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Systemic supervision in statutory social work in the UK: systemic rucksacks and bells that ring

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a perspective on contemporary supervision outlining an innovative model of live systemic supervision implemented across a local authority children's social work service. Following the Reclaiming Social Work model and the Munro Review of Child Protection, systemic approaches have become popular in English statutory social work. This intervention is distinct in that its focus was on developing and embedding systemic supervision through live mentoring. This approach enables different theoretical perspectives to sit alongside each other and inform practice. The paper explores four constructions of supervision as organisational development, as practice-based research, as 'training to transgress' and as adult learning. Using Proctor's model, which allocates roles, a structure and a reflecting process within team supervision, the programme sought to embed change through the supervision and live mentoring of supervisors. The programme aimed to promote team resilience, reflexivity and relationship-based practice alongside a robust stance on risk. The paper describes the model of supervision and its application before discussing the issues raised in its implementation. We consider its relevance in other settings across professional boundaries.

KEYWORDS

Social care; reclaiming social work; supervision; systemic practice; systemic supervision

Introduction

The English social work system has been subject to scrutiny with recent political reform resulting in practice being subject to over-proceduralised guidance and unwieldy electronic IT systems. This has curtailed the professional autonomy of social workers, who spend more time inputting data than with children and families (Dugmore, 2014). Good supervision is often presented as a counterbalance to such critique and as the cornerstone of good practice (Department of Health, 1991; Laming, 2003). However, there is little research evidence on the effectiveness of supervision in influencing practice (Carpenter, Webb, & Bostock, 2013) or on what happens in supervision (Wilkins, Forrester, & Grant, 2016). There is also considerable variation in supervision practice across countries (Bradley, Engelbrecht, & Höjer, 2010).

Munro's (2011) review stressed how high-quality supervision is needed to support the emotional and intellectual demands on social workers. Supervision traditionally takes place between an individual practitioner and their supervisor/manager; however, new approaches, such as the 'Reclaiming Social Work' model, developed in the London Borough of Hackney, have moved towards systemic social work supervision. These approaches bring together a focus on risk assessment and management with reflective clinical supervision (Pendry, 2012).

This paper is a collaboration between four authors, two of whom designed and developed the programme, providing on-going consultation with the commissioning managers. As part of the

organisational intervention, the other two authors were identified as 'Systemic Champions' within their organisation, after completing the first cohort of training. Their feedback and that of other staff is woven through this article to provide contextual detail. The first year of the programme implementation is discussed and evaluated in this paper.

The role of social work supervision in the UK

The failings of social work practice in the UK over the past 50 years often attribute poor quality supervision as partly responsible (Report into *the Death of Jasmine Beckford*, London Borough of Brent, 1985; The Laming Report, 2003). Reforms to social work within the UK presented an opportunity to transform supervision practice, utilising systemic theory alongside other theoretical approaches (Social Work Reform Board, 2011; Munro Review of Child Protection, 2011). The Triennial Analysis of Serious Case Reviews 2011–2014 demonstrated a move beyond a focus on individual practice to learning at a wider systemic level utilising a systems approach to the review, as recommended by Munro (2011). Whilst this has resulted in greater analytical depth the focus has remained on professional failings. The Triennial Analysis identifies the importance of authoritative practice including encouraging a stance of professional curiosity and challenge while respecting and valuing the roles of others, in line with systemic ideas. Findings from the analysis include poor communication resulting in breakdowns in interagency collaboration and inadequate information sharing. The treatment of assessment as a single event rather than an on-going process led to a lack of open-mindedness to alternative explanations. Complex cases were often worsened by multiple professional dynamics mirroring those of families (Sidebotham et al., 2016; Koltz, Odegard, Feit, Provost, & Smith, 2012).

Numerous models advocating reflective supervision have been proposed in recent years (Morrison, 2009; Ingram, 2013; Ruch, 2012). The Social Work Reform Board 'Employer Standards' (2011) prescribed that supervision should challenge social workers to 'reflect critically on their cases, fostering an inquisitive approach to social work' (Social Work Reform Board, 2012, p. 6). Morrison (1997) questioned whether social workers could remain 'emotionally responsive and literate in 'emotionally illiterate, blunted, sometimes more deeply disturbed' agency environments' (Morrison, 1997, p. 193). Forrester describes as 'Zombie Social Work', the supervision practice observed in many authorities, which focuses predominantly on 'the what and the when, with little consideration of the why or how' (Forrester, 2016, p. 12).

The case for a systemic approach

Munro (2011) recommended frequent case supervision to reflect on service effectiveness and case decision-making, separate from arrangements for individual pastoral care and professional development (p. 108). The Hackney 'Reclaiming Social Work' model, introduced in the last decade, was informed by values including keeping children safely together with families where possible, a perspective on social disadvantage and discrimination, privileging the voice of parents/carers and ensuring families' strengths and resiliencies are acknowledged and built upon (Goodman, Trowler, & Munro, 2012).

Applying these principles, Hackney introduced small multidisciplinary units using prescriptive methodologies for interventions. The weekly unit meeting would be the main mechanism for case supervision where cases were discussed and reflected upon before decisions were made. An evaluation by Cross, Hubbard, and Munro (2010) found that this approach created an organisational culture in which reflective learning, skill development, openness and support were fostered, with significant evidence of improved decision-making and interaction with families and professionals. A reduction of constraints on practice and administrative preoccupations resulted in more consistency and continuity of care. Significant results included a 50% reduction in staff sickness, and a 43% reduction in the use of agency staff (Goodman et al., 2012).

Further evaluation of this model suggested that the success of systemic ways of working depended significantly on effective leadership and the commitment of the whole organisation where whole-system reform is in place (Forrester et al., 2013). This study is subject to limitations in that the data obtained do not specifically relate to outcomes for children or families; however, the evaluation suggests that the intervention was successful in challenging Forrester's 'Zombie Social Work' (2016).

A project to embed the Hackney model in five further local authorities aimed to deliver systemic practice through the implementation of in-depth training, small units with shared cases and group systemic case discussions, clinician support, reduced bureaucracy, devolved decision-making and enhanced administrative support. An evaluation of this by Bostock et al. (2017), found that a 'good practice pyramid', comprising a systemically trained Consultant Social Work lead, systemic case discussion and clinician input with dedicated administrative support, were effective in embedding systemic social work practice with families. Practice was rated positively by both families and social workers although this was based on too small a sample to draw conclusions and it did not allow for comparison between groups. The constraints of this model include the difficulty of recruiting sufficient highly skilled social workers nationally and current systems for training social workers not being aligned with the systemic model. Goodman et al. (2012) suggest this change needs to take place before the system can really change. Davies (2013) criticises the model for being unable to address organised child abuse because of its emphasis on keeping a child with its family at all costs whilst Hare (2013) cites the risk of social workers becoming 'ruled by optimism' although acknowledges good supervision can mitigate this. Measures (2012) raises a number of criticisms including the argument that one size does not fit all, the issue of whether the approach can really address inequality, whether there is sufficient money and/or ability to recruit to the 'standards' required by the model and whether it is potentially dangerous to 're-frame' many problems via the environment and minimise attributing personal responsibility. He suggests a shift away from causes and symptoms to focus predominantly on environmental factors may just 'hide' rather than 'heal' (Measures, 2012). We argue that if any model becomes formulaic, and practitioners lose their ability to be truly critically reflexive, there is the danger of recreating organisational stagnation and the conditions for 'zombie social work' emerge.

Different models of supervision

There are many models of supervision attesting to the administrative, educational and maintenance functions of supervision. Morrison's 4 × 4 × 4 Model (2009) provides a comprehensive framework for supervision that acknowledges the political and social environment in which supervision operates and the challenges this creates for supervisors. He cites the impact of managerialism in which 'consumerism, authoritarianism, financialism and de-professionalisation' have become prevalent (Morrison, 2005, pp. 65–66). His model focuses on:

- the four stakeholders in supervision: worker, user, agency and other agencies;
- the four functions of supervision: management, development, support and mediation;
- the four stages of Kolb's learning cycle (1988): experience, reflection, analysis and plan/action.

Morrison articulates that when staff get stuck their ability to engage with the different parts in each of these frameworks is compromised and the supervisor's role is to ensure supervision re-engages each of the three frameworks.

Towards a broader definition of supervision

Partridge (2010) argues for the need to expand notions of supervision to create models that match the pace of organisational change in public services. Using Schön's (1987) conception of double-loop learning, she argues for the development of institutions as learning systems continuously transforming themselves as a result of feedback in a reflexive cycle, enabling increasingly precise and articulate

expression of the system's aims and purposes. One of the aims of the model described in this paper is to challenge the conditions that Forrester describes as present in 'zombie social work' supervision, to create reflexivity and an embodied approach to supervision (Bownas & Fredman, 2016) where practitioners make the shift between positioning themselves outside versus inside the system in supervision. Within this programme, it is the systemic supervision practice that is potentially transformative as opposed to procedural and transactional practice. The opportunity to transform staff and services makes this approach attractive to social care agencies.

Partridge proposes four constructions of the supervision process, each of which privileges a different aspect of the developing process and mitigates against formulaic applications of any model:

- *Supervision as organisational development*: privileges the role of supervision and supervision structures in developing and transforming the organisation as in the Hackney Model (Goodman et al., 2012). Supervision can be seen as facilitating 'communities of practice' (Wenger & Snyder, 2000, p. 139) that foster new and emergent ideas feeding into an evolving culture of change.
- *Supervision as primary participative research*: privileges the reflexive cycle set up in supervision as a research process, continuously informing the organisation about its performance and criteria of success. From this perspective, all supervision can be described as primary, participative research rather than secondary research (Penman, 1997).
- *Supervision as learning to transgress*: privileges the critical and reflexive nature of supervision in which dominant societal discourses are challenged and inequalities addressed, counter to Measures' (2012) critique above. This construction creates an interventive and contextualised frame for supervision in which knowledge is socially constructed. In this construction, a moral and aesthetic dimension is intrinsic to the process of supervision (hooks 1994).
- *Supervision as adult learning*: addresses the learning needs of the individual practitioner and their unique learning styles. Burnham (2010) highlights the influence of adult learning theory in systemic supervision, i.e. the spiral learning process (Stratton, 2005) and individual learning styles (Kolb, 1988). In facilitating supervisees, we invite them to become conscious of their own processes in a way that enables choice with respect to future action, supporting them to continually adapt to the context in which they are working.

The commission: what the local authority requested

We were commissioned by a local authority to help them embed systemic practice into their children's social work service. In contrast to Hackney, the authority was not failing and did not want full systemic training for their staff due to budgetary restrictions and because it was not supportive of the identity of the workforce as social workers. Furthermore, they did not want to train their social workers to become systemic therapists and risk them leaving the service. Instead, the focus of the intervention prioritised the implementation of a new model of social work supervision across the workforce through live mentoring of supervision groups. The intention was to change the current structure of teams, case allocation and line management, including more multidisciplinary working, with the hope of improving outcomes for children and families. The shared vision to inform service transformation was articulated as:

- a shared language
- systemic principles
- a shift from 1:1 to group supervision
- shared ownership of cases
- increased morale
- mutual support

With this vision in mind the following programme was constructed (see [Figure 1](#)).

Shifting from an individual to a group supervision process

The programme addressed staff at all levels in the organisation; however, the greatest investment of time and resources were targeted at the senior practitioners who supervised the social workers, in order to embed and sustain the Systemic Supervision Model, as in Stages 4a and 4b in [Figure 1](#).

In terms of organisational development and change, this focus on supervision aimed to more effectively establish systemic practice in the workforce. The proposed programme, outlined below, sought to address all levels of the Directorate in order to fully support and embed this model. The design of the programme also addressed the four constructions of supervision as identified above (Partridge, 2010), within a sustained approach that built capacity and ensured direct application to practice.

The implementation of the development programme

Stage 1: Introduction to the proposed changes

Stage 1 aimed to provide a space for staff to reflect on their position in relation to the proposed changes and allow space to process both positive and negative responses to this.

Stage 2: Organisational immersion

Organisational immersion consisted of two initial days training, with two further days three months later. This training provided the workforce with an introduction to core systemic ideas and concepts including:

STAGE	Component	Intended participants	Rationale	Delivery	Content	Timescale
1	Introduction to the project	All practitioners and managers	To "warm the context " for change and to explore models of change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 day Introductory workshop 	A "Preparing for change" day	1 day workshop
2	Organisational immersion	All practitioners and managers	To provide an overview of systemic theory and principles and develop a shared framework and language for practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2 whole day workshops for 20 participants per cohort 2 whole day follow up workshops six months later 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Systemic Practice Days 1 and 2 Systemic Practice Days 3 and 4, follow up 	2 days delivered regularly with second 2 day workshop follow-up after 3 months. Repeated until all relevant staff reached + additional cohort for new starters.
3	Leadership & Management – A systemic perspective	Senior management team	To ensure application of systemic ideas at all levels of organisation – to support whole system change and embedding organisational development and culture.	6 half day workshops/Action learning sets	Systemic Management and Leadership	To be delivered over three months
4a	Developing a structure to embed systemic practice and supervision	Supervisors of small teams	Structured programme of consultation and supervision to model and develop systemic supervision of practice	Ongoing monthly supervision groups	Systemic Supervision in practice	For 12 months
4b	Sustaining the structure	Supervisors of small teams	Mentoring of supervisors – situational leadership – to support and develop the model of supervision	Supervisors will be allocated a systemic clinician who will provide mentoring of the supervisor in supervision	Mentoring supervision groups/ action learning sets	For six months
5	Building capacity and creating systemic champions	Supervisors or practitioners	A small number of staff to be identified to develop clinical expertise internally	Bespoke training to be developed	Development of tailored CPD in Applied Systemic Social Work Practice	Development Starts midway through programme

Figure 1. New model of social work systemic practice development programme.

- An appreciative stance
- Systemic questioning
- Reflecting processes
- Cultural genograms and the life cycle
- Domains of risk and uncertainty
- Reflexive use of self and relationship
- The 'Social Graces' to attend to issues of differential power, including gender, race and class

Stage 3: Leadership and management: a systemic perspective

A specific time-limited programme for the senior management team was delivered, focusing on a systemic approach to leadership and management. This reinforced the application of systemic ideas at all levels of organisation in order to embed organisational development and culture. Beyond this, the first two authors provided on-going consultation and support to senior management and the systemic supervisors of the senior practitioners.

Stage 4: Developing a structure to embed systemic practice and supervision

This paper will describe in more detail the specific Systemic Supervision Model and process (Stages 4a and 4b, in [Figure 1](#)). All social workers and managers undertook the first two stages of the programme. Senior practitioners (who supervise all social workers) then joined a group that met monthly (Stages 4a and 4b), in which they received live supervision and mentoring of their supervision of their social work team, using an adapted version of the 'Bells that Ring' Model (Proctor, 1997). This model assigns roles and structure, providing clear boundaries to the supervision process through a framework that utilises systemic questioning and reflecting processes. This provides a shared vision and clear accountability (Lang, Little, & Cronen, 1990) and facilitates the development of an appreciative stance (Lang & McAdam, 2013), exploration of multiple perspectives (Mendez, Coudou, & Maturana, 1988) and the development of a situated sense of self in which issues of differential power (Burnham, 2005), can be addressed by challenging belief systems, personal values and how power and inequality are thought about.

Roles and structure in the Systemic Supervision Model

The roles within Systemic Supervision Model are:

(1) Supervisor assigns roles and timings

In addition to the Supervisor (an experienced systemic supervisor), the roles include Presenter, Consultant and Observers. One of the Observers is allocated the task of completing the recording summary. The Supervisor identifies from systemic picture concept cards two concepts that will frame the subsequent discussion.

(2) Presenter presents case

The Presenter presents the case, a genogram, emerging themes and their current dilemma that they would like the group to think about for 5–10 minutes.

(3) Consultant questions using curiosity

The Consultant uses hypotheses and systemic questions to inform their questioning from an appreciative perspective, focusing on strengths and resilience of the worker, the child(ren) and family.

(4) *Observers hold a reflecting conversation*

In order to maintain boundaries between the different subsystems, the Observers hold a reflecting conversation in response to the discussion that took place between the Consultant and Presenter, without engaging with the Presenter or Consultant (see Figure 2).

(5) *Consultant asks for feedback from Presenter*

The Consultant seeks feedback from the Presenter, on what the Presenter has heard, what they did and did not like or would like to think about further from the Observers' reflections.

(6) *Whole group reflects on process*

In this final stage of the process, all members of the supervision group step out of their allocated roles and join together to reflect on the full process.

Figure 2 illustrates in diagrammatic form the structure of the systemic supervision session showing the different subsystems of the Presenter/Consultant and the Observers who reflect each other during the process and the Systemic Supervisor or Mentor who facilitates the whole process.

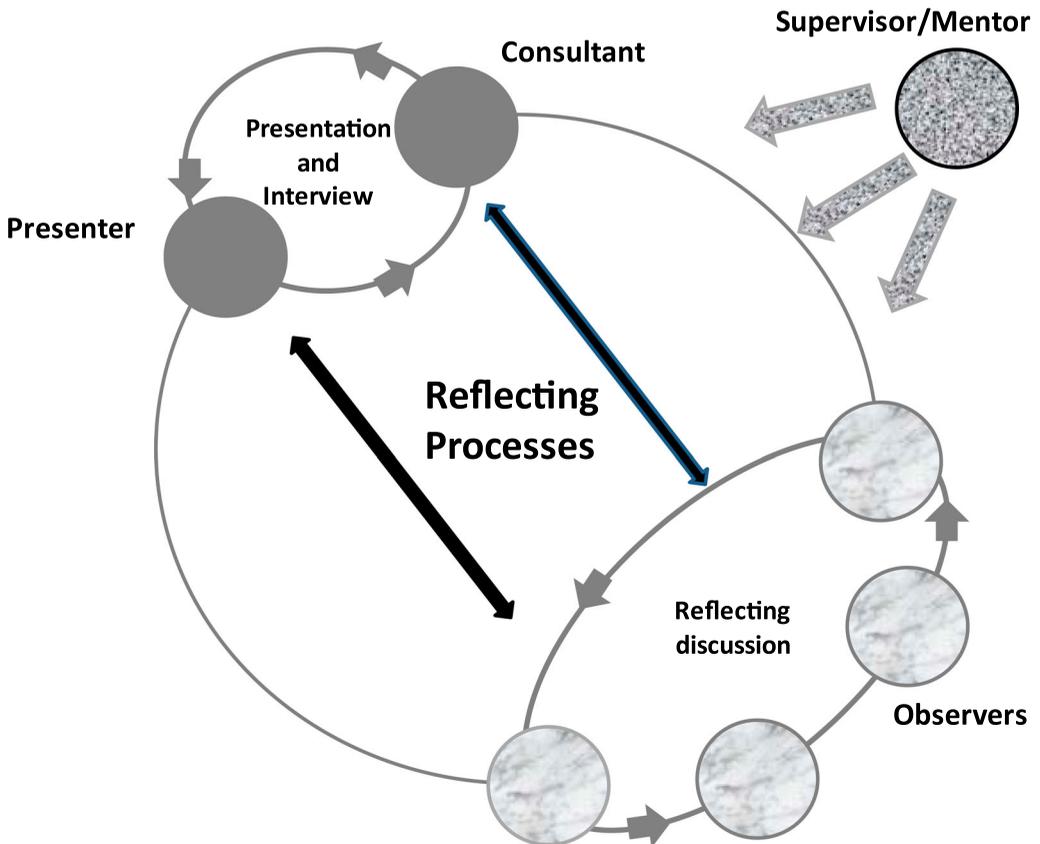


Figure 2. Roles and structure for the systemic supervision process.

Figure 3 shows the reflecting team conversation of the observers who reflect on the four quadrants: themes, relationships, appreciations and resonance or the ‘bells that ring’. Feedback from the systemic champions (co-authors) included:

The focus has been on identifying hypotheses and allowing practitioners to practice how to ask questions. This has been helpful however there are times where practitioners have felt that more modelling would be helpful especially how hypothesis may be easier translated into reflexive questions.

We are merging two worlds – social work and systemic practice; the role of the mentor in this has been invaluable; having the opportunity to develop a relationship with the mentor has been a positive experience and practitioners feel empowered to be a part of developing the model and be allowed to ‘tweak’ the things that might not flow as easily in the social work world.

Managing risk and uncertainty in children’s social care

In implementing a new way of working, it was essential to ensure that the crucial issues of managing risk and safeguarding children and families continue to be effectively attended to. The local authority already used the Signs of Safety model as a framework for child protection practice. This is informed by the three elements of respectful, collaborative and appreciative relationships; a stance of critical inquiry to minimise error and create a culture of reflective practice; and locating grand aspirations in everyday practice where the experience of the child is at the centre (Turnell, 2012).

In this project, the ‘Domains Model’ (Lang et al., 1990) has been introduced to address risk from a systemic perspective. This draws distinctions between the different aspects of the role of a professional. The ‘domain of production’ is where action takes place according to consensually agreed ideas of what is right and wrong, legal and illegal. In this domain there is one ‘universe’ of truth which is absolute, blame can be apportioned and legal and professional limits can be applied; curiosity is the curiosity of the investigator, looking for causes and where necessary attributing blame. In contrast, within the ‘domain of explanation’ there are as many constructions as there are people to make the distinction; there is a ‘multiverse’ of perspectives (Mendez et al., 1988), which can be held in mind and explored; truth is relative, blame suspended and curiosity is about irreverence. Within this domain, the professional takes a position of safe uncertainty (Mason, 2015). The aim of the Domains Model is to create reflexivity with respect to which domain is being inhabited at any one time, to

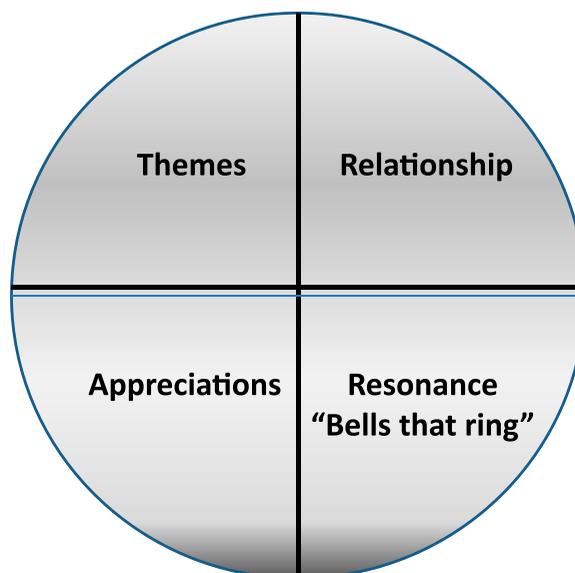


Figure 3. The reflecting discussion.

create a pause for reflexivity and to create agility and eloquence in the movement between domains. This is coherent with Beddoe (2010) in which she discusses the importance of resisting the reduction of the role of supervision to surveillance and embedding a process that interrogates 'risk thinking rather than unconsciously accommodating it', rejecting a reliance on prescriptive practice (Beddoe, 2010, p. 1292).

The presenter and consultant initially explore the presenting issue within the domain of production, a 'systemic pause' for exploration is created through the reflections of the observers in the domain of explanation and on the basis of these reflections the presenter and consultant decide on a way forward, shifting back to action in the domain of production. Identification of risk immediately signals the need for a return to the domain of production. The third domain of aesthetics explores what is useful, politically timely aesthetically and morally pleasing. The aim is to make the shift between the domains of production and explanation as aesthetic as possible, through exploring what the effects of taking a strong position with respect to risk might be in terms of relationships with children, their families, colleagues and other agencies. The champions commented that:

Social work has a tendency to operate in the domain of production; after reflection we need to go back to the domain of production as there is always the need for case direction otherwise the reflective discussion may not be helpful. However what has improved in the way questions are being asked and there is a greater recognition of the domain of aesthetics and domain of exploration in day-day discussions about cases.

A critique of the current intervention is that although the approach is coherent with the Signs of Safety model it would have been helpful to make the connections more explicit in practice and follow them through in the way in which team supervision was recorded.

Integrating the systemic approach with other approaches in social work

Burnham's 'Approach, Method, Technique' distinction (1992) was used as a way to think about integrating systemic ideas at different levels. The level of Approach includes one's philosophical, aesthetic and moral stance, and may include principles of any approach. The level of method includes frameworks, structures and models, in this case, the Systemic Supervision Model, but could also include other social work models such as 'Signs of Safety'. Technique refers to tools, strategies and techniques that may include systemic questioning, cultural genograms etc., but could also include techniques from other approaches such as 'Motivational Interviewing'. An individual may fully embrace a systemic approach at all three levels of 'Approach, Method, Technique', but they could also integrate other approaches such as psychoanalytic thinking and practice into their own preferred ways of working at any level. This distinction enables flexible thinking across different models and frameworks acknowledging and valuing the skills, knowledge and capacities social workers already bring to their practice.

An evolving collaborative process

In line with the construction of supervision as primary participative research, feedback from participants influences and constructs each new action research cycle of the project. More recent initiatives include the introduction of a series of cards that act as prompts in the supervision process. Currently, these include:

- Systemic concept picture cards
- Role cards for the respective roles in the supervision process
- An outline of the supervision process
- Summary of the 'Social Graces'
- Outline of the Domains and Risk
- Approach Method Technique
- The supervision recording form

Other developments incorporated into the framework, include an electronic study pack to support learning, identification of Systemic Champions from different levels in the workforce to promote the systemic approach and specific training for Independent Reviewing Officers to support them in thinking systemically about their role.

The systemic rucksack

One of the most visually symbolic developments came from the Director of Children's Services, in response to the social workers requesting more tools. The metaphor of a 'Systemic Rucksack' of skills that social workers could carry along with them in the course of their work was introduced. This concept was translated into the purchase of highly visible orange rucksacks for each senior practitioner containing the sets of cards described above.

Feedback and evaluation on the project to date

The level of enthusiasm, commitment and energy shown by the staff at all levels in the Local Authority has been impressive, and to date, the project has been a truly collaborative process. Each stage of implementation of the framework has been evaluated through the completion of participant evaluation forms at the end of each training day/supervision and mentoring session. At the end of the Stage 2 training days, 89% of staff rated the training as excellent or good and 99% rated the ideas as very relevant or relevant to their current practice.

The feedback from the training days shows that social workers were generally very positive about the training, though less confident in their abilities to apply ideas with 51% stating some confidence in applying ideas whilst 39% rated their confidence at 3 on a 5-point scale. This is perhaps not surprising given that our main intervention focuses on the Stages 4a and 4b supervision and mentoring sessions and practice-based theory through identification of systemic concepts in their on-going work. At the time of evaluation, immediately after the training days, the social workers would not yet have had these practice-based supervision sessions.

In the feedback from the Stage 4a supervision of supervision sessions, 80% of participants rated the systemic supervisors from our agency as either 'excellent' or 'good' at facilitating the group supervision process. The qualitative feedback from evaluation forms included an appreciation of the 'Bells that Ring' Model in slowing down the process, using a professional genogram and exploring dilemmas from the position of the other. Using the worker's own words to name and acknowledge their concerns and explore areas of difficulties, using circular questions and focusing on the dynamics between supervisee and supervisor were all identified as strengths of the supervision experience.

Feedback from the mentoring session in Stage 4b has provided the richest feedback. Key themes include the development of trust; open and honest discussion; increasing confidence; and thinking positively about clients and colleagues, supporting other evaluations of systemic social work practice. In particular, practitioners stated that it was new for them to connect to their own personal stories and link these to their professional identities. They stated that they found the model helpful and enjoyed hypothesising, valued learning new ways of asking thoughtful questions, and in particular, found the 'Picture Concept' cards helpful prompts to explore systemic concepts. Feedback about unhelpful aspects of the programme was much more limited, but included feeling confused over which recording form should be used and more general feelings of apprehension and unease relating to 'the unknown'

An example of direct quotes gathered during feedback from social workers and senior practitioners of this stage is included below:

- What do you feel you have learned about your clients?
Clients bring their own stories
How to make connections with clients emotionally, and professionally
The power of experiences/narratives on our emotions and behaviour

Humans are complex
 Thinking about how it feels for clients being interviewed
 To understand the context of their situation
 Thinking about social graces
 I will get it wrong. To live with the fact that as a Social Worker they may not like me but I need to have the difficult conversation

- What do you feel you have learned about your colleagues?
 The importance of making connections – professional & personal
 They are much more than 'JUST' social workers
 Individual experiences can be used for professional improvement and learning
 They are supportive
 They have done a lot of more positive things than they think
 We all have the same anxieties
 The amount of knowledge they have
 Their abilities – Strengths and weaknesses
 That they are dedicated
 They are good listeners
- What do you feel you have learned about yourself?
 I felt confident talking about my case. I have a good grasp of the family.
 That I know more than I think
 Difficulty in understanding complexity
 I still like Social Work
 The need to sit with uncertainty
 I have taken on board more ideas from five days training than I thought
 I still need to learn
 In order to engage in systemic supervision I need to allow the process to run and embrace it

Dilemmas and challenges

In such an ambitious project it is inevitable that there will be on-going challenges to address. These have been conceptualised as useful feedback from the system, and as an invitation to collaborate with staff to refine and further articulate the model and its application. One of the biggest issues in taking forward the model has been the ability of staff to prioritise supervision and mentoring sessions in their busy work lives, due to court work, duty rotas, etc. At times this meant that only a handful of staff were present in some supervision groups. The senior staff have been highly responsive to feedback of this nature and seen it as part of the process of embedding the new supervision structure. They have welcomed contemporaneous feedback and have been supportive in addressing emerging issues. The implementation of the Systemic Supervision Model crucially depends on the quality of the systemic supervisors, who were all bar one social workers by original training. Their ability to respond flexibly to challenges and to apply systemic ideas in a wide variety of ways is integral to the success of the project.

The process is still evolving and the intention is to remain active and responsive to feedback, to create an active learning system, evolving and adapting to the particular context as we proceed. Some of the critiques raised by social workers are outlined below:

You need to understand the principles of the model to deliver it – it has been challenging getting staff to all the training and mentoring sessions due to the demands of the day job.

Need to give more space for supervisees to reflect on their emotions in regards to a case and also in relation to the relationships they have with clients

There are expectations on social care to evidence particular aspects of their decision making and therefore the template for recording the supervision needed to merge the two worlds. The template has only been live for a few weeks and not enough people have trialled it to provide feedback at this time.

It is not possible to replace all one-one supervision with reflective group supervision. Therefore practitioners continue to offer 2 types of supervision.

In order for the new model to move from 1st order change to 2nd order change practitioners need to see the changes role modelled from higher up. There are some changes but still some way to go.

Practitioners find the mentoring sessions very stimulating as they are challenged to think about the purpose of their questions and where they may lead the discussion; what new hypotheses might be generated.

Going forward practitioners are hopeful that we will create more resilience in the workforce and see more meaningful engagement with families; a greater understanding of what we are doing and why we are doing it.

Stage 5: Building capacity and creating systemic champions

This article, like the systemic intervention, has prioritised Stage 4 of the framework. Stage 5, the final stage of the programme is still evolving. It was designed to further embed the systemic way of working, building capacity within the organisation beyond the current programme through the identification of Systemic Champions within the service. The aim is to work with a self-identifying group of Champions from across the workforce in a consultative way to construct next stages to support the new way of working.

Limitations and further evaluation: next stages

Most importantly, the next phase in the research cycle is to elaborate and enhance the quality of feedback in order to capture change in social work practice with children and families as well as within professional networks and in individuals' thinking. Unless the lives of children and families change for the better as a result of this programme, it will not have met its aims. Discussions with the local authority to identify the most effective way of evaluating service change are currently underway. Possibilities for further evaluation include seeking feedback directly from children, young people and families on their experiences of the new model; analysing video-feedback of family sessions; interviewing children and families with their social workers to explore their developing relationship and including them as Observers in the supervision process. Further evaluation might also include undertaking interviews with staff about their perception of the Systemic Supervision Model and change in their thinking and practice. Teamwork practices could also be explored alongside staff satisfaction, staff turnover and sickness levels which would contribute to a more stable workforce for children and families. Liaison has begun with local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) to increase partnership working, with CAMHS clinicians being introduced to the supervision model. CAMHS practitioners have subsequently begun to attend the systemic supervision sessions to support and extend multidisciplinary working. Evaluating the impact of this multi-agency involvement will be undertaken.

Implications for social work and systemic practice

This project involved the design and implementation of a programme involving all levels of the organisation in structural and conceptual change. A recursive action research cycle has been developed, where participants' experiences and perspectives feedback into the next research cycle. Initial feedback suggests that social workers are more reflexive in their practice and more able to bring themselves and the 'social graces' into their work. These changes indicate a shift in the quality of supervision. One would expect that the ability to be more present with oneself and ones colleagues would correlate with an ability to be more fully present with children and families, but this is yet to be explored. Although the evidence is yet to be gathered, further research may demonstrate a shift from Forrester's 'zombie social work' (2016) towards more reflexive practice.

The developments described here are new and tentative but early indications suggest that one of the noticeable effects is the creation of space to pause for reflexivity and permission to move away from the pressure to act without thinking. The Systemic Supervision Model appears to offer and

promote a supportive, containing environment that challenges and enables social workers to ‘reflect critically on their cases, fostering an inquisitive approach to social work’ (Social Work Reform Board 2012). Where resources remain restricted and the need is infinite, this model has much to offer social work services. This model has applicability in a range of other settings including health and education, for example, in acute psychiatry admission wards (Manojlovic & Partridge, 2001) and in schools (Lang & McAdam, 2013). There are applications of systemic thinking and practice in many different service settings and countries which can be drawn upon, such as the Open Dialogue Approach in services for psychosis in Finland (Seikkula, Alakare, & Aaltonen, 2011) and Non Violent Resistance approaches for young people with conduct disorders which originate in Israel but have spread throughout Europe, (Jakob, 2006). There is great potential in the developing relationship between systemic practice and social work.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Indeep Sethi is a qualified social worker and obtained a Masters in Social Work from London Southbank University in June 2006. She has extensive experience of working with vulnerable Children and their Families, predominately in Child Protection and Looked After Children services, with a wealth of experience in assessing and managing risk. Indeep is an experienced manager; supervising, supporting and developing social workers. She has always had a passion for providing good quality supervision, understanding the need for a positive, trusting relationship between supervisor and social worker, and offering a safe and reflective space to explore and identify ways to keep children safe.

Monika Krupa-Flasinska is a qualified social worker. She obtained an MA in Social Pedagogy from the University of Marie Curie-Sklodowska in Lublin, Poland in 1997. She has significant experience working within multi-diverse communities in London, Poland and India. Monika has extensive experience of working with risk and complexity in a statutory Children and Families settings. She has supervised, mentored and developed many student social workers, developing a particular interest in reflective supervision and practice. Monika has an interest and some experience in working within social work academia and research, taking part in the Change Project on Reflective Supervision run by Research in Practice.

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