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From doing to being: the tensions of systemic practice in social work – group reflective supervision in child protection

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This research aimed to consider the impact of introducing the systemic approach to child protection practice through the forum of group reflective supervision. A single case discussion was observed, recorded and transcribed and the data interpreted using thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006). The social workers observed were trained in the systemic approach to foundation level. The data generated showed social workers using hypotheses to put forward ideas about a family shaped by systemic principles. However the inclusion of a pathologising discourse about a mother being blind to the sexual abuse of her daughter and an absence of self-reflexivity suggested social workers were limited by linear thinking. The paper uses this data to suggest a tension between systemic practice and the child protection paradigm. The findings illustrate the challenge of occupying a systemic posture (the being) and the application of systemic concepts and techniques (the doing) in child protection. This paper recommends that systemic practice be taught and supported in social work to shape a more robustly reflexive systemic 'being' in the child protection context.

Practitioner points

- There are tensions in applying systemic principles in social work contexts that create unique challenges for practitioners
- Without due attention to systemic epistemology in group reflective supervision, practitioners can rely too much on techniques to the detriment of reflexivity
- Hypothesising in the child protection context can be useful in the work but can be constrained by institutional pressures
- Without paying attention to circularity and reflexivity, hypotheses can recreate pathologising discourses

Keywords: child protection; group reflective supervision; hypothesising; reflexivity; social work; systemic practice.

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Introduction

> *She's turned a blind eye or she's denied other things hasn't she? So maybe, could it be about that she doesn't want to accept …*
>
> *She could be replicating the same thing with her own daughter but from five to seven it would have been easier to deny and to turn a blind eye …*
>
> *I'd be interested in the cultural element, if this abuse happened in their country of origin, whether there's a culture in that area of kind-of turning a blind eye …*

These statements serve to demonstrate the pervasive power of a dominating discourse in relation to sexual abuse and its implications for motherhood (Hare-Mustin, 1994). Taken from a single case discussion observed during group reflective supervision, they show social workers putting forward hypotheses about the quality of a mother-daughter relationship, positioning the mother as in some way responsible for failing to protect her daughter from suffering sexual abuse (Jensen, 2005). The discussion intended to broaden the exploration of the impact of the daughter's sexual abuse on their relationship using systemic principles (Mason, 2012). Whilst practising within a second order systemic approach, social workers aimed to reflect the multiple truths inherent in family life through hypothesising (Cecchin, 1987; Selvini *et al.*, 1980). Whilst hypotheses can generate multiple ideas to bring forth the 'multiversa' (Maturana and Varela, 1980), this discussion and the use of the technique propagated linear causal descriptions that inadvertently reinforced a pathologising discourse about the mother being 'blind' to the sexual abuse of her daughter.

Context

Group reflective supervision is increasingly being used in children's social care departments, spurred on by the advancement of systemic approaches in local authority redesigns. Following the publication of the *Munro review of child protection* (Munro, 2011), Sir Martin Narey's report into social work education (2014), and the government's innovation initiative (Sebba *et al.*, 2017), redesigns are privileging practice-led frameworks that seek to redress historically process-driven reforms. These aim instead to strip back bureaucracy and create a 'culture, which prioritises excellent practice, based around the principles of innovation and excellence' (Department for Education [DfE], 2016: 3).

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Reclaiming Social Work (RSW) is one example of a government-supported innovation in the UK that utilised the systemic approach as a means of providing an evidence base for intervention (Cross, Hubbard and Munro, 2010). Subsequent reviews of the redesign reported that RSW units were demonstrating high quality practice and evidence of systemic ideas (Cross, Hubbard and Munro, 2010; Forrester *et al.*, 2013). Although reviews were positive, it is unclear from the findings what impact exposure to systemic ideas had on the workers and their subsequent work with families. Despite this, elements of RSW have also been embedded in the UK social work training scheme Frontline. The subsequent evaluation of the scheme noted a presence of systemic assessment skills in the programme's participants but did not link these skills to outcomes for families (Maxwell *et al.*, 2016).

Although the evidence base for systemic practice in both child and family work is robust (Carr, 2014; Stratton, 2016), there are notably fewer studies considering the impact of this approach with children's services and more specifically child protection (Forrester *et al.*, 2013; Maxwell *et al.*, 2016). The research available does note that systemic ideas are impacting the ways in which social workers are thinking and talking about families in regular weekly discussions or 'unit meetings' (Cross, Hubbard and Munro, 2010; Forrester *et al.*, 2013; Maxwell *et al.*, 2016). This was echoed in the evaluation of 'Focus on Practice', which reviewed the introduction of systemic training in three London boroughs and identified opportunities for reflective practice in regular group supervision as a positive outcome (Cameron *et al.*, 2016).

In addition, the recent Children's Social Care Innovation Programme evaluation recommended that policy-makers support systemic social work (Sebba *et al.*, 2017). This recommendation was grounded in their findings that outcomes improved following the inclusion of the systemic approach as a practice framework. The report stated that the systemic approach encouraged 'high quality case discussion, that is family-focused, and strengths-based, to build families/young people's capacity to address their own problems more effectively' (Sebba *et al.*, 2017: 70). This meta-review of innovations using the systemic approach suggests a direct link between how social workers are thinking about families and the impact on practice. It stops short of describing how this is achieved.

Systemic social work

The systemic approach is an inherently therapeutic one that has its roots in the field of family therapy (Pendry, 2012a; Stratton and Lask,

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2013). At its core, it privileges the centrality of relationships and context for a person's experience (Burbach, 1996; Dallos and Draper, 2010). It asserts that problems are inherently relational and that they are embedded between people rather than within people (Bateson, 1972; Cecchin, 1987; Hoffman, 1981). In line with the postmodern social constructionist paradigm, systemic practice embodies the belief that reality is not fixed; rather we create, maintain and privilege certain constructions of a preferred reality (Anderson, 2012; Gergen, 2009). This epistemological position emphasises the need for a practitioner to adopt a specific set of principles, a worldview that recognises their personhood, its influence, and informs how they approach work with a family (Hedges, 2010).

The formulation of this specific approach emphasises the significance of the theoretical orientation that a practitioner occupies in being systemic (Burnham, 1992). The relationship between the theoretical orientation and embodying the epistemology (the being) and its practical application (the doing) is contingent on a skilled use of systemic techniques and methods. Burnham describes a systemic method as the patterns or protocols of practice that exist at an organisation level which 'sets forth and brings forth aspects of the approach' (1992: 5). The term 'technique' is used to refer to those specific activities that a practitioner would use in their work with families. The 'approach-method-technique' trichotomy positions both techniques and methods as a means of bringing forth the systemic approach, the practical embodiment of the underlying principles (Burnham, 1992: 5).

The interaction between method, technique and approach can be seen in the reflecting team methodology. Although it has evolved as a practice, the various iterations share a commitment to generating multiple ideas about the families worked with and the systems around them (Andersen, 1987; Burnham, 1992; Donovan, 2007; Fredman, 2014). Team working characterises the methodology, where multiple voices are utilised in the construction of perspectives on a family's problem (Andersen, 1987). This method brings forth systemic epistemology in its recognition that this is 'no single unified truth'; instead, many ideas are presented and explored (Willott, Hatton and Oyebode, 2012).

In the therapeutic context, the reflecting team has been used to address stuck thinking in relation to a presenting problem in those experiencing the problem, providing multiple perspectives on the issue (Andersen, 1987). The aim is to broaden perspectives, thus enabling new stories about the problem to emerge (Fredman, 2014). This affords space for those experiencing that challenge to listen and think

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about other views on their difficulties, in the hope that their own thinking processes 'ignite' (Donovan, 2007: 228). The act of speaking in front of those that seek therapeutic support rejects the idea that the observer could somehow be objective about those observed (Bateson, 1972; Hatton and Oyebode, 2012). In giving voice to the multiple constructions of one problem, the reflecting team methodology makes explicit the role that the practitioner plays in thinking and talking about a challenge (Andersen, 1992).

Systemic methods in child protection

Parallels can be drawn between the reflecting team methodology and the use of group reflective supervision in the designs for RSW, Focus on Practice and Frontline. In an early review of the redesign that took place in Hackney children's services, researchers noted that weekly unit meetings enabled practitioners to benefit from regular discussions about the children and families working with their service. It was noted that unit meetings, necessitated due to shared case allocation, enabled a reflective space and a potential to provide 'a solid platform for joint reflection' (Cross, Hubbard and Munro, 2010: part 1, 22). This is a marked difference from conventional approaches to children's social work, where discussions are usually held between a single social worker and their line manager rather than a whole team (Forrester *et al.*, 2013). Although the review does not identify how these meetings facilitated reflection, it was noted that some units used it as an opportunity to step back from the work and consider the broader picture (Mason, 2012).

The opportunity to engage and reflect on information held about a child and family is integral to good social work practice (DfE, 2018). The Knowledge and Skills Statement for Child and Family Practitioners identifies reflection as key to analysis and decision-making. It sets out that children's social workers should be able to 'reflect on the emotional experience of working relationships with parents, carers and children' (DfE, 2018). The expectation is that in attending to the emotional quality of the work, a practitioner will be alive to the way in which any intervention will be affected by their own relationship to it (Ruch, 2007). Traditionally, individual supervision sessions between a social worker and their manager have been seen as a forum for embedding reflective practice (Beddoe, 2010; Howe, 1998; Revell and Burton, 2016). Although there are few studies that explore the content of supervision, those that exist note a tension between the need for managerial accountability and space for critical reflection (Baginsky *et al.*, 2010;

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Manthorpe *et al.*, 2013; Noble and Irwin, 2009). This is problematic given that in decision-making, the emotive aspect of the work can lead to choices being made that are not in the best interests of the child (Kearney, 2013). A critically reflective stance is fundamental to good social work practice.

The practitioner's role or *lens* requires explicit acknowledgement and is central to the reflecting team process and a systemic way of working (Andersen, 1992; Burnham, 2005; Hedges, 2010). A practitioner's person-hood will provide both the way of receiving and responding to the material presented (Burnham, 2012; Pendry, 2012a, b). Informed by this professional and personal frame, the impact needs to be explored and responded to. Self-reflexivity is described as a posture whereby the practitioner:

> *takes or grasps an opportunity to ... observe ... listen to ... question ... the effects of their practice, then use their responses to their observation/listening to decide 'how to go on'. (Burnham, 2005: 3)*

In occupying a position of self-reflexivity, the practitioner is alert to the role that they play in the creation of meaning and works actively to make explicit the way in which they privilege constructions based on their own personhood (Burnham, 2012; Pendry, 2012a, b). In recognising the multiplicity of these constructions, it is argued that a practitioner can try out multiple ideas with a family that are marked by 'reflexivity rather than conversations marked by causal, blaming – defending, criticizing – justifying talk' (Fredman, 2007: 46).

A review into the implementation of RSW in other local authorities identified the significance of systemic case discussion in supporting systemic practice with families. The review stated that these discussions were 'critical to reflective thinking' and that they were 'curious and reflective', enabling different ways of thinking about the family to be explored (Bostock *et al.*, 2017). In line with Fredman's above formulation (2007) it can be argued that group reflective supervision offers social workers the opportunity to get alongside families through more circular conversations. Using case discussions to explore patterns of relating between family members, what they might believe and how it might be shown, facilitates a posture of curiosity. In exploring the connections between these, a social worker is able to consider the patterns of interactions which may both construct and maintain the problem, utilising an attitude of 'wondering, of not knowing and of exploring' in work with a family (Tomm, 1985: 35).

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Systemic techniques in child protection

The need for professional curiosity is a theme arising from analysis of serious case reviews (SCRs). In their triennial analysis of SCRs from 2005 to 2007, Sidebotham *et al.* found that fixed thinking was presented as a learning point from child deaths and serious injury (2016). And like reflexivity, the importance of multiple perspectives in decision-making was a dominant feature of good social work practice (Brandon *et al.*, 2009; Helm, 2013; Turney, 2014). Although both curiosity and multiple perspectives appear integral to a systemic approach, what is underexplored is how this principle is achieved in child protection, when the desire for certainty is often the dominating paradigm (Kearney, 2013; Mason, 1993; Parton, 2014).

A technique that embodies curiosity is the technique of hypothesising (Cecchin, 1987; Selvini *et al.*, 1980). Hypothesising brings forth the systemic approach and facilitates a worker's professional curiosity. Hypotheses were noted in the reviews of RSW, the evaluation of its implementation in local authorities and Focus on Practice. Forrester *et al.* (2013) noted that case discussions focused on generating ideas about what might be going on in a family, providing a platform for considering how to approach working with them based on different understandings. The evaluation of RSW's implementation in local authorities echoed this by stating that hypotheses were a key feature of a systemic case discussion, providing evidence of social workers challenging established ideas about the families and creating testable actions (Bostock *et al.*, 2017).

As a systemic technique, hypotheses are described as sites in which ideas are put forth (Cecchin, 1987; Selvini *et al.*, 1980). They arise from information held about a family and evolve depending on other information coming to light; they are, in fact, neither true nor false, but rather, 'more or less useful' (Selvini *et al.*, 1980: 4). Hypotheses are one example of a 'supposition' in time, which will ultimately be re-constructed and co-constructed dependent on its use at that moment (Rober, 2002: 470). Hypotheses are temporal, valuable because of the stance that they create, encouraging curiosity in practitioners and resistance to single narratives about families (Cecchin, 1987). They are also opportunities for practitioners to use key systemic principles to contribute to their formulation (Dallos and Draper, 2010). Hypotheses should be relational, and include all components of the family and wider system in order to be most useful.

The reviews of RSW, the subsequent evaluation of its wider implementation, the research into Focus in Practice and Frontline, all make

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reference to the quality of case discussion and identify regular group reflective supervisions as a forum for applying systemic thinking. In addition, there is an interest in how hypothesising is used to explore different perspectives. Each evaluation positions hypothesising in the child protection context as a tool for generating different understandings of a family's situation that will lead to actionable ideas. Although little attention is paid to how these link to quality case discussion, the systemic literature indicates that the presence of hypothesising will mean that group reflective supervision will be marked by social workers adopting a position of curiosity, alert to the multiversa and the circularity inherent to systemic social work (Bertrando and Arcelloni, 2006; Rober, 2002; Selvini *et al.*, 1980; Tomm, 1987).

The absence of research into *how* social workers are impacted by their exposure to the systemic approach, and in turn how this approach impacts intervention with family introduces the rationale for the research study. The review of the literature indicates that group reflective supervision will provide an opportunity to generate ideas about how social workers thinking about families might be impacted. And the use of the word *might* introduces the epistemological and methodological assumptions of the data presented. The assumption embodied in this research is that the world, as we know it is constructed and is made through interaction and determined by historical, cultural and social factors (Burr, 2008). As such, the data and its findings should not be considered an objective reflection of a fixed reality but rather a means of finding our way towards evidence of the systemic frame in a social work context (Burck, 2005).

Method

Context and participants

The data for this research was collected from social workers in the Care Planning team in a local authority in South London. Social workers in this team worked with children and families who were considered to be children 'in need' or at 'risk of significant harm' (Great Britain, 1989). The social workers were organised into units that were made up of six social workers, a consultant practitioner, a unit coordinator and a unit manager. The unit model used was based loosely on RSW; the local authority had introduced the role of consultant practitioner, enabled some workers to access a training course in systemic practice (foundation level) and implemented a weekly group reflective supervision. In

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contrast to RSW, the use of group discussion in this local authority was not necessitated by the shared allocation of cases.

Data for the study was generated through an observation of a single session of group reflective supervision held by one unit and ethical approval was granted by the University of Bedfordshire. The unit observed comprised a consultant practitioner, a unit manager and five social workers. Of the four social workers that attended the group reflective supervision, three had received training to a foundation level in systemic practice along with the consultant practitioner. Two of the social workers were newly qualified workers who had obtained their training via the Frontline route, which includes a foundation level in family and systemic practice, and were completing a second year intermediate level qualification in systemic practice. The unit manager had not undertaken training in systemic practice.

Data collection and analysis

During and following the data collection, iterative thematic coding was performed over six stages (Braun and Clarke, 2006). During the observation, field notes were compiled using a working knowledge of key systemic ideas. This enabled themes to be generated iteratively, listening to the case discussion and making notes. The recording was then transcribed using an adaption of the Jefferson transcription system. The recording was anonymised and interesting codes were noted that demonstrated organising ideas not present during the observation. This process approached the data interpretatively, using the codes to record examples that were both semantic and latent (Braun and Clark, 2006). The identification of latent codes enabled exploration of the 'underlying ideas, assumptions and conceptualisations' so that consideration was given to how these contexts might inform and shape the data (Braun and Clark, 2006: 84).

During stage four, codes were checked and organised into groups that represented single themes; these included both latent and manifest codes. This provided an opportunity to include both explicit and implicit details that followed the interpretive paradigm. By stage five, Burnham's (1992) 'approach method technique' provided the basis for an interpretative schema that enabled an organisation of the latent and manifest codes present in the text. This enabled the themes that had emerged to be grouped into what they might signify in terms of systemic ideas in practice and to be organised via the level of technique, method and approach. An example of the data and corresponding themes are shown in Table 1.

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TABLE 1 *Social work case discussion within the context of group reflective supervision*

Select examples of data taken from case discussion	Themes identified
'What I want you to focus on is what's happening here *CP is signalling at the genogram and using her hand to identify mum and child's relationship* is it like she's gone blind or like she can't see what's happening because of what happened to her … wanting to have a man around or man in the house … is it like she initially didn't believe what (the girl) said, we think she still struggles with it.' (Lines 136-143, Consultant Practitioner (CP))	Relational principle Genogram Blind metaphor Case dilemma Linear assumption
'What's your dilemma?' (Line 244, Unit Manager (UM)) '… is there some kind of cognitive issue … can she see like what's happening or is she kind of blind to it – or is the impact of whatever has happened to her' (Lines 245-248, CP) 'Are we going to do our hypothesising? ... Are we hypothesising now?' (Lines 254, 258, UM)	Case dilemma Blind metaphor Hypothesising
'Could it be that it's more about denying, it couldn't have happened then because we weren't living together but she's turning a blind eye, or she's denied other things hasn't she? So maybe, could it be around that, that she doesn't want to accept.' (Lines 315-321, UM)	Blind metaphor Linear assumption
'I was interested in the response that mum received when she disclosed that she's been abused as a child and wondering if her parents, or she blamed her parents or somebody else blamed her parents and now that (the girl) has made a disclosure (mother's) natural thing is to assume that parents would be blamed … maybe she's feeling victimised, that she's going to be blamed as a parent and therefore, the only way to cope with that is to deny that it's actually happened or to struggle to accept it.' (Lines 333-351, social worker 3 (SW3)	Hypotheses Blind metaphor Intergenerational pattern Experience as a context of behaviour Relational principle
'I was thinking about mum's longing and the fact that she hasn't got experience of positive parenting coming from her own parents … so that pattern of changes of partners seeming to be still longing for a sense of comfort – to allow him in the home again, impacting her parenting … she clearly seems to have been missing some parenting comfort from her parents and from what has happened to her as a child from granddad.' (Lines 353-361, SW2)	Hypotheses Experience as a context of behaviour Relational principle Linear assumption
'I was wondering about (mum's) relationship with her grandfather and whether her parents met her emotional needs … if there were good things in that relationship as well as the sexual abuse, if that was the source of some of the positive emotional support that she received and her parents weren't able to provide that then … she might overlook the sexual abuse of other people for the same kind of comfort. So she might prioritise the emotional support that she receives from somebody … that the balance tips to prioritising that over the negative impact of the sexual abuse or the domestic violence.' (Lines 368-380, SW3)	Hypotheses Relational principle

TABLE 1 *Continued*

Select examples of data taken from case discussion	Themes identified
'Perhaps we'd be inclined to say oh so mum's experienced that why didn't she recognise the behaviour (in the child) … mum only has one child and if that behaviour to her was normal … because she had been sexually abused it's the only experience she has of a young girl growing up is herself … we're highlighting it as being odd but actually it might replicate her own experiences and her own behaviours so to her it wouldn't be odd.' (Lines 410-421, SW3)	Intergenerational pattern Narrative approach Family beliefs Logical force Noble intent
'If that is the case that she hadn't told her parents and her parents didn't know, I wonder if mum is unconsciously replicating that scenario so (the child) has said something but … (Mother's) own experience was that her parents didn't know (about the sexual abuse) so she doesn't know how to cope with that scenario of actually knowing when her own experiences are of parents who weren't aware.' (Lines 491-497, SW3)	Hypotheses Relational principle Family beliefs Noble intent
'Is mum trying to re-establish a male figure into the family unit so that she can put a lid on it? Maybe that's what happened in her family, the presence of male figures helped to keep that face of the family as being a positive family, a family that was functioning well. Whereas without that now (the child) is doing what she wants, she's talking … the lids off effectively, there's no one around to put the lid back on and she isn't sure how she can do that herself.' (Lines 633-648, SW4)	Structure & hierarchy Gender Family beliefs Family secrets
'(mother) has … like a one down approach so they – the power dynamics in each of the relationships is that the other person is more powerful than her, or she least powerful in all of her relationships … I wonder how (the child) fits into that and whether mum takes the same position with her which is why she to implement boundaries … I wonder if she experiences, or if there is a risk of her experiences the professional network to take on that same role … (it) creates a replication of mum being in a one down position and us being in a one up, equivalent to the abusive men in her life.' (Lines 445-460, SW3)	Structure & hierarchy Gender Professional system

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Presentation of data and findings

The observation of group reflective supervision showed that social workers were able to put forward ideas about the quality of a mother-daughter relationship. The themes indicated the presence of systemic principles in organising the discussion and facilitating the consideration of multiple perspectives of a family on a child protection plan. These themes indicated that social workers used a relational principle, explored patterns across generations and were curious about family beliefs and narratives (see Table 1). Although there was evidence that social workers could use systemic techniques such as a genogram and hypotheses to introduce the concept of the multiversa, the presence of linear statements about the mother being blind to the sexual abuse of her daughter reinforced a pathologising discourse.

Group reflective supervision and the dilemma

The group reflective supervision observed had a pre-agreed formula for case discussions that progressed through specific stages. These were identified in the data as a case presentation, the formulation of a dilemma with practitioners asking clarifying questions, followed by the presenter of the case occupying a listening position (Andersen, 1987), whilst team members generated ideas about the family. As with each of the stages, there was a pre-agreed time limit for generating ideas before the worker was encouraged to reflect on the statements presented about the family, finally agreeing actions to take forward, informed by these ideas.

The case dilemma and the act of hypothesising were identified explicitly in the data and marked a shift between the functions of talk. A colleague asked the worker, 'what's your dilemma?' The formation of the dilemma marked a shift in the case presentation (what ideas do we hold now?) to a position of generating possibilities about what might be happening (what other ideas might we need to check out?). This established the function of group reflective supervision as being about more than just a presentation of static facts as narrated by a single individual but an opportunity to generate new possibilities. In making explicit their dilemma, the worker was acknowledging their understanding as partial, and introducing a second-order systemic posture with the hope of inviting curiosity.

Through the framing of the dilemma, the caseworker conveyed the circularity inherent in a systemic approach:

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> *What I want you to focus (on) is kind of y'know what's happening here. (Consultant Practitioner is signalling at the genogram and using her hand to identify the mother and child's relationship.)*

The function of this dilemma is twofold: it is both a framing device for the hypotheses generated whilst emphasising the relational principle. In focusing on the space in between, the worker is bringing to life the key systemic tenet that problems are relational (Anderson, 2012). This is a direct invitation to the workers to focus both on the relationship in its literal sense whilst encouraging them to formulate ideas that are influenced by how those relationships might be constructing or maintaining the problem (Carr, 2012; Dallos and Draper, 2010).

Hypothesising and hypotheses

Hypotheses are integral to the method of group reflective supervision, positioned as both an explicit function of the talk and an implicit means of bringing forth systemic principles in formulating and practising systemic social work. In the data, thirty-five instances were identified whereby a worker was characterised as putting forward an idea about a family that was coded as fitting into the thematic label of 'hypothesising' (Cecchin, 1987; Selvini *et al.*, 1980). This label was characterised broadly as ideas put forward about a family that suggested a different way of seeing their situation than that put forth by the case presenter. Instances were identified where these ideas overlapped and either complemented or contradicted hypotheses already presented.

The act of hypothesising was clearly delineated in the formulaic nature of the discussion but was also demarcated in the way in which practitioners were taking it in turns to present differing accounts of what might be organising the relationship. The use of the question *'are we going to do our hypothesising?'* showed that the practitioners recognised the stage as a separate episode of talk that had a specific function in the case discussion that was different from the case presentation. The act of hypothesising is given a time frame within the meeting and this is represented in the patterns found in the data, with most of the hypotheses being organised around the parameters that were made explicit in the conversation. Hypothesising occurred for approximately 21 minutes and 31 seconds of the conversation, dominating in both prevalence of code and in proportion of the reflective supervision. As a feature of the method it is a key organising principle that progresses the case discussion.

Hypotheses were used as both a technique for communicating ideas about the family explicitly and brought forth the systemic approach

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implicitly. In the text, and at the level of approach, hypotheses communicated ideas about the relational aspect of family functioning, the importance of the family system and its interaction with others both professional and familial (see Table 1 for examples). It was noted that the practitioners engaged with ideas about the family's belief systems and patterns of behaviours. There was an explicit consideration of cultural and geographic difference in generating ideas about what this might mean for family experience (Burnham, 2012; Hardy, 2008).

Despite the prevalence of these themes, it was noted that there were implicit forces shaping the hypotheses, an underlying discourse that communicated both professional and societal assumptions about the family. These hypotheses were grouped by their commitment to presenting information as statements or questions and were constructed as fact, presuming certain beliefs about family members. These types of 'hypotheses' were underpinned by 'lineal assumptions' and were characterised by language that was inherently deterministic and reductionist in its application (Tomm, 1987, 1988).

Linear assumptions and the absence of reflexivity

Practitioners in the discussion were drawn into linear hypotheses that conveyed certainty. In the text, these were marked by the use of causal language:

> *… it could be that it's more about mum denying it, it couldn't have happened then because we weren't living together … but she's turned a blind eye or she's denied other things hasn't she? So, maybe, could it be about she doesn't want to accept…*

There was a single dominating narrative of a parent being 'blind' or unable to see the sexual abuse of her daughter. Of the hypotheses coded, there were six put forward that referred to the assumption that the parent could not or would not see what had happened to her daughter. This was an implicit assumption, conveyed in the language used, and points to how wider societal discourses were shaping the practitioners' response to the material presented.

The presence of the blind metaphor constructs the mother as both active in her choice not to see the sexual abuse, or not being able to see due to her own experiences. Both constructions render her as not seeing and limit the possibilities of other explanations emerging. Arguably the prevailing assumption about the mother embodies wider societal views in the west regarding sexual abuse and the responsibilities

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of motherhood. These views predominantly consider the mother as responsible for not detecting or somehow colluding in the abuse and these discourses are implicit and not voiced within the case discussion (Garvey *et al.*, 1990; Jensen, 2005). They are powerful meta-narratives that organise the practitioner's responses without being noticed (Gergen, 2009; Hare-Mustin, 1994).

The phrasing of the caseworker's dilemma demonstrates how significant language is in the narrative given on behalf of a family. Although the caseworker's dilemma is situated in the relational frame; it ascribes a quality to the relationship identified; asking 'is it like she's gone blind – or like she can't see what's happening?' In asking a value-laden question, the caseworker places responsibility with the mother and presents the idea that the woman is blind to the experience of her daughter. The number of hypotheses that carried forth this construction underlines the power of this unchallenged assumption and demonstrates the significance of the practitioners' relationship with the story that they're creating (Andersen, 1989; Willot, Hatton and Oyebode, 2012).

This analysis positions hypothesising as more complex than just putting forward an idea about a family and recognises that the hypotheses generated can both constrain and liberate a worker's perspective. Despite systemic principles being identified as underpinning ideas in some of the hypotheses, the dominating metaphor of a mother blind to the sexual abuse of her daughter reinforces unhelpful societal discourses relating to motherhood and reflects the initial assumption put forward by the case presenter (Hare-Mustin, 1994). A discourse that is not interrogated and instead comes to influence strongly the subsequent actions taken forward by the worker: 'yes that was one of my things like – whether like – y'know, her mum was abused by the grandfather'… 'and they've all done this blind-eye thing'.

Discussion

The quest for the 'right answer'

The Knowledge and Skills Statement for Children and Family Practitioners states that social workers should be capable of testing out 'multiple hypotheses about what is happening in families and to children' (DfE, 2018: 6). The expectation is that these will help lead to effective and timely decision-making, making use of evidence and professional judgment to protect children. The statement refers to the

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need for practitioners to arrive at a conclusion and act in order to prioritise need and ensure safety. The emphasis here is on action: the need to hypothesise arising from the need to intervene, creating an emphasis on getting it right.

It is encouraging that the Knowledge and Skills Statement recognises the usefulness of the process of hypothesising, but the relationship it creates between this and intervention is potentially misleading. The statement positions hypothesising as a means of coming up with the right answer rather than a starting point for generating ideas about a family situation in order to invite change (Fredman, 2007). This is demonstrated aptly in the case discussion observed. In echoing the language of the caseworker's dilemma, the practitioners not only reflect and reinforce societal discourses about childhood sexual abuse and mothers, but also affirm the dilemma presented and so are organised by and replicate the context in which they find themselves.

The child protection context in England and Wales is defined by the need to categorise children as at 'risk of significant harm' or 'in need' (Children Act, 1989). The need to define arises from the duty to intervene (Kirk and Duschinsky, 2017). This categorisation provides the basis for how social workers conceive of their moral and legal obligations and indicates one of the frameworks in which they construct meaning. It also influences the prevalent ideas about the nature of social work, the need to intervene leading to a '*do to*' approach to families rather than a '*do with*'. Ultimately a social worker's success is measured in safety for children, a role that expects certainty both in its requirement to categorise a child and to avoid the unthinkable, the serious injury or death of a child (Kearney, 2013; Parton, 2014).

Understandably, this is likely to lead to an emphasis on problem-solving and in turn a quest for the *right* answer (Higgins; 2015; Kearney, 2013; Mason, 1993). In the case discussion observed, this leads to a reliance on cause and effect assumptions that inadvertently restrict the workers ability to occupy a position of curiosity and be reflexive. Curiosity is a stance that embodies a 'commitment to evolving differences, with a concomitant nonattachment to any particular position' (Cecchin, 1987). A linear and assumptive hypothesis presents itself as a truth that closes down the possibility of such curiosity on the part of the worker and demonstrates that without understanding the purpose of a systemic hypothesis one can inadvertently maintain a pathologising discourse (Cecchin, 1987; Hare-Mustin, 1994).

Although the data shows that social workers were able to use hypotheses to generate multiple ideas, what appears challenging is the

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extension of this curiosity to include the self of the social worker in constructing the view taken. By this, we mean the influence of the child protection setting and the dominant story of social work for the practitioner in shaping their local meaning as well as the influence of wider societal discourses. Arguably, a posture of curiosity is stifled by the need for certainty on the part of the social worker, predicated by the legislative framework, and the effect of practising in a context that looks for 'safe certainty' in managing risk and stopping harm (Kearney, 2013; Mason, 1993). The hypotheses put forth sit within a 'first order perspective' because the intent is to identify the right idea about others, not including any reflexivity about self, and use this to intervene and to prevent harm, rather than including an opportunity for the workers to locate themselves in their interpretation (Hoffman, 1990: 3).

A reliance on cause and effect assumptions can lead to the maintenance of a fixed view of a family, and this will impact on how useful these hypotheses can be outside the case discussion (Fredman, 2007). Lineal assumptions are useful for 'orienting' but their ability to influence change is limited because they reinforce 'lineal perceptions by implicitly validating pre-existing beliefs' in a family (Tomm, 1988: 7). Cause and effect assumptions are often easily accepted and homogenising and do not recognise the complexity of situations (Broadhurst *et al.*, 2010). This is significant, given that part of the rationale for the incorporation of the systemic approach is to provide a means of intervening in families with the intention of co-creating change (Sebba *et al.*, 2017).

With this in mind, group reflective supervision in our view needs to be conceptualised as an opportunity to explore how a practitioner is organised in relation to a family. Fredman (2007) argues that hypothesising should include a consideration of the 'emotional posture' of the practitioner (2007: 51). She outlines how specific questions can be used to reflect on this position, exploring how one's practice will be influenced by this posture and how it might be changed. e.g., 'how might your family scripts about the role of mothers affect your work with the family?' Self-reflexivity can be enhanced both by including such questions in group supervision as well as practitioners positively connoting behaviours, identifying the logic and interrupting the discussion when they have 'joined' with negative connotations (Fredman, 2007: 54). This can also be extended through using circular hypotheses to inform circular questions that 'identify patterns for a circular or systemic understanding of the problematic situation' (Tomm, 1988: 5). In using circularity, practitioners are more likely to resist totalising language that is blaming and pathologising, thus enabling more helpful

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conversations with a family and more meaningful relationships to be developed (Donovan, 2007; Hingley-Jones and Mandlin, 2007).

Including such practices would encourage hypotheses that consider the multiple patterns of relating between mother and daughter. For hypotheses to be most useful for both family and worker they need to give voice to these numerous possibilities in a way that resists dominating metaphors, recognising *subjugated stories* and how these might be organised by their professional role, so that new ways forward can emerge (White and Epston, 1990). Through recognising the power of their context in shaping meaning, the worker may be more likely to put forth hypotheses that interrupt the normative structures that are likely to lead to unhelpful stories for both parent and child. In creating a multi-verse, with opportunity for 'elaboration, maintenance or change of diverse patterns of living', social workers have a greater chance of being alongside mother and daughter, providing them with space to co-create new stories of action and meaning (Lang, Little and Cronen, 1990: 40).

The data from our study suggests that hypotheses developed in group systemic supervision can introduce a multitude of possibilities for a family, but that in the child protection context, there is a risk of being drawn towards linear causality, predicated by the need for certainty. We propose here that using practices in supervision which will ensure self-reflexivity is likely to help workers to be aware of such pressures and avoid being drawn into such linear and blaming ways of seeing.

Conclusion

A hypothesis

Group reflective supervision as undertaken in this setting is underpinned by a systemic methodology. Its primary purpose is to generate ideas about a family that can inform actions in a practitioner's work, ultimately leading to change in family life, making children safer. The analysis of this case discussion shows that workers are able to generate perspectives on a dilemma that are informed by key systemic principles including the importance of context, the centrality of relationships and the significance of belief systems at a family level. However, there is an absence of self-reflexivity, of acknowledging the role of the practitioner's person-hood in the construction of those ideas, and a consideration of wider societal context in shaping their response to the material presented. Failure to grasp this second-order position demonstrates an absence of 'being' and gaps 'in doing' systemic practice in a social work context.

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The context of child protection influences and maintains the worker's need for the right answer and can limit hypotheses. The child protection role is one that desires certainty in order to maximise child safety. This suggests that in order for group reflective supervision to fulfil its aims, social workers need to understand how these demands organise their responses to family problems and may serve to constrain or liberate the individuals worked with. By doing so, he or she can demonstrate being systemic via the embodiment of a reflexive position, enabling a consideration of how his or her position as a child protection social worker is likely to shape action and inform practice with families.

This research recognises the value of systemic methods and techniques in exploring how relationships, context and beliefs influence and maintain specific family situations and how social workers might use circularity and reflexivity to identify and challenge pathologising discourse. At the same time it suggests that those redesigning services need to work towards formulating a systemic social work posture that recognises and responds to the tension of the child protection role. The formulation would need to address the interaction between the legislative context, societal discourse (around responsibility and risk) and how to respond to these in a way that is consistent with the systemic approach.

Group reflective supervision can be used as an explicit response to this tension, providing a space where social workers can explore how they are organising and being organised in their work with a family. This is likely to mean that there needs to be an explicitly and robustly reflexive model for group reflective supervision and its purpose when embedded in the child protection context, one that includes the emotional posture of the therapist (Fredman, 2007). In addition, this paper calls for an explicit emphasis on the importance of understanding the relationship between technique, method and the underlying approach both in training and in practice. The benefits of this and the wider systemic social work approach appear numerous, offering a way of being that privileges shared principles of inclusivity, respect and collaboration and an opportunity to get alongside families, call out harmful and unhelpful discourse and give space for new ways of relating to emerge.

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