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Mark Gregory & Laura Biggart

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'We are quite a "can anyone help me?" kind of team': the role of the team as secure base in social workers' sensemaking

Mark Gregory^a and Laura Biggart^b

^aSchool of Social Work, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK; ^bSchool of Psychology, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK

ABSTRACT

There is recognition that teams act as a locus for the sensemaking activity that underpins social workers' judgement. Research has highlighted that teams also provide emotional support for practitioners. Although sensemaking involves emotional and social processes, there has been limited examination of how emotional support in teams interacts with sensemaking. This article uses the Team as Secure Base (TASB) model as a framework for presenting findings from an ethnographic study of four social work teams in England. Data comprise interviews with social workers and supervisors ($n = 22$) and fieldnotes from observations ($n = 23$). Teams exhibited behaviour consistent with the domains of TASB, creating a space for safe exploration of social workers' thoughts and feelings. However, while a strong sense of team membership contributed to participants' sense of safety and self-efficacy, this impacted on sensemaking in other ways, such as giving less weight to the views of those who were not team members.

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Introduction

Children and families social work is complex, not only do social workers have to make sense of various sources and types of information but the work itself is highly emotive (D. Howe, 2010). There is growing recognition that social work teams are a locus for the sensemaking activity through which social workers process the myriad information that informs their professional judgement (Gregory, 2023; Helm, 2022; Whittaker, 2018). It is also acknowledged that teams provide a valuable source of emotional support (Biggart et al., 2017; Ferguson, Warwick et al., 2020). Opportunities to share emotional experiences promote emotional regulation, enabling individuals to maintain a sense of equilibrium (Rimé, 2009). Where emotions go unacknowledged and unresolved, it can have a range of negative consequences, including inhibiting the capacity of individuals to think clearly (Regehr et al., 2022; Rimé, 2009).

The notion that emotions and emotional processing play a role in social workers' sensemaking is not new (Cook & Gregory, 2020; O'Connor, 2020), however the relationship between emotions, team support, and sensemaking has been underexplored

CONTACT Mark Gregory  mark.gregory@uea.ac.uk

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empirically. Drawing on findings from an ethnographic study of children and families social work teams, this article seeks to address this gap, using the team as secure base (TASB) model (Biggart et al., 2017) to examine emotional support provided by teams and how that support influences sensemaking.

Sensemaking in teams

Sensemaking is the process through which individuals attach meaning and significance to experience and is integral to decision-making and judgement (Cook & Gregory, 2020). Dialogue with colleagues plays a crucial role in sensemaking (Gregory, 2023); Helm (2022) argues that the structured environment of the office helps social workers to use analytical reasoning to process their intuitive responses to unstructured environments, such as home visits.

Sensemaking entails constructing explanatory narratives that inform decision-making (Gregory, 2023); the social work team is a crucial space for this, as colleagues support each other to select and develop best working hypotheses (Whittaker, 2018). Sensemaking conversations happen freely when social workers are in a safe collegial environment (Helm, 2017); the familiarity of colleagues with a shared professional background enables safe exploration and holding onto uncertainty (Mason, 2019). However, within teams there can be a risk that colleagues may be more likely to reinforce than challenge each other's thinking (Helm, 2017).

Sensemaking and emotion

Sensemaking is not a purely cognitive process, it also involves feeling and emotion (Cook & Gregory, 2020; O'Connor, 2020). O'Connor's (2022) research conceptualises emotions as a complex practice as opposed to experienced phenomena, emphasising the active role they play in social workers' sensemaking.

The relationship between emotions and sensemaking is complex; emotions can either helpfully inform sensemaking or risk unhelpful bias (Cook, 2020). For example, a social worker undertaking a home visit at the end of a stressful day may leave the visit with a sense of unease. In this instance, the social worker's felt experience may trigger them to probe the source of their unease and could lead to important insights on the family's life being gained. On the other hand, the unease experienced by the social worker could be a projection of their own feelings at the end of a stressful day. Emotional responses need to be reflected upon and articulated to ensure that emotions helpfully inform sensemaking rather than creating bias (Cook, 2020).

Emotional labour and emotional sharing

Children and families social work is emotive work; social workers are witness to and containers of the distress and anxiety of the children and families that they work with (D. Howe, 2010). Work-related pressures – such as high caseloads, limited resources, and lack of support – also create feelings of anxiety for social workers (Ferguson, Disney et al., 2020). Managing these demands often involves engaging in emotional labour, where individuals adapt their emotional responses in order to fulfil the

demands of their professional role (Hochschild, 1983). Winter et al. (2019) argue that in a highly bureaucratised practice context, social workers can be prone to performing in ways that are emotionally-detached and task-focused in their encounters with children and families. Social workers may ultimately *become* emotionally detached rather than *suppressing or altering* their outward expressions of emotion; Hochschild (1983) describes this as deep acting versus surface acting. Deep acting enables social workers to resolve dissonance between how they really feel and the feelings they express (Hochschild, 1983) but can lead to practice that is emotionally distant (Winter et al., 2019). Surface acting, meanwhile, maintains dissonance between real and expressed emotions, which can cause further emotional stress (Carder, 2023).

It is important for social workers to have opportunities to process the emotions evoked by their work (Carder, 2023; Winter et al., 2019). Where the emotional demands of the work become overwhelming, social workers can be prone to employing a range of psychological defences – such as projection, transference, denial, and avoidance (Trevithick, 2011) – which can influence their capacity to assess risk (Regehr et al., 2022), negatively impact interactions with children and their families (Ferguson, 2017; Ferguson, Disney et al., 2020), and create difficulties in inter-agency communication (Kettle, 2018).

Emotional sharing promotes emotional regulation which enables sensemaking (Rimé, 2009), and teams can provide important opportunities for sharing of emotions; ethnographic studies have highlighted the role teams play in offering a space for reflection and containment (Ferguson, Warwick et al., 2020; O'Connor, 2022).

The team as secure base model

The notion of a secure base is derived from attachment theory; where a child has developed a secure attachment with their primary caregiver, the caregiver acts as a secure base that enables the child to safely explore their world. For the child, knowing that their emotional needs will be met by their attachment figure enables them to develop self-confidence and self-efficacy (Bowlby, 1988). Schofield and Beek (2014) developed a secure base model for foster carers and adopters, outlining five domains of caregiving that contribute to children experiencing a secure base: availability, sensitivity, acceptance, co-operation, and family membership.

To ensure that emotional balance is maintained, adults require a secure base in much the same way as children, though adults draw on a range of relationships to provide them with emotional security rather than relying on a primary caregiver (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2010). In social work, the notion of secure base has been used to examine the supervisory relationship (Williams, 2022), whilst Biggart et al. (2017) have developed the Team as Secure Base (TASB) model (see Figure 1) to analyse social workers' experiences of emotional support in teams.

The availability of colleagues and supervisors enables social workers to feel safe, opportunities for co-operation and experiencing acceptance promote self-efficacy, whilst sensitivity and team membership provide feelings of security and belonging (Biggart et al., 2017).

Though there is evidence that teams and emotions are central to sensemaking, and that teams provide important emotional support, there has been limited empirical work

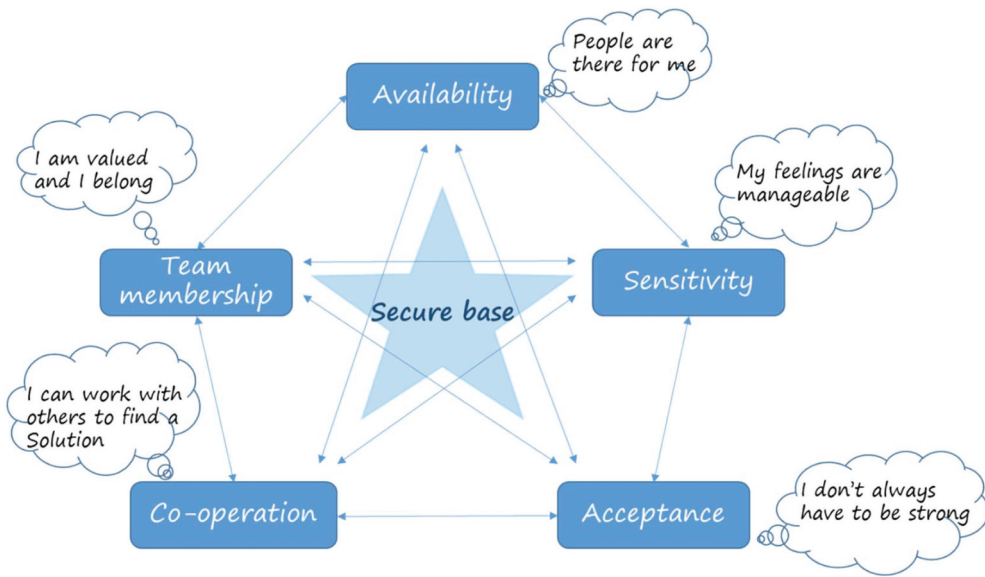


Figure 1. The team as secure base model (taken from Biggart et al., 2017).

examining the relationship between emotional support in teams and social workers' sensemaking. Biggart et al. (2017) suggest that providing a secure base helps social workers to construct more coherent narratives about their work, and this notion is also discussed by Helm (2017), who notes the need for further research to understand the relationship between emotions in teams and sensemaking. This article contributes to understanding the relationship between emotional support and sensemaking using TASB as a lens.

Methods

This article is based on findings from an ethnographic study of sensemaking in social work teams, with the primary research question: How does sensemaking take place through different forms of supervisory case-talk? The study took a broad definition of supervision to include formal supervision, group case discussions, informal supervisory conversations, and peer supervision. The study was approved by the university ethics committee and research governance approval was obtained from two participating English local authorities.

Four teams across the two local authority sites participated in the study, data were collected between September 2018 and March 2019 and comprised fieldnotes from twenty-three observations (approximately 120 hours of observation time) and twenty-two semi-structured interviews with social workers ($n = 17$) and their supervisors ($n = 5$). Handwritten fieldnotes were taken contemporaneously during observations and written up immediately afterwards, with a focus on preserving dialogue (Fetterman, 2019). A reflexive journal was used throughout to reflect on the researcher's influence on and interaction with the research sites; this is considered good practice in ethnographic research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Reflexive journals can also provide useful

analytical insights and evidence analytic decisions in reflexive qualitative research (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022).

Transcribed interviews and fieldnotes were analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2021) and themes related to team support were identified. Drawing on the thematic analysis, case studies were produced to examine how the teams involved in the study functioned to support social workers' sensemaking. Case studies are commonly used in ethnographic research (Yin, 2017) and support the development of the kind of 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) that is the hallmark of ethnography. Case studies enable the pulling together of different forms of ethnographic data – such as fieldnotes and interview transcripts – and enable triangulation in data analysis (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Case studies were produced drawing primarily on interview and observation data, though relevant excerpts from the researcher's reflexive journal were also used to show how analytical insights were developed. Providing such excerpts promotes transparency and helps to highlight the analytic work that takes place in reflexive qualitative research (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022).

When producing the ethnographic case studies, the concept of TASB (Biggart et al., 2017) provided a useful framework for exploring how participants experienced their teams. This article draws on the ethnographic case studies to examine how the teams provided a secure base and explores implications for sensemaking; data extracts presented in the findings were chosen based on being representative of participants' experiences. Where extracts are used that are atypical, this is highlighted within the findings. Names used in presenting the data are pseudonyms.

Findings

I wonder if there is a sense of 'touching base' before starting the week, does it help to ground social workers in the environment where they feel safe and secure before heading out into the uncertain world of practice? (Reflexive Journal)

The above excerpt followed an observation visit on a Monday morning; the office-space was particularly busy that morning in contrast to visits at other times of the week. These reflections resonate with the notion of TASB; social work teams can provide a safe environment that supports social workers to manage the emotional demands of day-to-day practice. The findings will outline how teams in the study evidenced the five domains of TASB – availability, sensitivity, acceptance, cooperation, and team membership – whilst also examining how the domains relate to sensemaking. The notions of *reciprocity* and *insiders and outsiders*, and their impact on sensemaking, will then be discussed in relation to team membership.

Availability – 'you can go to any of them'

Availability is the feeling that colleagues and supervisors will be there for social workers, particularly during times of need, thus promoting a sense of trust and security. Participants described experiencing this kind of availability within their teams:

I will come back straight after that visit and say to someone, I've just been on this visit and this happened . . . they are all good, so you can go to any of them . . . there's usually someone in my team there (Lucy, SW)

The capacity to access support from colleagues created a sense that they were not only physically present, but that they were emotionally available to provide support. The sense of availability was also valued for the kind of impromptu case discussion that supports sensemaking:

I find when those cases come in being in the office is way more helpful for me than being at home. I don't like crisis managing on my own at home. It stresses me out, whereas when I'm in the office it's easier to be like 'Ashley (Supervisor), I need your attention immediately' type of thing. So, I will go over and be like 'This is what's happened, this is where I'm at, what's my next steps, I think I need to do this, is that the right line?' and she is pretty good at being like 'Yeah, that's what we do next' (Jesse, SW)

Having a supervisor or trusted colleague available enables social workers to simultaneously manage feelings of anxiety and check out their own thinking. The capacity to move between making sense of information and reflecting on the emotional impact of the work was evident in observations of participants' case-talk:

Robin (Supervisor) is sat diagonally opposite Jo, who says that mum has had a blip, she had been doing well previously. Robin says I wonder what happens when she has these dips? Jo says she has been feeling low lately but had been managing fine with the kids until today. Robin says it seems to be when things go wrong with B, and Jo agrees . . . Jo says that the kids seemed fine yesterday when I visited 'but they shouldn't' . . . Robin says it's sad 'I really want her to do well' and Jo says 'Yeah, me too' (Fieldnotes)

Such conversations enable social workers and their supervisors to acknowledge emotional aspects of the work, whilst also providing opportunities for sensemaking activity, leading to the generation of hypotheses about the source of the mother's 'blips' and reflection on how this is experienced by the children. The physical proximity of Robin and Jo enabled this conversation to take place spontaneously, however Jeyasingham and Devlin (2024) found that, post-pandemic, increased hybrid and remote working have altered how social workers use colleagues and supervisors for the purpose of sensemaking. Given that availability is contingent on how readily social workers feel able to access colleagues, increased remote working may impact experiences of emotional support and opportunities for sensemaking.

Sensitivity – 'I can see you are worried'

Sensitivity helps to promote emotional regulation; it gives social workers the sense that their feelings are manageable and helps them to feel safe. Sensitivity also entails colleagues and supervisors recognising and being attuned to each other's feelings (Biggart et al., 2017). Availability and sensitivity overlap, and the capacity to immediately access supervisory support helped social workers to emotionally regulate:

Andy goes straight over to Jan and sits down next to her; he says, I think we need to have a case discussion . . . I haven't even really seen the kids as yet, there's four of them, and it's just diabolical . . . they have just been bombarding each other non-stop . . . It's just unsustainable. 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. Andy says, even if the outcome is then just a follow up strategy meeting when we know more. It might help to focus things and bring it back to the children, at the moment it just feels so chaotic (Fieldnotes)

Having opportunities to emotionally share enables individuals to think more clearly (Rimé, 2009) and reduces the likelihood of overwhelming emotions influencing assessments of risk (Regehr et al., 2022). Emotionally attuned colleagues who can name and provide space to discuss feelings can help social workers to reflect on and unpick how their emotions may be influencing their thinking:

I remember one of the guys in the office 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 ... I felt a little bit like that comment was really timely and made me realise ... it's not helpful to the kid at all for me to be looking to catch dad out and make dad a bad guy. Ultimately, the only thing that's going to help this child is for dad to change (Chris, SW)

Emotionally attuned colleagues may provide either support – to help social workers to maintain equilibrium – or challenge where they see that the emotional responses of their colleagues may influence how they make sense of information.

Acceptance – 'I don't care if I sound like an idiot'

Acceptance relates to building self-worth, it involves giving individuals permission to make mistakes, offering reassurance, and giving positive feedback when things have been done well. Where sensitivity and availability primarily contribute to feelings of safety and security, acceptance helps to promote a sense of being valued:

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 (Fieldnotes)

Providing praise for how social workers perform reinforces the sense that they are valued and valuable. Within the teams, there was also permission to acknowledge that the work can be challenging:

[T]he repeated 'it's difficult' phrase seems to be an acknowledgement of the complexity of the task and of constantly working in grey areas (Reflexive Journal)

This capacity within teams to recognise that the work is 'difficult' created a culture where vulnerability was accepted. In respect of sensemaking, this supported social workers to hold on to uncertainty and to be humble about the limits of their own knowledge:

[W]e are quite a 'can anyone help me?' kind of team. I think that's been the one thing I've learnt throughout my newly qualified year is, I don't care if I sound like an idiot, or if I sound like I'm not good enough ... in our team it's, like, just ask questions and get the help, because ... everyone is still learning, even when you talk to Steph (Supervisor), he'll be, oh, I didn't know that, and he asks for help all the time as well, so that's really good to be in a team like that (Katie, SW)

When individuals feel safe and held, they can explore and hold in mind multiple thoughts and feelings in relation to their work, and this promotes curiosity (Mason, 2019). The capacity to acknowledge and tolerate uncertainty helps social workers to feel safe and encourages them to be more exploratory in their sensemaking and more open to learning from their practice (Gregory, 2023).

Cooperation – ‘we enjoy sharing’

Cooperation helps to promote self-efficacy; by working meaningfully with colleagues, social workers build a sense that their work is valued and that they are capable. Within the two sites, there were numerous examples of cooperation, which helped to engender a spirit of collective responsibility for the work of the team:

[W]e all chat to each other about cases, and it’s cultural almost within the work to share our cases between the team and a bit what’s going on with each other’s cases and taking things from each other. Or, I rang that person to help with that situation, or I had that and did this, it’s just something that we do because it’s nice and because we enjoy sharing (Lucy, SW)

It is well established that collegial case discussion is central to social workers’ sensemaking (Gregory, 2023; Helm, 2017, 2022; Whittaker, 2018) and so opportunities to discuss cases in the office-space is important. However, when social workers had opportunities to undertake joint working, this enhanced shared sensemaking:

Toni says, ‘Just the man’ . . . I want to know what you think about my case now you’ve visited. Chris says, I didn’t have any concerns about R and his interactions with the children. W was more high functioning than I thought. Toni says, yeah I was less worried all the way through until the end when I met W . . . Chris says, I feel like mum feels guilty because of what happened with the medication, that impacts on the decisions she is making at every level . . . everything mum says you think ‘fair enough’, it’s only when you step back and look at it all. Toni says, I was feeling better about it until meeting W. You’re right, she feels guilty and that colours everything (Fieldnotes)

The office space provided a structured environment in which sense could be made of experiences in the unstructured environment of the home visit (Helm, 2022). One participant described how opportunities to talk to colleagues who had previously worked with a family ‘helped me to be confident that I’m doing the right thing and it’s helped me to approach the situation’. In this way, cooperation not only supports sensemaking dialogue, but also promotes autonomy through enhancing self-efficacy (Biggart et al., 2017).

Team membership – ‘A sense of team and belonging’

Team membership is closely related to belonging; in feeling that they belong to the team, individuals also see the value of the team and of their role within it. This helps foster a sense of security and self-efficacy. Team membership can be fostered in a number of ways:

[P]eople bring in cakes, biscuits, sweets to share with their colleagues; these are always appreciated and everyone participates in this ritual . . . On a Friday, they get fish and chips, this is another ritual. It seems to be about belonging, about that sense of team. The teams

also do social things together, going out for afternoon tea or drinks. Again, this seems to create a sense of team and belonging (Reflexive Journal)

This translated into a sense of trust and a feeling that team members would be available to each other for support:

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 (Ashley, Supervisor)

Conversations with colleagues and supervisors play an important role in sensemaking (Gregory, 2023; Helm, 2017; Whittaker, 2018); a sense of belonging to the team and a team culture that encourages sharing of thoughts and feelings helps create conditions for ongoing sensemaking dialogue between team members.

Reciprocity

It is important to note, however, that not all participants experienced their teams in the same way and there were interesting atypical experiences within the teams. *Reciprocity* appears to be an important aspect of membership in TASB; team members need to value and contribute to the team in order to fully experience membership of it. This was apparent in differences in how participants accessed and used support, particularly when they had past negative experiences within their team:

I had a manager who undermined everything I did and went out of their way to be as nasty as possible . . . it was very isolating, very lonely, she told me everyone in my team hated me, everyone disliked me . . . I don't think I ever really enjoyed the touchy feely personal. I've always felt that that would be used against you . . . I keep myself sane in a different way. And, how could I, when the one person who was making my life impossible, was the one person who was my supervisor (Casey, SW)

Where social workers had negative experiences of their team or supervisor, this impacted how they accessed support from their colleagues and supervisor:

I'm checking my thinking, checking that I'm not letting the child down and that I'm not doing anything that's not defensible or not child-focused (Casey, SW)

The use of colleagues and supervisors to promote defensible, child-focused decision-making is beneficial, but in this instance this more defensive use of team support came at the expense of using the team for emotional support and more collaborative sensemaking. Although Casey was an experienced social worker, it was noticeable that they were infrequently involved in case discussions with colleagues and they often sat away from the team to work independently. This physical distancing may have reflected an avoidance of engaging with the team on an emotional level, a common psychological defence in response to challenging or unresolved emotional experiences (Trevithick, 2011). This meant Casey was not able to reciprocally access and contribute to the TASB.

The ability to feel a sense of belonging to a team is an individual as well as collective experience. Carder's (2023) research found that team identity is complex, it can create a strong sense of belonging but it can also entail emotional labour on the

part of team members as they feel a tacit pressure to conform to group norms. This may inhibit the experience of TASB that is necessary for emotional support and sensemaking.

Insiders and outsiders

Where individuals feel a strong sense of belonging to their team, this may have some unexpected consequences for sensemaking. In one of the office sites, team members expressed both a strong sense of membership and high levels of acceptance of each other as practitioners:

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

There were instances, however, where the strong sense of shared competence appeared to colour how 'outsiders' to the team were perceived, reflected in expressions of scepticism about the veracity of information provided by other professionals, such as education and health professionals:

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 . . . (Fieldnotes)

There was a risk that information from other professionals might be downplayed due to perceptions that 'outsiders' were less reliable than colleagues inside the team. In a peer group supervision session, this scepticism about other professionals led to concerns being expressed about their motivation, and a hypothesis was put forward that painted other professionals as a potential source of harm to the young person:

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 (Fieldnotes)

Information sharing between professionals in child protection networks transacts anxiety as well as information (Kettle, 2018). Where the source of the anxiety – worries about risk to children – is not named, this can lead to projection and transference in interprofessional relationships (Kettle, 2018). These defensive responses may contribute to the development of an 'us and them' mentality. Bion (1961) highlights that groups function in two ways: as work-groups and basic assumption groups. Work-groups work towards shared goals and activities, in doing so they manage tensions and anxieties that result from group dynamics and the work task (Bion, 1961). However, when anxieties are not managed and emotions become overwhelming for the group, the mentality shifts to that of a basic assumption group (Bion, 1961). Basic assumption groups function to find strategies to defend against or ameliorate anxiety (Bion, 1961). One basic assumption response is fight or flight in which the aim of the group becomes survival in the face of a perceived threat (Bion, 1961) and this may explain the development of an 'us and them' mentality. This could suggest that, under certain pressures, teams that may otherwise exhibit secure base behaviour become preoccupied with protecting the team over and above their overarching task.

Other professionals can be a valuable sensemaking resource (Roesch-Marsh, 2018). However, when other professionals are treated as ‘outsiders’ and viewed with scepticism or hostility, this limits the capacity for collaborative sensemaking to take place and highlights the importance for multi-disciplinary training to encourage understanding of different professional perspectives.

Discussion

The TASB model provides a useful lens for examining how teams provide a safe, emotionally supportive environment. The experience of TASB is a prerequisite for the conditions in which effective sensemaking dialogue can take place. Echoing previous studies, the capacity of teams to provide emotional support enables social workers to engage collaboratively in sensemaking dialogue (Helm, 2017; Ferguson, Warwick et al., 2020).

Sensemaking is an emotional as well as cognitive process (Cook & Gregory, 2020; O’Connor, 2020) and so the emotional sharing that TASB supports is important for the emotional dimension of sensemaking. Experiencing emotional safety also enables social workers to inhabit a position of safe uncertainty, which is associated with the capacity to be curious and to think hypothetically (Mason, 2019). Being able to develop, hold, and test multiple hypotheses supports more rigorous sensemaking (Gregory, 2023).

The provision of TASB and its influence on sensemaking is, however, not entirely straightforward. Not everyone experiences the team as a secure base; for some participants, their professional history made them wary of seeking support within the team space. The impact on social workers of past supervisory or team relationships that were authoritarian or even abusive has parallels with neglectful or abusive caregiving in childhood impairing the development of a secure base (Howe, 2005). However, for individuals to experience their team as a secure base, there is a need for a degree of *reciprocity* and this is a point of difference in comparison with young infants. Adults can emotionally self-regulate much of the time and have agency in choosing what and with whom to emotionally share (Rimé, 2009), whilst young children are largely emotionally dependent on their caregivers (Bowlby, 1988). A minority of participants withdrew physically and emotionally from their teams, limiting their capacity to receive *and* provide emotional support and opportunities for sensemaking. Supervisors play a key role in enabling a supportive culture (Biggart et al., 2017; Gregory, 2024) and it is important that they help to integrate team members who may be struggling with team dynamics or the impact of negative past experiences.

Reciprocity in teams does not necessarily come without cost; participatory membership of teams involves a degree of conforming to norms and expectations, which can entail emotional labour (Carder, 2023). Where teams contribute to emotional labour, they may not provide space for social workers to express their felt emotions (Carder, 2023) and may not provide the emotional safety needed for sensemaking. Furthermore, Helm (2017) notes that team cultures can sometimes be problematic and lead to bias in how individuals make sense of information; there was evidence in the findings of the potential for information to be distrusted due to negative perceptions of ‘outsiders’ to the team. On the other hand, there was evidence that colleagues could challenge each other’s thinking, indicating that they felt accepted and were not afraid of personal judgement;

this kind of respectful challenge supports sensemaking (Helm, 2017). Supportive team cultures that provide spaces to think and feel promote sensemaking activity (Gregory, 2024).

A key facet of teams that promote containment, reflection, and meaningful cooperation is *openness* (Morrison, 2000). Where teams are open to others, it reduces the sense of there being insiders and outsiders (Morrison, 2000). Contributions and challenges from ‘outsiders’ can provide opportunities for holding safe uncertainty (Mason, 2019) and engaging in shared sensemaking (Roesch-Marsh, 2018). Revisiting the origins of TASB, the provision of a secure base promotes openness to exploration (Bowlby, 1988).

Defensive responses to ‘outsiders’ may reflect that teams are not fully providing emotional security; in these instances, teams should reflect on whether they are offering opportunities for meaningful emotional sharing, particularly in naming and processing anxiety. This should mitigate the risk of defensive positioning – such as falling into basic assumption group mentality (Bion, 1961) – and promote openness to new ideas. A team that exhibits openness is also less likely to require team members engaging in emotional labour to fit in (Carder, 2023). Where teams flexibly accommodate the needs and perspectives of a range of individuals, this promotes acceptance, reduces the need for team members to perform to conform, and creates an environment that is conducive to sensemaking.

Consideration also needs to be given to working practices that enable teams to work closely together and experience opportunities for emotional containment and sensemaking. This and similar ethnographic studies (Helm, 2017; Ferguson, Warwick et al., 2020) were undertaken pre-COVID-19 pandemic; recent research has suggested that moves towards remote and hybrid working are changing the way that social workers access and use collegial and supervisory support (Jeyasingham & Devlin, 2024). While there was evidence during the pandemic of teams adapting to provide a secure base (Cook et al., 2020), longer-term impacts of remote and hybrid working on team support and sensemaking warrant further research.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Mark Gregory is a Lecturer in Social Work at the University of East Anglia, where he completed his PhD in 2022. His background is in children and families social work, where he worked as a social worker and team manager before undertaking his doctoral studies. His research interests are in sensemaking, decision-making, and professional judgement, as well as supervision and team support.

Laura Biggart is a Lecturer in Psychology at the University of East Anglia. Her interests are in applied psychology and she has researched and published widely in the field of emotions and well-being, with a particular focus on emotional intelligence and emotional support in social work. Through her research, she has developed the Team as Secure Base model to examine how social workers are emotionally supported in their day-to-day practice.

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