlined above, with a focus on recruiting newly-qualified and experienced social workers in order to explore whether levels of experience influence how social workers construct case narratives and how they use case discussions to help them make sense of information.

One further avenue for future research would be to explore the possibility of an action research project based on embedding supervisory and group case discussion models that help to promote sensemaking. There are already useful models available for reflective group case discussions (Wilkins, 2017a; Lees and Cooper, 2019), and there are also useful tools – such as the empty chair (Patterson and Whincup, 2018) and tools that promote safe uncertainty (RiP, 2019) – to promote exploration of different narratives in supervision. These models could be adapted and worked up with the organisation involved to create a model for supervisory support designed to encourage exploration of narratives. This model could then be implemented and evaluated longitudinally to capture the experiences of social workers and supervisors within the organisation. Some further ethnographic work would also be valuable as part of the study to explore the impact of the project on everyday

sensemaking dialogue in the office space. Experiences of families receiving services could also be explored to see whether a focus on improving social workers' sensemaking helps to improve the experiences of those receiving services. There is some evidence from other studies that improved practitioner skills lead to improved outcomes for children and families (Forrester et al, 2019) and it would be useful to see whether an approach that seeks to improve sensemaking – in part, by engaging more with emotional and relationship-based aspects of social work – has a similar impact.

14. Conclusion

This section will offer some concluding thoughts on the relationship between sensemaking and supervision. I will revisit the research questions posed earlier in the thesis and briefly outline how each of the questions has been answered. In doing so, I will also offer some thoughts on how the methodology used within the research has helped to answer the research questions. To recap, the research questions posed were:

1. How does sensemaking manifest itself in social workers' case-talk?
2. How does formal one-to-one supervision contribute to social workers' sensemaking?
3. How do informal supervisory conversations, group case discussion, and informal peer discussion contribute to social workers' sensemaking?

14.1 Sensemaking in social workers' case-talk

This study adds to a modest but growing body of research looking at how social workers engage in sensemaking. Social workers' sensemaking was manifested in their case-talk through the construction of case narratives. The process of constructing a narrative involved three phases: initial formulations, developing the narrative, and adopted account. When undertaking an assessment, social workers appeared to pass through these phases, sometimes going through the cycle more than once if new information required a substantial revision of the social worker's narrative. Where new assessments were required, previous adopted accounts were heavily influential in how cases were initially formulated and how information was subsequently made sense of in the developing narrative.

Within the process of constructing a case narrative there was evidence that social workers draw upon intuitive and emotional ways of making sense of their work, and it was evident that social workers utilised a range of professional concepts and narratives to make sense of the lives of the children and families they work with. These professional concepts and narratives are not constructed in a vacuum but are the product of the interaction between the individual and the organisational, societal, political, and professional context in which they work. Such concepts and narratives are reinforced through use in the everyday sensemaking dialogue of social workers. Social workers also valued congruence in attaching meaning and significance to information, and whilst at times this was used as a form of triangulation, it also carried a risk of potential confirmation bias.

The use of ethnographic methodology has helped to highlight the way that social workers engage in sensemaking case-talk in different contexts. The interview and observation data shed light on the way that social workers made sense of cases in an emotional and relational way as well as through more professional conceptualisations of cases. This in turn illustrated the complexity of social work identity in contemporary C&F social work practice. Tensions were evident between a “human”, personal self that wanted to work in a meaningful relationship-based way with families, and a professional self that was “separate” and that viewed relationships as carrying potential risks.

This tension between the two selves can be seen to reflect tensions that exist between relationship-based and technical-rational approaches to C&F social work. Relationship-based practice encourages the integration of the personal and professional selves so that the self in action (Smith, 2012) can be used as a tool. Technical-rational approaches, meanwhile, encourage more standardised approaches to practice through the use of measurable outcomes, performance management, and adherence to process. This more clinical approach leaves little room for the feeling, personal self to engage in professional practice (Krohn, 2015). Often this tension meant that two distinct narratives were presented, with personal and professional narratives only occasionally being integrated to present more nuanced and complex accounts

of families' lives. Hingley-Jones and Ruch (2016) argue that integrating relationship-based and technical-rational approaches to practice, as opposed to seeing them as presenting a dichotomy, is important. This should promote the integration of personal and professional aspects of the self in a more unified social work identity (Harrison and Ruch, 2007). In my study, however, most personal narratives were ultimately set aside or bracketed-off to enable the social worker to move forward with taking difficult decisions. This serves to illustrate one of the central facets of the analysis, which the ethnographic methodology has helped to highlight: the role of identity – with all of the societal, organisational, and professional influences that shape it – in sensemaking.

14.2 Sensemaking and formal one-to-one supervision

The role of identity was again important in understanding the way that case-talk took place within formal supervision. Formal supervision was characterised by supervisors and supervisees agreeing an account of the case that could support decision-making. This was often done using a limited range of professional concepts and professional narratives in order to make sense of information; in particular, the use of impact on the child and threshold as a means to move from the social workers' reported experiences to reaching an agreed decision. At times there were examples of more hypothetical discussions and there was evidence of more reflective dialogue in some instances also, however the prevalence of supervisors and social workers constructing singular, agreed, professional accounts of cases was notable. The propensity for supervision to quickly move from the presentation of information, to framing the problem, to agreeing actions, mirrored findings from other key empirical studies of supervision (Wilkins et al, 2017).

Audience played a central role in how cases were constructed and presented in supervision. Through my analysis, I have suggested that the organisation – which itself is a complex embodiment of social, legal, and political expectations the social work profession – was the intended audience in supervision.

Supervisors and social workers agreed an account through their shared sensemaking that was intended to be plausible to the organisation and that conveyed identities of the supervisor and social worker based on professionalism and accountability. Other studies have suggested that supervision involves creating an account that can be sold to the organisation and other professionals (Saltiel, 2017) and that socio-political narratives lead to social workers constructing cases in ways that facilitate organisational responses to risk (Walsh et al, 2019). One upshot of creating such accounts to agree decision-making is the limited scope for reflection and for exploring cases in a more relationship-based, emotionally-engaged way. The extent to which the personal self, which contributes to social workers' sense of identity (Harrison and Ruch, 2007; Smith, 2012), could be presented in supervision was limited, and this inhibited the use of emotions as a sensemaking resource and the capacity to hold on to safe uncertainty.

In the office space, supervisors and supervisees were more comfortable in presenting personal aspects of their identity. Supervisors were often involved in light-hearted conversations with colleagues, and I highlighted some examples of supervisors offering ad hoc containment through informal conversations. That said, the need for supervisors to be accountable and have oversight of cases pervaded their case-talk in other settings too. In the office space, supervisors were directive at times, using similar professional concepts and narratives to move towards decision-making, and in one group case discussion and on some occasions in the office space, the professional power of supervisors enabled them to steer case discussion towards a particular narrative.

14.3 Informal supervision, group case discussion and peer interaction

As noted above, informal supervisory conversations generally had a different character to case discussions in formal one-to-one supervision, though the need for accountability for decision-making at times led to informal supervision mirroring the more formal nature of conversations in one-to-one supervision.

Conversations with colleagues in the office space and dialogue in group case discussions was generally somewhat different. The absence of explicit hierarchies in collegial relationships was one contributing factor and was especially evident in the group case discussion in Springshire. However, it also seemed to be the case that the absence of the organisation as audience, since conversations in the office and in group case discussion did not require the creation of a written record or the taking of decisions, enabled social workers to present more personal aspects of their identity through their case-talk. Case discussions with peers were characterised by more exploratory and hypothetical dialogue, captured well by the notion of “playing devil’s advocate”. Social workers were able to name their feelings explicitly and to explore, to some extent, what those feelings might mean. The expression of worry or uncertainty often helped to trigger sensemaking dialogue and this enabled social workers to test and weigh information, to explore hypotheses, and ultimately to talk through cases in such a way as to create better stories (Weick et al, 2005).

That said, at times in the office space and in group supervision, the pressure to take decisions was evident and sensemaking conversations would often come back to concepts like threshold that were used as a means to move towards decision-making. This is unavoidable in C&F social work teams tasked with completing assessments where concrete recommendations have to be made in prescribed timescales. The key is to ensure that social workers have sufficient spaces that enable them to hold on to a position of safe uncertainty (Mason, 1993) where they can utilise their expertise to explore a range of possible narratives about a case rather than fixing on a singular explanation and selecting and interpreting information that fits the chosen narrative. The office space provided opportunities for this to an extent; however, as I have suggested, more structured and formal opportunities for social workers to explore their work from a position of safe uncertainty and for them to explore personal as well as professional understandings of families’ lives would be beneficial.

14.4 Complexity and context in supervision and sensemaking

It is evident from my analysis that social work sensemaking is a complex psychosocial process, involving the interplay of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and social factors (Cook and Gregory, 2020). In particular, it involves the construction and presentation of identity through the construction and presentation of case narratives. Identity itself is highly complex; it is shaped through interpersonal interactions with others (Hyslop, 2018), through the organisation as a construct that embodies socio-political expectations of the profession (Hoggett, 2006; Leigh, 2016; Cooper, 2018), through the personal self's experiences, values, and dispositions, and through contested notions of professionalism and expertise (Fook et al, 1997; Jordan, 2004). Different facets of social workers' identities are presented at different times, and this was evident within my study. It was only possible to see the presentation of identity and how this related to sensemaking because of the use of ethnography and the different methods of data collection. The use of narrative approaches to supplement reflexive thematic analysis also enabled an exploration of how identity and audience interact in the way that social workers make sense of their work through case-talk.

Supervision is likewise a complex thing; it is a relationship and a process rather than simply a formal meeting that takes place once a month (Bartoli and Kennedy, 2015; Beddoe and Wilkins, 2019). Much like sensemaking, supervision can also be seen as a psychosocial process; within supervision the organisation as audience acts as a proxy for societal and political perceptions and expectations of the profession, social workers and supervisors present more professional aspects of their identity in response, the supervisor-supervisee relationship is inherently interpersonal, and the relational experiences of social workers – whilst not always explored explicitly – are always present, represented by the metaphorical empty chair (Patterson and Whincup, 2018).

Despite this complexity, still comparatively little is known about what happens in supervision (Wilkins et al, 2017) and opportunities to reflect on the process of supervision are scarce. Similarly, opportunities for social workers to unpick and reflect upon their sensemaking processes are also rare. Positively, some tools are being developed to promote greater reflection on how social workers make sense of their work, including tools that encourage holding on to safe uncertainty (RiP, 2019), and exploring personal and professional narratives about cases (RiP, 2020a). The importance of the relationship to supervisory practice and tools to reflect on relationship-based supervision have also been developed (RiP, 2020b). Such tools are a good starting point for social workers and supervisors to think about supervision and to think about how they use the space to meaningfully engage in shared sensemaking (Patterson, 2019).

This study has helped to highlight the context-dependence of social workers' sensemaking. This notion of context is bound up with identity and how the presentation of identity varies from context to context. I have shed light on what supervision looks like in practice, and how sensemaking takes place through supervisory dialogue. In exploring how the functions of supervision are not limited to monthly one-to-one meetings, I also hope to have shown that other forms of supervisory and collegial case discussion play an important role in social workers' sensemaking and help to supplement formal one-to-one supervision. This study can helpfully contribute to further research on sensemaking, supervision, and how they interact, and can also help to inform the development of tools and practices to promote better sensemaking through supervision.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form (Observation Only)

School of Social Work



Research brief – team participation

Title – *How do social workers use supervision to make sense of their work in children and families social work teams?*

About the research:

The research is looking at how social workers use supervision to help them to make sense of their work, how social workers think about children and families to help them to make decisions and form judgements. Sense-making is the way in which social workers process case information and intuitions to structure their judgements about what needs to happen with the case.

Supervision – both formal and informal – is one of the opportunities that social workers have to reflect on and think through their casework and it is how social workers use supervision to do this that is the focus of this research. This is an under-researched area and the researcher hopes that their research will help us understand what happens in supervision conversations.

My own interest in this subject comes from having worked in children and families social work for eight years as both a practitioner and a manager responsible for

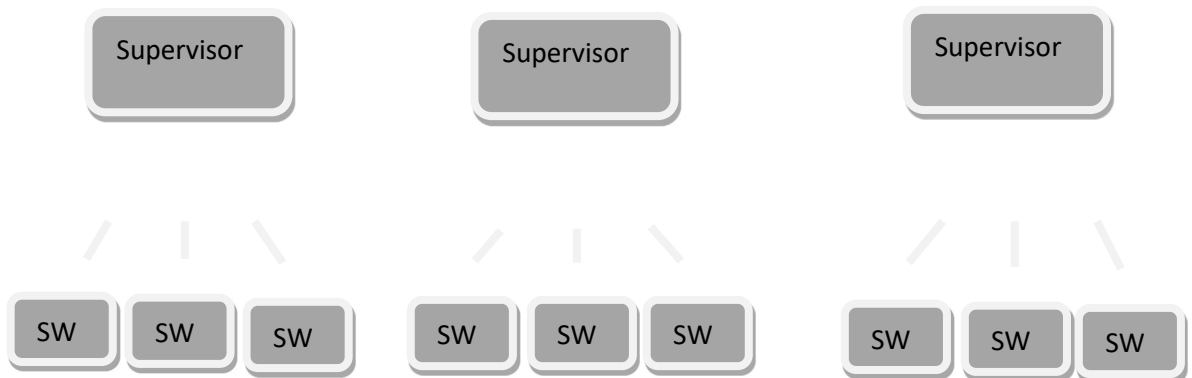
supervising social work staff. I left practice in October 2017 to begin this piece of research.

What the research involves:

There are three main parts of the research that could involve you:

1. Shadowing participating social workers and supervisors within their teams.
2. Audio recordings of formal one-to-one supervision.
3. Interviews with social workers and supervisors.

I am looking for a social work team (or teams) to agree to take part in the research; I will spend time with this team shadowing participating social workers and supervisors. I will be looking to recruit at least three supervisors and nine social workers (three social workers per supervisor) in total to take part in all elements of the research, please see the diagram below:



Other team members will be involved in the shadowing element as I may observe conversations they have with the participating social workers and supervisors.

If your team is interested in taking part, I will visit the team to explain the research further. Your manager will then discuss with you whether the team is happy to take part and I will then ask all team members to consent to me observing them in the office. If you are interested in taking part in all three elements of the study you will sign a separate consent form to agree to this. I will provide all team members with a full information sheet outlining what taking part in the study will look like for you and how the information I gather will be used.

If you have any further questions about the research please feel free to contact me on the email address below.

Contact details:

Researcher: Mark Gregory – mark.gregory@uea.ac.uk

Supervisors: Dr Jeanette Cossar – Jeanette.Cossar@uea.ac.uk & Dr Laura Biggart – l.biggart@uea.ac.uk

If you wish to discuss any issues relating to the research with someone other than me or my supervisors, please contact:

Head of School of Social Work: Professor Jonathan Dickens – j.dickens@uea.ac.uk

Title – *How do social workers use supervision to make sense of their work in children and families social work teams?*

Consent for team members involved in observation

Thank you for agreeing to be part of the observation element of my PhD study. Please tick the boxes below and then sign to confirm your consent:

I confirm that I have read and understood the research brief and participant information sheet.

I confirm that I have had the opportunity to discuss any concerns about the research with you.

I confirm that, having discussed participation in the research, I consent to being observed by you during your observation days in the office.

I understand that you will be taking notes and that these will be written up, analysed and incorporated into the PhD thesis and may be used in other published work by you.

I understand that all written notes will be recorded anonymously and will be stored securely as detailed in the participant information sheet.

I understand that participants have the right to withdraw up to 2 weeks after the last interview has taken place.

I understand that if you have any concerns about a child or family being at risk of significant harm that you will speak to me and relevant line manager.

Name:

Position:

Team:

Signature:

Date:

Contact details:

Researcher: Mark Gregory – mark.gregory@uea.ac.uk

Supervisors: Dr Jeanette Cossar – Jeanette.Cossar@uea.ac.uk & Dr Laura Biggart – l.biggart@uea.ac.uk

If you wish to discuss any issues relating to the research with someone other than me or my supervisors, please contact:

Head of School of Social Work: Professor Jonathan Dickens – j.dickens@uea.ac.uk

Appendix B: Participant Information Sheet and
Consent Form (Full Participants)

School of Social Work



Title – *How do social workers use supervision to make sense of their work in children and families social work teams?*

**Participant Information Sheet for Shadowing, Interviews & Recording of
Supervision – Social Workers & Supervisors**

Thank you for your interest in this study. Before you decide whether to take part, please read the following information carefully (this sheet is for you to keep). You may ask me any questions if you would like more information. This research was approved by the Social Work Research Ethics Committee at the University of East Anglia on..... My interest in this subject comes from my own experiences as both a social worker and supervisor working in a children and families social work setting. I left practice after eight years of working in Norfolk in October last year in order to undertake this piece of research.

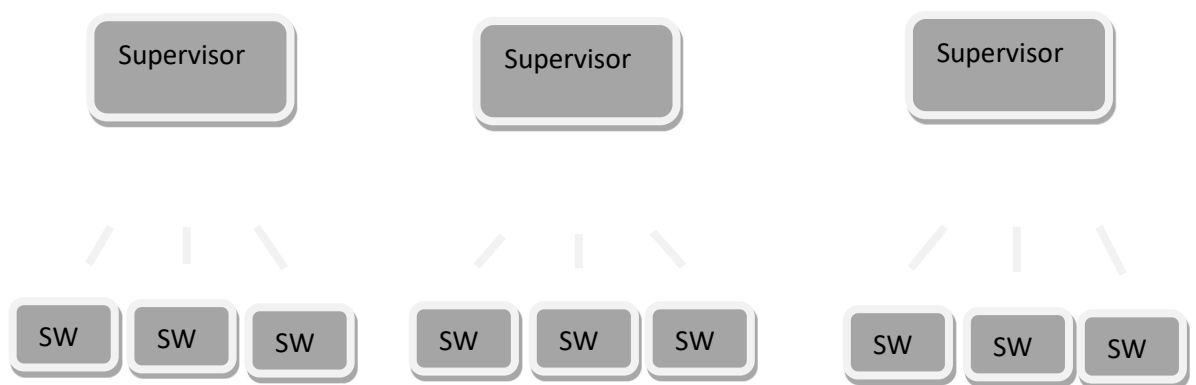
What is the research looking at?

My research is looking at how social workers use supervision to help them to make sense of their work, how social workers think about children and families to help them to make decisions and form judgements. Sense-making is the way in which social workers process case information and intuitions to structure their judgements about what needs to happen with the case.

Supervision – both formal and informal – is one of the opportunities that social workers have to reflect on and think through their casework and it is how social workers use supervision to do this that is the focus of this research. This is an under-researched area and the researcher hopes that their research will help us understand what happens in supervision conversations.

What is involved in taking part?

I am looking to recruit a total of nine social workers and three supervisors, with three social workers per supervisor as per the diagram below:



Each supervisor and social worker will be involved in three activities as part of the research project; if you agree to take part fully in the research, you will be participating in all three of these activities. Other team members who do not wish to participate in all aspects of the research will be involved in just the observation part of the study:

1. Being shadowed in the office on the days that the researcher is spending in the team. You will not need to do anything differently on these days, I will be there to shadow the social workers and supervisors participating in the research so that I can observe how cases are talked about and how this helps social workers to think about their casework. Visits to the office will be planned and I will ask that you are all given a reminder the day before I am

due to visit. I will be asking all team members to consent to being part of this aspect of the study and I will outline with you when I visit the team how you can discuss any worries about the study with me and how we might address anyone not wanting to be part of the study. I will also explain further what me being in the team will look like.

2. Recording of a formal, one-to-one supervision. I will not be present whilst the recording takes place, a Dictaphone will be placed in the room. I will speak to you before the recorded supervision so that we can agree how any private or personal discussions are handled, for example these may be discussed at the start of supervision prior to recording beginning or at the end once the recording has stopped.
3. A face-to-face interview with me, this will take place shortly after the visits to the team have ended. The interview will last for around one hour for social workers and around an hour and a half for supervisors. The interviews will be about your experiences of supervision (both formal and informal) and will be audio recorded.

Could there be any drawbacks to taking part?

The nature of the research project means that you will be discussing potentially difficult things with me during our interview and you will also be allowing me to audio record your supervision, which may also be worrying for you. I will set aside time for us to de-brief after the recorded supervision and after the interview so that you can discuss any worries or anxieties with them. If you require additional support, your organisation provides.....for employees in need of support. Please note that the audio recordings and transcripts will only be accessed by me and my supervisors and not by colleagues or managers in your organisation.

How will you store the information that I give you?

All information which you provide during the study will be stored in accordance with relevant data protection legislation and kept strictly confidential. All handwritten data will be recorded anonymously using pseudonyms or a unique ID number and not your real name. Any personal information gathered about you – such as your

age, gender, ethnicity and length of service – will be recorded alongside a pseudonym rather than your real name. Audio recordings and electronic documents will be stored on a password protected computer and paper documents, such as my handwritten notes and consent forms, will be kept in a locked drawer and securely destroyed once the PhD thesis has been submitted and examined. Audio recordings will be destroyed once my PhD thesis has been examined. Anonymised electronic transcripts will be kept by me for 10 years so they can be used for any further academic work I undertake. If I leave the University of East Anglia earlier than this, my supervisor will ensure that the anonymised data are archived.

Any information you share about service users will also be recorded anonymously. I will not write down any real names of service users, I will be using pseudonyms throughout, and I will not note down any other identifying information such as addresses or telephone numbers should I overhear these. My interest is not in the details of your cases but how it is that you as workers think about and make sense of your work.

How will the data be used?

The data will only be accessed by me and my supervisors. The data gathered will be used within my final PhD thesis; extracts from interviews, observations and recordings will be used to illustrate key themes. These extracts will be presented using pseudonyms and not real names. The data may also be used for academic articles intended for publication in social work journals or textbooks.

Will I be able to be identified if I take part?

All of the data from interviews, recording and observations will be written up using pseudonyms. When the findings are presented, I will be using short extracts from observations, interviews and recordings and not full conversations. The findings will not be presented as case studies of individual participants, they will be based on themes that I have identified and quotes to illustrate these themes will be drawn from a range of participants. I will not link or contrast quotes from interviews with quotes from other people's interviews, for example if you and your supervisor or supervisee have given different accounts of a shared experience in your interviews,

I will not present quotations that show this. This will mean that you will only be able to identify each other in shared conversations that took place in supervision or in the office. When I present workshops to the team(s) I will not use any direct quotations but will instead talk generally about themes that I have identified so that people in the workshops won't be able to identify themselves or colleagues.

The full write-ups of interviews, recorded supervision sessions and observations will not be made available to your colleagues, manager or senior managers from the organisation. I am independent of the organisation and the research is not intended for the purposes of evaluating or managing the performance of social workers or supervisors.

What happens if I agree to take part, but change my mind later?

You have the right to withdraw your consent to participate up to two weeks after the last interview has taken place. You will need to contact me in writing to withdraw your consent and you do not need to provide a reason. Electronic data (audio recordings and typed up notes and transcripts) will be deleted and not be used in the final project. Any handwritten or paper notes relating to you will be securely destroyed. Please note that some of my observations and reflections will be influenced by you as a participant indirectly and these will remain part of the research should you withdraw. Only direct observations and verbal data from you will be able to be removed from the study.

If you are a team member who does not want to be a part of the study at all, please contact me on the email address provided. Your contact with me will be confidential and we can discuss how I might be able to work around you not being part of the study.

Responsibility to disclose

If I become concerned about the safety of a child during the research period, I will inform you of my concerns and I will need to report these concerns to your line

manager. This would only be where I felt that a child or family was being placed at risk of harm by something that I have observed.

You are under no obligation to agree to take part in this research.

If you do agree you can **withdraw at any time up to two weeks after the last interview has taken place without giving a reason.**

Contact details of the research team:

Researcher: Mark Gregory – mark.gregory@uea.ac.uk

Supervisors: Dr Jeanette Cossar – jeanette.cossar@uea.ac.uk & Dr Laura Biggart – l.biggart@uea.ac.uk

Do also contact us if you have any worries or concerns about this research.

School of Social Work Ethics Committee Secretary:

e.slaymaker@uea.ac.uk

Head of School, Professor Jonathan Dickens:

j.dickens@uea.ac.uk

Title – *How do social workers use supervision to make sense of their work in children and families social work teams?*

Consent for social worker and supervisor participation in shadowing, interviews and supervision recording

Thank you for agreeing for agreeing to participate in my PhD study. Please tick the boxes below and then sign to confirm your consent:

- I confirm that I have read and understood the participant information sheet.

- I confirm that I have met with you and have had the opportunity to discuss the research with you.

- I consent to being shadowed during the observation visits and to notes being taken by you for the purposes of analysis.

- I consent to my supervision session(s) being audio recorded and transcribed for analysis.

- I consent to completing a face-to-face interview with you and understand this will be audio recorded and transcribed for analysis.

I consent to personal data being gathered, used and stored for the purposes outlined in the participant information sheet.

I understand that all written notes and transcribed data will be recorded anonymously and will be stored securely as detailed in the participant information sheet.

I consent to the data being used in your PhD thesis and in further published works as detailed in the participant information sheet.

I understand that I have the right to withdraw up to 2 weeks after the final interview has taken place.

I understand that if you have any concerns about a child or family being at risk of significant harm that you will speak to me and my line manager.

Name:

Position:

Team:

Signature:

Date:

Contact details:

Researcher: Mark Gregory – mark.gregory@uea.ac.uk

Supervisors: Dr Jeanette Cossar – Jeanette.Cossar@uea.ac.uk & Dr Laura Biggart
– l.biggart@uea.ac.uk

If you wish to discuss any issues relating to the research with someone other than me or my supervisors, please contact:

Head of School of Social Work: Professor Jonathan Dickens – j.dickens@uea.ac.uk

Appendix C: Interview Schedule (Social Workers)

Semi-structured interview schedule – social workers

Tell me about one of the cases that you discussed with your supervisor in the recorded supervision, one that was complex or challenging. *What were your initial thoughts about the case when you first picked it up? What were your thoughts about the case after supervision? How did supervision change your thinking about the case?*

When you think about the supervision you had on this case, how was it similar or different to your usual case supervision?

Tell me a bit more about your experience of supervision generally. Can you give me an example of a time that a supervisor has really helped you with a case that you were struggling with? *What did they do that helped your thinking about the case?*

Can you give an example of a time where supervision has not been helpful? *What did you find unhelpful about that particular experience?*

Can you talk me through a time in the last month where you've needed to talk to your supervisor about a challenging or complex case outside of formal supervision. *What were your thoughts about the case prior to the conversation with your supervisor? What happened during the conversation and how did this change how you viewed the case?*

Thinking about the case we first discussed at the beginning of the interview, did you speak to anyone other than your supervisor about the case? *How did speaking to them change the way you thought about the case?*

Can you give an example of a time where the team or a colleague within the team has helped you to think or feel differently about a particularly challenging case? *What did they do that helped you to think or feel differently?*

Thinking about your team, what opportunities do you have to discuss your cases with each other? *Can you give an example from within the last month where the team has talked through a case – how did this change how the social worker viewed the case? What role does your supervisor play in promoting case discussion in the team?*

Is there anything else you would like to say about your experiences of supervision?

How have you felt about taking part in this study?

Appendix D: Interview Schedule (Supervisors)

Semi-structured interview schedule – supervisors

Tell me about a case you discussed in the recorded supervision with x. Talk me through the process you went through in supervising the case. *What did you feel you needed to get from the conversation as a supervisor? What did you feel the social worker needed from you? How do you think you helped the social worker to think or feel differently about the case?*

Tell me about a case you discussed in the recorded supervision with y. Talk me through the process you went through in supervising the case. *What did you feel you needed to get from the conversation as a supervisor? What did you feel the social worker needed from you? How do you think you helped the social worker to think or feel differently about the case?*

Tell me about a case you discussed in the recorded supervision with z. Talk me through the process you went through in supervising the case. *What did you feel you needed to get from the conversation as a supervisor? What did you feel the social worker needed from you? How do you think you helped the social worker to think or feel differently about the case?*

Thinking about your everyday work as a supervisor, can you give me an example of a case-related conversation you have had with one of the social workers in the study in the last week? *What was the issue they were coming to you with? How did the conversation go? What was the outcome?*

Thinking about your own experiences of supervision when you were a social worker, can you give me an example of a time where supervision really helped your thinking about a case? *What did you learn from that experience?*

Can you think of a time when you were a social worker where you had a poor experience of supervision? *What was that like and why was it unhelpful? What did you learn from that experience?*

Thinking about your experience as a supervisor, tell me a bit about what your current supervision with your manager is like. *Can you give me an example of how they have helped you with an issue in the past month? How does this supervision compare to the supervision you had as a social worker?*

What has your experience of professional development been like as a supervisor? *Can you give an example of how you have used any training you have received to support a social worker in your team? Is there anything that you feel prevents you from developing your supervision practice, can you give an example?*

Thinking about your team, can you give an example of a time within the last month where they have supported each other in thinking about a particular case? *How have you been able to promote the team discussing their casework with each other?*

Is there anything else you would like to say about your experiences of supervision, either as a social worker or as a supervisor?

How have you felt about taking part in this study?

Appendix E: Analytic writing example

Excerpt from analytic reflections on certainty and uncertainty in interview data

Certainty and uncertainty: thinking and feeling

One interesting feature of uncertainty is that it does not necessarily always seem to be a purely rational state but is also a felt state. At times there is some incongruence between the seeming clear-cut nature of the case and how it is presented, and reports from the social worker of seeing the case as being uncertain or difficult in some way. This is evident in Suzie's case talk whereby she describes a decision to issue care proceedings and recommend removal at birth as "clear" and in which the decision, made early, has never changed, whilst at the same time feeling that there is "no real evidence" to back up the decision. Evidence in her case talk is then characterised as being something external to her own judgement; she sees 'expert' assessments as being determinative, alongside an extensive health chronology she is putting together. When potential counterevidence is introduced – that contact is going well – this is quickly dismissed, which suggests that the narrative about the case and the decision that has been reached are fixed and certain.

The feeling of uncertainty about the decision, characterised by noting a lack of evidence, may be linked to Suzie's difficult personal feelings about the case. She frequently describes the case as "awful" and "horrible" and notes the proximity in age of the parent to her own daughter. It is the feelings experienced in respect of the case that seem to be causing feelings of uncertainty in Suzie. The means through which such feelings seem to be alleviated to enable her to get back to a place of certainty is through the use of expert assessments and chronologies, which constitute a form of external evidence that puts the decision beyond any doubt.

This idea of uncertainty as a felt state rather than a purely cognitive one appears to be evident elsewhere in the data. For example, Shelley reflects on the fact that on a particular case she struggled to make a difficult decision regarding removal of children because of how she felt about their parents. When talking about the case generally, there is much more of a sense of building a case through constructing evidence and professional judgements, such as "failure to thrive", are used to support the decision. However, the harm to the children is characterised as "unintentional neglect" and this seems to create some doubt about the final decision despite the 'facts' of the case seeming to point towards a clear conclusion.

Interestingly, Robin (supervisor) comments on the need for Shelley to come to terms with the decision emotionally in order to move forward with it.

The way that certainty is experienced at times is also interesting, in particular in one of Casey's cases where she expresses the view that a case should always have been child protection. This contrasts with her supervisor's account of the case and, to an extent, with her recorded supervision where she acknowledges that they cannot evidence significant harm to the children. Casey's motivation for the case to be child protection in both the supervision and in her interview looks to be a desire for greater professional power. Here it seems that power may be a way of mitigating feelings of anxiety about the case, which she sees as chaotic. The anxiety is compounded by a pressing deadline due to the family being close to eviction. Power may provide a defence against this feeling of anxiety through giving a perception of control.

Here the certainty in the narrative seems to be a means to defend against the feeling of not being in control and this shows that the relationship between emotions, certainty, and uncertainty may play out in different ways. Certainty can be both a cause of unease and a potential panacea for it, whilst uncertainty in how a case is constructed is, at times, experienced along with a felt state of uncertainty or unease.

Certainty and uncertainty in the moral construction of parents

There seems to be a link between emotion and the use of moral reasoning too and this also adds to a sense of uncertainty for a number of the participants. Kelly, Lucy, and Taylor all highlight a difference between intentional and unintentional harm, and it appears that this distinction is important in how they think and talk about cases. A feature of their case talk is the way that they construct a narrative of concern alongside another narrative that is more positive. This creates uncertainty as they are having to weigh up narratives that they seem to experience as competing. The decision is ultimately characterised as being about which construction of the case is the stronger; in each of their cases, the social workers view assessments as being the means through which to reach a decision. In this sense, the process and procedure of completing an assessment seems to be the means through which uncertainty moves towards certainty and a clear recommendation.

By contrast, cases where the harm to the child is seen as being intentional are viewed more straightforwardly. Intentional harm – particularly physical or sexual abuse or deliberate neglect – tend to be seen as immediately determinative of a particular outcome. There is a

sense, then, that moral culpability is a factor that contributes to the level of certainty expressed by social workers in how they formulate their cases. This could be a function of certain cases being genuinely less 'clear-cut' or it could be that the lack of blameworthiness in certain cases creates a sense of unease – perhaps a form of emotional uncertainty – that creates some difficulty for social workers.

Certainty, uncertainty, and sensemaking

It may be useful to think that sensemaking, or an aspect of sensemaking, is about moving from a position of uncertainty to a more definite position that can inform decision-making. In some of the case talk that is characterised by things like multiple narratives and explicit hypothesising, there is a sense of still being in a state of interpretive flux. There are elements that are known and certain even within this case talk, but quite what they mean in terms of formulating a judgement that can then inform decisions about next steps is yet to be fully determined. Some other case talk is past this phase, however, and involves justifying or explaining decisions after the point at which they have been reached – building a case.

Another interesting factor that relates to both sensemaking and how certainty and uncertainty manifest in case talk is the role of incongruence. Incongruence seemed important within social workers' case narratives and was a feature in almost all of the interviews. This took different forms – sometimes a sudden change in the case, sometimes a difference of opinion between professionals – however, where incongruence was felt there was generally uncertainty in the narrative. For example, in one of Chris' cases his narrative begins with characterising it as a "straightforward closure", here the case has already been judged as straightforward and the decision taken to close. The tone of the narrative changes following unexpected allegations against the mother, something which leads to Chris questioning his previous views and working through possible hypotheses. This is exacerbated when the young person's account does not cohere with the views of police regarding the veracity of the allegations, and again this leads to Chris having to revisit his perception of the mother, the girl, the police, and his own value-base in terms of those relationships in order to make sense of what is going on.

Similarly, Lesley describes a case where a parent she was working with was accused of sexual abuse and her initial judgement was that the allegations were not likely to be true and that the parent may have been a victim of a young person seeking to exploit him. The parent later admitted that the allegation was true and this caused Lesley to have to revisit her hypothesis about the father. Interestingly, she managed to preserve some of the initial hypothesis – that

the father was vulnerable – within her new understanding of the case, enabling her initial judgement to persist to some extent. In relation to sensemaking, the literature (see Weick and also Klein) suggests that sensemaking usually occurs where there is incongruence or disruption, where something challenges existing understanding. These examples would seem to back that up.

In the case of Klein, he sees sensemaking as taking place when we experience something that does not fit with our existing repertoire of ‘frames’ or patterns. Klein argues that judgements are usually made intuitively via pattern-matching; we ‘fit’ information, a situation, or experience with a pre-existing mental template (‘frame’) that helps us to quickly categorise it and know how to respond. Expert decision-makers have a broad repertoire of frames and learning through experience enables more to be acquired. When a new experience or piece of information does not fit with these frames, Klein argues that this triggers a process of sensemaking. A new frame may be created as a result, existing frames may be amended to assimilate the new information, or the information may be reinterpreted so that it fits with an existing frame. It is interesting to think about how these strategies may play out and the relationship between the uncertainty that characterises the sensemaking process, and the certainty that exists when there is a straightforward pattern-match.

Thinking about this further, all of the participants used – to varying degrees – forms of professional shortcut in their case talk. Often these were ways of quickly, and quite definitively, characterising cases. For example, participants would use language such as “good enough” or “failure to protect” in describing parenting, or would categorise cases as “chronic neglect” or “there was emotional abuse”. This professional language seems to offer a quick way of making sense of cases and providing something of an anchor of certainty in how the cases can then be proceeded with. On cases that were characterised as neglectful – particularly those that were unintentionally neglectful – often the two narratives about the case related to capacity to sustain change and impact on the child. There was a sense on these cases that although the outcome in the particular case was uncertain, there were quite well-defined and well-used ways of making sense of the cases. There may then be something in the notion of social workers using a form of pattern-matching in order to assist them in quickly making sense of cases, with more deliberate sensemaking occurring when there is an experience of dissonance.

Certainty, uncertainty, and supervision

Some of the concepts discussed here may help to understand the role of supervision and the supervisor in how social workers make sense of their work. Firstly, supervision can promote dissonance through disrupting or challenging thinking. This then creates a degree of uncertainty as the new perspective has to be refuted, assimilated, or adopted by social workers in their ongoing construction of their case. Interestingly, all but three of the social workers said that one of the things they used and valued supervision for was offering a different perspective and/or challenging their thinking.

All of the supervisors talked about focusing on the impact on the child as something they used in supervision. This may be a tool that supervisors ultimately use to help their social workers to move from a position of uncertainty to a more certain position by narrowing their focus towards how things are affecting the child as opposed to focusing on a wider set of factors, such as parents' needs or the views of other professionals. Whilst a focus on the impact on the child is both necessary and admirable, it potentially excludes other factors that could contribute to social workers' conceptualisations of their cases and it will be interesting to see how the use of this focus on the impact on the child plays out in supervision conversations. There seems to be a possible tension between wanting to promote uncertainty on the one hand, and on the other hand using what may amount to professional shortcuts – impact on the child – to focus case conceptualisations towards a more certain end.

Another issue, related to how social workers use professional shortcuts to quickly conceptualise cases, is the way in which these are discussed in supervision. In particular, does supervision encourage reflection on these quick shortcuts that enable cases to be quickly characterised? Does supervision actually reinforce the use of such shortcuts as a means of quickly understanding a case? Are there opportunities to tease out and reflect upon differences between superficially similar cases in order to develop a more nuanced understanding of cases (or, to use Klein's language, to develop a broader repertoire of frames)? To what extent does supervision help to hold uncertainty – including the feelings that correspond with it – and to what extent does it seek to guide social workers towards more definite understandings of their cases? How are feelings of uncertainty expressed and managed in supervision?

Appendix F: Data Matrix Example

Excerpt from data matrix – supervision transcripts

Dyad	Initial formulations	Developing the narrative	Adopted accounts
<p>Ashley and Kai</p>	<p>Case history Limited instances. Ashley contributes historic info on one case, other case Ashley prompts Kai to check history.</p> <p>Case framing Both contribute, usually quite shorthand understanding of case (e.g. “involving DV wasn’t it?”, “mum has been drinking again”).</p> <p>Kai identifying ‘unknowns’ on cases.</p>	<p>Generating hypotheses Hypotheses generally co-constructed, though occasionally offered by Kai. When co-constructed, more steered by Ashley.</p> <p>Focus on YP issues (e.g. possible autism) and case concerns (e.g. DV).</p> <p>Feelings and relationships Some emotional responses to cases (e.g. “sad” “lovely family”).</p> <p>Some talk of level of engagement from parents and YPs.</p> <p>Personal feelings (“disappointment”) expressed to family. Discouraged by Ashley.</p> <p>Testing and weighing evidence Use of questions from Ashley, though sometimes Kai tests info independently.</p> <p>Ashley testing veracity of info and impact on child.</p> <p>Evidence tested against threshold.</p>	<p>Led mainly by Kai, prompting and reframing or summarising from Ashley. Some direction on future actions from Ashley</p> <p>Use of other services and safety plans to support closure.</p> <p>Use of engagement (or lack of).</p>

		Mix of family accounts, first-hand observations, and professional info.	
Jan and Leigh	<p>Case history On one case, exploring history of DV. Done jointly.</p> <p>Case framing Led by Leigh. Use of shorthand understanding (e.g. “there’s high level DV”, “home conditions this time”).</p> <p>Also gives detail around referral incident/concerns.</p>	<p>Generating hypotheses Led by Jan, focus on explaining neglectful home environment.</p> <p>Feelings, engagement and relationships Main focus on engagement.</p> <p>Expresses discomfort in having to address sensitive issues (e.g. home conditions).</p> <p>Acknowledges impact of personal life (“close to the bone”).</p> <p>Testing and weighing information Description of home conditions and report about child’s presentation.</p> <p>Parents’ narratives being re-told.</p> <p>Use of evidence from school.</p> <p>Mix of Leigh leading and questioning from Jan.</p> <p>Leigh explores impact on child and significance of incident from parent’s account.</p> <p>Jan testing veracity of parent’s account and focusing on impact on child.</p>	<p>Input from both, Jan sometimes takes lead on case building.</p> <p>Use of services and engagement, but also focus on concerns and impact on child.</p>

<p>Robin and Kelly</p>	<p>Case history On one case, jointly looking at history of neglect and repeating concerns.</p> <p>Some reflection from both, generally, on the value of chronologies as a tool.</p> <p>Case framing Some input from both, though led more by Kelly. Not lots of detail and some shorthand (e.g. “we’re massively concerned about his behaviour”).</p> <p>One possible snap judgement (“I was worried that that might only go one way at one point”).</p>	<p>Generating hypotheses Some co-construction, led by Robin. Some Kelly offering hypothesis. Focus on exploring main concern.</p> <p>Feelings and relationships Positive engagement correlated with things going well. Lack of engagement = bad.</p> <p>Mindful of possible manipulation but also positive views of parents at times.</p> <p>Testing and weighing information Implication that assessment will determine decision.</p> <p>Describing home conditions, parent or YP behaviour and parent-child interaction.</p> <p>Use of accounts from professionals.</p> <p>Re-telling of parents’ and YP’s narratives, uses their voice (via quotation).</p> <p>Kelly weighs significance of evidence, considering impact on child.</p> <p>Some questioning from Robin, thinking about future issues or impact.</p>	<p>Led by Kelly, limited input from Robin.</p> <p>Use of interactions and first-hand evidence primarily.</p> <p>Focus on parental capability and culpability.</p>

<p>Courtney and Taylor</p>	<p>Case history Only one instance, mention from Courtney of a worker she knows having worked with a family when previous children were removed.</p> <p>Case framing Mainly led by Taylor, quite detailed in describing issues and often more than one concern is raised. Some use of professional language to outline concerns (“there's been referrals about her going off on a mobility scooter with a 55 year old and all sorts of CSE worries”).</p>	<p>Generating hypotheses Mainly co-constructed, both lead at times. Some use of questions from Courtney. Focus mainly on exploring future parenting and parents’ behaviour.</p> <p>Some co-construction around weighing up source and significance of parent’s behaviour.</p> <p>Feelings and relationships Primary focus is on engagement, one instance of positive view of parent too.</p> <p>Testing and weighing information Assessments seen as valuable evidence.</p> <p>Brief drawing on YP’s presentation observed by Taylor.</p> <p>A couple of instances of parents’ accounts, though limited.</p> <p>Use of questioning from Courtney to probe for details and test evidence for significance.</p> <p>Taylor weighs evidence against future risk and current risk level. Use of threshold and impact on child.</p>	<p>Lots of input from Courtney, often leading on building case. At other times, Taylor leads.</p> <p>Taylor quite focused on positives, though balances with concerns. “Change” used quite frequently.</p> <p>Some professional language (e.g. “entrenched”, “level of neglect is like zero”).</p>

<p>Sam and Suzie</p>	<p>Case history One case only, mainly Suzie contributing. Pulling up old paper records to inform chronology due to lack of history on system. History explains current behaviour.</p> <p>Case framing Largely co-constructed, focus on main worry (e.g. "Sam: ...home conditions was one of the main worries...Suzie: ...one of the major ones").</p> <p>Use of professional language and shorthand ("DV incident, mum's had her eye socket broken").</p> <p>Some snap judgement ("Which I suspect will be worryingly high").</p>	<p>Generating hypotheses Only one example, Suzie explaining YP's behaviour.</p> <p>Feelings and relationships Personal feelings ("disappointed") shared with family.</p> <p>Engagement (or lack of) from YP and parent. Also talk of positive relationships with YPs.</p> <p>Emotional response to case ("awful").</p> <p>Testing and weighing information PCA seen as definitive piece of evidence.</p> <p>Reports on home conditions and presentation of YP. Observation of parent being drunk.</p> <p>Occasional use of parent/carer narrative. Mainly other professionals.</p> <p>Medical evidence highly valued.</p> <p>Some use of impact on the child. Sam uses prompts to test veracity and significance of evidence. Some co-construction.</p> <p>Incongruence between police info and parent's account.</p>	<p>Mainly led by Suzie, though some co-construction (mainly reinforcing) from Sam.</p> <p>Use of engagement and relationships in narrative. Notes positive change in families.</p> <p>Use of third-party evidence to reinforce concerns.</p> <p>Use of process and procedure and services in understanding case.</p>

Appendix G: Extract from Research Journal

Excerpt from research journal following fieldnote and group supervision coding

16/06/2020 – I am now putting together my data matrix for the fieldnotes. Some thoughts as I go through:

- The way cases are framed is interesting and quite uniform; cases tend to be reduced down to a main ‘defining’ feature that enables others to quickly understand which case is to be discussed. This is quite a reductive, shorthand way of framing cases but clearly serves a function.
- On one observation where lots of cases are framed, there are instances of cases being framed as worrying rather than in this shorthand way. Might this have been a busy day and so the worry is linked to volume of work coming in as much as the cases themselves?
- In Summertown, there are a number of instances of cases being framed by worker worry as opposed to issues on the case.
- Case history is quite limited all round.

18/06/2020 – I am going to carry on jotting down some thoughts as they occur to me whilst doing the matrix today:

- One thing that is coming up in looking at evidence (testing and weighing thereof) is the doubting of the veracity and credibility of parents’ accounts.
- Another issue, sometimes related to the above though not always, is congruence. Definitely a sense that evidence tends to be given more or less weight depending on whether it feels as though it fits. Often things like “that doesn’t sound right” or “it doesn’t add up” are said when considering accounts and thinking about their veracity.
- Threshold and impact on the child are used, particularly by supervisors.
- Summertown observation 6 has a nice example of usefulness of evidence being about how well it fits with SW’s hypothesis or judgement. Shelley and Robin discuss an expert psych assessment; Shelley is sceptical about how helpful it is as it makes

a clear recommendation for removal when she thinks there are positives and they “would struggle to meet threshold”. Robin holds a different view, thinking that despite improvements things are “still not good enough” and he agrees with the assessment.

Moving on to feelings and relationships:

- Engagement (or lack of) is quite prevalent, with positive engagement sometimes influencing optimism about a case and lack of engagement doing the opposite. Paradoxically, though, lack of engagement sometimes justifies case closure.
- Feelings about cases and individuals are expressed in both teams.
- Relationships and the impact of them more openly discussed in Summertown; some discussion of “grooming”, and also awareness of how relational factors might influence thinking. Evident too in Springshire, but especially so in Summertown.
- Relational aspects – engagement and likeability of parents – offered as explanations for inconsistency in decision-making on otherwise similar cases.
- Emotional language about cases is actually quite limited. Generally, they are either “sad”, “frustrating”, or “lovely”. These three words crop up very commonly in case descriptions.
- Acknowledgement at times of wanting parents to do well.

Hypothesising:

- Generally about behaviour, either parents’ or children’s. More often seems to be about parental behaviour though.
- Noticeably more prevalent in Springshire than in Summertown, hypothesising evident to some degree in all observations in Springshire in contrast to just over half in Summertown. Group case discussion more hypothetical in Springshire too, more focused on testing and weighing evidence in Summertown. May reflect level of decision – i.e. removal and adoption – of case in Summertown compared with lower level case in Springshire.
- Hypotheses often generated collectively, with at least two participants and sometimes more. Occasionally an individual will just offer a hypothesis, but this is less common than them coming about through dialogue.

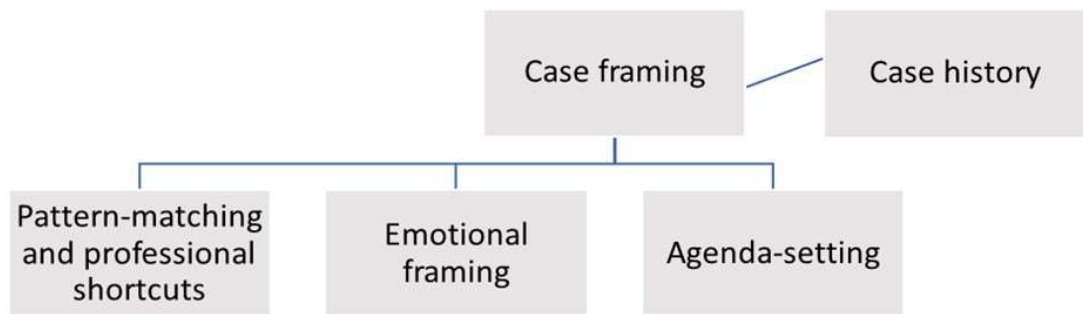
19/06/2020 – The first thing that strikes me is that the ‘adopted account’ section is comparatively less populated than ‘developing the narrative’ and ‘initial formulations’. It is also comparatively less populated when contrasted with the same category from the supervision transcripts. This suggests that the office space might be less of a forum for justifying decisions and judgements. Perhaps it is more of a forum for testing out ideas, and this would be supported by the relatively more common ‘testing and weighing evidence’ code and the greater instances of explicitly expressed uncertainty.

For now, some thoughts as I go along:

- Where adopted accounts are presented and there is some certainty in case formulation, this is done more briefly than in supervision and will sometimes relate to a specific aspect of the case and a lower level judgement rather than supporting an overall judgement about the case or a specific decision.
- Interestingly, in group case discussion there is no taking of decisions. Some offering of adopted accounts is evident but feels a little more provisional. This might reinforce the notion that group case discussion offers a more exploratory space for SWs.
- Decisions tend to be dominated by threshold, though some other factors are apparent and interesting. Engagement is used as a reason to either close or escalate. Offering structure and preventing re-referral are also cited as reasons to keep cases open or escalate them.

Appendix H: Mapping of key themes and sub-themes

Themes and sub-themes under ‘Initial Formulations’ stage of sensemaking:



Themes and sub-themes under ‘Developing the Narrative’ stage of sensemaking:

